

# **The Experiences of Blind Canadians in the Federal Public Service**

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## **Executive Summary**

Income inequality and unemployment continue to be key issues brought forward by the blind community in Canada. More specifically, within the workplace, blind Canadians have discussed their disappointments with the *Employment Equity Act (EEA)*, the lack of accessible procurement, prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination, and technological barriers. These barriers that legally blind people face in employment remain an ongoing problem, which is a concern for the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC), the client for this project. As one of Canada's largest employers, the Government of Canada has the ability to become a model employer by obtaining a greater representation of people with disabilities within the federal public service.

The objective of this Master's Project is to understand the experiences of legally blind Canadians who work or have worked within the federal public service in order to identify barriers that continue to exist and provide recommendations on what can be done to address these barriers. The project will allow a more thorough and deeper understanding of the experiences of legally blind Canadians when both obtaining and maintaining employment and will assist the CHRC plan for future work to be done in collaboration with stakeholders that represent legally blind Canadians.

The research questions are:

- *What are the lived experiences of legally blind Canadians who worked or are working in the federal public service?*
- *What barriers exist for legally blind Canadians working in the federal public service, as well as what can be done to address these barriers?*
- *What strategies could be established to successfully obtain employment and create a successful work environment?*

## **Background**

The CHRC was established by Parliament by the *Canadian Human Rights Act (CHRA)*, which prohibits discrimination based on 11 protected grounds, including disability and calls for improved access to employment, services and facilities in all areas that fall under federal jurisdiction. The CHRC has a broad mandate to promote human rights through research and policy development and to protect human rights through a fair and effective complaints process. The CHRC also conducts compliance audits under the *EEA* to help achieve equality in the workplace so that no person is denied employment opportunities or benefits for reasons unrelated to ability.

Canadians with disabilities, including legally blind Canadians, have various laws and policies in place to protect their rights such as: the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the *CHRA*, the *EEA* and the Treasury Board Secretariat's Policy on the Duty to Accommodate Persons with Disabilities in the Federal Public Service. However these existing human rights laws and policies on creating an equitable workplace at the federal level do not seem to adequately address the needs of legally blind employees.

Members of the disability community have debated whether or not the creation of a Federal Disability Act would provide a more comprehensive, sufficient and effective means to achieve barrier removal. Currently, Canada has yet to alleviate certain barriers common to legally blind employees, such as ensuring that accessible technology is a required part of the procurement process and that the government's internal websites and programs are made accessible to those who are legally blind. As a result, barriers to employment, including within the federal public service, continue to exist for legally blind Canadians.

## **Literature Review**

The literature review focused on the various themes that emerge when considering specific barriers that legally blind people face in employment as well as the suggested solutions to address some of these barriers. Some of the literature examined included studies from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, and the United States. However, a majority of the literature reviewed focused on studies from Canada as this information was viewed as the most relevant and comparable to the current study.

The different barriers that legally blind individuals experience when trying to obtain, maintain and advance in employment were identified as significant problems in the literature. Some key barriers identified include: a lack of career opportunities, career advancements and meaningful employment; a lack of accommodations due to the perceived and actual costs and/or due to a lack of employer knowledge; a lack of necessary and accessible technology, without which individuals with visual impairments are unable to access information; and social factors such as social exclusion, stigma, and ignorance, misconceptions and prejudice. Possible solutions to some of these barriers focused on providing education and training to employers and employees on the capabilities of individuals who are legally blind and providing legally blind employees with the necessary tools and accommodations to perform their jobs.

## **Methodology**

The study used a qualitative inquiry approach as focusing on the lived experiences of individuals by eliciting their personal stories through interviews was essential to this project. Interviews were conducted with 12 legally blind individuals who have either worked or continue to work in the federal public service. The interviewed participants came from a variety of sectors within the federal public service, had varied positions and job titles and had a number of different years of experience within the workforce.

Open-ended in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted over the phone and were approximately 45-60 minutes long. A conversational style interview approach was combined with an interview guide approach to allow for the flexibility to fully understand the respondents' perspectives, while also ensuring that certain areas were addressed to create comparable data that could be more easily analyzed. A qualitative data analysis approach was used to reveal common patterns or themes from the interviews.

## **Findings**

The interviews provided an opportunity to explore a range of first hand experiences and perspectives of working within the federal public service. The findings were organized into the following five general topic areas: entering the federal public service and initial orientation; barriers and challenges; changes in the federal public service; federal public service vs. elsewhere; and possible solutions. Key concepts and themes were then identified within each general topic area.

Participants had varied experiences upon entering the federal public service. Difficulties obtaining the appropriate accommodations and the lack of accessible and usable internal systems and processes within the federal government were among the key barriers identified. Participants also discussed difficulties moving both horizontally and vertically in the federal public service and the misunderstandings and misconceptions about their capabilities from employers and fellow employees. This led to discrimination, stigma and exclusion in the workplace. A number of changes in the federal public service were identified and participants indicated that certain aspects have gotten progressively worse and more difficult since they first started working. Implementing mandatory accessibility requirements and mandatory training for managers were key suggestions made to address some of the identified barriers and challenges. Participants also discussed the implementation of a Federal Disability Act and what would need to be done to ensure its success.

## **Discussion**

The discussion integrates the findings from the interviews with the literature reviewed. A number of key barriers to employment were identified in both the literature and findings. The barriers that were common to both the literature and findings were organized into the following four themes: underemployment and career opportunities; accommodations; inaccessible technology and inability to access information; and social factors. However, there were also a number of barriers that were not identified in the literature and were unique to the findings. Some of these barriers included having to go through hierarchical levels of approval to obtain the appropriate accommodations, the lack of internal accessible systems and applications within the federal government and the fear and disincentive to bring issues forward.

A number of possible solutions to address some of the identified barriers were also identified in both the literature and findings. Education and training for managers and employees on disability issues and programs to provide support and assistance for both legally blind employees and their managers were suggestions made by both the literature and findings. Providing the appropriate tools and accommodations was another key suggestion made. However, the implementation of a Federal Disability Act, establishing mandatory accessibility requirements, collaborating with the private sector to provide more innovative accommodations and establishing a central aid fund in each department of the federal public service were suggestions unique to the findings.

## **Recommendations**

Given the CHRC's broad mandate and pursuant to the *CHRA*, the study identified ways for the Government of Canada to make workplaces in the federal public service more equitable for legally blind individuals. Eleven recommendations based on solutions identified in the literature and suggestions made by the interviewed participants have been provided within the following three categories:

### *1. Accommodations and Accessibility*

Ensure that the physical environment and information in the federal public service is accessible and usable. Implement mandatory accessibility requirements during upcoming discussions on the specifics of a Federal Disability Act. Establish a duty to accommodate fund.

### *2. Education and Training*

Provide workshops for managers and training opportunities for employees. Ensure that training opportunities for legally blind individuals are accessible.

### 3. *Support Services*

Establish an online network of employers to advise other employers who are new to working with visually impaired employees. Establish an accessibility committee to assist managers and employees with issues they might be encountering.

### **Conclusion**

This project created an opportunity to understand the first-hand experiences of legally blind individuals who have either worked or continue to work in the federal public service. Through the literature and interviews, barriers that hinder employment and possible solutions to address these barriers were identified. By implementing the recommendations made in this report, the federal public service will be made more accessible, equitable and inclusive for legally blind individuals. Future legislation and experiences of legally blind employees will help to measure the success and progress of addressing the barriers identified in this report.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In January 2016, the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC) held a consultation with stakeholders in the blind community on advancing human rights for blind Canadians. One of the key issues brought forward by the participants was income inequality and unemployment. More specifically, when addressing concerns within the workplace, participants discussed their disappointments with the *Employment Equity Act*, the lack of accessible procurement, prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination, and technological barriers. These barriers that legally blind people face in employment remain an ongoing problem and although the CHRC continues to promote and protect human rights for all Canadians, including those who are legally blind, more work needs to be done to address these barriers. In addition, as one of Canada's largest employers, the Government of Canada has the ability to become a model employer by obtaining a greater representation of people with disabilities within the federal public service (Gordon, 2006, Employment section, para. 2).

The objective of this Master's Project is to understand the experiences of legally blind Canadians who work or have worked within the federal public service in order to identify barriers that continue to exist and provide recommendations on what can be done to address these barriers. The project will allow a more thorough and deeper understanding of the experiences of legally blind Canadians when both obtaining and maintaining employment. By contributing to and advancing this discussion, the project will assist the CHRC plan for future work to be done in collaboration with stakeholders that represent legally blind Canadians.

For purpose of this study, legal blindness refers to individuals with low vision or complete loss of vision. Canadian standards define legal blindness as less than or equal to 20/200 vision in the person's best eye with the best possible correction (Canadian National Institute for the Blind [CNIB], n.d.).

The research questions are:

- *What are the lived experiences of legally blind Canadians who worked or are working in the federal public service?*
- *What barriers exist for legally blind Canadians working in the federal public service, as well as what can be done to address these barriers?*
- *What strategies could be established to successfully obtain employment and create a successful work environment?*

In support of these objectives, this report will provide the following deliverables to the client:

- Literature review: summary and analysis of past research on blind individuals and employment identified in various academic and professional sources.
- Interviews: summary and analysis of interviews with legally blind Canadians who have either worked or are working in the federal public service.
- Recommendations: general recommendations discussed in the literature and made by the interviewed participants will assist the client in identifying solutions on how the Government of Canada can make workplaces within federal departments more equitable for legally blind individuals.

This report is structured as follows: the first two sections will set the context of the report and will include the introduction and background; the next sections will be the main body of the report and will include the literature review, the methodology, the findings from the interviews and the discussion; and finally, the last two sections of the report will consist of the recommendations and conclusion.

## 2.0 BACKGROUND

This section provides an overview of the client, followed by a brief overview of existing and proposed legislation to protect the rights of people with disabilities. This discussion addresses concerns with some of the laws and policies currently in place and includes a summary of a recent court decision related to these concerns. Together, these sections provide context to the research project.

### Project Client

The client for this study is the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC). The CHRC was established by Parliament by the *Canadian Human Rights Act (CHRA)* in 1977. It has a broad mandate to promote human rights through research and policy development and to protect human rights through a fair and effective complaints process (Canadian Human Rights Commission [CHRC], 2013a). The Constitution of Canada divides jurisdiction for human rights matters between the federal and provincial or territorial governments. The CHRC has jurisdiction over federal government departments and agencies, Crown corporations, First Nations governments and federally regulated private sector organizations. Provincial and territorial governments have their own human rights codes and are responsible for provincially/territorially-regulated sectors.

Pursuant to the *CHRA*, federal and federally regulated employers and service providers cannot discriminate against individuals on the following grounds of discrimination: race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, family status, a conviction for which a pardon has been granted or a record suspended and disability (CHRC, 2013d). If individuals feel they have been discriminated against based on a prohibited ground, they may file a human rights complaint with the CHRC. The CHRC may deal with a complaint in a number of ways, one of which is to refer the complaint to the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, which is independent from the CHRC and has the authority to order a remedy or award damages.

The CHRC also conducts compliance audits under the *Employment Equity Act (EEA)*. The purpose of the *Act* is to achieve equality in the workplace so that no person is denied employment opportunities or benefits for reasons unrelated to ability and to correct the historic employment disadvantages experienced by four designated groups: women, Aboriginal peoples, members of visible minorities and persons with disabilities (CHRC, 2013c).

The CHRC does a lot of work on people with disabilities. For example, in 2012 the CHRC released the *Report on Equality Rights of People with Disabilities*. This

report presents a national portrait of people with disabilities compared to people without disabilities based on seven dimensions of well-being, considered critical from an equality rights perspective. These dimensions are: economic well-being, education, employment, health, housing, justice and safety, and political and social inclusion. The report found that people with disabilities were more likely to have lower annual incomes, were more likely to settle for part-time instead of full-time employment and a notable proportion believed that an employer would likely consider them disadvantaged in employment (CHRC, 2012, pp. 28-61). In 2015, the CHRC released the report entitled *The Rights of Persons with Disabilities to Equality and Non-Discrimination: Monitoring the Implementation of the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Canada*. The report found that between 2009 and 2013, over 41,000 discrimination complaints were made to various human rights commissions and tribunals across Canada and almost half of these complaints were related to disability (CHRC, 2015, p.1). Additionally, a large proportion of these disability-related complaints were related to employment. The CHRC has also consulted with stakeholders in the disability community to ensure that the principle of “Nothing about us, without us” is used in all of its collaborative efforts to advance equality. For example, in January 2016, a daylong stakeholder engagement meeting was held with members of the blind community, with the objective of working together to advance human rights for blind Canadians.

## **Existing and Proposed Legislation**

Canadians with disabilities, including legally blind Canadians, have various laws and policies in place to protect their rights. The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982) guarantees people with disabilities equality and equal protection under the law (s.15). The *CHRA* states that “...all individuals should have an opportunity equal with other individuals to make for themselves the lives that they are able and wish to have and to have their needs accommodated...” (Canadian Human Rights Act [CHRA], 1985, s. 2). Furthermore, the *CHRA* prohibits discrimination based on 11 protected grounds, including disability, and calls for improved access to employment, services and facilities in all areas that fall under federal jurisdiction (Benoit, Jansson, Jansenberger, & Phillips, 2013, p. 971). Employers also have a duty to accommodate individuals with a disability in order to prevent or reduce discrimination. Sometimes the duty to accommodate can cause organizations undue hardship, which can only be justified when accommodations would cost too much, or create risks to health or safety (CHRC, 2013b).

The Treasury Board Secretariat’s Policy on the Duty to Accommodate Persons with Disabilities in the Federal Public Service aims to create and maintain an inclusive, barrier free environment by ensuring that people with disabilities have equal access to opportunities and can fully participate in the workplace (Human

Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2013, p. 3; Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2002). The *EEA* also ensures equal access to employment for people with disabilities, while the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada creates equal access by ensuring that information provided by the government is available in multiple formats (Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians [AEBEC], 2015, p. 2; Benoit et al., 2013, p. 971). From an international perspective, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which the Canadian government ratified in 2010, outlines non-discrimination, full inclusion in society, equal opportunity and accessibility as general principles to be recognized for people with disabilities (United Nations, 2006, article 3).

Despite these existing mechanisms, members of the disability community have debated whether or not the creation of a Federal Disability Act would provide a more comprehensive, sufficient and effective means to achieve barrier removal (Gordon, 2006, Examining Legislation as an Option section, para. 2). The purpose of a Federal Disability Act would be to provide systemic solutions and mechanisms to those with disabilities within federal jurisdiction without undermining the existing legal rights under the *CHRA* or the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (Gordon, 2006, Principles and Framework Assumptions section). Although the Government of Canada has indicated its commitment to the creation of a Canadians with Disabilities Act, the exact timeline and specifics of the Act have yet to be determined.

Ontario passed its own legislation for individuals with disabilities, entitled the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), which aims to develop, implement and enforce accessibility standards for Ontarians with disabilities (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005). This Act includes mandatory education training for all employees in Ontario on the needs of workers with differing abilities and addresses the financial costs often associated with certain accommodation equipment by subsidizing its purchase (Jansenberger, 2014, pp. 84-85). This helps to alleviate financial barriers when accommodating individuals with disabilities in the workplace. Australia uses a similar model to alleviate financial barriers for both employed and unemployed blind Australians through a bi-weekly allowance covering the cost of assistive devices (Jansenberger, 2014, pp. 76-86).

The various enacted and proposed human rights laws and policies on creating an equitable workplace at the federal level, do not seem to adequately address the needs of legally blind employees. The sheer number of guidelines and programs has led to inadequate information sharing and inadequate accountability mechanisms across the federal public service (Lyrette, 2000, p.1). Legally blind public servants have stated concerns about the federal government's ability to

provide the sufficient tools necessary to perform their jobs (Ireton, 2015). For example, according to the Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians (2015), all levels of government in Canada, including the federal government, have the ability to purchase accessible Information and Communication Technology (ICT) by ensuring that accessibility is a part of the procurement process (p. 1). The Alliance points to section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act in the United States, which requires federal agencies to develop and procure ICT that is accessible to people with disabilities (AEBC, 2015, pp. 3-4). Purchasing and developing accessible technologies allows workplaces to move away from solely accommodating the individual and instead works towards creating an environment that is both more accessible and inclusive. However, Canada has yet to make purchasing accessible ICT a required part of the procurement process.

The Canadian courts have recognized the importance of ensuring that policies and services of employers and providers are both accessible and non-discriminatory. In 2010, a key court decision was made when the Government of Canada was successfully sued for its lack of accessible external websites. Donna Jodhan, a legally blind sophisticated computer user, was unable to apply online for public service jobs because her screen reading software, which is a program that reads website content aloud to the reader, could not access the information on the federal government's websites (Ireton, 2015). Jodhan sought a systemic remedy, to which the court ordered the government to make its websites accessible within 15 months (*Jodhan v. Canada*, 2010). To meet this commitment to web accessibility, the Government of Canada adopted the most current internationally recognized Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, also known as WCAG 2.0 (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2013). However, these guidelines do not apply to internal websites within the federal government, making them largely inaccessible to legally blind federal public servants. Therefore, although numerous policies and legislations have been put in place, barriers to employment, including within the federal public service, continue to exist for legally blind Canadians.

## **3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

A literature search was conducted to present an overview of the research topic. A vast amount of literature has been written on legally blind individuals and the different barriers they face within a variety of different contexts. There is also a general consensus in the literature that legally blind people have a higher rate of unemployment compared to individuals who are not legally blind. This literature review will focus on the various themes that emerge when considering barriers that legally blind people face in employment, as well as the suggested solutions to address some of these barriers.

Some of the literature examined included studies from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, and the United States. However, a majority of the literature reviewed focused on studies from Canada as this information was viewed as the most relevant and comparable to the current study. Additionally, not all of the studies reviewed used the term legally blind, nor did they all include a clear definition of the degree of vision loss experienced by the individuals in their study. The terms visually impaired, seeing disability, low vision and blind were used in a number of studies and are used in the review when appropriate. However, when possible and made clear, the term legally blind is used. The literature review will first discuss the different barriers that exist for legally blind individuals when both obtaining and maintaining employment. This is followed by a discussion on the possible solutions to address some of these identified barriers. The review will end with a brief summary of the literature.

### **Barriers**

This section of the review outlines the most commonly cited barriers identified in the literature. First, a general overview of unemployment for individuals with disabilities is provided, followed by information on unemployment for individuals who are legally blind. This includes a discussion on the different barriers and differences in unemployment experienced within the blind community depending on their degree of vision loss and when their vision loss occurred. Next, the lack of career opportunities for legally blind individuals is discussed, which includes the types of employment obtained, the lack of information about career opportunities, underemployment and the lack of career advancements. This is followed by a discussion on accommodations in the workplace and the lack of technology and inability to access information for legally blind employees. Finally, social exclusion, stigma, and ignorance, misconceptions and prejudice are discussed as common

barriers experienced by legally blind individuals when both obtaining and maintaining employment.

### *Unemployment*

The ability to work creates a foundation of personal identity, accomplishment and meaning as well as providing obvious economic benefits (Gillies, Knight, & Baglioni, 1998, p. 398; La Grow & Daye, 2005, p. 173; Reid, 2005, p. 1168). Studies have shown that while employment is related to increased self-esteem and self-efficacy, unemployment can lead to depression and low-self esteem (La Grow & Daye, 2005, p. 173). Historically, unemployment and underemployment have been both a social and economic problem for people with disabilities (Gillies et al., 1998, p. 397). Canadians with disabilities continue to remain at a disadvantage in securing employment despite advances in disability rights' legislation, the availability of assistive technologies and increased societal awareness (Candela & Wolffe, 2002, p. 5; Benoit, Jansson, Jansenberger, & Phillips, 2013, p. 971). Explanations for the high unemployment rate of people with disabilities tend to focus on both personal and societal barriers (O'Day, 1999, para. 2). Although anyone's opportunities for employment may be affected by psychosocial factors such as the motivation to work, the development of skills, self-esteem and social support, and demographic factors such as sex, age, race, educational level and socioeconomic status, it has been suggested that these factors may have a greater impact on individuals with disabilities (Shaw, Gold, & Wolffe, 2007, p. 3).

Studies have stated that vision loss is becoming an increasing problem for Canadians. According to the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (n.d.), vision loss is expected to increase as Canada's aging population increases. Additionally, studies have shown that low levels of employment for individuals with varying degrees of vision loss are found in a variety of sectors. The 2012 Canadian Survey on Disability reported that adults with a seeing disability had lower educational outcomes, lower employment rates and lower incomes than adults without this disability and many adults with a seeing disability reported additional difficulties in the labour market including a lack of job modifications (Bizier, Contreras, & Walpole, 2016, pp. 3-13). In a study conducted by Benoit et al. (2013), Canadians who were legally blind felt that employers would not hire a legally blind applicant for a job even if he or she were qualified (p. 979).

There are reported differences in employment within the blind community depending on the severity of vision loss. Individuals with less severe vision impairments have been found to have higher employment rates than individuals who are blind (Gold, Shaw, & Wolffe, 2005, p. 1150). Additionally, although they are a minority, individuals who successfully maintained employment after vision



loss were found to have faced additional barriers in the workplace compared to individuals who were blind prior to employment. A recent study reported that legally blind individuals with later-onset blindness experienced more discrimination in the workplace than individuals who were born with blindness or had earlier-onset blindness (Jansenberger, 2014, p. 57). The main reason for this was attributed to the amount of time it takes for someone who is newly blind to become proficient in using the appropriate technology and the resentment felt among colleagues over having to accommodate and adjust their working conditions (p. 57).

A clear distinction is often made between blind individuals who are employed and those who are not. Reid (2005) suggests that there is a polarization between the highly qualified and successfully employed blind individuals, who are sometimes referred to as the blind elite and the much larger group of blind and partially sighted individuals who are excluded from the workforce (p. 1168). The literature regards this exclusion and rate of unemployment as an unacceptable and ongoing problem (Gillies et al., 1998, pp. 397-398; O'Day, 1999, para. 81; Reid, 2005, p.1168).

#### *Lack of Career Opportunities*

The most commonly sought after jobs for blind and visually impaired people were found to fall under the following categories: office work, customer service, social services and education (Gold et al., 2005, p. 1150). However, a recent qualitative study revealed favourable conditions for legally blind people working in the public sector. Legally blind participants who had government jobs reported lower levels of perceived stigma and those who were employed in the public sector reported higher morale and a more successful transition in their accommodations than those who were employed in the private sector (Jansenberger, 2014, pp. 56-74). Additionally, part-time or short-term work was found to be common for legally blind individuals. However, those who took up this work received a reduction in their disability pension payments, causing them to feel as though they were being penalized for working, which created a disincentive to seek this type of employment (Jansenberger, 2014, pp. 58-59). Individuals with an annual income of less than \$25,000 were found to be the most fearful of losing these types of payments and economic benefits (Crudden & McBroom, 1999, Barriers to employment section, para. 10).

People who are legally blind or vision impaired have reported to be significantly less satisfied with their career development, services and training opportunities than people with no visual impairments (Gillies et al., 1998, pp. 397-407). Additionally, the location of information about possible jobs and the availability of jobs in communities were identified as common barriers to employment (Crudden & McBroom, 1999, Barrier to employment section, para. 3). In a study conducted

with unemployed legally blind adults, almost all of the participants recognized that there might be some jobs that are unsuitable for people who are blind; however, the participants indicated that the lack of information about job openings was their primary problem (O'Day, 1999, para. 16). They stated that it was often difficult to find motivation to search for career opportunities when their efforts were repeatedly unsuccessful, leaving them both jobless and discouraged (para. 24). Blind individuals cited independent contacts such as friends and partners as the most helpful and useful resource to finding employment (Crudden & McBroom, 1999, Overcoming barriers to employment section, para. 1).

There are also barriers to meaningful employment for legally blind individuals, which is employment that matches an individual's values and talents and contributes to both their personal and professional development (Benoit et al., 2013, p. 971). Meaningful employment is also related to underemployment, which is when individuals are employed at levels that are inadequate with their education and skills (Goertz, van Lierop, Houkes, & Nijhuis, 2010, p. 405). Visually impaired employees reported feeling both underemployed and overeducated in their current jobs (Crudden & McBroom, 1999, Barriers to employment section, para. 2; Goertz et al., 2010, p. 405). It has been found that both not working or not working in a job that an individual is qualified for can affect self-esteem, increase feelings of hostility and create dependent relationships (Shaw et al., 2007, p. 1).

With the appropriate accommodations, it was found that employees who are blind reported very few concerns related to job mastery. Any barriers that were identified were found to be typical of the general population, such as concerns about the future, planning the next career step and figuring out how to get promoted (Rumrill, Schuyler, & Longden, 1997, Discussion section, para. 4). However, employed individuals who are blind or visually impaired stated that they received few opportunities for promotions or career advancements (Gold & Simson, 2005, p. 141). One reason for this had to do with the availability and convenience of the necessary technology for certain jobs. Different positions within an organization may require different technologies and adjustments for individuals who are legally blind and as a result, for the sake of ease and convenience, career advancements and opportunities are not offered (Gillies et al., 1998, p. 400). Studies have also reported cases where employers would not expand the job duties of legally blind participants. One legally blind participant in a study reported that although she had personally never received a promotion, new employees who were trained by her had (O'Day, 1999, para. 33). An additional study reported that one legally blind individual had held the same position at his job for twenty years because he did not believe his managers would consider him capable of the increased responsibilities that would come with his potential career advancement

(Jansenberger, 2014, p. 68). Therefore, even after being successfully employed, legally blind individuals continued to experience barriers as they attempted to advance in their careers.

### *Accommodations*

In a nation-wide study on blind and visually impaired Canadians, 71% of the participants reported that they had received job accommodations while working and although in over half of these cases the employers paid for the accommodations, in 23% of these cases the participants paid for the accommodations themselves (Gold & Simson, 2005, p. 141). Due to the costs associated with these accommodations, it was found that in times of economic recession, legally blind people's jobs were more vulnerable than their counterparts (Jansenberger, 2014, p. 69). These perceived expenses also caused employers to become hesitant to hire individuals who were visually impaired (McDonnall, O'Mally, & Crudden, 2014, pp. 214-215; Shaw et al., 2007, p. 3). However, according to Rumrill et al. (1997), most reasonable accommodations have been found to cost very little to implement (Discussion section, para. 7).

The types of accommodations identified in the literature varied depending on the individual and their degree of vision loss. Some of the accommodations identified included: modified workspaces, modified work schedules, modified responsibilities and job duties, flexible deadlines, education and training, exchanges among workers in regards to certain tasks and adaptive equipment (Crudden, 2002, pp. 615-616; Gold & Simson, 2005, p. 141). Job-restructuring strategies, such as reducing workloads, eliminating job duties and providing a longer training period to learn new tasks were seen as being much more individualized than job-accommodation strategies and helped to ensure that legally blind individuals were able to perform work at the same speed as their sighted counterparts (Crudden, 2002, p. 618). Additionally, it was reported that physical modifications to workspaces, such as providing larger work areas, different furniture, rearranging items in the workplace and reducing glare, both ensured successful job retention and were the most common types of accommodation provided (pp. 615-618). However, although an older study found that blind employees viewed their employers as the most important contacts to implement reasonable accommodations, a more recent study found that many employers were unaware of or had limited knowledge of where to find information on workplace accommodations for individuals who are visually impaired (McDonnall et al., 2014, pp. 221-222; Rumrill et al., 1997, Discussion section, para. 8). Therefore, without this information, individuals who are legally blind are put at a disadvantage when trying to both obtain and maintain employment.

### *Lack of Technology and Inability to Access Information*

Technology plays a key role in allowing legally blind employees to perform their jobs. Yet despite the many advantages technology brings to those who are legally blind, the rate at which it continues to improve can cause adaptive technology to lag behind. Additionally, according to legislation, employers have a duty to accommodate individuals with disabilities in the workplace. This means that it is often the responsibility of the employer to purchase the necessary equipment for a legally blind employee. However, the costs associated with adaptive technology and assistive devices have reportedly caused problems in this area. Some legally blind individuals reported difficulties in convincing potential employers, including large companies, to purchase the necessary equipment (O'Day, 1999, para. 34). This again caused legally blind employees to be put at a disadvantage when obtaining and retaining employment (Gillies et al., 1998, pp. 399-400; Jansenberger, 2014, p. 62). Additionally, a study found that technology and its accessibility became a major source of stress for individuals with vision loss. These individuals became anxious when there were delays in obtaining the necessary equipment and when they were asked to perform certain duties without having sufficient time to learn how to use the equipment (Crudden, 2002, p. 620).

Another barrier to employment can be found when Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is not accessible, causing a legally blind employee's ability to access information to be severely limited (Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians, 2015, p. 1). The ability of employees with vision loss to access information on print material was also found to have caused delays in productivity because of the amount of time it took to transfer this material to an adaptive format (Crudden, 2002, p. 620). Without the same access to information and resources as other coworkers, legally blind individuals are put at a disadvantage in the workplace.

### *Social Exclusion*

Social exclusion occurs when individuals are excluded from society's main resources, such as employment opportunities and participation in the workforce (Benoit et al., 2013, p. 971). Additionally, outside of an individual's home life, the majority of someone's social interactions occur at work (La Grow & Daye, 2005, p. 173). Individuals who are unemployed are therefore deprived of this social interaction and the many benefits it provides. However, for individuals who are legally blind and employed, social interactions in the workplace can also act as a barrier. This results in legally blind employees expending more effort to actively ensure that they are not socially excluded in the workplace. For example, although most employees may overlook the advantages of lunch and break time activities in the workplace, for legally blind employees these activities provide key opportunities

to build relationships, gather information about their work environment, network and assimilate into the organization's culture (Naraine & Fels, 2013, pp. 208-210). These opportunities contribute to feelings of social acceptance, which is necessary for employment satisfaction and has a positive impact on employee performance (p. 209). Naraine & Fels (2013) refer to this social interaction as strategic chat time, which is defined as any time during the workday that is used for informal social interaction, such as lunch, breaks and social activities (pp. 208-209).

Although strategic chat time provides many beneficial opportunities, blind and low vision employees reported experiencing barriers when getting to know colleagues, establishing friendships and networking for career advancement (Naraine & Fels, 2013, p. 210). For sighted employees, the ability to build social rapport with fellow colleagues is highly dependent on visual and non-verbal communication, such as making eye contact, observing facial expressions and body language, all of which are often not possible for legally blind employees (p. 209). This puts them at a social disadvantage since they are unable to use the common methods of social interaction. However, according to Naraine & Fels (2013), blind and low vision employees demonstrated passive, resourceful, receptive and proactive behavioural techniques when socially interacting with fellow employees during strategic chat time (pp. 210-211). Blind and low vision employees who were passive tended not to engage in social interactions and in some cases, would avoid breaks altogether, while those who were resourceful found their own ways to be social, such as making private arrangements with others (pp. 211-212). Employees who were receptive were willing to listen to and accept new ideas and suggestions, which made them receptive to social interaction, while employees who were proactive tended to take initiative and were much more assertive by making lunch dates, reaching out to make small talk, memorizing colleagues' voices, initiating social activities and introducing themselves directly to others (pp. 212-214). Therefore, the type and degree of social interaction varies with each individual and their personality type. For legally blind individuals who are more introverted and passive, social interaction in the workplace may be a greater barrier than it is for someone who is more extroverted and proactive. However, the social interactions that many sighted employees take for granted often require much more effort and initiative from legally blind employees. It has been found that the onus often gets put on the individual with the disability when it comes to initiating social interactions at work (Golub, 2006, p. 715).

Studies have argued that organizations are often unprepared to socially integrate employees with disabilities into the workplace (Naraine & Fels, 2013, p. 209). Typically, when a new employee is hired, an internal memo stating their arrival is circulated; however, in a society where attitudes towards disabilities can result in

feelings of discomfort, this type of introduction for employees with disabilities can be inadequate and insufficient. When an employee with a disability is hired, it was found that in some cases fellow employees received no official awareness training and no information about the specific disability or the needs of the individual with the disability (Naraine & Fels, 2013, p. 209). Without this information, fellow employees are put at a disadvantage in successfully integrating employees with disabilities into the workplace.

### *Stigma*

Benoit et al. (2013) suggests that those with a physical disability such as blindness may experience greater barriers in both obtaining and maintain employment because their disability is more obvious to employers than other disabilities (p. 972). However, it has also been suggested that because blindness is both a physical and unavoidable disability, it may have less stigma attached to it and be viewed more favourably than those who use addictive substances, which tends to be seen more as a character deficit associated with moral responsibility (Benoit et al., 2013, p. 978; Gillies et al., 1998, p. 398).

The notion of stigma is discussed in the literature as being a major contributing factor to the high rate of unemployment for legally blind individuals. Benoit et al. (2013), discuss two types of stigma that contribute to the low labour force participation for legally blind people: enacted stigma and perceived stigma (pp. 970-972). Enacted stigma is more direct and may take form in verbal insults or unfriendly policies towards a stigmatized person, whereas perceived or felt stigma results from the perception of being treated poorly by others (p. 972). An example of perceived stigma can be seen in a study where individuals with visual impairments noted that they thought they were being scrutinized on the job and that they were being compared to their sighted counterparts (Crudden, 2002, p. 619). According to Benoit et al. (2013), perceived stigma can potentially be more harmful than enacted stigma because the fear of being discriminated against can cause individuals to avoid social interactions, which can result in missed opportunities and resources (p. 972).

### *Ignorance, Misconceptions and Prejudice*

Ignorance and misconceptions were cited as reasons why employers will pass over the application of a legally blind person in favour of another individual. The lack of employer understanding and misconceptions surrounding the abilities of legally blind people may be due to prejudiced and negative attitudes, such as the inability to conceive of a legally blind person as able and capable of employment (Benoit et al., 2013, pp. 979-980; Gold et al., 2005, p. 1150; Gold & Simson, 2005, p. 141;

McDonnall et al., 2014, p. 214; O'Day, 1999, para. 26-27). According to McDonnall et al. (2014), negative employer attitudes can lead to discrimination in hiring, decreased career opportunities, limited training opportunities, a lack of acceptance among fellow employees, lower salaries and workplace harassment (p. 216). Wacker (1976), states that the sighted world continues to have preconceived attitudes about blind people, including a widely held view that blind individuals are incapable of employment (p. 28). Historically, employers have thought that workers with disabilities, including individuals who are visually impaired, would not be able to compete with sighted workers in employment and that other employees would not know how to work with them (Golub, 2006, p. 715). Additionally, it was found that many employers did not know how a person with visual impairments could perform certain job duties, such as using a computer, despite the fact that a computer is often a requirement for most jobs (McDonnall et al., 2014, p. 222). This may explain why some studies have indicated that there is greater employer concern about hiring an individual who is blind in comparison to hiring individuals with other disabilities (p. 215). If employers are unaware of how prospective employees can perform essential job duties, they will be less likely to hire them. Employers who have had experience working with visually impaired workers stated that there were a number of anticipated challenges prior to hiring them. Some of these anticipated challenges included: concerns that hiring an individual with visual impairments would take a lot of effort; concerns and doubts regarding their abilities to do the work; concerns about guide dogs and having an animal in the workplace; a lack of knowledge about what to do with a visually impaired employee; and worries that they would receive special treatment in the workplace (Wolffe & Candela, 2002, pp. 627-628). In addition to the perceptions held by employers and fellow coworkers, teachers to blind or visually impaired individuals were also found to believe that the career opportunities for the blind or visually impaired were limited (Gillies et al., 1998, p. 399).

In a study on members of the Royal New Zealand Foundation of the Blind, a majority (79%) stated that they had experienced barriers to gaining employment, retaining employment and/or gaining advancement in their careers (La Grow & Daye, 2005, pp. 175-178). Although one of the main barriers identified by the participants centered on the direct and indirect consequences of having a severe vision impairment, the attitudes and behaviours of potential employers was the second most common type of barrier raised (pp. 173-179). Participants stated that both employers and fellow coworkers were ignorant of their capabilities and as a result, they often faced discrimination in the workplace (p. 179). Additional studies on employer attitudes have found that some employers believe that jobs are too technical or dangerous for blind or vision impaired individuals and that there may be delays in productivity upon hiring an individual with visual impairments, despite

evidence showing that blind or vision impaired employees are often more motivated, productive, loyal and have a strong safety record (Gillies et al., 1998, p. 399; Shaw et al., 2007, p. 3; Wolffe & Candela, 2002, p. 622).

Although global attitudes have been seen to increase towards individuals with disabilities with the enactment of different legislations, studies found that an employers' willingness to hire individuals with disabilities did not show a similar increase. According to Wolffe & Candela (2002), studies on the attitudes of employers towards hiring individuals with disabilities in the years before and after the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act showed very little change (p. 623). However, it was found that employers that had previously employed workers with visual impairments were both more likely to hire individuals with visual impairments again in the future and could help other employers to feel more comfortable with the idea of hiring visually impaired workers (Shaw et al., 2007, p. 3; Wolffe & Candela, 2002, p. 622). It has been suggested that the more experience employers have with visually impaired employees and the more knowledge they obtain, the more positive their attitudes towards them will be (McDonnall et al., 2014, pp. 213-222; Wolffe & Candela, 2002, p. 624).

Other people's perceptions of individuals with a disability is sometimes referred to as a wall of prejudice, since no matter how capable an individual with a disability may be, they are often considered different and inferior to people without disabilities (Gillies et al., 1998, p. 398). Some legally blind individuals have felt that blindness support agencies have been contributing to this wall of prejudice. A study found that legally blind people felt that certain fundraising activities of these agencies were reinforcing stereotypes of helplessness to draw in public pity in order to obtain more donations (Jansenberger, 2014, p. 59). There was a common sentiment among legally blind individuals that any money gained through these acts was not worth the perpetuation of negative stereotypes about legally blind people (p. 59).

## **Possible Solutions**

The remainder of this review will focus on possible solutions identified in the literature to address some of the barriers experienced by legally blind individuals in employment. Although a majority of the suggested solutions focused on what employers and organizations could do to address these barriers, some studies made suggestions on what legally blind individuals could do to help themselves obtain and maintain employment.



### *Employment Consortium*

Candela & Wolffe (2002) discuss the concept of an employment consortium as a possible solution to increase the likelihood of employment opportunities for people who are blind and visually impaired (p. 5). An employment consortium would consist of employment specialists who would assist individuals in job seeking, job development, job placement, follow-up and job retention (p. 6). This assembly was identified as providing a more efficient means for individuals who are blind and visually impaired to find and respond to possible jobs.

### *Education*

Public education campaigns and educational programs were suggested as possible solutions to combat the stigma around legally blind people and employment. These campaigns and programs would inform the public to help dispel myths about blindness, change attitudes about the capabilities of people who are legally blind, raise awareness about the needs of legally blind employees and promote the benefits of inclusive workplaces (Benoit et al., 2013, pp. 970-981; Jansenberger, 2014, p. 84; La Grow & Daye, 2005, p. 181). It was also suggested for employees with visual impairments to educate others in the workplace about their disability and to take on the responsibility of making colleagues as comfortable as they can be by using humour, engaging them in conversation and answering questions about their disability (Crudden, 2002, p. 619; Golub, 2006, pp. 722). However, rather than solely relying on legally blind individuals to educate both their employers and coworkers, it was suggested that employers and human resources personnel should also be well informed so that they are able to address concerns and ensure that legally blind employees feel comfortable in the workplace (Jansenberger, 2014, pp. 72-73; McDonnall et al., 2014, p. 213). This way, the onus and responsibility does not completely fall on the legally blind employee.

There are a number of different tools to help employers understand how individuals who are visually impaired perform different tasks, including publically available brochures and videos, and websites (Wolffe & Candela, 2002, p. 622). Additionally, employers who have experience hiring, accommodating, training and working with employees who are legally blind, were suggested as a good resource to help advise and educate other employers looking to hire legally blind workers (p. 632). In regards to educating employers on appropriate job accommodations, McDonnall et al. (2014) stated that this lack of employer knowledge would best be addressed by having a strong internet presence where this information could easily be found (p. 223).

### *Training*

Intensive blindness skills training and placement services were identified as possible solutions to overcome the barriers put up by ignorant employers (Benoit et al., 2013, p. 979; La Grow & Daye, 2005, p. 181). On-the-job training, job-specific courses and general skills development were identified as the most useful types of education and training for gaining employment, retaining employment and career advancement (La Grow & Daye, 2005, p. 178).

Additionally, it was suggested for employers to ensure that their employees receive official awareness training and information about an employee's disability, preferably before the individual with a disability begins working (Naraine & Fels, 2013, p. 209). Employers could also ask visually impaired employees if they would provide them with training on how to be a sighted guide, this way employers would be able to model the behaviour that they expect other employees to use (Golub, 2006, p. 720). Visually impaired employees would benefit from having fellow coworkers and employers undergo additional training on knowing when to provide verbal cues, such as telling them when people enter and leave a room and making them aware of certain types of social interactions (Goertz et al., 2010, p. 413; Golub, 2006, p. 720). This would help to facilitate the social integration of legally blind employees in the workplace, which would in turn create a positive work environment.

### *Government Assistance*

It was mentioned that strategies to address and overcome barriers typically tend to be focused on an individual level and that they should instead be focused at a systemic level through the creation of policies and programs (Crudden & McBroom, 1999, Abstract section, para. 1). Government incentive programs were a suggested method to encourage employers to hire legally blind workers (Benoit et al., 2013, p. 981). Additionally, according to Benoit et al. (2013), government agencies should regularly publish blindness-specific statistics, which would include the barriers and stigmatization that legally blind people face when both obtaining and maintaining employment (p. 981). It was also suggested that both the provincial and federal governments should have the responsibility of addressing any barriers to the built environment (La Grow & Daye, 2005, p. 181).

### *Tools and Accommodations*

Employers must provide the physical tools necessary for legally blind employees to perform their jobs. According to Golub (2006), in order for employers to fill their toolbox, they must ask legally blind employees what equipment and accommodations are needed and they must ensure that all equipment and facilities

are upgraded and accessible (pp. 719-720). Obtaining and installing the appropriate equipment should also be done at the earliest time possible in order to ensure the employees' success (Crudden, 2002, p. 620). It was also suggested for employees with visual impairments to be used as a resource for testing the usability and accessibility of equipment and locations (Golub, 2006, p. 720). One study suggested that workplaces could create an accessibility committee to address the physical and attitudinal barriers for employees with disabilities (Rumrill et al., 1997, Discussion section, para. 7).

Providing the appropriate accommodations both acknowledges and validates differences within the workplace and allows employees with disabilities to feel safe, valued and respected (Golub, 2006, pp. 721-722). After the appropriate accommodations have been made, it is important for employers to expect the same level of performance from legally blind employees as they would from their sighted counterparts, while still remaining flexible in the way the work is performed (Golub, 2006, p. 721). Employers who have had experience with visually impaired workers suggested that time can be an appropriate accommodation in some circumstances. These employers suggested allowing employees with visual impairments slightly more time to complete training and certain on-the-job duties (Wolffe & Candela, 2002, p. 627). It was also suggested for both the legally blind employee and the employer to make expectations about productivity clear so that any issues that need to be addressed are brought to the forefront ahead of time (Crudden, 2002, p. 620). This may help to dispel myths about the incapability of legally blind workers, which may help to change employer attitudes towards legally blind employees. Other suggested accommodations included having helpers to assist visually impaired employees both before and during employment, providing accommodations for guide dogs and transportation assistance (Wolffe & Candela, 2002, p. 627). According to Rumrill et al. (1997) employees who are blind suggested that glare guard and venetian blinds, detectable warnings on stairways, carpools with coworkers and installing braille and large-print signage are all low-cost accommodations that could be implemented in the workplace (Discussion section, para. 7).

### *What Legally Blind Employees Can Do*

Employers found it helpful when employees with disabilities were direct in stating what they needed to be successful in the workplace (Golub, 2006, p. 722). Additionally, employers stated that the more blindness competencies an employee with visual impairments has, such as the ability to read braille and assistive technology skills, the more successful the employee will be (p. 722). Employees with visual impairments should also maintain a positive attitude, be personally motivated, persistent, maintain a strong work ethic, seek support from family and

friends when needed, avoid using their blindness as a crutch and view challenges as new opportunities (Crudden & McBroom, 1999, Individual success section, para. 8; Crudden, 2002, p. 615; Goertz et al., 2010, p. 413; Golub, 2006, pp. 722-723).

## **Summary**

The unemployment rate of individuals who are legally blind and the different barriers they experience when trying to obtain employment, maintain employment and advance in employment were identified as significant problems in the literature. The lack of information on career opportunities and the misconceptions about their abilities from the general public, including employers, hindered their chances of finding employment and therefore limited their chances for success. However, once the barrier of obtaining employment was overcome, legally blind employees were faced with additional barriers within the workplace. The appropriate accommodations and necessary technology, coupled with the lack of employer knowledge or inability to provide these necessities, affected both their abilities and performance in the workplace. In addition, the social exclusion and lack of understanding or preconceived attitudes from fellow employees were negative factors that further affected their work life. Together, the different barriers identified by previous studies portrayed a general societal lack of awareness and knowledge on issues pertaining to legally blind individuals and the continued incapability of workplaces to provide an inclusive space for legally blind employees.

Possible solutions to some of these barriers were also identified in the literature. Many of these solutions focused on educating employers and employees on the capabilities of legally blind individuals. Providing the appropriate tools and accommodations were also identified as possible solutions and would require further education and training for employers and employees. The participation rates of legally blind people in the workforce and the quality of their experiences in the workplace will help to measure the success and progress of removing the barriers identified in the literature.

## **4.0 METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative inquiry approach was used for this research project. Qualitative inquiry focuses on the lived experiences of individuals by eliciting their personal stories through interviews or other mediums (Grossoehme, 2014, p. 109). In this study, interviews were conducted with legally blind individuals who have either worked or continue to work in the federal public service. By using the qualitative inquiry approach, a better insight into the lived experiences of legally blind Canadians working within the federal public service was obtained. The objective of this study was to identify key themes and barriers to employment for legally blind individuals and possible solutions to these barriers. Therefore, the qualitative inquiry approach was best suited to fully understand, interpret and explore the personal experiences of legally blind federal public servants.

### **Sample**

Legally blind Canadians who have worked or continue to work in the federal public service are the units of analysis in this research project. Sources used in order to obtain a sample of 12 individuals included the listserve for the Association of Federal Public Servants with Visual Impairments and the stakeholder attendee list of the Commission's consultation on working together to advance human rights for blind Canadians. An introductory letter was sent by email to the respective attendees at the consultation who work or have worked in the federal public service and to the Commission's contact person who has access to the listserve (Appendix 1). The email asked individuals if they would be willing to participate in an interview and if they would be willing to forward the email to anyone they knew who would qualify and be interested in participating. Interested participants who responded to the introductory email were then sent a consent letter by email to verify participation (Appendix 2). Out of the 25 individuals who responded to the introductory email, the first 12 individuals to respond and agree to the consent letter were scheduled for an interview date and time. The interviewed participants were a diverse group of individuals. They came from a variety of sectors within the federal public service, had varied positions and job titles and had a number of different years of experience within the workforce.

### **Interview Approach**

The qualitative inquiry approach correlates with the personal nature of open-ended in-depth qualitative interviews, ensuring that it is the ideas and opinions of the respondents that are of utmost importance to the research (Patton, 2002, pp. 175-176). Given that the legally blind interviewees were in varying locations, the open-ended in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted over the phone and were

approximately 45-60 minutes long. Additionally, the interviews were conducted by one interviewer to reduce bias, ensure consistency and respect the privacy of the participants.

Qualitative open-ended in-depth interviews were an appropriate method for the proposed research question because of its lack of structure, allowing the respondents more freedom to address the questions by providing additional information that they deemed necessary and important (Babbie & Bernaquist, 2014, p. 325). This research method also provided the interviewer with the opportunity to explore topics and address unanticipated issues. The general questions posed during the interviews were meant to set a direction for the conversation between the interviewer and the respondent. However, the purpose was to understand the respondents' experiences in the federal public service. Therefore, by combining a conversational style interview approach with an interview guide approach, the interviews allowed for the flexibility to fully understand the respondents' perspectives, while also ensuring that certain areas were addressed to create comparable data that could be more easily analyzed.

Some of the questions included, but were not limited to:

- What was your initial orientation to the workplace like?
- What were the perceptions of other employees and managers?
- What barriers or challenges did you encounter in the workplace? How were these addressed? How comfortable were you in bringing these issues forward?
- What accommodations did your employer provide to you and which were the most effective/useful?
- What could be done to make working in the federal public service more accessible to people who are legally blind?

It was important for the participants to know that their responses were not associated with their names or specific places of work, so that an honest portrayal of their experiences in the federal public service could be obtained. Interviews were audio recorded for completeness and diligence. In doing so, rather than transcribing everything that was being said during the interview, the interviewer was able to write key points that were made by the respondents.

## **Data Analysis**

After each interview, a transcript was made from the audio recordings. The information obtained from the interviews was analyzed using a qualitative analysis approach. The goal of qualitative data analysis is to reveal patterns or themes from

the interviews in order to make generalizations (Babbie & Bernaquist, 2014, pp. 373-375). The information obtained from the interviews was semi-structured; therefore, general topic areas were identified and a thematic analysis under each topic area was produced. This provided coherence to what was said by the interviewees, while still remaining true to the original content. Key themes were based on the diversity of the respondents' experiences, attitudes and circumstances.

Depending on the different themes and commonalities that emerged from the respondents' experiences, through the qualitative analysis approach, an informed and in-depth understanding of the barriers within the federal public service were obtained. The conversations with those who have had a first-hand experience and the flexible structure of the in-depth interview questions allowed new insights to surface. Through this process, the experiences of legally blind Canadians in the federal public service were more manageable to understand and interpret, thereby answering the proposed research question.

## **Limitations**

This project is limited by its scope. Due to the time consuming nature of conducting, transcribing and analyzing qualitative interviews, not all individuals who received an introductory email and wished to participate in the study were interviewed. In order to ensure that the project was manageable in the time frame available, the first 12 individuals who responded to the email and gave their consent to participate were included in the study. Therefore, certain experiences may not be reflected in this study. Additionally, although intersecting factors such as sex, age, race and other disabilities may have contributed to the participants' experiences in the workplace, specific questions pertaining to these factors were not asked during the interviews.

Despite these limitations, the acquired interviews provided sufficient information to obtain a rich understanding of the experiences of legally blind federal public servants in the workplace.

## 5.0 FINDINGS

### Introduction

The interviews conducted with legally blind Canadians provided an opportunity to explore a range of first hand experiences and perspectives of working within the federal public service. The findings from the 12 interviews are presented below in a thematic structure. This strategy will allow for key concepts to be identified within each general topic area. The topic areas are as follows: entering the federal public service and initial orientation; barriers and challenges; changes in the federal public service; federal public service vs. elsewhere; and possible solutions. Under some of the identified topic areas and themes, direct quotes given by the participants are provided to further emphasize their personal experiences in the federal public service. The chapter will end with a brief summary of the findings.

### Entering the Federal Public Service and Initial Orientation

***“There was no national program ready to look at someone coming in with a disability, doing a proper assessment and then making sure they had the tools to do the job.”***

Participants were first asked about how they came to work in the federal public service and what their initial orientation into the workplace was like. Eight of the participants indicated that their entry into the federal public service was fairly standard and straightforward. In these instances, the individuals were either recruited or wrote entrance tests and participated in competitions and interviews and were the successful candidate. However, one participant indicated that many months had passed from the time that this individual was initially hired, until the time that this individual actually started working. The main reason for this was due to a lack of accommodations and equipment not being ready. This participant indicated that at the time, there was no national program in place to do a proper assessment of someone coming in with a disability. Additionally, there was no one there to ensure that visually impaired employees had the necessary tools to do their jobs. Another participant stated that there were not a lot of support services in place at the time. Three participants stated that they had initially brought all of their own accommodations to the job. However, there were four participants who stated that they had very supportive managers who either asked what they needed or together they figured out what they needed. In these cases, the managers made sure that they received the appropriate equipment and accommodations.

Four participants indicated that they entered the federal public service through Employment Equity hiring programs or during times when the federal government was interested in recruiting people with disabilities. One individual could not



imagine being hired in a general hiring process where the environment was not already open to hiring people with disabilities. This participant also felt that this openness led to an interest in looking at issues around accommodation. One participant attributed his/her success in entering the federal public service to being bilingual.

In regards to orientation, seven participants indicated that they received no special orientation or assistance due to their disability and that their orientation was much like any other employee. One participant recalled being left to figure out most things on his/her own.

## **Barriers and Challenges**

***“There’s a line that’s being drawn somewhere and I’m always at the lower end of that line as opposed to above it.”***

The participants discussed a number of barriers and challenges during the course of their employment in the federal public service. The barriers and challenges that were identified have been organized by the following themes: accommodations; inaccessible technology and inability to access information; career opportunities; misunderstandings and misconceptions; discrimination, stigma and exclusion; education and training; blindness later in life; and bringing issues forward.

### *Accommodations*

Eight participants found that the appropriate accommodations were sometimes difficult to obtain. Having to fight for accommodations was stated as being demoralizing, frustrating and a blow to one’s self-esteem. One individual stated the requirement to get someone to justify the need for accommodations and it was not until after this justification that the employer took action. Additionally, the length of time it took for participants to receive accommodations was due to hierarchical levels of approval, which created subsequent barriers. Without these accommodations individuals were unable to perform their jobs. However, obtaining the appropriate accommodations was deemed highly dependent on one’s manager. One participant stated that some managers would bend over backwards to try and accommodate employees with visual impairments, while other managers did not want to invest the time and effort. This inconsistency across the federal public service was seen as an additional barrier for legally blind employees.

One participant stated that when applying for jobs or promotions that required a written exam component, this individual always asked for extra time and was accommodated appropriately. Additionally, during selection processes, two participants mentioned that providing examinations in a format that individuals

would be able to participate in was a necessary accommodation. Without these accommodations, the participants stated that they would not have been successful in these processes.

An adaptive technology program was another accommodation noted as being both effective and useful. The purpose of this program is to conduct assessments on people with disabilities to see if there is a need for special equipment and if there is, the necessary equipment is purchased. However, this program is only within one agency in the federal government and there is currently no one working in the program and doing the assessments who has a disability. One participant stated that having a program for people with disabilities, without anyone with a disability working in the program shows a lack of understanding. The rest of the federal public service relies on the services under Shared Services Canada, known as the Accessibility, Accommodations and Adaptive Computer Technology Program (AAACT). Although this program does provide assessments, it does not give or purchase the necessary equipment. The program recommends equipment to people with disabilities, but it is then up to each agency to come up with the money to purchase the appropriate accommodations. Additionally, one participant stated that there are a lot of people with disabilities who are afraid of getting assessed to determine what accommodations they might need because they feel that it will result in them getting sent home. They feel that the assessment and resulting accommodations will make them seem incapable and will be perceived as a burden for the employer.

One participant argued that due to the expenses associated with equipment and accommodations, without the appropriate funds, managers are less likely to hire individuals with visual impairments. Another participant stated feeling that blind people were the most expensive individuals to accommodate in the workplace. For example, special computer technology and/or programs such as Jobs Access With Speech (JAWS), which is a screen reader that provides speech and braille output, closed-circuit televisions (CCTV)/video magnifiers and braille displays are all common and expensive accommodations for visually impaired employees. However, without any additional funding, managers have to use money from their budget to purchase the appropriate equipment. One individual stated that this creates a systemic barrier as it produces a disincentive for managers to hire visually impaired individuals. It also makes it more difficult to promote and retain individuals with visual impairments. Additionally, one participant mentioned that within the workplace there used to be a national technical aid fund to assist persons with disabilities. This fund could be used to help visually impaired employees obtain the appropriate accommodations that they required. However, this fund has been moved around and watered down in more recent years.

Participants noted that there are many different levels of needs within the blind community. Depending on the extent of an individual's vision loss and the type of job, certain accommodations will be more beneficial and useful to some rather than others and therefore costs associated with an individual's accommodations will vary. For example, three participants stated that they had either a full time or part time reader assistant/attendant to provide physical help. Having a reader assistant/attendant was noted as being particularly beneficial for people who have complete vision loss and in offices that rely heavily on paper documents. Additionally, for individuals who travel quite a lot for work, having a guide is extremely beneficial, particularly on trips where driving is necessary. However, for individuals who have some vision, magnification devices were found to be the most useful. Assistive technology such as a screen reader was the most frequently mentioned accommodation and was noted as being a necessary tool to perform successfully at work. One individual also mentioned that in many cases, accommodating blind and visually impaired people is much more difficult than accommodating people with physical or mobility impairments. For example, when a ramp is built, an individual in a wheelchair can go in and out of a building without any problems. These types of accommodations are structural and permanent. However, accommodations for people with visual impairments are constantly changing because information technology is constantly changing. Email systems, word processing systems and operating systems are continually being upgraded, which causes the whole environment to change and as a result, accommodations are forced to keep up.

Teleworking was an accommodation mentioned by five participants who had mixed responses. One individual stated that teleworking was a great opportunity and accommodation. This individual preferred teleworking to commuting to work and stated that teleworking eliminated the additional stress of going back and forth to work, which allowed this individual to work longer. If teleworking was not a provided accommodation, this participant might not have been able to continue working or might have taken early retirement. Two other respondents felt that it either provided no additional benefit, or that it would provide additional challenges. One of these interviewees stated that teleworking is not always a useful accommodation and is highly dependent on one's role in the workplace. For example, this individual stated that as a manager, teleworking would not be a practical option. This person also stated that as a person with a disability, one of the most effective ways to reduce misconceptions about your abilities is to demonstrate them in person. Therefore, being displaced from the office would make it challenging to overcome these perceptions. There was also one respondent who experienced difficulties in obtaining the approval to telework, while

another individual, who although never experienced any difficulties in obtaining approval, had a personal preference of working in the office.

*Inaccessible Technology and Inability to Access Information*

***“Because of the Donna Jodhan court case I can tell you that I can comfortably navigate most external government web pages, but internally, it’s the Wild Wild West.”***

One of the biggest barriers identified by all respondents was the lack of accessible systems internally. Individuals found that even with their voice-activated software and adaptive technology, they are still unable to access certain internal systems. Four participants made reference to the Jodhan case and how because of that case, all Government of Canada’s external sites, documents, online forums, etc., are required to meet international standards of accessibility. However, there are still many inaccessible internal applications and programs within the federal government that people with visual impairments struggle with everyday. For example, the government’s travel system, leave system and document repository system are not fully accessible. Additionally, seven interviewees made reference to the government’s new pay system that was recently implemented called Phoenix, which is also not accessible. Participants discussed the stress that goes along with trying to use inaccessible technology that is essential for job performance. As a result, these accessibility issues can cause visually impaired employees to perform certain tasks at a slower pace than their sighted counterparts.

Nine participants stated that the government continues to implement technology that is inaccessible and either nothing is done to address it or people say they will look into it but then they never do. Over the years one individual had been told several times that because there is no obligation to make internal systems accessible, the inaccessible systems would continue to be used. One participant also mentioned that the attempted workarounds due to the inaccessible systems are mediocre at best. Additionally, people continue to design technology without accessibility and usability in mind and if these two components continue to be an afterthought, they will also continue to be the biggest barriers for blind employees going forward. However, there are cases where accessible and usable technology has been designed but federal public servants are unable to use them. For example, three participants mentioned that most people within the federal government use a Blackberry, despite the fact that they are largely inaccessible and while alternative accessible devices such as iPhones and smartphones do exist, security concerns prevent these devices from being used by government employees. Therefore in many cases, legally blind employees are faced with either using an inaccessible Blackberry device or not using any phone at all.

One respondent stated that information is power. Therefore, a person with a visual impairment who does not have access to information because of inaccessible technology becomes powerless and ineffectual. As a result, this individual stated that there are a lot of blind people who continue to do their job and pretend they have access to information even though they don't because they don't want to be seen as powerless and outside the realm of operations. In addition to access to information as an accessibility barrier, two individuals mentioned barriers with regards to access to buildings. For example, for one participant some of the biggest accessibility barriers had to do with the physical work environment, such as inaudible elevators and the design of the workspace. Another participant stated that the building this person currently works in is very difficult to navigate and while it may meet minimum standards of accessibility, it is not necessarily usable.

### *Career Opportunities*

***“So it seems that once you got hired, you were left in that position, basically an entry level position and you really didn't get much assistance in moving any further.”***

Six participants noted that although the blind community is one of the most highly educated communities, it is also the worst employed and most underemployed. Participants gave numerous examples of blind individuals they knew who were working in jobs that were inadequate to their educational levels and skills. One participant stated that his/her own personal position is currently classified as one level below what someone doing these duties or activities would normally receive.

The *Employment Equity Act*, passed in 1986, was intended to help hire and retain people with disabilities; however, one participant did not recall a single instance where the *Act* was ever used to help promote a person with a disability. This participant stated that once individuals with visual impairments were hired, they were left in that position, which was usually an entry level position and not much assistance was given in moving any further. This individual also stated that if you were to look at where people with disabilities are now within the federal government, compared to when they were initially hired, you would see that they are either at the same level or have maybe moved up one or two levels. Another individual felt that the ability to maintain his/her current position was based on the fact that it was obtained before this individual lost his/her eyesight.

Ten interviewees stated that there were roadblocks put in front of them when trying to obtain management positions or other career advancements. They found that it is often difficult for staff to accept them as managers and to win the approval of management due to misconceptions about their abilities. One individual stated that

if it were not for his/her disability, this individual would most likely be at a higher position and would have finished his/her career at the director level, while another participant stated his/her progression would have probably been faster. Three interviewees stated that it is difficult to not only move vertically in the federal public service, but also horizontally. Different jobs across the federal government have different duties, which means that there may be different accommodations required to do the job. Additionally, different departments may be less flexible or may have less support. This inconsistency and fear of the unknown makes it difficult for individuals with visual impairments to move around in the federal public service.

One participant who received promotions noted that it was because this individual had earned them, meaning that this individual had written the required exams and was deemed the successful candidate. This participant attributed his/her success and work ethic to the support of his/her family and to the mentality that this individual was born and raised with, which was to determine your own limits. Although all participants were well aware of their abilities and stated that there are certain jobs that are particularly visual that they know they would be unable to do, one individual stated that the inability to obtain most jobs has very little to do with the disability itself and is more to do with finding ways to mitigate the impact of the disability.

#### *Misunderstandings and Misconceptions*

##### ***“My biggest barrier is other people’s attitudes.”***

Ten respondents stated that there are still a lot of misunderstandings and misconceptions about individuals with visual impairments from both fellow employees and managers in the federal public service. These participants mentioned that there is a lack of understanding from managers on what it means to have a person with a disability work for them and/or what needs to be done to accommodate them. For example, one individual once had a boss who knew nothing about the duty to accommodate or an employer’s obligations up to the point of undue hardship. There is also a lack of knowledge on what the appropriate technology and accommodations are and how to obtain them. One participant mentioned that there are some people in the workplace who just don’t care or bother to learn about accommodations or people with disabilities because they know they are only going to have to deal with them every so often. However, one individual stated that determining the appropriate accommodations and understanding what to do was a learning process for both themselves and this individual’s employer.

There is also a lack of knowledge on accessibility. One individual stated that most departments in the federal government wouldn't know how to assess a workplace to make sure that its websites and documents are accessible and most don't have the knowledge on how to make documents accessible. Another individual stated that currently one of the biggest barriers is that there is no systemic program or timeline in place to ensure that everything is made accessible within all departments and agencies. There are pockets of people trying to do things here and there but nothing is really moving forward and nothing is being done systemically. Agencies tend to work in silos and as a result, multiple agencies end up working on similar issues without sharing any information.

Ten participants stated that there is a lack of knowledge and understanding of their abilities and capabilities. One individual stated that the biggest barrier was found in other people's attitudes. Three individuals recalled experiences where their managers or directors demonstrated a lack of faith in their ability to do certain tasks. These participants found that in some cases, managers would just assume that visually impaired individuals were unable to do certain things, rather than asking and letting the individual figure out what they can and cannot do for themselves. Particularly during the hiring process, one individual stated feeling that there was some level of silent questioning in regards to how this individual was able to perform certain tasks. Additionally, one participant stated that there is often the assumption that if you can't see then you can't read, which simply is not true. As a result of these misconceptions, two individuals stated that they usually don't disclose that they have a disability until they are asked to come in for an interview. Another individual stated that during the course of his/her employment this individual had always been quite private and much of this was attributed to not wanting to be underestimated. Therefore, one of the biggest obstacles and barriers in the federal public service is overcoming people's perceptions of blindness and preconceived notions about what a visually impaired individual's limitations are. However, a lot of these misconceptions are based out of fear, a lack of experience and a lack of contact with individuals with visual impairments. In order to ease people's concerns, four participants stated that they often feel the need to prove themselves and their worth. One individual felt that his/her manager and fellow employees did not realize the extra effort and additional hours this individual puts in to be successful.

#### *Discrimination, Stigma and Exclusion*

***“What I felt is that if I told managers when I was applying for jobs that I was legally blind, they wouldn't hire me.”***

Seven participants stated that they had experienced some form of discrimination at least once during their time in the federal public service. One individual stated that the current corporate culture is not inclusive or supportive of people with disabilities. For example, one participant was told directly that she/he could not be hired because the employer did not think that this individual could do the job due to this individual's visual impairment. The other individuals experienced less direct forms of discrimination and stated that they often felt they were not hired for certain jobs or that employers did not want them because of their visual impairment. One individual stated that handing an employer his/her resume with his/her disability on it, versus without it, elicits two very different reactions. Another individual stated that there were many blind individuals who would show up for an interview, but as soon as they walked through the door with their guide dog, something would come up and they wouldn't be employed. Therefore, most of the discrimination and stigma that participants had experienced were found to be much more subtle than overt.

One participant stated that discrimination often becomes exclusion and the impact that exclusion can have on people is tremendous. Exclusion can break people to the point where their self worth is removed and in some cases it can lead to people developing mental health issues. People with disabilities are sometimes made to feel that they are less of a person because the different ways in which they do certain things are not accepted by employers or mainstream society. This participant stated that exclusion is something that many people with disabilities fight against quite regularly. For example, one individual had been in situations where people who were not comfortable with disabilities avoided this individual and would not relate to this individual in the same way that they would relate to somebody without a disability. However, this participant felt that this discomfort tends to change as people get to know individuals with visual impairments.

Three individuals stated that they found networking to be particularly difficult and in some cases it was seen as a form of social exclusion. For example, people often network during meetings when there is a break; however, one participant stated that because people wouldn't always know how to approach or talk to him/her, many times they simply wouldn't. Additionally, the inability to make eye contact around the room and read nametags makes it more difficult for individuals with visual impairments to ask questions and start up conversations. Another individual mentioned that having a guide dog often acted as a social icebreaker and felt that smaller groups and one-on-one interactions were much easier than being in a large group. Therefore, these larger social settings can sometimes place individuals with visual impairments at a disadvantage. Another form of social exclusion mentioned was when people forget to identify themselves when they speak. This becomes a



bigger barrier in larger meetings and is frustrating for legally blind individuals because they are excluded from obtaining the same amount of information as a sighted person.

### *Education and Training*

Five respondents felt that the onus and responsibility was always on them to educate and train their employers on their disability. Six participants stated that there is a lack of training on disability issues for managers within the federal public service. One individual recalled that other than a diversity course, which had a few pages of a handout on disabilities, there were no courses for managers with respect to disabilities. This individual also felt that any educational or training services that currently exist were stated as being understaffed, wrongly staffed, wrongly organized and not given the status to do what they need to do to be effective. Additionally, there is currently no specialized training on technology and new applications for visually impaired employees. One individual stated: "Apple [the company] treats me better and gives me more training than I've had here at work."

Language training was also a barrier for three individuals. Obtaining a certain level of French is a requirement for many job positions in the federal public service. However, it took one participant over a year to obtain the appropriate French language training and evaluation, which was a requirement for this individual's job position. In comparison, it takes one month for individuals who do not require accommodations to receive this training. Additionally, one individual had to personally pay more for French language training than fellow sighted coworkers. This was because the school that the federal public service normally contracts out with to do the French language training did not know how to make the appropriate accommodations for blind people. As a result, this individual felt both disadvantaged and that his/her personal development wasn't considered as high of a priority as his/her sighted counterparts' personal development.

### *Blindness Later in Life*

***"My experience is a lot different than a lot of other people because I could see when I started in the government...so I know what I'm missing and a lot of people don't know what they're missing."***

One individual who became blind later on in life did not have the same training as individuals who had been blind since birth or became blind as children. A lot of individuals who have been blind since they were children can read braille and were taught certain skills while they were in school. However, individuals who become blind or visually impaired during adulthood or during their work life are faced with a

steep learning curve as they begin to learn new skills while they are working. This individual who became blind later on in life felt uncomfortable doing certain things that were second nature to people who grew up blind. Another individual who has been blind since childhood stated that people who become blind later on in life require additional assistance that is lacking in the federal public service, which creates an additional barrier for them.

### *Bringing Issues Forward*

***“Everyone knows if you have a disability you are the last to be hired and the first to be fired.”***

Five participants stated that many people with visual impairments are afraid and nervous to bring issues forward. One individual found it useful to have prior knowledge on the duty to accommodate, as this allowed this individual to be more direct in stating what she/he wanted and needed. Another individual stated that being open about his/her condition and having a good sense of humour helped this individual to bring issues forward. Additionally, one individual who felt comfortable bringing issues forward attributed this to the fact that this individual's issues were probably minor in comparison to others. Two participants stated that the issues that they brought forward were always the same or similar type issues, which became repetitive and exhausting to continually bring up. One of these individuals stated a constant concern that she/he was complaining too much or pushing too hard, which resulted in withholding certain issues from managers. One participant also mentioned that it is more difficult for contract employees, casuals and students to bring issues forward because they have less power and stability than permanent employees.

Filing formal complaints is one method that can be used to bring issues forward; however, four individuals mentioned that the process is both lengthy and unfair. Often it is a person with a disability filing a complaint against an agency and while the agency has the resources and support to bring in lawyers and money to battle the complaint, the person with a disability does not have access to these same resources. This lack of support creates a power imbalance and makes the process difficult, uncomfortable and cumbersome for individuals filing the complaint. One individual recalled a human rights complaint that had undergone three investigations and after each investigation it was shown that the employer was discriminating against the individual; however, it took 13 years for the complaint to reach the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal. Therefore, the length of time that the process takes creates a disincentive for people to file a complaint in the first place. This investment of time and effort has led visually impaired employees to feel that it is necessary to pick your battles. Additionally, the repercussions of filing a

complaint can be damaging to one's career. One participant gave an example of a legally blind employee who after filing a human rights complaint was treated as a pariah and was never able to advance in their career.

One individual stated that unions are also unhelpful when bringing issues forward. Due to the fact that individuals with visual impairments are such a minority, any issues concerning them were not seen to be a priority. This individual stated that having to go through unions or other agencies before being able to go to the Canadian Human Rights Commission to file a complaint posed further challenges. These other agencies lack the knowledge and power to address human rights complaints and it can take up to two years for the complaint to go through the union's process. Additionally, unions are unable to deal with infrastructure issues or issues that have to do with the work environment. The difficulties with these redress processes has caused legally blind employees to feel alone when championing their cause.

## **Changes in the Federal Public Service**

**“I have to say in some ways I find it worse, I find it harder.”**

Seven respondents stated that since they started in the federal public service, certain aspects have gotten progressively worse and more difficult. One individual stated that although there has been more talk about accessibility over the years, it has not significantly changed people's attitudes towards persons with disabilities. In addition, the importance of information and knowledge in the workplace has increased significantly, which has led to an increase in the complexity of the information that is being looked at. Another individual stated that the federal public service is evolving without including, causing visually impaired employees to be left behind.

One individual stated that in the past five years, relationships and interactions in the federal government have become more distant and de-personalized. Instead, people have become more caught up in processes and policies. People making key decisions are not humanizing these decisions because they do not have contact with the individuals that these decisions are affecting. They are making these decisions based on finances and the fact that visually impaired employees are a minority. Therefore, the decisions that they have made, such as making purchases and implementing systems that are inaccessible, have, in some cases, caused individuals with visual impairments to feel that they are being excluded from the federal public service.

The work environment in the federal public service has also changed. Two individuals stated that the federal government used to have a more collaborative

environment, whereas now the environment is more competitive. The increase in downsizing has led to increased competition and individuals with disabilities always seem to be the first to go. The federal public service was also found to be more centralized, bureaucratic and stringent. For example, one individual stated that the process for installing software or hardware at someone's desk used to be quite simple. An individual could easily obtain approval directly from the manager or director and receive help from Information Technology personnel. However, now there is a complex multi-layer process of approval to go through before anything is accomplished. Additionally, one individual stated that a lot of the centrally made decisions, such as the new Phoenix pay system, do not take accessibility into consideration. Another individual found that because of the government's desire to be transparent and more centralized, it lacks flexibility, which leads to rigidity. This rigidity means that they are not creating equitable solutions to problems. For example, this individual stated that people in government try to be fair by not giving individuals an advantage, but sometimes this advantage is more of an accommodation that is necessary in order to create an equitable environment.

### **Federal Public Service vs. Elsewhere**

***“If you do get a job as a government employee, you're respected a lot - more than you would be respected at the private level.”***

Participants were asked about other work experiences they may have had and how these experiences compared to working in the federal public service. For the seven individuals who did have other work experiences, either in the private sector or the non-profit sector, their responses varied and were highly dependent on the nature of the work they were doing. One individual received more support and opportunities during work experience outside the federal government, while another individual stated to have experienced very little protection outside the federal government. Two participants stated that their work experiences in the different sectors were somewhat similar, while two other respondents noted that working in the private sector was significantly different than working in the public and non-profit sectors. The public and non-profit sectors both tend to be service driven while the private sector is more financially driven. As a result, the private sector budgets differently, has different competitive processes and different merit criterion. One interviewee stated that performance evaluations and promotions in the public sector are not necessarily based on merit as they are in the private sector. This individual felt that promotions in the public sector had more personal, persuasive and charismatic influences and that doing a good job in the public sector did not necessarily warrant a reward as it did in the private sector. However, one individual stated that as a person with a disability, the best place to work is within government. This participant explained that based on their own experiences,

people with disabilities are respected more in the federal public service than they are in the private sector. Another individual stated that the happiest people with disabilities are self-employed.

## **Possible Solutions**

***“We hear the words committed and supportive - I’ve heard this so many times...but at the end of the day, if you don’t have the authority to make that change or the interest to get involved in that activity, those are easy bits of verbiage that support and make you look good without necessarily committing you to action.”***

The participants discussed a number of possible solutions to address the identified barriers and challenges within the federal public service. These recommendations were organized into the following themes: mandatory accessibility requirements; mandatory training; Federal Disability Act; collaboration and support services; private sector; funding; Canadian Human Rights Commission; and increased awareness.

### *Mandatory Accessibility Requirements*

Nine participants suggested that to make working in the federal public service more accessible to people who are legally blind, the Government of Canada should ensure that all internal pieces within the government meet international standards. This would include legislating accessibility requirements internally and making accessibility a required part of the procurement process for both hardware and software. These participants stated that making, buying and implementing accessible technology is key to addressing many of the barriers in the federal public service. One participant noted that if there are barrier free design standards for buildings, there should also be barrier free design standards for technology. Another participant stated that people would be outraged today if a government building only had stairs and no wheelchair ramp and yet there is not the same level of outrage when the government releases policies and programs that are inaccessible. This individual also mentioned that to make the federal public service more accessible to people who are legally blind, essentials such as audible elevators and tactile map displays should be made mandatory in every government building. One participant stated that instead of just assuming that there is a one-size-fits-all approach to accessibility, information should be provided in multiple formats, such as in braille or in an accessible e-format.

One participant mentioned that everything the government does should not only be made accessible, but it should also be usable. Only until this is implemented will workplaces truly become fair and equitable. Another individual mentioned that

currently, accessibility is on a best effort basis, meaning if you can do it, go ahead and if you can't, don't bother. However, until accessibility is made a priority, the efficiency of legally blind employees will remain minimized. One individual also stated that the benefits of increasing accessibility in the workplace would not only be felt by legally blind individuals, but by all employees. For example, today wheelchair ramps are not just used by people in wheelchairs; moms with strollers and deliverymen that have large packages on trollies, amongst others, all benefit from this accessible accommodation as well.

### *Mandatory Training*

Four participants suggested mandatory training for managers as a possible solution to make working in the federal public service more accessible for legally blind employees. This training would ensure that managers know of the duty to accommodate and what their obligations are up to the point of undue hardship. Training on the skills and abilities of visually impaired individuals, accessibility, disability management and what accommodations are available in the federal public service would also help to increase knowledge, awareness and understanding. These individuals also suggested that this training be provided on a continual basis, so that it wouldn't be treated as a one-off type of requirement. Two individuals suggested for this type of education to be a component of management development programs. However, one individual stated that making training mandatory for all managers might develop cynicism within the manager community, particularly for managers who are not dealing with any visually impaired employees. If they are not currently faced with this situation, managers may feel that they have no purpose in being trained. However, by providing this training and education in advance, another individual stated that managers will be better equipped to handle or prevent certain issues from arising and will be less likely to question the abilities and competence of a visually impaired employee. Therefore, exposure through this type of mandatory training and awareness would help to advance society by shifting towards a culture of inclusion.

One individual also suggested that training be provided to Employment Equity specialists. This individual stated that although these specialists are well intentioned, they are understaffed and undereducated on disability issues. Additionally, another individual suggested that training programs for career advancement opportunities and languages be provided in inclusive and accessible formats for visually impaired employees. Therefore, if a legally blind employee wanted to obtain language training, it wouldn't cost this employee or management anymore than it would for a sighted employee to obtain the training.

### *Federal Disability Act*

In regards to the implementation of a Federal Disability Act, seven of the participants agreed that having this kind of an act would help to address or bring attention to some of the identified barriers, whereas five of the participants were more hesitant or unsure about the implementation of yet another act, stating that there are already multiple acts and mechanisms in place now, such as the *Canadian Human Rights Act*, the *Employment Equity Act* and the duty to accommodate policy. However, as one individual pointed out, despite the fact that these existing acts and mechanisms are in place, barriers continue to exist. One individual stated that the most difficult part of a Federal Disability Act and its ability to address barriers is enforcement and implementing requirements at the minutia level. Therefore, four participants stated that in order for a Federal Disability Act to be successful, there has to be compliance. One individual stated that you can have as many acts as you like, but if there is no penalty for not complying then the Act has no teeth and would be a waste of paper. If this Act is going to be implemented, there has to be penalties in place for violating it, its directives have to be made clear and the accountability has to be put at proper levels. For example, one participant suggested that more accountability needs to be placed on managers and one way to do this would be to implement performance standards and consequences if these standards are not met.

One individual suggested that unlike section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act in the United States, which uses web standards from 1999 that are outdated, the Federal Disability Act should be created in such a way that allows accessibility and information technology standards to evolve. However, much like section 508, as a part of the procurement process, the Federal Disability Act should ensure that companies provide a report on their accessibility. This way if companies want to do business with the Government of Canada, they have to state how accessible they are, which requires them to have knowledge and understanding on the topic.

Four participants stated that for there to be any positive effects, the Act would have to apply to federal government employees and certain aspects would have to be made mandatory. Additionally, one individual stated that people get used to doing things once they are made mandatory and once they get used to it, it becomes second nature. Only then will people's attitudes begin to change. For example, this individual mentioned that when they were growing up, wearing seatbelts and motorcycle helmets were not made mandatory; however, once a law was passed requiring everyone to wear a seatbelt and a helmet, people's attitudes started to change as they began to realize the advantages of wearing both. However, another individual suggested that it can sometimes be off putting if individuals feel as though they have to do something, so rather than solely focusing on the punitive

components of the Act, it should be promoted as a positive piece of legislation. This way, visually impaired employees are not seen as a burden. One individual mentioned that a lot of people within the disability community are putting their hopes behind this Federal Disability Act, thinking that it will provide the impetus for change. However, if it doesn't, there will be a lot of very disheartened and damaged individuals.

### *Collaboration and Support Services*

One individual suggested that there should be more sharing of information between agencies. Instead of having multiple agencies working on the same issue in silos, there should be a handful of agencies working on a particular issue together, where the solution would be government wide. In doing so, there would be greater consistency throughout government and issues would be addressed more efficiently.

One individual suggested that there should be an area within each department or agency that can support managers and employees with accommodations, technology, tools or whatever issues they may be encountering. Additionally, programs and services such as the Accessibility, Accommodations and Adaptive Computer Technology Program should be given greater support and assistance so that it can continue to make things accessible and easier for federal public servants with disabilities. Having these kinds of support services would greatly benefit visually impaired employees because it would reduce time spent on figuring out their technology, which would increase their efficiency at work. One participant also suggested that every department should be mandated to have a persons with disability network, which would report people's issues. This would give visually impaired employees a chance to have their voices heard, which would comply with the principle of "Nothing about us without us".

### *Private Sector*

In order to become more innovative with accessible technology, one individual suggested for collaborations to be made with the private sector. This would help visually impaired employees maximize the potential of accessible technologies that could be used in the workplace. However, another individual suggested for the Government of Canada to stop doing business with the private sector until they hire a certain percentage of individuals with disabilities. If people with disabilities are working in both the public and private sector, managers and employees at all levels will become more comfortable because it will start to be considered the norm. Working with individuals with disabilities will no longer be seen as a



phenomena or an anomaly, which will help to break the psychological and societal barriers that currently exist.

### *Funding*

One participant stated that there is a need to have some kind of funding in each department to offset the costs of accommodations from manager's budgets. Not only would this remove the systemic barrier of added expenses when hiring individuals with visual impairments, but it would make the process of obtaining accommodations much more efficient. This individual stated that having a central fund in each department to support employees with accommodations prevents individuals from having to rationalize accommodations up their chain of command. However, while a duty to accommodate fund or technical aid fund doesn't solve or address every barrier, it would reduce difficulties legally blind employees currently face when obtaining accommodations.

### *Canadian Human Rights Commission*

One participant suggested that the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC) could also help to address some of the identified barriers, particularly in regards to the accessibility of internal applications and programs. This participant suggested for the CHRC to conduct audits on departments, which would force departments to put the appropriate accessibility measures in place. This individual also noted that these measures wouldn't be simple workarounds. The CHRC could create a timeline for departments and agencies to make the necessary changes, while also having reports coming in and conducting audits every year to check progress and ensure compliance. However, before the CHRC can begin to conduct audits on other departments and agencies, this individual suggested that the CHRC ensure that their own systems are made accessible.

### *Increased Awareness*

One individual suggested that there might need to be a public court case, a human rights complaint or some sort of class action by the CHRC to bring attention to these barriers and to hold the government accountable for allowing these barriers to continue in the workplace. Another individual found that bringing attention and awareness to these issues is helpful because it increases people's understanding, which then allows these issues to be addressed. Additionally, for the government to retroactively fix anything, one participant stated that there would have to be some level of public outcry and public sympathy.

## Summary

The participants had varied experiences while working in the federal public service; however, several reoccurring themes were identified. Many of the barriers and challenges that were mentioned centered on inaccessible technology, particularly internal programs and systems within government that are inaccessible, as well as the inability to access information and difficulties in obtaining the appropriate accommodations. Participants discussed the roadblocks they encountered when trying to advance in their careers, current and existing misunderstandings and misconceptions about their abilities, and the lack of knowledge or education and training in the workplace on their disability. Participants also discussed additional difficulties when trying to bring any of these issues forward. The existing redress processes were found to be lengthy, complex and discouraging to legally blind employees. Additionally, after a brief discussion on changes in the federal public service, many participants found it to be more competitive, bureaucratic and process driven, causing certain aspects to be more difficult for visually impaired employees.

The participants made quite a few recommendations to address some of the identified barriers. Participants suggested that certain accessibility requirements should be made mandatory, such as ensuring that all internal systems within government are accessible and for accessibility to be a required part of the procurement process. It was also suggested that mandatory training for managers would help to increase knowledge and understanding on issues pertaining to visually impaired employees, which would reduce misconceptions and discrimination in the workplace. Another possible solution discussed in greater detail was the implementation of a Federal Disability Act. Participants stated that in order for this Act to be successful there would have to be compliance, accountability and certain aspects would have to be made mandatory. The Canadian Human Rights Commission and its ability to conduct audits on departments was one suggested method to ensure compliance. Additionally, it was suggested for there to be more collaboration between agencies and with the private sector, and greater support services and funding in each department.

## 6.0 DISCUSSION

### Introduction

The original objective of the project was to understand the experiences of legally blind Canadians who work or have worked within the federal public service in order to identify barriers that continue to exist and provide recommendations on what can be done to address these barriers. It aimed to provide a more thorough and deeper understanding of the experiences that legally blind Canadians have when both obtaining and maintaining employment. The findings from the interviews and the literature review provided insight into several major themes that hinder or prevent employment, as well as possible solutions to address some of these barriers. This chapter integrates the findings from the interviews with the literature reviewed. The chapter will begin with a discussion on the key barriers to employment for legally blind individuals, followed by a discussion on the possible solutions to address these barriers. The chapter will conclude with a summary.

### Barriers

A number of barriers to employment were identified in both the literature review and the findings. However, the following four themes were prevalent and common to both the literature and findings: underemployment and career opportunities; accommodations; inaccessible technology and inability to access information; and social factors. Together, these barriers help to portray the difficulties that legally blind individuals experience when both obtaining and maintaining employment.

#### *Underemployment and Career Opportunities*

The findings and literature recognized unemployment and underemployment as a significant barrier for legally blind individuals. The literature found legally blind individuals to be significantly less satisfied with their career development than people with no visual impairments (Gillies, Knight, & Baglioni, 1998, pp. 397-407), and were reported feeling underemployed and overeducated in their current jobs, while also receiving few opportunities for promotions or career advancements (Crudden & McBroom, 1999, Barriers to employment section, para. 2; Goertz, van Lierop, Houkes, & Nijhuis, 2010, p. 405; Gold & Simson, 2005, p. 141). The findings from the interviews were consistent with the literature review results. Participants spoke about feeling underemployed and many experienced difficulties when trying to advance in their careers. Participants also indicated that if it were not for their disability, they would most likely be at a higher position or their progression would have been faster. The findings noted that in the federal public service, individuals with disabilities tend to hold the same position they initially acquire without any or few advancements. Similarly, a recent study by

Jansenberger (2014) found that one legally blind individual had held the same position at his job for twenty years because he did not believe that his manager would consider him capable of a promotion (p. 69). However, Gillies et al. (1998) explained that the lack of career advancements might be due to the availability and convenience of accommodations that are required for legally blind individuals to perform different jobs (p. 400). This was also reflected in the findings. Participants expressed that different jobs in the federal public service have different duties. This means that different accommodations might be required and the availability of these accommodations is dependent upon the flexibility and support of the department. Therefore, moving both vertically and horizontally was identified as a challenge for legally blind employees in the federal public service. In addition, both the literature and findings indicated that legally blind individuals recognize that there are some jobs that are particularly visual and therefore unsuitable for people who are blind. However, given the appropriate accommodations and ways to mitigate the impact of their disability, legally blind individuals find most jobs easy to master and obtain.

### *Accommodations*

The findings and literature noted that obtaining the appropriate equipment and accommodations is a challenge for legally blind individuals. In addition, both the literature and findings identified that the types of accommodations required will vary depending on the individual and their degree of vision loss. The literature discussed that the costs associated with these accommodations can create hesitancy amongst employers to hire individuals with visual impairments (McDonnall, O'Mally, & Crudden, 2014, pp. 214-215; Shaw, Gold, & Wolffe, 2007, p. 3). This was reiterated in the findings. Participants noted that the expenses associated with equipment and accommodations are a systemic barrier, as they produce a disincentive for managers to hire, promote and retain individuals with visual impairments. Participants also commented on the lack of funding within the federal public service to assist persons with disabilities with these types of expenses. O'Day (1999) found that some legally blind individuals reported difficulties in convincing potential employers to purchase the necessary equipment (para. 34). The participants also experienced similar difficulties. Respondents found that having to fight for accommodations or justify their need for accommodations was demoralizing, frustrating and a blow to one's self-esteem.

In addition to cost, the length of time it took for participants to receive the appropriate accommodations was found to be a subsequent barrier reflected in the findings and not in the literature. Obtaining the appropriate accommodations was deemed highly dependent on one's manager and would often have to go through hierarchical levels of approval. For example, the findings indicated that although

the process for installing software or hardware at someone's desk used to be quite simple, now the federal public service has established a complex multi-layer process of approval that individuals must go through before anything can be accomplished. In addition, while some managers will bend over backwards to try and accommodate employees with visual impairments, other managers do not want to invest the time and effort. However, the literature identified both an older study, which found that blind employees viewed their employers as the most important contact to implement accommodations and a more recent study, which found that many employers were unaware of or had limited knowledge of the appropriate accommodations for individuals who are visually impaired (McDonnall et al., 2014, pp. 221-222; Rumrill, Schuyler, & Longden, 1997, Discussion section, para. 8). The findings from the interviews were consistent with the results from the more recent study. Participants noted that there is a lack of understanding from managers on what needs to be done to accommodate them, and what the appropriate technology and accommodations are and how to obtain them. Respondents also found that there is a lack of training on disability issues for managers in the federal public service. Therefore, difficulties obtaining the appropriate accommodations and a lack of employer knowledge on what the appropriate accommodations are can hinder employment for legally blind individuals.

#### *Inaccessible Technology and Inability to Access Information*

The literature and findings both identified inaccessible technology and the inability to access information as a barrier for legally blind employees. One study in the literature found that inaccessible technology became a major source of stress for individuals with visual impairments (Crudden, 2002, p. 620). This was mirrored in the findings when participants discussed the stress that goes along with trying to use inaccessible technology that is essential for job performance. However, a common theme identified in the findings, which was not identified in the literature, was the lack of internal accessible systems, applications and programs within the federal government. Participants noted that the government continues to implement and procure inaccessible technology and there is currently no obligation to do anything about it or to make internal systems accessible. Participants also indicated that there is no systemic program in place to ensure that everything is made accessible within all departments and agencies. Instead, agencies tend to work in silos, which results in multiple agencies working on similar issues without sharing any information. In addition, people continue to design technology without usability in mind and the attempted workarounds due to inaccessible systems are mediocre at best. As a result, without accessible technology and the ability to access information, the findings indicated that visually impaired employees might

perform certain tasks at a slower pace than their sighted counterparts. The literature also reflected this by indicating that the inability to access information can cause delays in productivity (Crudden, 2002, p. 620) and is a barrier to employment for legally blind employees (Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians, 2015, p. 1).

### *Social Factors*

The literature and findings identified a number of social factors in the workplace as significant barriers for legally blind individuals. Social exclusion in the workplace was one of these identified barriers. The findings indicated that exclusion can remove people's self worth and is something that many people with disabilities fight against quite regularly. Naraine & Fels (2013) found that social interactions in the workplace can contribute to feelings of social acceptance by providing legally blind employees with key opportunities to build relationships, gather information about their work environment, network and assimilate into the organization's culture (pp. 208-210). However, the findings identified that in some cases, networking and larger social settings can become a form of social exclusion for legally blind employees. Participants noted that the inability to make eye contact around the room and read nametags makes it more difficult for individuals with visual impairments to ask questions and start up conversations. These findings reiterate a point made by a study identified in the literature. According to this study, blind and low vision employees reported experiencing barriers when networking and getting to know colleagues because building social rapport for sighted employees is highly dependent on visual and non-verbal communication, such as making eye contact, observing facial expressions and body language, all of which are often not possible for legally blind employees (Naraine & Fels, 2013, pp. 209-210). Therefore, certain social settings and social interactions can sometimes cause legally blind employees to feel socially excluded in the workplace.

The findings revealed that most of the discrimination and stigma that participants had experienced in the federal public service was more subtle than overt. For example, participants stated that they often felt they were not hired for certain jobs or that employers did not want them because of their visual impairment. These findings were similar to a study conducted by Benoit, Jansson, Jansenberger, & Phillips (2013), where Canadians who were legally blind felt that employers would not hire a legally blind applicant for a job even if he or she were qualified (p. 979). The literature identifies this type of stigma as perceived or felt stigma, which results from the perception of being treated poorly by others (Benoit et al., 2013, p. 972; Crudden, 2002, p. 619). However, according to Benoit et al. (2013), this type of stigma can potentially be more harmful than a more direct form of stigma because

the fear of being discriminated against can cause individuals to avoid social interactions, resulting in missed opportunities and resources (p. 972).

One barrier that was identified in the findings and not in the literature was the fear of bringing issues forward. The findings indicated that this fear results in individuals withholding certain issues from their managers. Participants noted that the issues they bring forward are always the same or similar type issues, which becomes exhausting and repetitive to continually bring up. In addition, methods and redress processes for bringing issues forward, such as filing formal complaints, were found to be lengthy, unfair and complex. The findings also noted that in some cases, individuals experienced repercussions after filing a complaint. Therefore, the unfair processes and repercussions were found to create a disincentive for legally blind employees to bring issues forward in the federal public service.

Misconceptions about legally blind individuals was another barrier identified in both the literature and findings. The literature found that misconceptions and misunderstandings surrounding the abilities of legally blind people might be due to prejudiced, preconceived and negative attitudes, such as the inability to conceive of a blind person as able and capable of employment (Benoit et al., 2013, pp. 979-980; Gold, Shaw, & Wolffe, 2005, p. 1150; Gold & Simson, 2005, p. 141; McDonnall et al., 2014, p. 214; O'Day, 1999, para. 26-27; Wacker, 1976, p. 28). According to McDonnall et al. (2014), negative employer attitudes can lead to discrimination in hiring, decreased career opportunities, limited training opportunities, a lack of acceptance among fellow employees, lower salaries and workplace harassment (p. 216). The findings were consistent with the literature review results. Participants found that there was a lack of knowledge and understanding of their abilities and capabilities in the workplace and recalled experiences where managers or directors demonstrated a lack of faith in their ability to do certain tasks. The findings indicated that one of the biggest obstacles for legally blind employees in the federal public service is overcoming people's perceptions of blindness and preconceived notions about what a visually impaired individual's limitations are. However, participants found that a lot of these misconceptions and attitudes are based out of fear, a lack of experience and a lack of contact with individuals with visual impairments. This point reiterated what was found in the literature. Studies in the literature suggested that the more experience employers have with visually impaired employees, the more positive their attitudes towards them will be and the more likely they are to hire individuals with visual impairments again in the future (McDonnall et al., 2014, pp. 213-222; Shaw et al., 2007, p. 3; Wolffe & Candela, 2002, pp. 622-624). However, according to Gillies et al. (1998), other people's perceptions of individuals with disabilities is sometimes referred to as a wall of prejudice since no matter how capable individuals with

disabilities may be, they are often considered different and inferior to people without disabilities (p. 398). The participants emphasized this point when they stated that they often feel the need to prove themselves and their worth to fellow employees and their employer.

## **Possible Solutions**

A number of possible solutions to address some of the identified barriers were identified in both the literature review and the findings. The following three themes were prevalent and common to both the literature and findings: education and training; programs, policies and legislation; and tools, accommodations and accessibility requirements. Together, these solutions represent a way to assist legally blind individuals in employment by creating a more inclusive work environment.

### *Education and Training*

One recommendation that was identified in both the literature and findings was the need for education and training on disability issues in the workplace. The literature suggested that both employers and human resources personnel should be well informed on the needs of legally blind employees so that they can address concerns and ensure that legally blind individuals feel comfortable in the workplace (Jansenberger, 2014, pp. 72-73; McDonnall et al., 2014, p. 213). The findings revealed similar suggestions. Participants suggested mandatory training for managers as a way to help increase knowledge, awareness and understanding on disability issues in the federal public service. This training would ensure that managers know of the duty to accommodate and would include training on the skills and abilities of visually impaired individuals, accessibility, disability management and what accommodations are available in the federal public service. Participants also suggested that this training be provided on a continual basis rather than as a one-off type of requirement. In addition, according to Golub (2006), visually impaired employees could help to educate employers about their disability by providing training on certain issues such as how to be a sighted guide (pp. 720-722). The literature suggested that visually impaired employees would also benefit from having fellow coworkers undergo awareness training about an employee's disability, preferably before the individual with a disability begins working, to help facilitate their social integration in the workplace (Goertz et al., 2010, p. 413; Golub, 2006, p. 720; Naraine & Fels, 2013, p. 209).

Public education campaigns and educational programs were suggestions identified in the literature to help dispel myths about blindness, change attitudes about the capabilities of people who are legally blind, raise awareness about the needs of legally blind employees and promote the benefits of inclusive workplaces (Benoit et



al., 2013, pp. 970-981; Jansenberger, 2014, p. 84; La Grow & Daye, 2005, p. 181). Although the findings reiterated the importance of bringing attention and awareness to these issues to increase people's understanding, the participants suggested that in order for any barriers to be actively addressed, a public court case, a human rights complaint or some sort of class action by the Canadian Human Rights Commission may need to be implemented.

The literature and findings also suggested that training programs be provided to legally blind individuals. The literature identified intensive blindness skills training as a possible solution to help legally blind individuals gain employment, retain employment and advance in their career (Benoit et al., 2013, p. 979; La Grow & Daye, 2005, pp. 178-181). Participants reiterated the importance of training programs for legally blind individuals. In particular, participants suggested that training programs for career advancement opportunities in the federal public service, such as French language training opportunities, should be provided in an inclusive and accessible format for visually impaired employees.

#### *Programs, Policies and Legislation*

The literature suggested that in order to address and overcome barriers, strategies should be focused at a systemic level through the creation of policies and programs (Benoit et al., 2013, p. 981; Crudden & McBroom, 1999, Abstract section, para. 1). The findings reiterated this by suggesting that programs and services such as the Accessibility, Accommodations and Adaptive Computer Technology Program, should be given greater support and assistance so that they can continue to make things accessible and easier for federal public servants with disabilities. The findings also suggested that there should be an area within each department or agency that can support managers and employees with accommodations, technology, tools or whatever issues they may be encountering. In addition, every department should be mandated to have a persons with disability network, which would report people's issues. Similarly, one study in the literature suggested that workplaces could create an accessibility committee to address the physical and attitudinal barriers for employees with disabilities (Rumrill et al., 1997, Discussion section, para. 7).

One suggestion identified in the findings and not in the literature was the implementation of a Federal Disability Act. Participants noted that despite the many existing policies and legislation in place to ensure that individuals with visual impairments can participate in the workplace, the federal public service has yet to achieve full barrier removal. Therefore, participants discussed the implementation of a Federal Disability Act and whether or not this would be useful in addressing some of the identified barriers. Respondents stated that in order for such an act to

be successful, there would have to be compliance, penalties would have to be in place for not complying, directives would have to be made clear, accountability would have to be placed at proper levels and certain aspects would have to be made mandatory. Participants noted that once things become mandatory, people get used to it and their attitudes begin to change. However, studies on the attitudes of employers towards hiring individuals with disabilities in the years before and after the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act, showed very little change (Wolffe & Candela, 2002, p. 623). The findings from the interviews suggested that sometimes it can be off putting if individuals feel as though they have to do something, so rather than solely focusing on the punitive components of the Act, it should be promoted as a positive piece of legislation to prevent visually impaired employees from being seen as a burden.

### *Tools, Accommodations and Accessibility Requirements*

The literature and findings both suggested that in order for legally blind employees to perform successfully in their jobs, employers must provide the necessary tools and accommodations. The literature suggested that employers should ask legally blind employees what equipment and accommodations are needed, obtain and install the appropriate equipment at the earliest time possible and ensure that all equipment and facilities are upgraded and accessible (Crudden, 2002, p. 620; Golub, 2006, pp. 719-720). Participants were found to agree with the suggestion to ensure that all equipment and facilities are upgraded and accessible. They suggested that all internal pieces within the government be updated to meet international standards and to have mandatory accessibility requirements internally by making accessibility a required part of the procurement process for both hardware and software. However, in order to ensure that internal applications and programs are made accessible, participants suggested that the Canadian Human Rights Commission could conduct audits on departments, which would force departments to put the appropriate accessibility measures in place. In addition, participants mentioned that everything the government does should not only be made accessible, but it should also be usable. Only until this is implemented will workplaces truly become fair and equitable. The findings suggested that collaborating with the private sector could be one way to provide more innovative and accessible accommodations in the federal public service. According to Golub (2006), providing the appropriate accommodations both acknowledges and validates differences within the workplace and allows employees with disabilities to feel safe, valued and respected (pp. 721-722).

The findings also indicated that there is a need to have some kind of funding in each department in the federal public service to help assist with the costs of accommodations. Having a central aid fund in each department would remove the

systemic barrier of added expenses when hiring individuals with visual impairments and it would make the process of obtaining accommodations much more efficient for visually impaired employees.

## **Summary**

The literature and interviewed participants both discussed barriers relating to underemployment and career opportunities, accommodations, inaccessible technology and inability to access to information, and social factors. A general dissatisfaction with career development surfaced in both the literature and interviews. Legally blind individuals were found to feel underemployed and received few opportunities for career advancements. Difficulties moving vertically and horizontally in the workplace were also highlighted as challenges for legally blind employees in the federal public service. Barriers relating to obtaining the appropriate accommodations were due to the associated costs and lack of employer knowledge on what the appropriate accommodations are for visually impaired employees. In addition, the length of time it took for legally blind employees to receive the appropriate accommodations was a subsequent barrier identified in the findings and not in the literature. Inaccessible technology and the inability to access information were found to cause stress and delays in productivity in both the literature and findings. However, the findings also noted that the lack of internal accessible systems and applications within the federal government posed additional challenges for employees with visual impairments. Finally, the literature and findings identified social factors such as social exclusion, stigma and misconceptions surrounding the capabilities of legally blind individuals as having a negative effect when such individuals were trying to both obtain and maintain employment. However, one barrier identified in the findings and not in the literature was the disincentive to bring issues forward in the workplace. Participants were found to be fearful of the repercussions and found redress processes to be lengthy, unfair and complex.

A number of possible solutions to address these barriers were identified in the literature and by the interviewed participants. Education and training for managers and employees on disability issues was a suggestion made by both the literature and findings. This would increase knowledge, awareness and understanding in the workplace and would help to facilitate the social integration of visually impaired employees. Providing training programs to assist legally blind individuals with career advancements was also suggested. In addition, the literature suggested that public education campaigns and educational programs could be a way to increase public awareness and understanding on issues concerning legally blind individuals, whereas the findings suggested that a public court case may be an effective way to bring attention to these issues. Ensuring that programs are in place within the

workplace to provide support and assistance for both legally blind employees and their managers was suggested by the literature and reflected in the findings. Interviewed participants also discussed the implementation of a Federal Disability Act and what would need to be done to ensure that such an act is successful. Finally, both the literature and findings suggested that in order for legally blind employees to be successful in the workplace, employers must provide the appropriate tools and accommodations. However, certain suggestions were unique to the findings, such as establishing mandatory accessibility requirements, collaborating with the private sector to provide more innovative accommodations and establishing a central aid fund in each department in the federal public service to assist with the costs of accommodations. Together, these suggestions help to address some of the identified barriers to employment for legally blind employees and provide solutions on what can be done to ensure a more successful work environment.

## 7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Canadian Human Rights Commission has a broad mandate to promote human rights through research and policy development. In addition, the *Canadian Human Rights Act* calls for improved access to employment, services and facilities in all areas that fall under federal jurisdiction. Given this mandate and pursuant to the *Act*, the following recommendations identify ways that the Government of Canada can make workplaces in the federal public service more equitable for legally blind individuals. Recommendations are based on solutions identified in the literature and suggestions made by the interviewed participants. Eleven recommendations are presented within three broad categories: accommodations and accessibility, education and training, and support services. Implementation goals within each category are either short-term (1-3 years) or long-term (3-5 years). Short-term implementation goals require fewer resources than the long-term implementation goals.

### **Accommodations and Accessibility**

#### *Short-term implementation*

1. Engage individuals with visual impairments as a resource to test new and upcoming systems, equipment and locations to ensure that it is both accessible and usable.

#### *Long-term implementation*

2. Ensure that all buildings in the federal public service have braille and large print signage where necessary, audible elevators and tactile map displays.
3. Ensure that information in the federal public service is provided in multiple formats, such as braille or an accessible e-format.
4. During upcoming discussions on the specifics of a Federal Disability Act:
  - a) Implement mandatory accessibility requirements. These requirements would include ensuring that all internal processes and systems within the federal government meet international accessibility standards and that accessibility is a required part of the procurement process.
  - b) Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act in the United States would serve as an important reference point, as it requires federal agencies to develop and procure Information and Communication Technology that is accessible. In addition, as a part of the procurement process it requires

companies to provide a report on their accessibility. However, unlike section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, the Federal Disability Act would allow accessibility and information technology standards to evolve.

5. Establish a duty to accommodate fund within each central agency in the federal public service to support employees and provide employers with the necessary funding for accommodations.

## **Education and Training**

### *Short-term implementation*

6. Provide workshops for managers in the federal public service to address the needs of legally blind employees in the workplace. These workshops would be daylong events, spanning several months. Legally blind employees would be involved in the organization of these workshops. The workshops would include lessons on:
  - a) The duty to accommodate and employer obligations up to the point of undue hardship;
  - b) What accommodations are available for employees with visual impairments in the federal public service;
  - c) The skills and abilities of visually impaired individuals; and
  - d) How to make workplaces and information more accessible and usable for visually impaired employees.
7. Provide training opportunities for employees in the federal public service on how to make the workplace more accessible and inclusive for visually impaired employees. This training would be conducted through an information series, spanning 3-5 months. Legally blind employees would be involved in providing the training and the Accessibility, Accommodations and Adaptive Computer Technology Program would provide additional assistance. The training would include:
  - a) Information on how to make documents accessible to visually impaired employees;
  - b) How to be a sighted guide; and
  - c) How to socially integrate visually impaired employees in the workplace. For example, learning when to provide verbal cues, how to address visual impaired employees in certain workspaces and how to

successfully include visually impaired employees in meetings and social engagements.

*Long-term implementation*

8. Ensure that the information provided in the workshops for managers is a component of management development programs.
9. Ensure that career advancement training, such as French language training and management training is accessible and meets the needs of visually impaired individuals.

**Support Services**

*Short-term implementation*

10. Establish an online network of employers who have had experience hiring, accommodating, training and working with employees with visual impairments to help advise other employers that are new to working with visually impaired employees.

*Long-term implementation*

11. Establish an accessibility committee within each central agency in the federal public service that would help managers and employees with accommodations, technology, tools and additional issues they might be encountering. Committees would work in collaboration with one another and each committee would have to ensure that at least one individual with a disability is a member of its team.

## 8.0 CONCLUSION

The main objective of this research project was to understand the experiences of legally blind Canadians who work or have worked within the federal public service. The research provides the client with a body of literature, supplemented by current perspectives and experiences of legally blind federal public servants. The literature review provided an overview of the various themes that emerge when considering specific barriers that legally blind people face in employment and solutions on how to address some of these barriers. However, the interviews with legally blind individuals provided a better insight into their lived experiences. Together, this represents a valuable resource to inform future work to be done by the Canadian Human Rights Commission in collaboration with stakeholders that represent legally blind Canadians.

There is a general consensus in the literature that individuals with visual impairments experience barriers when obtaining employment, maintaining employment and advancing in employment. The different barriers identified by previous studies portrayed a general lack of employer and societal knowledge and awareness on issues pertaining to legally blind individuals. The continued misconceptions about their abilities and lack of appropriate accommodations and necessary technology, limit their chances for success and negatively affect their performance in the workplace. Participants in this study also identified these barriers as existing problems for legally blind employees in the federal public service.

The number of individuals willing to participate in the study portrayed a general interest in the objective of the research project. Participants were willing to share their personal and first-hand experiences in the federal public service and also expressed an interest in receiving the final report. The interviews provided rich information about the barriers experienced by legally blind employees in the federal public service and offered possible solutions on how to address some of these barriers. However, there was a general sense of frustration towards the continued existence of many of these barriers and the lack of action taken to address them.

By implementing the recommendations made in this report, employers and employees in the federal public service will obtain a greater understanding of the issues concerning legally blind employees. In addition, legally blind employees will receive greater support services, accommodations and tools, which will increase their performance and create a positive experience in the workplace. Ensuring that legally blind employees have the same access to information and resources as



their sighted counterparts provides a more accessible and usable work environment and allows greater opportunities for success.

Despite the existing policies and legislation in place, the experiences of legally blind individuals have made it clear that barriers continue to exist in the federal public service. Participant experiences are invaluable and instrumental to addressing the needs of legally blind employees and to the formation of future legislation and policies. Therefore, future legislation and experiences of legally blind employees will help to measure the success and progress of addressing the barriers identified in this report, and will determine whether the federal public service has been made more accessible, equitable and inclusive for legally blind individuals.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 – Recruitment Materials: Introductory Letter (sent by email)

The Canadian Human Rights Commission is supporting a project on the experiences of legally blind Canadians in the federal public service. One of the objectives of this project is to identify the current barriers legally blind public servants face in employment and to provide recommendations on how to overcome these barriers. The researcher, Kimberly Dhaliwal, is a graduate student in the Master of Arts in Dispute Resolution (MADR) program at the University of Victoria. Kimberly is also an employee within the Policy, Research and International Division at the Commission. Eric Diotte is a Senior Research Analyst at the Canadian Human Rights Commission who is supporting this research project.

An important component of this research is to conduct interviews with legally blind individuals who have worked or are currently working in the federal public service. Therefore, your participation in a phone interview that Kimberly will be conducting for this project would be greatly appreciated. The interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes and will be scheduled at your convenience. Participation is completely voluntary and all interviews will be kept confidential.

If you are able and wish to participate in this study, please contact Kimberly in the next few days. Alternatively, if you know someone who is legally blind and has previously worked or continues to work in the federal public service, and may be interested in participating in a phone interview, please feel free to forward this email to them.

You may contact Kimberly at (250) 415-0511 or [kpd@uvic.ca](mailto:kpd@uvic.ca)

Thank you for your consideration.

Christine Short, Senior Policy Advisor

## **Appendix 2 – Free and Informed Consent (sent by email)**

### **Introduction**

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled 'The Experiences of Blind Canadians in the Federal Public Service' that is being conducted by Kimberly Dhaliwal and supported by Eric Diotte, Senior Research Analyst at the Canadian Human Rights Commission.

Kimberly Dhaliwal is a graduate student in the School of Public Administration at the University of Victoria and is an employee in the Policy, Research and International Division at the Canadian Human Rights Commission. You may contact the researcher if you have further questions at (250) 415-0511 or [kpd@uvic.ca](mailto:kpd@uvic.ca)

As a graduate student, Kimberly Dhaliwal is required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Master's degree in Dispute Resolution. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Vakil. You may contact her at (250) 721-6442 or [tvakil@uvic.ca](mailto:tvakil@uvic.ca)

### **Research Purpose**

The barriers that legally blind people face in employment remains an ongoing problem, and although the Canadian Human Rights Commission continues to promote and protect human rights for all Canadians, including those who are legally blind, more work needs to be done to address these barriers. In addition, as one of Canada's largest employers, the Government of Canada has the ability to become a model employer by obtaining a greater representation of people with disabilities within the federal public service.

The purpose of this research project is to understand the experiences of legally blind Canadians who have worked or are working in the federal public service. The final report will consist of both a literature review and interviews conducted with legally blind participants. You are being asked to participate in this study because it is important to supplement the findings in the literature with the perspectives and lived experiences of legally blind employees. Your experiences working in the federal public service will help to identify the barriers that continue to exist, as well as possible solutions to address or remove these barriers.

## **Conditions for Participating**

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include a single phone interview with the researcher. Interview details and methods are as follows:

- The phone interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes.
- It will be scheduled at a time that is convenient for you.
- The interview will consist of general open-ended questions in order to ensure that the experiences of each participant are being adequately heard.
- On the scheduled date, the researcher will initiate the phone call and conduct the interview.
- The researcher will take notes to record your responses.
- The researcher will audio record the interview in order to create a transcription of what was said. This will allow a more accurate analysis of the interviews and will be destroyed once the researcher has finished their analysis.
- You may decline to answer any question during the interview.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study after the interviews are conducted, your data will either:

1. be used in the study, only if you consent OR
2. not be used in the study and be destroyed.

To withdraw your participation, simply contact the researcher or the academic supervisor by phone or email. At that time, you will be asked whether or not the data collected may be used in the study. Either verbal or written consent is acceptable. If consent is not given, the data will not be used in the study and will be destroyed.

## **Benefits/Risks**

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including the time required to participate in the phone interview and making adjustments to your work or personal schedule to accommodate the interview.

This study is considered “low risk”, as defined by the Tri-Council Policy, in that potential participants should not reasonably expect to experience any harms greater than those encountered in his/her everyday life as it relates to this

research. If during the interview, recalling certain information and experiences elicits an emotional response, you will be offered a break, the chance to stop and reschedule the interview, and/or the chance to stop the interview altogether.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include:

- An opportunity to share your experiences as a legally blind employee working in the federal public service
- Contributing to and advancing the discussion on barriers to employment for legally blind individuals
- Providing insight and recommendations on how to address and remove the barriers that currently exist for legally blind employees

Also, if you agree to participate in this study an executive summary of the report can be provided to you. At the conclusion of the interview, the researcher will ask if you wish to have a summary and make suitable arrangements to provide you with a copy.

### **Access to Information and Confidentiality**

In terms of protecting your anonymity, only during the data gathering phase will it be possible for the researcher to associate responses with individual participants. At all other stages, your anonymity will be assured. Neither your name nor the name of your institution will be identified in the study.

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by coding each interview (e.g. “participant A”, “participant B”, etc.) and by maintaining the protection, access, control and security of your data and personal information during all phases of the study. Once the audio recordings have been transcribed to an electronic file, they will be destroyed. The electronic data will then be kept in a password protected computer file.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared during the researcher’s defense of the final report. Individuals attending this defense will include the client, academic supervisor, another faculty member (to be named) and any individuals from the community who wish to attend and observe. In addition, the executive summary of the report will be made available to participants and employees at the Canadian Human Rights Commission.

All interview data from this study will be disposed of at the end of the project. Paper files will be shredded and audio recordings and electronic data will be erased.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and academic supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria at (250) 472-4545 or [ethics@uvic.ca](mailto:ethics@uvic.ca)

### **Consent**

Please email Kimberly Dhaliwal to indicate that you have read and understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you consent to participate in this research project.