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ACE Year 3 Shorter Report

Introduction

Disability and accessibility are becoming increasingly important issues across Atlantic Canada. According to the 2022 Canadian Survey on Disability, Atlantic Canada has some of the highest disability rates in the country. In Nova Scotia, 37.9% of people aged 15 and older identify as having one or more disabilities, compared to 35.3% in New Brunswick and 30.9% in Newfoundland and Labrador. Nationally, the average is 27%.

These realities are shaped by several overlapping factors across the region, including aging populations, rural and remote service delivery challenges, transportation barriers, labour shortages, and growing awareness of disability inclusion in workplaces and communities. As more people age, disability is becoming an increasingly common part of everyday life and work. At the same time, many people with disabilities continue to experience barriers to employment, communication, transportation, healthcare, and community participation.

Accessibility Confident Employers (ACE) was created in response to these growing workforce, accessibility, and inclusion challenges across Atlantic Canada. Originally launched in Nova Scotia and now expanding into New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador, ACE supports employers to build more accessible and inclusive workplaces for people who identify as Deaf, Neurodivergent, and/or as having a disability. Through practical training, tools, and resources, ACE helps organizations strengthen accessible recruitment, hiring, retention, communication, and workplace practices while building the confidence and capacity needed for long-term organizational change.

Now in its third year, ACE has evolved beyond a set of resources or learning opportunities. It has become a trusted entry point for organizations beginning their

accessibility journey, while also supporting employers working to embed accessibility more deeply into workplace culture, systems, and decision-making.

This report shares findings from ACE's third-year evaluation completed by Claire Levin (Research Power Inc.), including survey responses, focus groups, and training evaluation data collected over the 2025-2026 year. Together, these findings highlight growing awareness, shifts in attitudes and practices, and the increasing recognition that accessibility is not a one-time action or compliance exercise, but an ongoing process of identifying, preventing, and removing barriers so that everyone can participate fully and equitably.

Methodology

This report uses a mixed-methods approach to understand the impact of the Accessibility Confident Employers (ACE) initiative over its third year of implementation. Findings draw on quantitative and qualitative data collected through surveys, focus groups, and training evaluation feedback.

The evaluation included:

- 46 survey respondents representing a range of sectors, organizational roles, and regions
- 3 in-depth, independent focus groups with participants engaged in ACE programming
- 155 training evaluation surveys collected over a three-year period

Survey data was used to identify trends related to accessibility awareness, confidence, hiring and retention practices, and organizational change. Focus groups provided deeper insight into participant experiences, implementation challenges, and emerging opportunities. Training evaluations offered additional perspective on the accessibility, relevance, and practical application of ACE learning resources and activities.

Together, these data sources were analyzed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and areas of impact across organizations and sectors. The findings presented in this report reflect both measurable outcomes and participant experiences, providing a broader understanding of how accessibility learning and practice are evolving within workplaces across Atlantic Canada.

From Intention to Action: What Meaningful Change Really Looks Like

For many organizations, the journey with ACE begins with intention. A desire to be more inclusive. A recognition that something needs to change.

What emerges across both the survey and focus groups is that this intention is beginning to translate into action, but not in a uniform way.

For some organizations, particularly smaller or early-stage ones, the work is still taking shape:

“Currently my business is a small, early stage start up so policies and procedures are still to be developed... my intent is to continue to hire people with disabilities.”

For others, the shift is more structural. Accessibility is no longer something addressed case by case. It is being built into systems:

“It establishes a truly inclusive system, not just one-off accommodations.”

Focus group participants bring this shift to life with concrete examples of changed practices:

“We send interview questions ahead of time and ask about accommodation needs.”

Across both data sources, there is clear movement from reactive to proactive approaches. Organizations are beginning to design for accessibility rather than respond to it after the fact.

This includes the adoption of universal design practices:

“We incorporate universal design into the workplace... adjustable desks, screen-reader-compatible digital tools, and flexible scheduling, benefiting all employees.”

And, in some cases, more holistic supports:

“We have launched a peer mentoring program that pairs newly hired employees with disabilities with experienced employees... reducing feelings of isolation.”

At the same time, there is honesty in the data about where change has not yet happened:

“Nothing yet... but hopefully soon!”

These responses are not outliers. They are part of a broader pattern. The sector is in transition. ACE is helping move organizations forward, but they are moving at different speeds.

Summary insight:

Organizations are shifting from intention to action, with early but meaningful movement toward proactive, system-level approaches to accessibility. Progress is uneven, but the direction is clear.

The Power of Practical, Trusted Resources

One of the strongest and most consistent themes across the focus groups is the value of ACE resources.

Participants are not just aware of them. They are using them regularly, returning to them, and sharing them with others:

“I use the resource hub, I direct people there, I tell people about sessions.”

This kind of organic sharing signals more than satisfaction. It reflects trust.

Participants repeatedly described ACE resources as grounded, relevant, and immediately usable:

“I always have people look at the resources from this project because it’s local and relevant.”

“The format is very engaging and digestible... easy to apply right away and integrate into work.”

Survey data reinforces this in a different way. Participants highlight the flexibility and accessibility of training as a key strength:

“Greater ability to offer training (flexible, free).”

Together, these insights point to something important. ACE is not just delivering information. It is providing tools that fit into real workflows, real time constraints, and real organizational contexts.

Many participants described the resource hub as something they return to over time:

“I like to have a big toolbox that I can access.”

This ongoing engagement matters. It reflects a shift from one-time training toward continuous learning and application.

Summary insight:

ACE resources are trusted because they are practical, local, and easy to apply. They are being actively used and shared, positioning ACE as an ongoing toolbox rather than a one-time intervention.

Building Confidence, Shifting Mindsets: The Quiet Transformation

Beneath visible changes in policy and practice, there is a quieter transformation happening. People are thinking differently.

Survey respondents describe increased confidence:

“ACE’s most meaningful change has been implementing targeted training and peer networking.”

This confidence shows up in how people approach their work:

“ACE training has supported me in my role, not organizationally.”

Focus group participants describe similar shifts, often framed as moments of awareness:

“It has helped start conversations that weren’t happening before.”

There is also growing openness in workplace culture:

“Employees sometimes feel more comfortable disclosing disabilities.”

Importantly, this shift includes a deeper understanding of complexity. Accessibility is no longer seen as static:

“Not every day is the same... accommodation needs can change.”

Participants are also engaging more with intersectionality:

“I appreciate the intersectional lens that ACE holds around disability.”

At the same time, there is tension. Increased awareness does not always lead to consistent experience:

“As someone with ADHD I have been struggling with having support and accommodations.”

This gap is critical. It highlights that mindset shifts are ahead of system change.

Summary insight:

ACE is driving meaningful shifts in confidence and mindset. People are thinking differently and engaging more openly, but consistent organizational application is still catching up.

What Sticks: High-Impact Learning and Human-Centered Design

Participants are clear about what makes ACE learning effective.

It is not abstract. It is human, practical, and grounded in lived experience.

Focus group participants emphasize the role of storytelling and lived experience:

“Knowledge checks, storytelling, and first voice perspectives are key.”

“Having people with lived experience involved in all aspects has been key.”

This approach reduces fear and creates space for engagement. Participants do not feel like they need to have all the answers before participating.

Survey responses reinforce the importance of flexible delivery:

“Greater ability to offer training (flexible, free).”

Learning is also social. Opportunities to connect with others matter:

“Implementing targeted training and peer networking... engaging individuals in accessibility and inclusion learning events.”

As participants build this foundation, their expectations shift. They begin to ask for more depth:

“More advanced training.”

This is not a gap. It is a signal of success. It shows that learning is sticking and creating readiness for the next level.

Summary insight:

High-impact learning in ACE is practical, human-centered, and rooted in lived experience. As participants grow, they are increasingly seeking deeper and more advanced learning opportunities.

From Learning to Doing: The Need for Deeper and Sustained Supports

As organizations move from awareness to action, new needs emerge.

Participants are no longer asking only for training. They are asking how to implement, sustain, and measure change.

Survey data highlights the importance of ongoing supports:

“Professional career counselors... provide progressive support for several weeks to months... offering ‘invisible guidance’ throughout the entire process.”

Focus group participants echo this need in different terms:

“It would be helpful to have tools to evaluate the impact of training.”

There is also a clear call to expand beyond recruitment and hiring:

“There is a strong need for retention support.”

Participants are ready to move into deeper implementation, but they need:

- Practical tools
- Ongoing guidance
- Support across the full employment lifecycle

This includes support at multiple levels, from organizational systems to individual experiences.

Summary insight:

As organizations begin to act, they need deeper, sustained, and more tailored supports to move from initial changes to lasting impact.

Momentum in a Challenging Environment

A defining feature of the data is the tension between strong impact and challenging conditions.

Participants are clear about the realities they are navigating:

“It’s becoming an increasingly noisy environment... organizations are expected to become experts in many areas.”

“Organizations are shrinking, funding is being cut, and roles responsible for this work are disappearing.”

Engagement is also uneven:

“People don’t always want to be trained... sometimes they are voluntold.”

Despite this, ACE continues to see growth and uptake:

“Every day people are signing up, which is amazing.”

This tension is important. It highlights both the strength of the project and the fragility of the environment in which it operates.

Summary insight:

ACE is generating strong momentum, but this work is happening within constrained and sometimes shrinking organizational contexts, making sustainability a key consideration.

Reaching People, But Not Everyone Yet

There is strong evidence that ACE is reaching a growing audience, particularly through networks and word of mouth.

Participants describe actively sharing resources:

“I direct people there, I tell people about sessions.”

However, awareness is still uneven:

“Many people still don’t know about the project.”

This is especially true in:

- The private sector
- Organizations outside existing networks

Participants also emphasize who needs to be engaged:

“It should include frontline staff, not just managers.”

“Decision makers need to take the training too... without their buy in, there is no real change.”

In-person engagement is identified as particularly effective:

“In person engagement like events and booths has been very effective.”

Summary insight:

ACE is expanding its reach, but significant gaps remain. Future growth depends on reaching new sectors and engaging both frontline staff and decision makers.

Expanding the Work: Scaling with Intention and Context

As ACE expands into new regions, participants emphasize the importance of maintaining what works.

Relationships are central:

“Using existing networks is critical. Starting from scratch is hard.”

There is also a clear call to avoid duplication:

“Do not duplicate efforts... act as a connector.”

Survey data reinforces the importance of flexibility:

“Greater ability to offer training (flexible, free).”

Participants also highlight the need to adapt to different starting points and regional realities.

Summary insight:

Expansion must balance growth with intentionality, maintaining core strengths while adapting to diverse regional contexts.

Seeing the System: The Next Frontier

Perhaps the most important shift emerging across both reports is a move toward systems thinking.

Participants are beginning to see accessibility as interconnected:

“It establishes a truly inclusive system, not just one-off accommodations.”

There is growing recognition that accessibility is a shared responsibility:

“ACE training has supported me in my role...”

At the same time, this awareness is not yet consistent:

“I don’t know, I’m not in charge of hiring.”

This points to the next phase of the work. Moving from pockets of awareness to organization-wide integration.

Summary insight:

Systems thinking is emerging, but embedding it consistently across organizations remains the next major opportunity.

Conclusion: A Catalyst with Momentum

Taken together, these findings show meaningful progress shaped by real experience and real constraints.

Through the ACE initiative, more than resources or training have been developed. A foundation of trust, credibility, and shared learning is in place. Participants return to the tools, share them with others, and apply them in practical ways.

This foundation is driving change. Organizations are moving beyond intention into action. For some, this means small but important shifts like adapting hiring practices or fostering more inclusive conversations. For others, it involves deeper transformation, embedding accessibility into systems, culture, and long term planning.

Across both the survey and focus groups, there is a clear trajectory. Workplaces are shifting from viewing accessibility as an add on to recognizing it as essential to strong organizational practice.

This progression is evident:

From intention to action, as values become practice.

From awareness to implementation, as learning leads to change.

From accommodation to inclusion, as systems are designed to work for everyone.

At the same time, progress is not happening under ideal conditions. Participants face growing pressure, limited capacity, and in some cases fewer resources. Engagement varies, and not all organizations are equally ready to act.

This creates an ongoing tension. Momentum is strong, but not guaranteed.

Sustaining it will require intentional effort. Participants highlight the need for deeper supports that help organizations implement and maintain change over time, along with thoughtful expansion that reaches new audiences while preserving quality.

Partnerships will be key, helping extend reach while keeping the work coordinated and responsive to local context. Continued investment in both resources and capacity will also be essential.

What stands out most is the role ACE is already playing. It is not only delivering training. It is creating the conditions for change. It is shaping how people understand accessibility, their role within it, and how organizations design more inclusive systems. It is building shared language, tools, and a sense of possibility.

In this way, ACE is acting as a catalyst. The work is not complete, but the direction is clear. The opportunity now is to build on this foundation, expand its reach, and ensure accessibility is consistently experienced across workplaces.