

METHODOLOGY ABSTRACT

Designing Pathways to Work™

A practical framework for translating lived capacity into viable, income-generating work for individuals with disabilities.

Alison Ainsworth · Strategist, venture creator, community builder

The problem

In Canada, 27% of adults aged 15+ live with one or more disabilities — roughly 8 million people.¹ Among working-age adults with disabilities, only 62% are employed, compared with 78% of those without.¹ An estimated 740,000 Canadians with disabilities have the potential to work but are not currently employed.² The gap is not capacity. The gap is the absence of pathways designed around the individual.

The approach

Designing Pathways to Work™ is a structured, human-centered process for designing real work — built from a detailed understanding of the individual (strengths, patterns, variability, conditions for reliable participation) and extended outward into their natural ecosystem of relationships, routines, community spaces, and local businesses.

The resulting pathways take different forms — small entrepreneurial ventures, customized roles, or community-based opportunities. The form is shaped by alignment, not by assumption.

The five-step model

01 Identify strengths in everyday life

Begin with the person — what they already do well, what they are drawn to, and the conditions under which they are most reliably themselves.

02 Translate strengths into viable opportunities

Move from interest to economic possibility. Identify where strengths intersect with unmet needs in the local environment.

03 Design for fit, not predictability

Shape the work around how a life actually operates — schedule, energy, support — instead of forcing the life to fit a fixed role.

04 Activate the natural network already there

Engage families, neighbours, employers, and community spaces as the load-bearing structure of the pathway.

05 Sustain the pathway

Build in the conditions — relationships, routines, accountability — that allow the work to function over time, not just at launch.

Outcomes

Pathways designed through this approach produce work that reflects the individual, functions in real conditions, and can be sustained over time — contributing to income, stability, participation, and a stronger sense of contribution. Operating examples include **Wags Cookies Ltd.** (founded by Alison and later acquired with an explicit inclusion mandate; selected for the official GRAMMY Awards® gift bags, 2023) and **Sweet Freeze** (a mobile, community-integrated venture).

“Work does not need to be found. It can be built.”

References

[1] Statistics Canada. *Canadian Survey on Disability, 2017 to 2022*. The Daily, December 1, 2023. Employment rate of persons with disabilities aged 25 to 64 (62%) and prevalence of disability among Canadians aged 15+ (27%).

[2] Statistics Canada / Government of Canada. Estimated 740,000 Canadians with disabilities have the potential to work but are not currently employed. Cited in federal Disability Inclusion Action Plan reporting.

[3] Statistics Canada. *Income of Canadians with and without disabilities, 2017*. Persons with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty than those without.

[4] Statistics Canada. Youth (ages 15–24) with disabilities experience higher unemployment than peers without disabilities.

SPEAKER ONE-PAGER

Alison Ainsworth

Strategist, venture creator, and community builder designing pathways to work for individuals with disabilities.

Bio

Alison Ainsworth is a strategist, venture creator, and community builder whose work sits at the intersection of family, disability, and community. Over more than two decades, she has designed practical, human-centered pathways that translate lived capacity into viable, income-generating work.

She founded **Wags Cookies Ltd.**, a purpose-driven business that grew from a home-based idea into a recognized brand reaching national and international audiences — including selection for the official GRAMMY Awards® gift bags in 2023 — and was later acquired with an explicit inclusion mandate. She is also the founder of **Sweet Freeze**, a mobile, community-based venture, and continues to develop new concepts (Revive Pick Up Co., Rural DeliverEase) as templates other communities can adapt.

Alison brings extensive experience in community building, fund development, and cross-sector collaboration across municipal, provincial, and federal programs. She has served in nonprofit leadership and contributed to public dialogue on disability and inclusion at local, national, and international levels — including a Larry King Live segment on service dog awareness.

Lived foundation: more than two decades raising an adult daughter living with complex medical and developmental challenges since birth — the source of the methodology.

Signature topics

Designing Pathways to Work™

Signature keynote · 45–60 min · Plenary

The flagship walk through the five-step model — illustrated by operating ventures and real outcomes.

Start With the Person

Breakout · 30–45 min · Families & service providers

What it actually looks like to begin with strengths and the realities of a life — long before role, hours, or system.

Small Ventures, Big Impact

Breakout or workshop · 45–75 min

How modest, human-scale ventures generate income, visibility, and belonging — drawn from Wags Cookies and Sweet Freeze.

Activating the Network Already There

Panel or workshop · 45–90 min

Mapping and activating the natural network — family, neighbours, employers, community — as the load-bearing structure.

If Capacity Exists, Participation Must Follow

Plenary or fireside · 30–45 min

The gap between assessed capacity and actual participation — what the data tells us, and what the work looks like.

Audiences

CONFERENCES & SECTOR SUMMITS	Plenary keynotes for disability, employment, education, and inclusion gatherings.
FAMILY FORUMS & COMMUNITY GATHERINGS	Grounded, accessible talks for families navigating school-to-adulthood transitions.
SERVICE PROVIDERS & ORGANIZATIONS	Working sessions for teams evolving how pathways are identified and supported.
BUSINESS & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT	For employers, chambers, and local business networks ready to participate in real opportunities.
FUNDERS, POLICY & GOVERNMENT	Briefings and panels on the systems and investments that make pathways possible at scale.

Logistics

LENGTH	20-min fireside · 45-min keynote · 60–90-min workshop
FORMAT	In-person, virtual (Zoom / Teams), and hybrid
TRAVEL	Based in Alberta, Canada · available across Canada, US, and worldwide
CUSTOMIZATION	Each talk is tailored to your audience, theme, and time
ACCESSIBILITY	Plain-language framing · captioning- and ASL-friendly · sensory-aware design
LEAD TIME	8–12 weeks preferred · shorter windows considered

Booking & contact

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