

Successful collaboration between occupational therapists and home renovators

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Home modifications are environmental interventions that aim to support performance and engagement in meaningful activity, as well as living in place in one's home. They can be approached as an interdisciplinary team effort comprising of contractors and construction professionals, health care professionals like occupational therapists (OTs), and even architects and interior designers. OTs play a vital role in supporting the safety and wellbeing of clients in the home, and they can do so in consideration of both current and future needs.

There is a fast-growing senior population in Canada, which is accompanied by an increase in the prevalence of age-related disability (Statistics Canada, 2018). Due to this prevalence, we believe there are numerous opportunities for OTs to be leaders in enabling occupation through tailor-made home modifications. We also feel there is a great need to raise awareness about the unique role of occupational therapists in the home modifications field, as well as to increase access to our services. It is estimated that nearly one in three older adults experiences a fall each year, which costs the health care sector an estimated \$2 billion annually (Canadian Patient Safety Institute, n.d.; Statistics Canada, 2018). OTs can help make the current housing stock more accessible and suited to aging in place (Canadian Patient Safety Institute, n.d.; Statistics Canada, 2018). In 2018, the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) initiated concrete actions to advance the profile of OTs through establishing its Home Modification Task Force, selecting home modification as one of its 2019–2022 Strategic Priorities (CAOT, 2019), and becoming a regular member of the Canadian Home Builders Association (CHBA) Home Modification Council (CHBA, 2019).

At the October 2019 CHBA Home Modification Council meeting, the CAOT representative interviewed three home renovation contractors to get their experiences and perspectives on working with OTs for their home modification projects. This short article presents their spontaneous insights regarding this collaboration.

Ensuring clients' needs are met

Over his last seven years working in the accessibility space, and more than three decades in the construction industry, Peter Hache has been involved in many home modification projects, from homes for people planning for their retirement to those for people recovering from traumatic injuries. Hache mentioned that, when there is not an OT already involved on the team, he makes every effort to involve one with whom they can collaborate. He notes that having an OT on the team ensures quality modifications that align most closely with the needs of the client.

This comment was echoed by Pat Acquisto, a contractor who has been carving a path as an industry leader in accessible construction over the last 15 years: “[T]he reason I rely on [OTs] is because they have the medical understanding which paints a picture of the client's limitations... With OTs, we help design a unique, accessible, and safe environment.” Acquisto has worked with a broad spectrum of clientele over his years in accessible construction, including people recovering from traumatic accidents and people with progressive and degenerative conditions. He discussed how individuals with progressive and degenerative disorders often want to retain the maximum amount of function for as long as possible, and how collaboration between contractors and OTs is integral to achieving this goal. “[M]y knowledge of the medical aspects of clients' needs is limited. It's based only on my years within the industry... I've never received any medical [training], so we rely on OTs to bring that [perspective] to the table,” said Acquisto. He continued on to say that having an understanding of the client's condition is essential to designing modifications that will support them through various stages of their life.

Without an OT's input on home modification teams, Hache said, it is easy to fall into a pattern of simply implementing whatever ideas are presented to the construction team, without holistic consideration of the client's restrictions. Hache also mentioned how contractors and builders have the industry knowledge and problem-solving skills to manifest the modifications to the home, but lack the insight into how people interact with this environment, both physically and psychosocially. “[T]hat is where we absolutely need an OT,” said Hache.

Hache's advice for fellow contractors looking to get involved in accessibility and home modifications is to understand the space, understand the people, and understand that every home, every job, and every client, is a unique situation. Similarly, Acquisto advises his peers to keep an open mind, citing how, in his experience, he's been able to build the proper modifications for clients' needs, but he wouldn't have been able to do so without the occupational therapy perspective.

The contractors all agreed that OTs bring important expertise to home modification discussions, and the people who end up benefitting are not just the clients, but the contractors as well. Each contractor was easily able to recall a time they worked with an OT on their home modification team, and how the OT's involvement was essential to meeting the needs of their client and achieving the optimal outcome. One such example was given by Hache, as he discussed a client who had lost the use of a leg. When Hache and his team first arrived, the client's initial and primary concern was that they weren't able to use the restroom

in the house. After bringing an OT in to assess the space, the team made changes so the client could access the bathroom and independently use the shower and toilet. Through their collaboration with the OT, Hache's team also made structural changes to other areas of the home to best support the client's occupational goals and improve their quality of life.

Planning for current and future needs

The desire to implement modifications that will support clients' current and future needs was echoed by Foti Hatzidemetriou, another contractor with more than three decades of experience in the construction business, as well as a background in architecture and design: "We want to create an environment in which [clients] can live longer in their home and in their community." Hatzidemetriou told us about a client who wanted to return home after being discharged from the hospital, but whose home was not conducive to his new mobility challenges. With the contribution of an OT, Hatzidemetriou's team was able to improve the home's accessibility without creating an institutionalized atmosphere: "working closely with an OT gave us a clear picture of the [client's] condition and how it could either improve or deteriorate over a period of time. We were able to establish some parameters for the design and come up with solutions that satisfied the client's needs." Hatzidemetriou also discussed how guidelines and recommendations for installations are only a part of the solution, and how he has witnessed that clients themselves often aren't able to predict what their accessibility needs will be in the distant future. Planning for the client's future needs is indeed an aspect that an OT could provide in a home modification project.

Collaboration is essential

It is clear for these three contractors that multi-professional collaboration, including OTs, is essential in adapting the existing housing stock to suit people with accessibility needs. OTs are unique in that they utilise models such as the Person-Environment-Occupation Model (Law et al., 1996) to develop their holistic understanding of all intrinsic, personal factors that might impact a person's capacity, as well as any extrinsic, environmental factors such as the built structures. OTs can then use that understanding to build customized plans for each client to maximise occupational engagement, which sometimes necessitates making modifications to the home environment. On interdisciplinary teams, occupational therapists bring their expertise of client needs, and contractors then bring their vital industry knowledge to the table and concretely implement the home modifications.

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Hatzidemetriou, Hache, and Acquisto all agreed that an optimal home modification plan needs interdisciplinary input from people with a variety of backgrounds in order to serve the clients best. These complementary collaborations will be essential as more and more Canadians opt to age in place and remain active in their community.

Professional Development Resources

CAOT recognizes the great opportunity for OTs to join home modification teams across the country and has thus developed a fact sheet to support OTs in promoting their contribution to home renovators and clients (CAOT, n.d.). Multiple professional development initiatives are also available through CAOT to enhance OTs' capacity and expertise in practice areas such as home modifications and home assessments. More information about upcoming professional development offerings can be found on the CAOT website (caot.ca).

Finally, optimal collaboration cannot be possible without ensuring that partners are delivering services according to the best standards of practice. In order to support OTs in engaging with contractors that are upholding the best work ethic in the industry, CAOT has published a Contractor Questionnaire that covers the aspects of the contractor's certification, liability insurance, and provision of referral. The questionnaire can be consulted on the CAOT website.

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