



It's Not Just About Disability: Understanding The Whole Person

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IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT DISABILITY: UNDERSTANDING THE WHOLE PERSON

Key Concept: Intersectionality

It is important to understand that every employee brings their own unique lived experience to the workplace. Two employees with the same disability may require completely different accommodations and there is no “one size fits all” approach. It is vital to engage employees about their specific needs instead of making assumptions based on stereotypes or what you might have experienced in the past.

Intersectionality is a term that is becoming widely used. It recognizes that a person's various identity factors (such as disability, race, gender, etc.) combine or intersect. Having just one historically disadvantaged identity can lead to barriers, but having multiple marginalized identities can increase the chances of experiencing barriers, particularly at work.

Reflection: How Disability Can Intersect with Other Employee Characteristics

Below are a few examples of intersections of disability and other identity factors. Reflect on how the combined characteristics can interact and compound the barriers that individuals can face at work. This list is not exhaustive, nor does each example paint the entire picture of that specific intersection.

Example 1

Olu recently arrived in Canada and has been offered a position at a large-fleet employer as a software developer. He has mild cerebral palsy and did not disclose this during the interview process. Olu has been struggling to find a family doctor in his new neighbourhood and this is creating delays in getting his medical records confirmed. Because of this, his employer is hesitating to identify him as having a disability and then to provide him an accommodation.

- **Be aware:** Because of additional difficulties due to his newcomer status, Olu faces barriers related to his disability that employees with Canadian citizenship who have the same disability may not have to face. As a newcomer, he might also feel less confident in his immigration status or his employment chances – and this can lead him to hesitate to be open about having a disability.
- **Take action:** Focus on the work activities that pose a barrier to the employee, rather than a diagnosis of disability. In the case of an employee like Olu, a keyguard over his keyboard, an arm support, a closer parking space, or a schedule of working from home a few days per week might be all that is needed.

Example 2

Jen is a local hauler with a heart condition that requires regular visits to both her family doctor and cardiologist. She is also a single parent, and this sometimes requires her to be at home if she can't find childcare, or needs to drive her son to appointments, etc. She likes her job because of the flexibility it provides, as she is only expected to pick up the shifts she can handle. However, sometimes during especially busy periods with many shifts to fill, she has heard her colleagues complain that she is not pulling her weight.

- *Be aware:* Jen's caregiving responsibilities in combination with her disability make her coworkers feel she is not committed to her work. A workplace culture with misconceptions about disability and other challenges will be a barrier that prevents employees with disabilities from feeling included and can negatively affect satisfaction and productivity.
- *Take action:* Ask employees who have a disability, and other potential challenges, about their experiences in the workplace. When employees like Jen open up about their experiences, encourage supervisors to address hurtful comments directly. Communicate regularly to all of the staff that everyone has their own set of characteristics – and the company's accommodation practices and colleagues' understanding will help everyone to perform at their best. See the tips in the THRC tool on [Creating Welcoming Workplaces](#).

Example 3

Yannick is an account manager with rheumatoid arthritis. His condition causes him to experience pain and discomfort when he sits for long periods of time. When he first entered the workforce 30 years ago, disability accommodation only focused on accessibility needs like parking spaces and washrooms, so he assumed he was not qualified. Over the years, Yannick learned to make do without any workplace accommodation, despite dramatic changes in the company's accommodation practices. He retired without knowing about his company's budget towards ergonomic assessment, which could have provided him with an ergonomic keyboard and chair to alleviate some of his pain and discomfort.

- *Be aware:* Age can impact our internal perceptions about disability. Generational shifts in disability accommodations in the workplace caused Yannick to wrongfully assume that accommodations would not be useful for him.
- *Take action:* Watch for missed opportunities. Communicate regularly to your employees about what accommodations are and what they can offer to support an employee at work.

Implication: What Does This Mean for Employers?

- Disability doesn't exist in a vacuum. The more intersecting identities an employee has, the more likely they are to experience barriers related to their disability.
- Not everyone experiences the same disability in the same way. It is important not to assume that an accommodation that has worked previously will work for everyone.
- Accommodation involves having conversations with employees about what works for them.
- Lead with empathy. Make sure to check in with employees who need it.

This empathetic and informed approach helps to validate an employee's experience and foster a culture of inclusivity and shared understanding about disabilities and other challenges in the workplace. For more information, please consult our [other tools](#), including:

- A Manager's Tool for Having Accommodation Discussions
- Creating Welcoming Workplaces

Additional Resources

- [The move towards an intersectional approach | Ontario Human Rights Commission \(ohrc.on.ca\)](https://ohrc.on.ca)