

Disability in the Workplace: Hidden Disabilities and Human Resources Practice

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Introduction

Establishing a true or realistic description of disability is not an easy task. The disabled population is a diverse group whose borders are permeable and whose characteristics are often very personal. The impairments on which their status is based can be as unique as their personalities. In addition, social and architectural environments can aggravate or eliminate disabilities. The central issue for this paper is an exploration of the response to disability within an employment context and the extent to which this dependent on the visibility of an impairment.

In order to do this, the research review will explore the way that an employee with an impairment is 'treated' within a couple of organisational contexts. First, it will look at theoretical organisational equality frameworks for any differences in their policies toward hidden disabilities and second, psychologically based literature will be analysed for differences in managerial response to hidden impairments.

In the findings section, recent interview data from human resources (HR) and line managers will be presented to analyse the way that managerial perspectives and workplace policies operate in practice. The aim of the paper is to show that on the whole, traditional HR equality policies and practices are less able to adequately respond to the challenges of hidden impairments and view them as being more problematic and somehow 'counting' less than more visible impairments. For the purposes of this paper the term 'hidden' will include impairments that are either relatively invisible, or that the disabled person may have chosen to hide.

Review of Previous Research

Within any context, the boundaries of that which constitutes a disabling impairment/condition are not easy to definitively capture. It could be suggested that one of the most obvious ways of visualising disabling conditions would be on a three dimensional measurement of medical condition, permanence and severity. At the lowest end of the scales might be found mild, temporary illnesses that few people would label as disabling conditions. At the point that is temporally constant, but still non-severe, might be found impairments such as mild shortsightedness, eccentricity or a predisposition to headaches. Increasing the severity of these conditions at some point would bring them into the company of those considered disabled. Often the three points will be unrelated to each other in the manner that might be expected, however it would be hard to dispute that those impairments that are interpreted at the most extreme end of the three axis are often understood at least by inexperienced observers as more disabling than others. But how far might the visibility of impairments be seen as constituting a further variable? Explorations will begin with an analysis of organisational frameworks and their legal foundations.

a) Organisational Responses. The legal approach in both the UK and the US within the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) is to prescribe a circumscription of a 'disabled' group without qualification as to the visibility of the impairment (Bruyere and OKeefe, 1994; Bruyere and James, 1997; Cooper and Vernon, 1996; Doyle, 1996). Both Acts prescribe a qualifying group based on the effects of impairments on life activities before listing special exceptions and additions to the protected group. Minor adjustments on the basis of visible impairments are made to the Acts in the case of

facial impairments. Most importantly for our purpose, the philosophies that underpin the designs of these pieces of legislation reflect the way that civilised societies conceive of and practice equality of opportunity (Rawls, 1971). This understanding of equality is termed the liberal model and it assumes that equality of opportunity exist in those circumstances where all individuals are enabled freely and equally to compete for employment rewards.

Mirroring the principles that have shaped these employment statutes, organisational equality frameworks place an emphasis on internal organisational policies and practices to ensure that they are free from bias and available to everyone (Cockburn, 1991; Jewson and Mason, 1986). They achieve this by minimising subjectivity in a standardisation of decision-making processes. Special treatment is allowable in as much as individuals (particularly of minority groups) can be specifically equipped with the means to compete.

On the surface of it, then, an application of this framework to people with disabilities, again, does not make a distinction between hidden and visible disabilities. Within less formal circumstances, at an individual managerial level, however, differences in treatment on the basis of impairment visibility do begin to emerge.

b) The response of individuals interacting with people with disabilities. Research which has turned its attention within the disability category to look for consistencies in response to impaired individuals has often confirmed the pivotal importance of the visibility of impairment on employer response. Much of the literature also demonstrates that employers appear to respond more easily to impairments that are visible.

For example, previous research has shown that employer prefer to hire individuals who have a visible disability. Drehmer and Bordieri (1985) and Stone and Sawatzki (1980) have reported that applicants with a history of mental illness were judged less favourably than applicants with paraplegia by potential employers even though the applicants had equivalent qualifications. Florian (1978) also found a preference for candidates with a visible physical impairment over those that are blind, mentally impaired or who have epilepsy. The research concluded that disabled individuals who suffered from either an amputation or facial disfigurement were the most employable candidates for positions requiring responsibility.

Investigating more widely within the category of impaired people again confirmed that individuals prefer to associate with disabled people whose impairments are more tangible. Harasymiw, Horne and Lewis (1976) conducted studies from 1968-1975 with over 4,000 individuals on their attitudes toward social interaction with individuals exhibiting one of 22 medically defined disability types. They found an extremely stable hierarchy of preference of association. The order of disability preference was physical disabilities, sensory disabilities, psychogenic disabilities and finally social disabilities (such as alcoholics and drug addicts) in descending order.

Researchers have attempted to explain these preferences by organising the wider group of disabled people into different disability categories. They have based their findings on perceptions of dimensions of commonality by employing factor analytical type research designs. For example, in a review suggesting a classification of the dimensions of variables that interact with the perception process in the area of social stigma (a term that is often applied to disability), Jones et al. (1984) propose six dimensions, many of which centralise notions of visibility.

1. Concealability. Is the condition hidden or obvious. Can it be hidden?
2. Course. Are there any temporal changes to the disability? What will be its ultimate outcome?
3. Disruptiveness. Does it hamper interaction?
4. Aesthetic qualities. To what extent does it interfere with communication processes.
5. Origin. What was the cause of the disability? Was anyone responsible?
6. Peril. What kind of danger is posed by the impairment and how imminent and

serious is it?

Also representative of this approach is the work by Antonak (1988). Clusters of similarity in attitudes, suggestive of underlying organising dimensions, include organic categories (stressing medical and physical dimensions of impairment), functional categories based on the split between psychoeducational and psychosocial, sensorimotor, visibility, interference in communication, social stigma, reversibility prognosis, extent of incapacity, and difficulties in daily routine.

Similarly, using complex multidimensional scaling techniques that attempted to uncover the perceptual framework respondents use when organising disabilities, Schmelkin (1985) asked his respondents to sort 35 types of impairment (e.g., cancer, mental illness, deafness, mental retardation, cerebral palsy) into as few or as many categories as they saw fit. Subjects were provided with no other frame of reference. An analysis yielded four dimensions that were most important in classification. People with disabilities were organised into dimensions depending on the degree of physical impairment, the visibility of the impairment, behavioural vs. cognitive disabilities, the specific versus diffuse disabilities.

Methodology

The following data is derived from in-depth face to face interview material with HR and line managers. There were approximately 20 managers in each of the samples and their organisations represented a wide variety of sectors and activities. Interviewees were questioned and/or encouraged to talk freely on any aspects of disability employment that was important to their organisation. The following analysis shows that the distinction of hidden vs. visible disabilities emerged as a crucial variable to both sets of interviewees, in their individual psychological reactions toward impairment, at the level of HR policy and practice and within HR equality strategies.

Results - The Operation of Disability Equality Policy and Practices

a) Individual reactions to employees with disabilities. At the level of the individual operational manager, the research findings support the work of those who have shown that a hierarchy of preference toward impairment type exists. Out of four broad impairment groups introduced into discussions (i.e. physically disabled, learning disabled, emotionally disabled and sensory disabled) most managers indicated a preference for hiring individuals with physical or sensory impairments, the effects of which could usually be seen and understood (Woodhams, 1998). Lower down the order of preference, the responses toward hiring staff with learning disabilities was mixed. Although many managers mentioned that there were in their opinion many benefits associated with employing staff with learning disabilities (reliability, personality, ability to communicate, enthusiasm), in the final analysis anticipated problems made them less attractive as potential employees.

And finally, examples of people with emotional impairments, e.g. personality disorders, seemed to be as unknown to the interviewees as they are to the public in general, but this did not aid their potential attractiveness. This type of disability is most frequently hidden, aided by its control with the use of medication. Connotations of madness provokes fear and suspicion (EOR, 1997) and are often dramatically exploited by film directors (Davis, 1996) heightening the potential for the fear factor. Individual managers certainly seemed to prefer to employ and associate with those whose disabilities they could see and even understand, and discriminate against those whose disabilities were less obvious.

So, to what extent may this negativity toward hidden disabilities be translated into organisational practice. The next section will investigate.

b) Employment and Equality policies and practices. The interviews revealed that there were a number of points within employment practices where the visibility of impairment condition made a difference to the way that disabled staff were hired and dealt with. In

a contradiction of the above literature, potential employees with a visible disability tended to be employed with more caution than those who were not visibly disabled. Within many organisations, employees that were unable (or unwilling) to disguise their disabilities were hired under different terms and conditions. The employment of those more noticeably disabled often involved a gradual introduction to the company and the other staff and a slow increase of responsibilities and hours.

Perhaps this was because most potential employees with invisible disabilities chose to mask their impairments where they are able to do so. Many managers spoke of their experiences with disabled employees who had kept their impairments hidden during the recruitment stages only to reveal them later within resultant functional restrictions. For example, in a manufacturing organisation a manager mentioned that instances of diabetes were often disguised until it was shown that individuals were dependent on regular and well timed breaks for food in order that they avoid episodes of low blood sugar levels. Within a fast food environment, a dyslexic shift supervisor was promoted from serving customers and then found to be unable to write reports at the end of each day without help. Within the same environment, new employees masking sensory impairments (e.g. difficulties with sight or hearing) had later been found to be unaware of the buzzers, bells or lights essential to the process of burger production. Others were restricted by hidden mobility disabilities that hindered speed of food assembly.

One of the most frequently mentioned issues of concern with hiring people with visible disabilities is the way that customers may react. Quotations from managers within a couple of the service sector organisations demonstrate that there can be a mixed response from customers. On the one hand, a positive customer response can promote the employer in its aim to be seen as a caring and community-minded employer. Many managers who had employees with visible disabilities spoke of their surprise over the reactions of the general public. The majority of received comments reported by the managers had been very favourable: "I've had some people come up to me and say how nice it is that were giving people like this a chance." (Line manager, Retail, 61 staff, 2 disabled.)

On the other hand, many members of the public can be very ignorant in their views. "One customer was watching him serve behind the counter and complained to the supervisor that his presence was putting her off her food and she didn't want her children seeing him. We asked her (the customer) to leave rather than him (the employee)." (Line Manager Hotel and Catering Sector, 350 employees, 6 disabled.)

One of the reported central issues concerning the operation of equality practices revolved around attempts to monitor the workforce for equality purposes. Monitoring for the presence of a group requires group identification and at this point managers indicated that problems concerning the visibility of impairments began to emerge. Findings indicated that the issue of monitoring for disability frequently remained unresolved.

Due to the nature of many types of impairment, accurately profiling the disabled employee population was found to be problematic. The problem was one of identifying a group many of whose members could not be seen. On a superficial level the identification of the group should have been a simple matter. Most of the sample organisations were operating with written definitions of disability (in most organisations the DDA definition) that were intended to operate as objective and dispassionate judges of disability status. In other words, within the research sample organisational definitions of disability within equality policies, like the legal definitions previously described, did not differentiate between hidden and visible impairments.

In practice, however, in spite of these formal instruments of measurement (their definitions), employees or potential employees were always granted the discretion to decide on their own status. It was reported that many chose to depart from the formal organisational understanding. They were also given the means to do this within the monitoring form.

Out of a range of available monitoring procedures designed in response to the circumstances of other groups (i.e. line management nomination, HR nomination, etc., Jewson et al. [1992]; CRE, [1991]), self-nomination forms were generally held to be the only monitoring instruments that would be reliable and appropriate. There was generally a recognition that the declaration of a disability may mean admitting to something that is sometimes hidden, may be intensely personal, and may be considered irrelevant to the individual concerned. Such an action could be the source of emotive objections. "It might be that they think that its none of our business what sort of a state they're in as long as they're doing their jobs well, and on one level I can see their point." (Personnel Officer, Media.)

Again anecdotes from managers attested to this defence of personal information. Even with an assurance of confidentiality, attempts to obtain monitoring data often met with powerful resistance and failed. Disabled individuals, quite understandably, failed to comprehend the rationale behind self-declaration initiatives and considered such information to be private. One mixed service organisation reported investing considerable effort and time into the design of a self-disclosure monitoring form for disability and had only received 9% of the questionnaires back. The Senior Human Resources Officer from that organisation reported that their efforts could have been more efficiently directed if a campaign of reassurance over the rationale of the exercise had preceded the issuing of the forms. In fact the HR manager of a multiple store retail organisation had achieved 89% completion rate on the basis of just such a campaign.

The unions were frequently consulted about monitoring efforts, but could not see the necessity for employees to declare their hidden disabilities. For example, an engineering organisation in the interview sample had wanted to collect statistics on all their staff with disabilities and had put this suggestion to the union within an equal opportunity briefing session. Despite the fact that the union concerned had a written policy at national level encouraging these initiatives, the shop stewards refused to cooperate on the grounds that information such as this could be intrusive and used as a criterion for redundancies. Summarily, a personnel manager in a hospital was interested in introducing monitoring at the same time as updating their computerised personnel system and explained how the staff side rejected their attempts feeling that the act of gathering the information was discriminatory. In the end it all fell on stony ground.

Another manager had been through the same experience with the union with the incorporation of an additional perspective: "One of the key members of the union is disabled himself which leads him to pursue disabled issues, but funnily enough not to do with employment. He was one of the biggest opposers to this self classification (monitoring system)." (Equal Opportunities Officer, Manufacturing: Energy.)

In conclusion, it can be seen that organisations were unsure how to categorise or measure the extent of disability in the workforce. Although many personnel initiatives to identify disability were similarly motivated (by the desire to achieve equality via monitoring practices), their approaches showed that they were unable to achieve their objectives. Other aspects of employment practice also showed that the treatment of employees with impairments can be dependent on the nature of the condition or impairment that is relevant. Much of the debate in this section is attributable to the three variable dimensions of disability described at the start of the paper, but also most importantly within this area, the dimension of visibility/ invisibility.

c) Equality Policies and Strategies. There were many organisations in the sample that wished to be seen as good equality employers and had set themselves targets and quotas to achieve with regard to disabled employees. In other words, they wished to pursue a purposeful strategy of inclusion of disabled employees with all of the practice implications that this entailed. However, of primary importance to them was the fact that if impairments were hidden, inclusion could only be arbitrary, not strategic. If we are to assume that individuals

will maximise their chances at a job interview and hide their disabilities if at all possible (EOR, 1997a), then it is impossible to purposefully employ individuals with those types of impairments that can and probably will remain hidden.

The consequences of this individual decision could often be seen at organisational level in one of two ways. On the one hand, in many organisations a high proportion of staff with disabilities had been achieved unknowingly. Disabled employees who had successfully hidden their impairments for many years and felt (perhaps) that it had recently come to be to their advantage declared them within a reassuring and open environment, particularly in response to a correctly conducted monitoring exercise. For the first time, HR managers within these organisations were able to count disabled employees as making a significant proportion of their employee pool. On the other hand, employees who were known to have impairments and yet had decided not to officially declare and register their impairments with their HR department, were regarded as frustrating to those HR practitioners who then could not produce them as evidence of their enlightened organisational approach to disability and could not count them toward their achievement of targets.

Discussion

The preceding analysis of managerial responses to the issue of the visibility of disability shows that in many ways the employment of an individual with an invisible impairment is less welcome from the perspective of both individual managers and at an organisational level. At an individual level, the research showed that managers feel less easy about employing individuals with hidden impairments. A lack of understanding and previous experience combined with a fear factor to discourage managers from interacting with individuals where a less visible impairment was exposed to them.

At an organisational level, it could be stated that much of the organisational purpose and satisfaction with the operation of equality policies and practices lies in its potential to be visible to others. Liberally minded organisations place a great deal of emphasis on the ability to demonstrate fairness. Much of the emphasis within these organisations rests on policies being fair and being seen to be fair (Jewson and Mason, 1986). Those disabilities that are hidden or well disguised will complicate this prominence of attention to fairness.

The need for visible fairness interfered with many traditionally operated practices associated with equality. For example, the ultimate objective of equality programmes, being the attempt to achieve a representative percentage and even distribution of a minority group, hinges largely on the visibility of that presence. The data on monitoring efforts in particular underlined this point. Measurement is important to liberal frameworks because an assessment of the effectiveness of equal opportunities programmes usually depends on statistics of employment patterns. Responses to the marginality of minority groups are guided by systems that identify those groups in order that the success or failure of equality objectives can be determined (Schaeffer and Lynton, 1979). Agendas in this area were very clearly directly in contradiction with each other.

On the one side, organisations were very keen to collect data concerning their disabled population in order that they could (reportedly) concentrate their efforts on good practice in response. On the other side, there were numerous illustrations of individuals disguising their impairments and being protected in their right to do so by others that stated that public declarations of perceived private impairments were not a subject for legitimate organisational enquiry. In fact, it could be seen as ironic that the in the espoused pursuit of organisational fairness, many organisations were seen to be treating sections of their disabled employees unfairly.

In addition, the purpose behind special measures that are legally allowable and encouraged under organisational good practice frameworks in order to enable people with impairments to compete equally, is also undermined by the invisibility of impairments.

Disabled people that had benefited from good disability practice (having paid time off for medical appointments, for example) may again not be visible advertisements for the success of equality policies. Justice, even if it is being done, can not be seen to be done amongst this group.

Additionally, many of the alternative business case or diversity rationales (Cassell, 1997; Kandola and Fullerton, 1994) for minority inclusion depend on the conspicuous presence of the minority group. A visible minority presence will promote the external image of the organisation as a good practice employer, enhance morale within the organisation and/or encourage customers from the same minority group and encourage a wider pool of applicants. An invisible minority presence does not add any weight to these particular rationales for inclusion.

In conclusion, the research has shown that in spite of national and organisational definitions that do not differentiate in their protection of both visible and invisible impairments, there are still significant numbers of people with disabilities who will hide their impairments if they can. In a direct challenge to this activity there are organisational practices that require their minority grouping to be open and preferably self-evident to achieve success. And whilst the perceived potential for discrimination still powerfully influences behaviour amongst people with impairments to hide their impairments wherever possible and whilst the framework intended to remove discrimination still emphasises cooperation of the organisation's terms and visibility over privacy, there is little potential for improvement.

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