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Invisible disabilities: Perceptions and Barriers to Reasonable Accommodations in the Workplace

By Carrye Kay Syma

Abstract

The subject of invisible disabilities is becoming more prevalent in the workplace. Invisible disabilities (as defined by the Invisible Disabilities Association) refers to symptoms such as “debilitating pain, fatigue, dizziness, cognitive dysfunctions, brain injuries, learning differences and mental health disorders, as well as hearing and vision impairments”. There are times when employees are hesitant to disclose their invisible disability to their employer or coworkers, which means that accommodations for disabilities may not be requested or made. Accommodations made in the workplace for invisible disabilities can include flexible schedule, special software for assisting with scheduling or prioritizing tasks, or architectural changes such as a standing desk. It is important to note however, that each accommodation is different and there is no blanket rule on how to deal with accommodations.

Introduction

The Americans with Disability Act (ADA) was signed into law in 1990 and was succeeded by the Americans with Disability Act Amendments Act (ADAAA) in 2008. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) enforces the ADA. The ADA was created to help prevent discrimination against individuals with disabilities and allow them the ability to have the same working conditions as those without disabilities. Workplace accommodations are made so that those with disabilities (invisible and visible) may perform their duties as someone without disabilities.

This literature review investigates invisible disabilities in the workplace, coworker’s perceptions of invisible disabilities, and barriers to requesting reasonable accommodations for invisible disabilities in the workplace. Invisible disabilities as defined by the Invisible Disabilities Association refers to symptoms such as debilitating pain, fatigue, dizziness, cognitive dysfunctions, brain injuries, learning differences and mental health disorders, as well as hearing and vision impairments. Some examples of invisible disabilities are: Psychiatric disabilities (Ex: major depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, anxiety disorders etc.); Traumatic brain injury; Epilepsy; HIV/AIDS; Diabetes; Chronic Fatigue Syndrome; Cystic Fibrosis; Attention Deficit-Disorder or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD/ADHD); Learning Disabilities; Chronic Illness or pain and Sensory Disabilities (vision or hearing problems). For the purpose of this literature review, the definition of a reasonable accommodation is the legal definition found in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary: something done to accommodate a disabled person that does not jeopardize safety or pose an undue hardship for the party (as an employer or landlord) doing it. Under the ADA, employers are required to provide reasonable accommodations to qualified employees with disabilities, unless doing so would pose an undue hardship. Accommodations that may be made for invisible disabilities may be those described in *Perceptions of People with Disabilities: When is Accommodation Fair?*, “...including architectural improvements, providing special software for people with sensory impairments, or allowing people more flexible work schedules to accommodate their medication schedule” (Paetzold, Garcia, Colella, Ren, Triana, &

Ziebro, 2008). It is again important to note however, that each accommodation is different and there is no blanket rule on how to deal with accommodations.

Literature Review *Invisible Disabilities: Unique Challenges for Employees and Organizations* by Santuzzi et. al questions the ability of the laws to protect those with invisible disabilities, or help their employers to accommodate them arguing that, “current legislation and policies may not be sensitive to the unique experiences and disclosure decisions faced by workers with invisible disabilities” (p. 204) Employees with invisible disabilities may feel vulnerable when and if they disclose their disability.

Invisible Disability Disclosure in an Employment Interview: Impacts on Employers’ Hiring Decisions and Views of Employability questions the ability of the laws to protect those with invisible disabilities, or help their employers to accommodate them. This particular article by Dalgin & Bellini, 2008, claims that those with “highly stigmatized disabilities such as mental illness” (Santuzzi, Waltz, Finkelstein & Rupp, 2014) may not disclose their invisible disability because of what their supervisor(s) or coworker(s) will think. This is based on work by Thompson in *Disclosure as a disability-management strategy: A review and conclusions*. (Thompson, 1982). The article *Factors Affecting Coworkers’ Procedural Justice Inferences of the Workplace Accommodations of Employees with Disabilities* by Colella et. al (2004) states, “Some disabilities elicit more negative reactions than others because they are seen as more socially undesirable and are particularly stigmatized” (Colella, Paetzold & Belliveau, 2004). From this, it is obvious that organizations need more guidance from current legislation on how to handle invisible disabilities, and employees need more guidance on how and when to disclose. Perhaps trainings could be devised on this sensitive topic so that workplaces could hold these trainings to better help employees and coworkers understand what invisible disabilities are and how to provide accommodations for them.

Depression is one invisible disability about which much has been written due to its prevalence. In their 2001 article, *Depression in the Workplace: Costs and Barriers to Treatment*, Richard Goldberg and Steven Steury write, “Depression is expected to be the second most common disease by 2020 and to account for 15 percent of the disease burden in the world” (p. 1639). They also write that, “People who have depressive disorder suffer limitations in physical and social functioning that are as severe or more severe than those caused by such conditions as hypertension, coronary artery disease, lung problems, and back pain”. Thus, those with depression or dysthymia may suffer in the workplace in ways that we may not consider which ultimately could lead to use of sick days and disability leave resulting in more money spent by the employer. The work of Kessler and colleagues, *Depression in the workplace: effects on short-term disability*, is referenced in the Goldberg and Steury article and based on their findings, “...workers with depression had 1.5 to 3.2 more short-term disability days than other workers during a 30-day period, with an average salary-equivalent productivity loss of \$182 to \$395” (p. 1640). As a reference point, \$182 in 2001 equates to \$247.40 in 2016 and \$395 in 2001 equates to \$536.94 in 2016. This is important to note because if the employer is aware of the disability and makes accommodations, the person dealing with depression may be more productive in the workplace thus saving the employer money. “Depression, whether detected or undetected, most likely contributes to low productivity, absenteeism, increased use of health and mental health services, substance use, job dissatisfaction, and accidents” (Goldberg and Steury, 2001). When someone like a supervisor is dealing with an invisible disability like depression and misses work

often, there could be a ripple effect for those working under that supervisor missing work or becoming disengaged due to lack of supervision (a present supervisor). Ignoring invisible disabilities in the workplace can cost employers money and cause morale to be low and negative. This can lead to harmful and toxic relationships. The work of an employee with an invisible disability may be affected. This could mean that *work evaluations* may reflect poorly on performance that could be a result of the disability and not lack of experience or knowledge of the individual.

One concern introduced by Santuzzi et al. is that the requests for accommodations for invisible disabilities may be seen by coworkers as illegitimate or requested to get special treatment/privileges. Colella writes in an article from 2001, *Coworker Distributive Fairness Judgments of the Workplace Accommodation of Employees with Disabilities*, about the need to sometimes involve coworkers in accommodations because some of the accommodations may affect the coworker, such as with space or workload. Further, Colella writes that how coworkers view the accommodation may be a factor that, "...enters into the 'cost' of accommodation" (Colella, 2001). Coworkers may be considered, in some instances, as stakeholders in the accommodation process although Colella writes that this consideration has been minimal so far (page 100). It is possible for coworkers to perceive that a peer is being given different or preferential treatment at work. This could upset the flow of work because of coworker's perceptions. Colella addresses four considerations regarding accommodations:

"First, accommodation is an individual issue, making it difficult to develop consistent rules governing the accommodation procedure. Second, clearly communicating the reason for the accommodation may present a serious breach of the privacy rights of the accommodated person. Third, coworkers do not have a legal right to voice in the decision about how an accommodation is to be made. Finally, coworkers usually will lack the knowledge necessary to determine someone else's accommodation needs" (Colella, 2001).

An important definition to consider in this particular article is that of distributive fairness. "...distributive fairness refers to the perceived fairness of the outcome of a decision (from *A taxonomy of organizational justice theories* and *Organizational justice: Yesterday, today, and tomorrow* by J. Greenberg, 1987, 1990a), which in this case means how fair coworkers believe the accommodation is in terms of its effect on the distribution of rewards and resources" (Colella, 2001).

Garcia, Paetzold, and Colella, write that, "...understanding of peers' reactions to the appropriateness of accommodations may contribute to the reduction of barriers for disabled persons" (1419) in their article, *The Relationship Between Personality and Peers' Judgements of the Appropriateness of Accommodations for Individuals with Disabilities*. This article mentions the negative 'feelings' that are present with coworkers when disabilities are invisible. Mental disabilities appear to be most often viewed negatively and could be perceived as 'fake'. Lee's article, *Legal Requirements and Employer Responses to Accommodating Employees with Disabilities* (1996), cited in the Garcia, Paetzold, and Colella article, "proposed that both the cost of the accommodation and any perceived disruption by the accommodation might influence the feasibility of accommodating an employee" (1420). Barriers to coworker acceptance of accommodations include whether or not the workload for the coworker will be increased due to

the accommodation for the invisible disability, cost of accommodation, and perceived rewards for the one requesting the accommodation.

An article, by Paetzold, Garcia, Colella, Ren, Triana, & Ziebro, *Perceptions of People with Disabilities: When is Accommodation Fair?*, speaks to the difference between the intent of the ADA and what is often the outcome of a requested accommodation, that others may think it unfair. They offered four possible conditions of how an accommodation may be viewed as unfair including accommodations “perceived as making the accommodated person’s job easier, ...when coworkers feel that the accommodation is making their own jobs more difficult, time consuming, or unpleasant, ...accommodations may be construed as being a valuable outcome that is provided to another but not to oneself, ...finally, accommodations for others can be perceived as reducing one’s own outcomes” (p. 28). This article focuses on a study performed by the authors. Unfortunately, “Results of this study are discouraging because they indicate that leveling the playing field for people with disabilities may have, as a corollary, unwelcome collateral effects” (34). As I mention later in this literature review, educating everyone in the workplace on ADA, invisible disabilities and accommodations is vital for success in the workplace. Perhaps ADA training could become a part of employee onboarding to engender a more understanding environment sensitive to those with invisible disabilities.

One concern about coworker reactions to invisible disabilities is addressed by Colella in *Coworkers Distributive Fairness Judgments of the Workplace Accommodation of Employees with Disabilities*, “When a disability is invisible (e.g., depression or back pain), coworkers may not believe that the person who has the disability is actually disabled. Indeed, coworkers may question whether the person is faking the disability to get an accommodation if the disability is not readily apparent” (Colella, 2001). Psychiatric disorders, according to research, are those often seen most negatively by coworkers. This again may lead to perceptions of unfairness, “When a disability is invisible, coworkers may believe that the person with the disability is actually faking the disability to get an accommodation, thus leading them to see any accommodation as less fair” (Paetzold et al., 2008).

The article *Factors Affecting Coworkers’ Procedural Justice Inferences of the Workplace Accommodations of Employees with Disabilities*, by Colella et al. speaks to the, “Legal constraints that prevent the release of information about the accommodation process” and that this “may lead to negative inferences about fairness” (Colella, Paetzold & Belliveau, 2004). In this same article, Colella et al. write, “We specifically propose that the nature of the disability and the disabled person’s status within the work group will influence inferences about the procedural fairness of an accommodation” (10).

However, not all coworker reactions are negative. Colella et. al. (2004) hypothesize several propositions on procedural fairness including the following:

“Proposition 3: The more contact that coworkers have had with persons with disabilities, the more likely they will be to infer an accommodation to be procedurally fair, due to more positive perceptions of consistency and accuracy.

Proposition 4: To the extent that coworkers’ perceptions of organizational support are positive, the more likely they will be to infer an accommodation as procedurally fair, due to more positive perceptions of bias suppression and ethicality” (Colella, Paetzold & Belliveau, 2004).

In their study focusing on learning disabilities in the workplace, *The Americans with Disabilities Act and Adults with Learning Disabilities as Employees*, Price write about implementation of ADA in the beginning as, "...the ADA put the onus on individuals with learning disabilities to change the culture of work by bringing an understanding of their disabilities to the workplace that would foster a partnership with their employer". (Price, Gerber, & Mulligan, 2003). The study by Price and colleagues focused on two broad questions: (a) How do American adults with learning disabilities view their disabilities? And (b) What impact has the ADA had on employment of adults with learning disabilities in our study? The following themes were found in the results of this study: (a) job acquisition; (b) experiences on the job; (c) job advancement; (d) employer perceptions of learning disabilities; and (e) self-disclosure in the workplace. (Price, Gerber, & Mulligan, 2003). It is important to note that in this study, the authors found that none of the study participants asked for pre-employment accommodations or "requested any type of accommodation during his or her employment".

This qualitative research summarizes points and conclusions from relevant articles, and points to several barriers that may prevent individuals from disclosing their invisible disability. The workplace and/or employer(s) must address barriers and challenges. One serious barrier is the reluctance of an individual with an invisible disability to divulge the disability for fear that that there will be adverse consequences in the workplace. Individuals with invisible disabilities are concerned with how they may be viewed by employers and coworkers and this may lead to lack of disclosure. Another struggle is education. How do we educate employees on what constitutes an invisible disability so that in an employment setting when accommodations are made there is less judgement and more acceptance? Paetzold et al. write that in cases where possible workplace unfairness may be perceived due to accommodations, "Armed with such knowledge, organizations can identify the circumstances in which it may be effective to provide education and training about the nature of the ADA, types of disabilities that may require particular forms of accommodation, and the role that such accommodations play for employees with disabilities" (p. 28).

Invisible Disabilities: Unique Challenges for Employees and Organizations by Santuzzi and colleagues suggests, "One action item could be to develop policies and practices that focus on training and educating supervisors and coworkers about the ambiguous and transitory nature of many invisible disabilities" (Santuzzi, Waltz, Finkelstein & Rupp, 2014). Colella et echoes this in an article. al. (2004), "If coworkers know that a policy exists that *all* accommodation decisions are made by multiple people, then they may be less likely to perceive that any one decision is based on bias or inaccurate information" however, "Organizational policies cannot be effective unless they are known to employees" (Colella, Paetzold, & Belliveau 2004). This points to the importance of communicating to employees the policies that are created must be communicated to employees. Colella et. al. end their article *Factors Affecting Coworkers' Procedural Justice Inferences of the Workplace Accommodations of Employees with Disabilities* with,

"When the accommodation process becomes one that is understood, accepted, and supported by all those involved, persons with disabilities will be less reluctant to request those accommodations to which they are legally and humanely entitled, and more likely to receive those accommodations that provide an "even playing field" so that they can

perform their work with the same advantage experienced by others” (Colella, Paetzold & Belliveau, 2004).

This begs the question, are employers doing enough to let people know that accommodations may be made? Have human resources departments educated employers or are we still relying on individuals to ‘know their rights’? It is important to note however, that each accommodation is different and there is no blanket rule on how to deal with accommodations.

Case Study

Names have been changed to protect the identities of the individuals interviewed for this case study.

Case: Edwina, insulin dependent diabetes

Edwina is a 50-year-old female with insulin dependent diabetes. For this case study Edwina was asked the following questions (answers are in italics following questions):

How long have you known about your invisible disability? *I’m 50 and found out I was diabetic when I was 19, so 31 years or so.*

Were you diagnosed before or after your current position? *Way before, in college, I’ve been at my current job for 20 years.*

What accommodation(s) have you asked for and why? *None, really, just for my supervisors to understand that I have a health issue and that I may need to come in late (after a low) or take a sick day (diabetics can have high readings while ill). All of my supervisors have been very accommodating.*

Have accommodations been made? *Yes, my supervisors and colleagues have been very accommodating, some even travelling with me to conferences, etc. so that I am not staying away from home by myself.*

Did you discuss your invisible disability with your supervisor? Did he/she ask for more information? *Yes, I felt like they should know about my condition, in case I did go low, and so that they would know what to do. I usually over explain, so no, they didn’t ask additional questions.*

Do you feel that your invisible disability has impacted your ability to do your job? *Rarely, sometimes....I have experienced lows at work and its inconvenient and a time waster. It takes a bit for my blood sugar to come back up.*

What other information would you like to add about your invisible disability and workplace accommodation(s)? *I don’t like to think of myself as not being independent or not strong, but sometimes the perfect storm comes along and I have to deal with it. I don’t want people to think of me as ‘less’ or ‘disabled,’ so I try really hard to eat right, exercise and manage my diabetes appropriately. My coworkers have been very supportive and some have gone above and beyond in helping me out with my diabetes.*

Edwina’s previous supervisor, Leslie, was also asked a series of questions regarding Edwina’s invisible disability and accommodation(s). The following questions and answers were provided by Leslie:

When were you made aware of Edwina’s invisible disability? *When I became the department head, Edwina made me aware of her diabetes. She wears a pump beneath her clothing but wanted me to be aware as she does not travel alone.*

What accommodation(s) were asked for? *She didn't ask for any accommodations. Colleagues (women) were already travelling and rooming with her at conferences. We attended several professional conferences where I roomed with her.*

Were these accommodations made? *Yes*

Have there been special circumstances taken into consideration based on Edwina's invisible disability? *Only her request she travel with another female colleague.*

What other information would you like to add about Edwina's invisible disability and workplace accommodation(s)? *Edwina made sure the women travelling with her understood what happens if her blood sugar drops. When travelling to a remote campus, Edwina started exhibiting these symptoms. I drove to the nearest hospital (about 20 miles) in a small town where they were able to quickly stabilize her. Edwina had made sure I had her husband's cell phone so I was able to call him and let him know what had occurred. If Edwina had not informed me and educated me on her condition it could have been a critical situation for her. Being aware of her medical condition and what to look for gave me the information I needed to react immediately rather than assuming she would be okay.*

Please feel free to suggest other questions or add any other comments you feel may be beneficial. *As a supervisor it's important to be aware of medical situations. This allows the supervisor to react quickly and appropriately.*

In the case of Edwina and Leslie, Edwina communicated with her supervisor about her invisible disability. It was important for Edwina to disclose her invisible disability in the event her blood sugar went low and she needed medical attention. Due to the communication between Edwina, her co-workers, and Leslie, there was an understanding of the needs and accommodations to be made even though Edwina did not directly ask for accommodations.

Conclusion

Invisible disabilities are affecting the workplace and must be addressed. Those struggling with invisible disabilities need to consider sharing information about their disability with their employer as well as requesting accommodation(s). The question of whether or not to inform coworkers should be left to individual employees and what they feel comfortable divulging. More research needs to be done on how to create learning opportunities and sensitivity in the workplace to those with invisible disabilities. Training should perhaps be offered at the time a new employee begins work, but one general rule will likely be difficult to implement due to the complicated intersection of federal and state law, as well as individual company policy/policies.

Accommodations need to be made on a case by case basis as there is no 'one size fits all' solution. There may be instances where creative solutions will need to be considered to meet an accommodation. In the case of Edwina, one such solution was her supervisor and colleagues traveling with her to conferences so she wouldn't be alone if her blood sugar went low. While this is not always a viable solution in all cases, in the case of Edwina, it was a creative that worked well. The bottom line is that everyone should have the opportunity to grow and prosper in their work environment.

Helping employees become aware of resources available to them is a job that should fall to the employer. If there is an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), then the employer should let the employee know about this resource. If the employer is unaware of resources that might be

available to assist employees, then employer and employee should work together to identify resources.

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