



Lives and Experiences of Employees with Disabilities in Post-Secondary Institutions

Brian Anthony Calcafuoco

Sault College, Sault Sainte Marie, Ontario, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Exploring motivation and sense of self amongst ability-diverse employees while dissecting current disability policy using an ableist as well as hegemonic lens through the eyes of the employees and managers themselves is necessary within post-secondary institutions. The focus was on creating a unified voice, improving future policies, and strengthening organizational leadership as well as a positive sense of self amongst the ability-diverse population. This is in many ways an extension of a previous study completed by this researcher with post-secondary student participants (some interview questions varied) meant not only to strengthen the rights of this population even further, but also to note any differences in thought between employees and students identifying from this vast minority group. Ten participants self-identifying as disabled were recruited from Sault College in Sault Sainte Marie, Ontario, Canada. From the interviews, there were five major reoccurring themes voiced by all participants; thoughts on the connotation of the word disability in today's world, feelings about perception by the College community and the community at large on disability and those employees who are disabled, why it is challenging or there is fear to disclose diagnoses to colleagues in a professional setting, the importance of having passionate leaders (both in position and attitude) with the desire to be a vehicle for positive change, how well supported they feel (in their personal lives and at the College), and overall recommendations from the participants about what needs to change to better their lives and experiences as well as the lives and experiences of future ability-diverse employees across the PSE system.

Keywords: *Ability-Diverse, Disability, Post-Secondary Education (PSE), Policy, Person with disability*

INTRODUCTION

A person with a disability (PWD) and their potential in a professional work setting can very much hinge on a manager's/colleague's perception of disability. According to Marques et al., (2020), managers with a more openminded spiritual view are more likely to see the potential for a PWD to thrive on the job; contrastingly, closeminded managers who see PWDs as lesser are more apt to feel as though someone with a disability would not be as effective or does not belong working with non-disabled people in the workplace fostering the potential for discrimination/unrest between the manager(s) and many of their employees regardless of their disability status.

Stephen Hawking (2011) once discussed how his disability was not a barrier to any of his achievements and that he still had a remarkable career and high quality of life. Despite some mitigation of discrimination over the last twenty years because of increased inclusion of PWDs in various sectors of the workforce, there still needs to be more opportunities because of long lasting impediments caused by said discrimination through exclusion and hegemony from their non-disabled counterparts. These impediments can have an adverse impact on PWDs leading to suffering, illness, and ultimately create a burden on society in general. If managers view disability as another way to diversify their employment team(s) it can be seen as an asset and advantage for everyone (Marques et al., 2020). Although disability along with its many and everchanging specifics can still be seen as very complex today (Marques et al., 2020), goals and motives of PWDs while working are no different than their non-disabled colleagues; with this, Scott et al. (2017) opine that "Every individual with and without a disability has the right to work, to freely choose their employment, to

*Corresponding Author's Email: bcalcaf@gmail.com

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work in just as favourable conditions and to be protected against unemployment” (p. 2). In short, these principles are at the core of every human being, regardless of their diversities or challenges, to be a successful, contributing member of society. For many PWDs, their ability to thrive in the workplace hinges on having a positive sense of self, which can be fostered and cultivated when managers take a transformational approach to leadership, which can increase confidence as well as job performance (Kensbock & Boehm, 2016). This suggests that those in positions of power not only have an enormous responsibility in demonstrating the value those with diverse abilities bring to a place of employment by adopting a transformational approach, but they must also form a culture where everyone sees this worth, thus creating a pleasant and motivating environment for all to succeed (Kensbock & Boehm, 2016).

Transformational Leadership And Attitude: A Vehicle For Change

Even in modern times, persons with disabilities still face many hardships both in their personal as well as professional lives and “despite their growing numbers [in the workforce], persons with disabilities [PWDs] are often subject to discrimination and unfavourable treatment, even in developed countries” (Marques et al., 2020, p. 2). This ongoing discrimination as well as treatment demonstrates the need for change in various professional and personal settings for the ability-diverse. Transformational leadership and attitude are imperative for PWDs to develop a positive sense of self; World Health Organization (WHO, 2011) identifies the world’s one billion disabled people as the globe’s biggest minority group, with a high unemployment rate according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2010) signifying the disabled are in need of support from management, colleagues, peers, friends, and in this case, all of the PSE system. Just as previous studies have indicated the absence of students with disabilities from discourse at the post-secondary level (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012), Kensbock and Boehm (2016) discuss that there are also few studies that analyse success factors, leadership, and the inclusion of employees with disabilities, showing the need for future research to appropriately address their wants and needs; they need a voice, advocacy, and equity to help them excel in all facets of their lives. All of this begins with small steps and empathy from the non-disabled with something as simple as the consideration of language used in policy.

Throughout history and in recent years, those with disabilities and the word(s) used to describe them have evolved and changed; according to Andrews et al. (2022), person-first language is used and often preferred or even required by many academic entities and journals

such as the American Psychological Association, the American Medical Association, and many others.

Individuals with disabilities are still often “unseen,” in the background of society, and are presented with multiple “shadow barriers” in their day-to-day lives typically unnoticed by members of the non-disabled community (Olsen & Pilson, 2022). These barriers are often magnified by various forms of media and pop culture which “[serve] to undermine disabled people’s lived experience as a source of understanding disability” (Olsen & Pilson, 2022, p. 19) demonstrating the need for education and discourse not only for non-disabled employees of the post-secondary education system but for everyone, everywhere. This then creates situations where specifically the non-disabled are not only able to understand the life of a person living with a disability more clearly but also question and change their own paradigmatic assumptions about disability; commonly that those living with disabilities are ashamed of their challenges, consider themselves or are seen as a burden, or struggle with the worth of their existence (Olsen & Pilson, 2022).

PURPOSE

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore motivation and sense of self amongst ability-diverse employees while dissecting current disability policy using an ableism as well as hegemonic lens through the eyes of ability-diverse employees. The focus was on creating a strong voice and improving future policies.

METHODS

Techniques rooted in epistemology help to analyze current policy and attitudes impacting ability-diverse employees at the post-secondary level. Further exploration from a phenomenological lens will include how they feel they are viewed by their coworkers, friends, peers etc., and as a result, how they are affected holistically; from the physical, to the social, emotional, and even spiritual areas of their lives. The hope is to understand the shared experiences of employees with disabilities and how they perceive the world in which they exist while making improvements where necessary to foster positive changes for a better overall quality of life, both professionally, as well as personally. This study has been previously approved by the Sault College Research Ethics Board.

Participant Selection Process

Recruitment took place at Sault College (Sault Sainte Marie, Ontario, Canada). Criterion-based sampling was used to select current College employees who self-identify as disabled; this was to circumvent the need for medical documentation with the cognizance that every

employees' experience with disability could be different. This process of self-identification has been positively utilized in many previous studies such as Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012) and many others. It was the hope that these varying perspectives and journeys would foster more meaningful interviews with depth and a myriad of opinions, answers, and life stories. An electronic poster was circulated to recruit participants from this institution through the internal email system by supportive individuals and entities within Sault College. Although there were similar challenges to previous studies of this kind including one conducted by this researcher, namely the need for more time and lack of resources, greater issues arose when it came to finding willing participants for this current study with employees that did not occur previously when the target participant group was post-secondary students; according to the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC, 2018), employment rates for those with disabilities was under 50% as of 2018 while non-disabled individuals were much higher, between 70 and 80%. Therefore, not only is it challenging to find work, but the stigma associated with disability in the workplace is still very real; this can include poor accommodations, barriers when it comes to opportunity for promotion, and a general feeling of being disadvantaged in the eyes of colleagues and even themselves when it comes to performing day-to-day work-related duties (CHRC, 2018). The underlying feeling of this researcher, using the above CHRC information as a reference point, is that several potential participants feared their involvement in this study would somehow "expose" their disability to managers and colleagues, making their work life more challenging, difficult, or cause them to be perceived negatively by others. Over twenty people reached out with initial interest but only n=10 employees participated in this study once being sent the invitation to participate and consent form even though their anonymity was assured. Despite these challenges, using Hong and Cross (2020) and other studies with similar participant numbers as a basis, it was deemed that ten was a fair number of participants allowing for a more in-depth analysis of participant interviews and transcriptions while simultaneously avoiding data saturation (Guest et al., 2006). It was not a requirement for participants to disclose any official medical diagnoses, although they were asked with the opportunity to decline, to share the reason(s) why they felt they qualified for the study, and to discuss any specifics of which they were comfortable sharing during their interview. Ten participants were Sault College employees at the time of recruitment.

Each participant was given an invitation to participate, outlining their expected involvement in the study and any risks they might experience if they voluntarily agreed to be a part of it. Participants had to sign a consent form and were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to respond to any question they were not comfortable answering; partnered with this was a friendly environment along with periodic checking with each participant throughout their interview to make sure they were comfortable with the question(s) being asked at the time. Participants were also given an opportunity to review a draft of the written manuscript before it was disseminated to any other individual or entity, public or private.

Data Collection

Semi-structured comprehensive interviews were led to uncover common themes using phenomenology to understand the shared experiences of employees with disabilities and how they perceive the world in which they exist. Interviews were electronically recorded and transcribed verbatim. It was the expectation that these employees would provide an understanding of how they view their disability and the role it plays in their work and home life. There were several set questions asked, and interviews ranged in length from twenty-one minutes to one hour depending on participant responses and the other discussions that initiated from said responses. Data was collected over a five-month period from September of 2024 to January of 2025. Questions asked included:

- How do you feel about the use of the word disability in 2024/2025? Does word choice matter?
- In relation to your disability, how do you believe you are perceived by your peers, colleagues, friends, and coworkers?
- How do you conduct and complete work tasks? Does your condition influence the process at all?

Participants were also asked what they hoped would come out of this study and in summation, what they wanted other people to know about their condition(s) to help them and future ability-diverse employees. Recordings were explored to uncover common and reoccurring themes within the participants' answers which were then organized into categories for further exploration.

RESULTS

Ten participants lent their own distinct voice about their disability, personal journey, and life experience(s) to this study. Within each individual's uniqueness, five common themes were uncovered; a) thoughts on the connotation of the word disability in today's world, b)

feelings about perception by the College community and the community at large on disability and those who are disabled, c) why it is challenging or there is fear to disclose diagnoses to colleagues in a professional setting, d) the importance of having passionate leaders (both in position and attitude) with the desire to be a vehicle for positive change, e) how well supported they feel (in their personal lives and at the College), and lastly, the participants were also asked for overall recommendations about what needs to change to better their lives and experiences as well as the lives and experiences of future ability-diverse employees across the PSE system. (see Figure I below).

Table I: Participant Sample Analysis

P*	Self-Identified Challenge/Condition
P01	knee replacement (both knees), IBS, bursitis
P02	stroke, *muscle weakness, *epilepsy, *seizures, *physical challenges (*all related to stroke)
P03	MS
P04	OCD, hearing impairment
P05	MS
P06	Crohn's disease, psoriatic arthritis, psoriasis, spondylitis
P07	GAD, PTSD
P08	ADHD, learning challenges (processing)
P09	ADHD
P10	high anxiety, food anxiety, dyslexia

*Participant = P

Figure I: Common Themes within the Collective Participant Voice



Connotation of the term Disability

Throughout the interviews, most participants exhibited strong sentiments that word choice in the present-day matters, with opinion that the word disability is outdated and carries with it a negative weight, connotation, and thoughts of being “less than”.

P01 was an exception to this as they were fine with the word disability; in fact, they talked specifically of

how they felt the word challenge was cumbersome because it can apply to so many other contexts. When opining on disability they mentioned, “I think disability is fine. It doesn’t offend me. It doesn’t make me feel like I’m different in a bad way, I know I’m just different.”

P02 was in some ways less concerned about language, generalizing it is more about how a person is treated rather than changing the language used as “that’s the smaller battle to fight,” but did state that “disability really implies that you are not able, so I try to use the word physically challenged or handicapped. Something that is a little less weighted to the disabled identity. That somehow, if you’re disabled, you’re sick.” The weight disabled carries for her is that an ability-diverse person is then looked at like they need to stay at home or be looked after, that they are incapable in their life. P03 echoed similar thoughts with preference for what they termed as “ability language” which supports the use of words like “exceptionalities” as it could just mean a person is different rather than incapable.

In the disabled world, there is quite a myriad of exceptionalities the non-disabled community should *try* to be cognizant of including invisible challenges that can be overlooked. Having a form of multiple sclerosis (MS) primarily impacting them cognitively (what they described as episodic MS), P03 gives an example of this as they will often be given “odd looks” when people see they have an accessible parking sticker. P04 remembered comparable occurrences in the past when examining their obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and is often upset by people claiming to have OCD without any diagnosis as “you’re sort of dismissing what it means to experience [OCD].” This has happened to them both personally as well as professionally and they want to bring awareness to the unseen obstacles behind invisible challenges.

P05, like P03, has a form of MS, however for them, it originally manifested in the form of vision loss; they still lose vision to this day when they are exercising or get too hot, and they constantly must cool themselves down to avoid overheating. When this first occurred, there was lingering damage resulting optic neuritis; coupled with this was neuropathy causing tingling as well as burning in their hands and feet. To treat their MS, they receive an Ocrevus infusion every six months, the main side effect of this is extreme fatigue for at least a few days after the infusion. This is the reality for P05 who in her interview explained how she does not like the word disability because she believes it makes people feel bad for someone with various challenges. She also mentioned how she does not want to make people feel bad or cause herself to stand out. Specifically, she does

not like when people ask how she is doing or tell her that she is strong in her battle with MS; generally, she feels no individual person regardless of their needs should be treated differently than any other human being; in her words, “there’s people that just treat me like me.” Simply, this shows the desire to not be defined by struggles, challenges, or disability.

Before this study, P06 never identified as disabled though does believe having discussions and getting hidden disabilities “out there” is key. They personally are unsure if this will alleviate the stigma behind invisible disabilities, and they themselves find it difficult to explain things to those who have never gone through anything (like having a disability). This participant suffers from several autoimmune conditions including Crohn’s disease, psoriatic arthritis, psoriasis, and ankylosing spondylitis. These challenges create difficulties mentally sometimes resulting in depression, anxiety, and extreme fatigue. They cope by going to the gym and working out; it is a time when they shut off their mind and stop thinking about their day-to-day life and the adversities that come with being a diverse person.

P07 who has generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), spoke very directly about their challenges opining they do not love the word disability. Although their GAD and PTSD do not typically impact their day-to-day, they find themselves supporting people with similar challenges. On occasion this can be anxiety provoking, but they are usually able to compartmentalize and manage this by working from home when possible as well as walking, exercising, getting outside, or speaking to colleagues with similar experiences; this last technique allows them (and their colleagues) to debrief, a coping mechanism and resource for which they are very thankful. In summing up her thoughts on her own conditions and the word disability, she felt that words “carry weight” and there’s likely a better way to describe someone who identifies as disabled; this may take time considering most professional and government documentation still uses “disability” when describing people with diverse abilities. P08, a participant with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) as well as some learning challenges with processing agrees with P07, believing that language matters and they themselves do not use the word disability because “there are better words.” P08 has no problem discussing or disclosing their own personal challenges and uses the proper names of her conditions when she feels the need to discuss them with others.

Both P09 and P10 seemed to deeply feel that words and word choice matter(s) in their responses. P09 was diagnosed with ADHD later in life and P10 suffers from a high level of officially diagnosed anxiety. P09 talked about the need to reframe language, and that disability does not properly “identify” the spectrum, differences, or intersectionality of various conditions; they opined the problem with the word disability is that it counteracts this spectrum; more specifically when talking of its connotation and negative undertones, P09 thought of recent history and how “anything that was different was just put ‘over there.’” To this participant, this previously mentioned spectrum of disability is extremely intricate, often coming with preconceived notions and conceptions from the non-disabled community that place a ceiling (or attempt to) on those being put in the disabled group. P10 added a unique and thoughtful perspective to all of this; they felt they have/have had access and privilege but see others with exceptionalities that deeply impact their lives who do not have the same access; therefore, the term disability applies because not everything is accessible, “the world is not accessible [for all].” The word disability is not well-liked by this participant; however, they do find it empowering to call things out to “champion and be the voice [for those who cannot speak for themselves].” To them, being an advocate is a life choice, not just doing things like posting on social media. Part of this championing is the ability-diverse community working as a collective to ensure there is opportunity and access for everyone as consistently as possible.

Perception, Disclosure Challenges, Fears, and Support

Participants were asked to comment on how they felt they (and their disability) were perceived by friends, colleagues, peers etc. within the College and greater community. Many participants had a fear of disclosure in a professional setting for a myriad of reasons. P01 had mixed thoughts mentioning that others usually show “genuine care and concern” and does not necessarily feel discriminated against for not being as able. They opined that people in the past have shown a lack of care and concern in other ways, specifically due to their age. They want people to know that those who are older have intellectual ability, information, and perspective they can pass on to the next generation. In their opinion, there seems to be a lot of inner turmoil in their department, leaving them with the feeling of needing to be rebalanced. Their life partner has helped them to promote work-life balance as well as find happiness outside of work with him and his family.

Contrastingly, here at this institution, P08 feels very well supported and comfortable with the colleagues they have in their department. They are all close to one another and help each other with the ebb and flow of their days and diversities. P09 feels very well accommodated as well but stated there needs to be awareness and acknowledgement of neurodiversity, mentioning they thought there were likely numerous employees who were neurodivergent. This awareness and acknowledgement could begin by having open dialogue with senior leadership about how employees should have similar accommodations to the students. For example, there is a “Success Team” to help students navigate through their scholastic pathway but as they put it, “what is available for employees?” People still need to be educated on conditions which they cannot see so neurodivergent individuals feel seen and heard.

Although educating others could potentially aid in a stigma reduction for people who identify as neurodivergent, P10 examined their anxiety and thought that in one way it made them more relatable though they do not disclose in a professional setting because they feel people can be dismissive. They thought reducing the stigma would not help women in leadership roles; she is thankful she has her family and her own coping mechanisms for as woman, she feels she would not be taken seriously if she disclosed openly at work. She mentioned the organization could do a much better job handling disclosures; for example, equity and diversity are focused on but not inclusion. Inclusion should be a strategic process, not an afterthought, where if the design is universal, everyone is already included. In summation on her thoughts of disclosure as a female she said, “it’s not safe to do so, so I just don’t. I would like to continue wearing the mask... we here [at this employer] have a lot of work to do.”

Due to complications with their conditions, P02 uses a leg brace but chooses to usually hide its visibility from others; they get along well with most of their colleagues but sometimes feels like a nuisance when having to ask for certain accommodations or needs. This often makes her feel uncomfortable and she thinks if inclusion was more streamlined, she would not have to ask for this assistance, it would naturally already be provided or available. These streamlined accommodations would be most helpful in situations such as when a colleague questioned her need for the use of the parabus. This participant had the fortitude to deal with the questioning accordingly although the colleague pried for quite a long time; there was a second incident during a job interview where the interviewer seemed to focus on P02’s leg brace, and she believes it is the reason, at least in part

why she was not the successful candidate. The participant thinks these negative perceptions/actions could be avoided in the future if there is more foresight with implementation of inclusion and more inclusive environments. Despite all of this, P02 does feel like this employer does do a respectable job of accommodating and sees the push for an open and encouraging environment; nevertheless, she still feels there is a disconnect between policies and how those with disabilities are *treated*.

P04 had likeminded sentiments to that of P02 regarding perception. While in a previous role, they had a colleague who would try to destabilize their OCD by moving things around their office to “set [them] off.” This happened more than once, with the participant believing this was all done with malicious intent. This puts into perspective the many issues that are avoided or never discussed, again demonstrating the need for both inclusion and more understanding to minimize as well as mitigate these incidents/negative perception. Although not disclosing to many people within the organization, P04 did indicate when discussing their conditions in their interview that “it feels good to talk about this” showing the meaningfulness behind healthy dialogue and openminded discussion(s).

Uniquely, P03 considers knowledge of conditions such as their MS to be powerful; they opine that “people can learn from knowing I have MS.” They do not feel they are looked at differently because of their challenges related to MS, but did acknowledge that their symptoms do not normally manifest in a physical or noticeable nature and this experience may be unique to them. This individual does think the College is supportive, though because many of their struggles are rooted in cognitive difficulties and cognitive acuity is imperative to their role here, safety for their employment does weigh on them heavily at times. They finalized this part of the conversation mentioning they were also very thankful for backing from their local union.

P05 feels that with her MS, she would like the opportunity to work from home if needed; this participant is less vocal when it comes to their needs stating, “I don’t think I’m very well supported, but I also don’t think I really push for it.” As a “frontline” employee she is not permitted to work from home and often has pressing deadlines; if said deadlines coincide with when her infusion is due “[she is] in more pain, more tired.” This should be understood by her superior for her to work to the best of her ability. Through all of this, P05 was thankful for the outside support of her personal trainer who treated her like everyone else and yet still pushed her; she believes she needed to be pushed

to these limits, and training has helped make her much stronger than she was before.

For P06, most of his struggles in relation to his disabilities are hidden often placing him in a constant state of fear because his days are unpredictable. He tries to “push through” and get things done on his own, and even though he does not use supports through the employer, knowing of their availability often brings him a sense of comfort. P06 did discuss another side to this; from his view, many people he encounters feel hidden conditions are fake, this even extends beyond his employer and into his personal life. These disclosure challenges make it complicated for him to create a dialogue and open up to others even though some days the pain is excruciating, causing him to have to stay in bed for the day and miss work.

P07 also had mixed thoughts on disclosure and perception from others within the institution once she discussed her exceptionalities. In the past, she has felt very well supported by her immediate manager and her department, however, has had varying experiences with other colleagues. People have made negative comments about her conditions in general without knowing she has them, and after explaining her diagnosed anxiety to someone working in another area of the institution, they told her that people with anxiety cannot do the same things everyone else can; when this interaction was brought to the attention of Human Resources, they stated she should not have “provoked” the individual in question. To her, these types of incidents are a continuous reminder of others’ perceptions and does not share anymore for fear of certain “adverse reactions.”

Participant Recommendations and Final Thoughts

Participant recommendations were unique to each interviewee, but commonalities included the need for greater education, understanding and empathy from various employees across this institution, and the entire PSE system.

On the topic of education P07 says “[it] is the most effective way to change people’s thoughts, feelings, values.” She hopes more education for everyone can help change people’s thoughts on disabilities mentioning the need for more professional development to inform employees but felt that most people who attend those are already openminded and it is not possible to make attendance mandatory. P07 also sensed a need for improved accessibility at Sault College as “accessibility for staff is horrendous; nobody cares when we can’t access things because we’re not paying students.” She finished this idea with the thought that employees need to be cared for as the students are, and her general feeling is that they are not. This evolved into

a discussion on the topic of language; she wanted people to know that the terms and words people use matter, and in the end, employees need to be supported so they can assist students with similar conditions; help and healing is holistic.

Moreover, P01 mentioned the importance of honouring what people say so they can work effectively and in comfort. They talked about how many of the classrooms needed to be more ergonomically friendly (they have voiced these concerns in the past) for those dealing with physical challenges and limitations but did say the free gym membership provided by the employer is a good step towards a healthier lifestyle.

In summation, P03 communicated mostly positive experiences and feels they have been treated well when it comes to their accommodations and support; because their MS impacts them cognitively, specific everyday tasks relating to their job can be difficult. To combat this, they were provided with a schedule accommodation as afternoon classes can be fatiguing, and they were also given a “special” chair used specifically for resting but they admittedly find attempts to rest problematic since one of their prescribed medications is too stimulating. This participant wanted readers to know that continued discussion of day-to-day struggles of the ability-diverse like the ones they mention above can help in the constant education of others thus creating better accommodations and foresight resulting in a more complete sense of inclusion for all employees.

P04 had a simple affirmation when it came to their diversities and would appreciate if someone would just ask them if there was anything they can do to assist in alleviating some of the day-to-day challenges their conditions create for them. This participant wants colleagues/people to know that because of their OCD they have a particular process on most days and would love to say, “from 8 to 8:30[AM] this is my time I use before I start my day.” This is the time they need for organization; at a previous job, they tried to stay late to prepare for the next workday, but some colleagues would tell them they were making others look bad. The real reason for this advanced preparation was to hopefully relieve stresses relative to their OCD/hearing loss and P04 believes it is important for everyone to realize that the way something is perceived may not be the reality. In an academic institution supposed to be filled with accepting and openminded individuals, employees should always be mindful of this and the significance of adjusting to the needs of others. This participant wants to bring more awareness around OCD and what it means to experience this disorder in

conjunction with hearing loss; definitively, having systems in place help them succeed but what people do not often recognize is that their hearing problems can exacerbate their OCD, “they are interconnected on some level.” They feel their interview put perspective on their “issues” while creating a desire to improve their hearing as well as look into supports and figure out how they can improve as a person while managing their conditions.

P02 additionally sensed a general push for support from the collective College community and an open, encouraging environment for potential assistance yet noted the “visibly handicapped” are markedly missing. She recounted a story when attending an in-service at the College where there was much discussion on accessibility legislation but not any discussion on how ability-diverse people are currently treated or any improvements to be made regarding said treatment. P02 feels this lack of discussion on treatment is the beginning of the disconnect amongst disabled/non-disabled employees and cited the need for more parity at the employee level when it comes to equitable hiring practices, talking specifically here about those with visible disabilities. This participant wanted the community to know that raising awareness on how to support colleagues with disabilities is imperative moving forward; while basic accessibility requirements are (“probably”) being met, more focus should be on appropriate treatment and awareness of varying exceptionalities amongst the ability-diverse population(s). Currently, she feels she lives in an environment where she cannot freely speak out, and discussion as well as discourse on disability should be more evident to foster safe spaces in this movement towards equity. She discussed that support groups for employees in partnership with initiating more awareness through this study may be a good place to start in building that foundation for an equitable future for all.

Comparable to P02 above, P05 endorsed the significance of support groups for ability-diverse employees, and as she discussed earlier, she would appreciate more flexibility in her job. She has asked to work off-site, and that request was denied. She wants senior leadership to understand if she is unable to be in the building, there is currently no one to cover her type of work and would appreciate a back-up person. As it stands right now, when she is absent, she comes back to more paperwork than when she left which magnifies stress and could potentially intensify symptoms of her MS. When asked what she wanted people to be aware of concerning her MS, she talked about the need to have things written down; due to certain cognitive challenges in relation to her condition, she cannot always just be

told information verbally. In some of her concluding thoughts, she reflected that it is difficult for people to really know what is truly going on with a person who has MS as “there’s a lot of invisible you don’t see... a lot of other things going on.” In conjunction with this idea was a feeling that people seem to always perceive the worst but, in her words, “MS is not a death sentence.”

In part, P06 focussed on the positive in that many people at the College have been good to chat with; he is very open once he gets to know people and there are people here who will listen (informally) if he needs to talk to someone. Yet, at times he feels people are passing judgement about the validity of his conditions because they are invisible. He thinks people should ask questions or try and understand a little bit more. “Instead of reacting or coming to a judgement, try and put yourself in someone else’s shoes, even for a minute, to understand their point of view, where they’re coming from.”

On the topic of understanding, P08 wanted to tell readers that reactionary behaviour is a reality of her ADHD, and it often causes her to “react fast, think slow, [then] come to a better understanding.” Despite these cognitive challenges, she believes being neurodivergent has it benefits and has turned many aspects of her condition into strengths. To her, education of others would be helpful; she herself took ADHD training and felt it not only helped with her job but to also understand herself. P08 says “it was tremendously insightful” and there is no reason why this insight would not be the typical result for anyone taking this type of training. In her interview, she recalled a time when she was not being listened to and needed front office staff to help her focus and stay on track. At first, she was not being heard but because of self-advocacy and confidence, her needs were eventually met. It is possible with foresight through knowledge, education, as well as effective inclusivity, that setbacks like this can be avoided entirely creating a less stressful and more positive work environment. To help this come to fruition, P08 discussed that the AODA and various other policies should be read closely by the current administration and believes there is potential for an abridged version to be created as a guide for all employees at Sault College. P09 concurred that more discussions with senior management are needed on a few different levels. When colleagues take the time to actively listen, it fosters a more complete understanding of the complexities of neurodivergence, avoids minimization of these conditions, and helps diverse employees feel both seen and heard. This participant has been granted a flexible

schedule by their manager but thinks this is a personal understanding from the manager of the neurodivergent community and not necessarily linked to the role of that administrative position; in short, if they reported to a different manager, they are not completely confident they would have been granted such accommodations.

P10 shared comparable opinions about administration at this institution as well as across the PSE system, saying that people in “certain” positions need to be “passionate about making sure [this] organization is responsible for this change.” Elaborating, she argued people working at the College need to invest in doing “the work.” When asked what she meant, she mentioned that this institution loves to invest in committees for dialogue, but somebody must be responsible to see something through to completion so people know what to do in certain situations; there need to be more action items in general, people can learn and read about policies and procedures, but demonstrations are the best way for everyone to learn. For example, doing drills and scenarios can not only help for preparedness/getting things right regarding specific College procedures, but could also assist in uncovering gaps or areas of improvement. On speaking out about raising awareness of issues, P10 talked of how some people at this employer take things personally when it should be considered system-based or an objective suggestion, not an attack. “This is for the betterment of the organization, and the health and safety and wellness of everyone.” When discussing organizational improvements, P10 mentioned examples including fire, lockdown, and remote work procedures. She also specified the need for all employees to be looked at as a person in a position, not just a position. All people come with diagnoses, exceptionalities, or packages within themselves. This participant founded this point when saying decisions should be viewed from a human-focused lens and then progress can be made in terms of policies and procedures. Her thought was this institution is small enough to lead from a person-first lens but not yet “safe enough.” Despite some advancement over the years, there are still labels, biased opinions, and attitudes. “It [a person-first lens] begins with leadership” and should be a priority. In her eyes, there does not seem to be much genuine empathy, and the institution likes to “guise [their thoughts and actions] under a people centered approach... we like to say that we’re people focused” but the investments are in the wrong place and that speaks loudly. The collective institution and PSE system should be more proactive, not reactive and right now confidentiality is being used to limit access to a more inclusive environment. P10

concluded by emphasizing a need for the creation of more supportive models to foster the success of all employees.

LIMITATIONS

There were numerous factors resulting in limitations to this study. Data was obtained from one small-sized college located in northern Ontario (Sault Sainte Marie), Canada; had participants been recruited from other colleges in Ontario, Canada, or even from institutions in other countries, it may have added perspective to the challenges of participants, and they may have varied depending on institution, location, or even culture. There were certain time-related limitations, as the researcher had a contractual as well as a second self-imposed deadline which added pressure to complete the study within those parameters. Exacerbating this deadline was the challenge of obtaining participants for the study which took a lengthy amount of time. Further, eighty percent of the participants were employees identifying as female, leaving only twenty percent identifying as male. The results of the study may have had richer responses, or an entirely different outcome had there been more male participants, those identifying as non-binary, those using the pronouns they/them, or the many other forms of human/self-identification. Just as in a previous study conducted by this researcher, there were once again challenges in locating peer-reviewed, reputable sources to provide a foundation for this research resulting in a fair allotment of time needed to locate and contextualize said sources with this current study. Lastly, acquiring a larger sample size may have added depth to the corresponding findings or even altered the results of this study; despite these limitations, the ten participants gave very thoughtful, candid responses, and even though there were challenges, the information gathered from the interviews is necessary for the advancement of the PSE system towards a pathway with a focus on a more human-centered approach concerning the many unique people it employs.

DISCUSSION

The participants of this study have been very sincere with their responses and voice, giving all people much to ‘hear,’ with or without exceptionalities, across the PSE system community, and the greater community at large. Another common aspect of these findings that must be noted is an element of fear of disclosure that exists much more strongly amongst employees than it did with the students, this is very telling. As with students at many post-secondary institutions, disability impacts a substantial number of employees far

exceeding the ten participants interviewed for this study. Some were comfortable disclosing their uniqueness to others, some were selective with whom that information was shared, and some very clearly did not feel comfortable disclosing in any capacity within a professional setting. In the end, it should be individual differences that unite not divide, after all, as employees at an institution of higher learning, it is the duty of everyone to be lifelong learners themselves and be open to hearing as well as educating themselves about the diverse individuals employed at said institution(s). With these diversities come a wealth of experiences, backgrounds, skills, knowledge, and of course adaptations that everyone as a cooperative and (hopefully) open-minded team can learn from; the effort and voice of the collective is always stronger than any one single person.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, there still needs to be better understanding, further education, and inclusion of ability-diverse persons across the PSE system and beyond by their non-disabled counterparts. There were clear complications brought forward by the study participants; some females were very selective and seemed fearful to come forward and disclose or ask for help because of their gender as well as the potential for further stigmatization simply for identifying as women. Similarly, the men selectively disclosed, and did not regularly seek supports, or ask for significant help of any kind. It is the job of every employee at this institution, across the PSE system, and world-wide to not only say they are open and inclusive but to live by those words and be open and inclusive, without judgement. Based on the participant interviews/recommendations, the following recommendations are being made to all members of the PSE system(s) across Ontario, Canada, and the world:

- Be mindful of the inclusion piece to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. If an institution or employer is truly inclusive, there should be no fear of disclosure because supports and services would be easily accessible and known by all to be available without having to ask any one individual or person for such services.
- When suggesting services provided by the institution such as the Employee Assistance Program or various psychiatric or mental health supports, it should be clear the hours or sessions available before utilizing such supports and coverage should increase as needed.
- When advocating for grant money, funding, and supports, upper management and stakeholders should have a more sincere consideration of accessibility needs for all employees (and students). The first step to a positive work environment with a proactive approach to inclusion is through a true demonstration of caring involving intended action. Committees can also be a wonderful aspect to creating a stronger voice for the ability-diverse community, but without action, will continue to fall short.
- Employers should consider third-party applications or accessibility audit tools that are not trackable (not Microsoft Forms as it can be internally tracked) for ability-diverse employees to anonymously express their wants, needs, and concerns.
- In-services, professional development, and discussions by ability-diverse individuals not connected to the institution should be provided to give insight of their exceptionalities and lived experience(s), allowing everyone the opportunity to learn without any internal employee having to disclose their challenges or conditions.

Finally, it is up to everyone to want to take action, to advocate for inclusive change, and be lifelong learners. On occasion, solutions can be found in the simplest form. One should remember that living with a disability, challenge, or exceptionality can be difficult and intersect with other tribulations of life, always consider this before passing judgement without knowledge. The smallest act of thoughtfulness, attempt to help, or provide a solution may have the biggest impact for change.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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