

RESPECT *at work*

RESEARCH REPORT

Ableism in Canadian Workplaces

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Employees living with disabilities often experience negative social attitudes about disability from employers and co-workers in their workplaces, as well as both overt and subtle forms of violence, discrimination, and harassment (Duff & Ferguson, 2011; Harpur, 2014; Oud, 2019; Snyder et al., 2010). Ableism refers to “a system of oppression that discriminates against people with disabilities due to the fact that they do not correspond to (Western) social standards of physical, physiological, neurotypical capacities, etc. Ableism can take the form of ideas and assumptions, stereotypes, attitudes, practices, physical barriers in the environment, or oppression on a broader scale” (DisAbled Women’s Network of Canada, 2020, p. 14). Previous studies of employees with disabilities within varied work environments have found that ableism is prevalent. Examples include the invisibility of disability at work, a lack of awareness and understanding of disability, and harmful, stereotypical views of people with disabilities as less capable workers (Duff & Ferguson, 2011; Harpur, 2014; Oud, 2019; Snyder et al, 2010).

Recently, a national mixed-methods study was conducted with the aim of gaining insight into Canadian employees’ experiences of harassment and violence at work (see Berlingieri et al., 2022). The Harassment and Violence at Work in Canada study was a collaboration between researchers at Western University’s Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children, the University of Toronto, and the Canadian Labour Congress. The two interrelated components of the study consisted of a bilingual online survey (which drew 4,878 respondents) and 34 semi-structured one-on-one interviews to further understand workers’ experiences and the impacts of harassment and violence at work. This research brief focuses on these interview participants’ experiences of ableism in the workplace.

We do not all experience harassment and violence in the same ways, and this is key for understanding how ableism occurs in the workplace. Intersectional feminist theory (Crenshaw, 2018; Hill Collins, 2019) and feminist disability theory (Garland-Thompson, 2011; Garland-Thompson, 2014) proposes that the discrimination and subordination faced by those who experience multiple forms of oppression are unique¹. Experiences of ableism in the workplace, then, must be thought of as a form of oppression that intersects with others on the basis of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and many others.

Our findings show that ableism often shows up in the context of employees needing accommodations to best do their job and is also present in the daily experiences of existing as a person living with a disability in a workplace. Interview participants shared persistent experiences of ableism in Canadian workplaces in the following ways: lack of awareness and understanding of disability, workplace refusal to accommodate workers with disabilities, and contradictions between external and internal disability supports. Interview participants also discussed the impacts of these experiences of ableism and had strong recommendations for making the workplace a safer and more supportive place for Canadians living with disabilities.

¹ The use of the term subordination here focuses on a systemic (rather than individual) conceptualization that considers subordination “as something that happens to a person by virtue of [their] membership in social groups” (Moreau, 2019, p. 117). This allows the analytical focus to shift to “policies, practices, and physical structures that tacitly accommodate a more privileged group’s needs at the expense of subordinated groups” (Moreau, 2019, p. 117).

Lack of Awareness and Understanding of Disability

Most interview participants described experiences that demonstrated supervisors and co-workers lacked a basic understanding of disability and had little awareness of how disability might affect someone at work.

Several interview participants discussed a differentiation between “visible” disability (such as using a wheelchair or being visually impaired) and “invisible” or “less visible” disability (such as neurodivergence or mental health issues). Those living with invisible or less visible disabilities often have greater difficulty with lack of awareness and understanding amongst supervisors and co-workers, as well as a lower likelihood of being given necessary accommodations (Prince, 2017; Santuzzi et al., 2014). Indeed, several interview participants in this study reflected on their difficult experiences with ableism in the workplace relating to mental health struggles including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Their experiences were misconstrued and/or invalidated at work (e.g., through accommodation refusals, not believing employees’ experiences, and reliance on stereotypes of disabilities).

Workplaces may also be missing the foundational knowledge that people living with disabilities are not a homogenous group (DisAbleD Women’s Network of Canada, 2020). Disability is experienced individually and is related to a person’s specific impairment, as well as their personal experiences, identity, the work environment, and other factors. Interview participants discussed being met with confusion, disbelief, and misunderstandings when disclosing their disabilities at work and requesting necessary accommodations that could support them to do their job.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) emerged as a problematic area for our study participants primarily due to employer lack of understanding. Several interview participants with PTSD requesting workplace accommodations shared that managers had no knowledge or competence regarding this condition, with some managers engaging in behaviours that were harmful and exacerbated a worker’s disability. One participant spoke about her experience of PTSD related to an abusive ex-partner who was also employed at her place of work, but at a different location. When a change in her work meant potentially having direct and daily exposure to her abusive ex-partner, she requested an accommodation based on her diagnosis of PTSD and written recommendations from her psychologist. She was not believed and, instead, was met with resistance. As she explained:

“And so, it basically dragged out for like months where I kept on asking for updates from the manager, like what’s going on? Like I’m losing sleep over this. I’m not eating properly and having flashbacks. Like I’m really, I’m not doing well. And the continuous, continuous idea of having to return to that environment where he would have access to me, and I could be quite unsafe. It was...just being ignored. After about two months, I received an email back indicating that my not wanting to work in the environment with my ex-husband was not grounds for an accommodation.” (Education Worker D)

This participant went on to describe a long and gruelling process to try to obtain an accommodation at work that was necessary for her health and safety and ability to continue working.

Other interview participants described challenges such as being treated differently at work after disclosing having PTSD. One participant described being treated as incapable, incompetent, and unable to participate in decisions about her job after disclosing her disability and requesting support at work. She had aspects of her job that were not impacted by the disability taken away without consultation. She described her return to work after a PTSD-related short-term leave as follows:

“Like my return to work was pretty much just them giving me a laptop and saying, “You can find your tasks in an email.” I was used to having, like, a team. A really active workplace with collaborative work every day... And what they did to me is say, “Go home. No one’s going to call you. You don’t need anyone. Do data entry.” That’s what I was made to do, and it was a task that was usually assigned to students....

...One of the reasons I couldn’t go back to work, according to them, was that I was fragile and traumatized. So, I said, “But given the fact that the doctor signed off on my return to work, isn’t it a bit discriminatory to say that you aren’t going to take me back because I’m fragile and traumatized?” (Federal Corrections Worker B)

A lack of knowledge and understanding of disability in the workplace, in particular invisible disabilities, can lead to negative consequences for workers, especially when their supervisors and co-workers invalidate their experiences. For workers, it can lead to negative and inaccurate judgments about their abilities, the denial of needed accommodations, and the loss of meaningful work. For workplaces, it can result in the loss of skilled workers (Lindsay & Fuentes, 2022), and decreased productivity, employee morale, and job satisfaction (Pionke, 2019). Experiencing ableism as a worker with PTSD can be a form of harassment and violence that can negatively impact workers’ personal/social life, result in sleep difficulties, and have a negative emotional impact for workers (Berlingieri et al., 2022). Further, work may be impacted as those experiencing harassment and violence may miss work, experience decreased productivity, and/or lose trust in supervisors at work (Berlingieri et al., 2022).

Workplace Refusal to Accommodate Workers with Disabilities

Interview participants commonly described negative, difficult, and extremely stressful experiences and outcomes when requesting disability-related accommodations at work. Examples of accommodations requested by interview participants in this study included: change in location, a quiet workspace, temporary leave from work, respectful communication from supervisors, and changes in job duties. Consistent with other research on disability in the workplace, many workers initially attempted to have their needs met informally without going through a formal accommodations process. Some workers avoid formal accommodations processes out of fear of potential negative impacts on their employment (Oud, 2019). Interview participants’ experiences confirm that this trepidation is founded.

Unclear and exceedingly lengthy accommodation processes, devoid of appropriate, timely, and transparent communication with workers, made requests to employers to access accommodations challenging. The ambiguous, disempowering accommodation processes often left workers waiting and in some cases the wait time worsened their condition.

One employee explained how this unclear process impacted their health and ability to work:

“I met with two psychiatrists on [date] because I was completely burnt out. And, on [date], [employer representative] wrote to me again with a bunch of people CC’d (because I didn’t answer by [date]), to say that they agreed that I could talk to my doctor and that I could get back to them on like [date]. But I was already completely burnt out, like, I couldn’t take it anymore. I hadn’t slept at all during the holidays, and so I couldn’t do it anymore. And then on [date], the doctors, the two psychiatrists, diagnosed me with severe depression in connection with what had happened when I returned to work.” (Federal Corrections Worker B)

Interview participants described feeling like their workplace would go to extreme lengths to avoid providing needed accommodations and would engage in harmful tactics to try to delegitimize employees’ experiences and avoid having to provide support. For example, some employers blamed individuals for their “issues”, made accommodations seem unreasonable and unfounded, and/or created a false narrative that the person requesting accommodations had “personal issues” or was a “difficult employee”. One interviewee who worked for the Federal Government described receiving an accommodation that did not match their needs, and then being made to feel indebted to their workplace for being offered anything at all.

Among the tactics interview participants reported for denying workers’ requests for needed accommodations, was the obligation to provide vast in-depth information from medical and/or psychological professionals to confirm the validity of their disability. Such requests for detailed “proof” violated doctor-patient confidentiality. Even when workers satisfied this request, their employers chose not to follow the formal recommendations made by specialized health professionals. Privacy invasion and violations, as well as denying the validity of a disability, are two common forms of ableism experienced by those living with disabilities (for example, Olkin et al., 2019; Oud, 2019; Pionke, 2019). As a result, workers experience a denial of their legal right to accommodations, a limited ability to work, and a loss of financial security. It also deprives the employer of the valuable and skilled contributions that workers living with a disability can make to their workplaces.

Some workers were left feeling that they were being pushed out of the workplace for needing accommodations and that their employer would rather they leave the job than support them.

The interview participant spotlight below, recounts the experiences of a federal employee living with PTSD, and the struggles and barriers she consistently encountered in attempting to obtain an accommodation.

Interview Participant Spotlight: “Federal Corrections Worker A”

Federal Corrections Worker A was an interview participant who had previously worked at the same job location as her now ex-husband. During their relationship, her ex-husband was abusive toward her. When their relationship ended, she took a position at a different work location so that she no longer had to have contact with him. Three years later, she was notified by her workplace that she would need to change locations, which meant returning to the same place where her abusive ex-husband still worked.

Upon receiving that news, she began suffering from symptoms of PTSD. As a result, she submitted a request for an accommodation citing her PTSD and indicating that to return to that location would certainly exacerbate her condition and impact her well-being. Her request, which was supported by her psychologist, was that she not be forced to work at the same location as her abusive ex-partner, but rather, that she remain in her current location or be placed elsewhere.

The accommodations process took a very long time. Months went by with little communication and few updates to the worker. In this time, her symptoms of PTSD continued and worsened, including loss of sleep, anxiety and stress, gastrointestinal issues, body pain, nightmares, and having flashbacks. In this time, the continuous potential that she would have to be in a workplace where she felt unsafe and where her abusive ex-husband had access to her wore on her mental health.

“I started to just like really lose a lot of sleep over it. I was having nightmares about what my ex-husband had done to me. I started having nightmares about like what it would actually be like to be back in the workplace. And the unit that she wanted me to go and work in was set up in a way that like if I scream for help, nobody would hear me.”

The worker was eventually informed that her PTSD and not wanting to work where her abusive ex-husband works was not grounds for an accommodation (despite submitting relevant health information showing the harm this situation posed to her health and well-being). Federal Corrections Worker A was put into a position where she had to engage in independent research regarding the policies at her workplace regarding accommodations. She found that they were not being followed.

Still pursuing the needed accommodations, she provided additional supporting documents from her psychologist further detailing her needs and restrictions. Again, weeks passed where she received little or no information about the status of her request, only to learn after some time that her request was rejected again, and she needed to submit even more documentation from her psychologist. Throughout this process, what little communication she received from her workplace was vague and any instructions she received regarding submissions were unclear.

At one point in time, her manager contacted her psychologist by phone without consulting the worker first. The manager attempted to convince the psychologist that the accommodations were not needed and that she should rescind her supporting documentation.

After that, the worker filed a grievance with her union, a harassment complaint, and a workplace violence complaint. At the time of the interview, she was still involved in these processes, awaiting an outcome and anticipating having to escalate her grievance and/or complaints if they are denied. The worker is experiencing continued strong resistance and a lack of support from her workplace. The long, stressful process, which requires her to tell her story repeatedly and to take on much of the responsibility for the process, and the lack of a clear outcome is adding to and worsening her symptoms of PTSD.

Contradiction Between External and Internal Support of Disability

Several interview participants described situations where their employer is publicly supportive (for example, by holding employee workshops on self-care, or making donations to mental health-related initiatives) of people living with disabilities, in particular mental health issues, whilst not providing support to their own employees and instead actively mistreating those requesting accommodation. Interview participants described employers who they expected would be supportive of mental health experiences, but then lacked knowledge and understanding of the range of mental health challenges that exist, how those challenges show up at work, how crucial workplace support can be for those experiencing mental health challenges, and what can be done to provide that support. This contradiction adds an additional layer of distress for those experiencing ableism in the workplace. It can deeply impact how a person feels about their workplace and their relationships with their managers(s) and co-workers. As one participant described:

“...they completely ignore mental health, in my opinion. And I sit there through campaigns and campaigns about wearing buttons and tell people how you feel. And management has mental health first aid certificates, but nobody can explain to me how that helps me as an employee or what they could do for me if I came to them and I was in distress.” (Federal Government Worker A)

Impacts of Experiencing Ableism at Work

Experiencing ableism at work because of having a disability and/or needing accommodations relating to a disability has serious consequences for workers' health, well-being, and lives in general. When an employer engages in ableism rather than seeing an opportunity to work with their employee to provide support, this can have far-reaching impacts for the employee and the workplace. Workers' symptoms and conditions may be worsened, and their capacity to recover or stay well may be impacted. This is important for employers as well as workers because research shows that employee health and well-being can improve productivity and profitability for workplaces (Lowe, 2020).

Interview participants shared that their self-worth was negatively affected by employers' delegitimizing their disability and needs. This led some workers to question their understanding of their experiences and whether their disability-related requests were valid, whether they were deserving of employment and support, and whether they were capable of knowing what they need and/or are justified in asking for it. Ableism at work can also make people feel ashamed of their disability and of having an experience that others perceive as being outside of the so-called norm (Charmaz, 2010; Santuzzi et al., 2014). Relationships among co-workers can be compromised as workers living with a disability are treated differently and socially excluded resulting in negative social and work-related consequences (Pionke, 2019; Santuzzi et al., 2014). Workers may even feel like having a disability and needing accommodations makes them a non-ideal, non-desirable employee in the eyes of their current and other prospective employers. Engaging in a combative process with a worker who has requested an accommodation can sharply increase their distress at a time when they are most in need of support (Santuzzi et al., 2014; Wahl, 1999). This form of ableism succeeds in making the worker feel exasperated and unable to continue pursuing their needs. In some cases, workers end up needing to take leave from their work environment to be safe and to remove themselves from a situation causing them stress and harm. This difficult choice has major financial and health implications for workers and can negatively impact careers over the long term.

Some interview participants also described being harassed while they were off on medical leave for their disability. Employers applied pressure to workers on leave to "get better" and return to work by engaging in intimidation tactics, frequent unnecessary contact, and making threats regarding the security of the person's employment. These often-covert tactics have lasting impacts on workers who are trying to take necessary time away from work but who instead face mistreatment as a result of employer actions or inactions.

Remaining employed is life changing for people yet can become extremely challenging without necessary accommodations and while experiencing ableism at work. Workers living with disabilities are forced to make difficult, life-altering decisions as a result of the ableism they experience at work.

Interview Participant Spotlight: "Federal Government Worker B"

Federal Government Worker B had been employed at the Federal Government for over 20 years when things changed for her at work. Following a change in management, she was assigned to a new direct supervisor. With the shift in management, Federal Government Worker B was moved from a private workspace where she had been for several years to a desk where she was surrounded by loud and disruptive co-workers. In the new location, pre-existing mental health challenges with anxiety and depression were triggered and she found herself suffering from symptoms of anxiety. She experienced great difficulties engaging in her work in these conditions. As a result, she submitted a request for an accommodation specifying that she required a quiet, clean, well-lit workspace.

While she waited to hear back regarding her request, her supervisor began sexually harassing her. What began as inappropriate name calling (use of romantic pet names) escalated over time to include other inappropriate verbal behaviour and touching. The worker reported some of this behaviour to a superior in a position above her immediate supervisor. She was told that the supervisor had been spoken to about her behaviour and that it would not happen again. However, the behaviour continued.

Federal Government Worker B described feeling very hesitant to engage in the reporting process in her workplace, and cognisant of how others might perceive her for having more than one active complaint at a time. She felt others would see her as a “troublemaker” despite having had a long and successful career. These concerns of how others would perceive her meant she did not report some of the sexual harassment she experienced right away, including the escalating behaviours

With no word on whether her request for an accommodation would be fulfilled, she received inappropriate responses that contributed to her difficulties.

“They were laughing at me, and they were like, oh, you’re making mountains out of molehills. It’s really not that bad...”

...And then at one point she says, “you know, you could be really nice to them”. She says, “you should really thank them and tell them thank you for all the efforts”. ...She was kind of like making me feel really bad. She goes I’ll even give you my office just so that you’re happy.”

After a number of incidents of inappropriate touching by her supervisor, Federal Government Worker B reported the sexual harassment she had been experiencing in full to upper-level management. When she received no response at all, she then reported the harassment to Human Resources with a request for a change in supervisor.

During this time, Federal Government Worker B had to take intermittent periods of time away from work due to the way the situation was negatively impacting her mental health. She had to continue reporting to the same supervisor who was harassing her, and her request for an accommodation was not met. She had to miss a lot of work as her mental health worsened.

After realizing she was not going to receive the support she needed from her workplace, Federal Government Worker B was put in a position where she had to engage in independent research and pursue efforts to find a remedy. She found new ways to report her experiences of harassment by filing a grievance against her employer, filing a complaint under the Canada Labour Code, and filing a complaint with the Canadian Human Rights tribunal. She was forced to set aside her workplace’s negligence in providing her accommodation in favour of prioritizing the process to address the sexual harassment she experienced. At the time of the interview, the person who sexually harassed her continued to provide supervision, including assigning her workload – which Federal Government Worker B says increased exponentially as retaliation for her reporting.

Recommendations

The voices of those living with disabilities who experience ableism in the workplace must be prioritized as we aim to build a world of work free from this form of discrimination. Many interview participants in this study had already given much thought to what is needed to mitigate their experiences of ableism in the workplace and to make work safer and more supportive for those living with disabilities.

Many interview participants reflected that providing them with the support and accommodations that they needed would not result in undue hardship to their employer, and that the ways they were treated and the related harms they experienced were completely avoidable.

The list of recommendations below stems from the interviews in this study:

Many workplaces and employees would benefit from education about disability and accommodations to move beyond a basic understanding of these concepts, and to divest from a reliance on negative stereotypes and ideas about people living with disabilities and invest in a workplace that values workers living with disabilities.

- In particular, employers need education about less visible disabilities such as mental health issues (including PTSD) and neurodivergence, how these disabilities show up at work, and how to create a supportive workplace.
- It is crucial that employers develop their understanding of disability from an intersectionality lens in order to best understand workers' individual experiences of disability and how these intersect with other aspects of their social identity (e.g., gender, race, age, sexual orientation, etc.).
- Education could also help employers better understand the value of workers living with disabilities and the ways that work can be improved by the inclusion and support of those living with disabilities.

Workplaces need to improve the accommodations process. Employers can:

- Provide education to all employees about what accommodations are and clear and accessible procedures for requesting an accommodation.
- Communicate more often and more transparently with workers during the accommodations process once a request has been made. Interview participants described lengthy, convoluted processes where they were completely uninformed after making a request for an accommodation.
- Have more oversight of the accommodations process (for example, from a third party) to ensure that policies and procedures are followed, and accurate and timely communication is provided to the employee.
- Understand that accommodations are not special treatment or workers "trying to scam the system" (Federal Corrections Worker A), but rather, opportunities to support employees living with disabilities. All workers can benefit from a workplace that believes and supports employees' experiences and needs.

- Carefully consult workers who have disclosed a disability to ensure that any accommodations provided truly meet their needs and do not result in further harm.

Develop strong policy and procedures to prevent ableism in the workplace and ensure that the policies and procedures are carefully followed.

- Employers can review their internal processes such as those relating to hiring, promotion, supervision, and evaluation to focus on making improvements and removing barriers for those living with disabilities. This is a process that can be done in partnership with advocates of those living with disabilities.

Conclusions

Many Canadian workers experience ableism in the workplace, or discrimination based on having a disability. Our interviews with Canadian workers reveal specific ways that ableism is occurring in workplaces across the country. Interview participants described supervisors and co-workers who lacked a basic understanding of disability, in particular in relation to invisible disabilities such as mental health issues. A particular knowledge gap exists in understanding workers' experiences of PTSD, and this results in an inability to access support for this disability at work. Interview participants also shared experiences of their workplaces refusing to provide necessary accommodations at work relating to disabilities and/or making the process for disclosing and requesting accommodations intentionally difficult and stressful. Several interview participants described a contradiction between their workplace's public-facing support of disabilities and the internal harassment and violence of workers employed there who have disabilities and require support. Ableism in the workplace has impacts on workers' health, employment and financial security, well-being, and personal life. Interview participants described their condition worsening as a result of experiencing ableism, as well as questioning their self-worth and their understanding of their own experiences, feeling shame and being made to feel like a less valuable employee. The voices of those who have experienced ableism in the workplace should be centered as we move forward in trying to eradicate this form of discrimination in the workplace.

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