**Disability Disclosure: A literature review**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines a number of research articles on the topic of disability disclosure within employment settings. The review summarises the search results from a small-scale private study and should not be treated as a comprehensive review of the topic. The results are grouped under five main themes: attitudes towards disabled employees; attitudes towards different types of disabilities; disclosure during recruitment processes; disclosure whilst in employment; and disclosure related to different disabilities. The implications of the literature for the author’s job role are then briefly discussed.

**Keywords**

Disability disclosure; Reasonable adjustments.

**Introduction**

In order to prevent unlawful disability discrimination in the workplace, the Disability Discrimination Act 2005, asserted that reasonable adjustments must be made by employers to accommodate disabled employees. When investigating reasonable adjustments in the workplace, Campolieti (2007) found that accommodations could reduce the likelihood of disabled individuals leaving employment and Burkhauser, Butler and Yang Woo Kim (1995) suggested that accommodations could significantly increase job tenure. Therefore, reasonable adjustments to the work environment may be essential to keep disabled employees in employment. It must be acknowledged, however, that in order for an employer to provide accommodations, it is the responsibility of the individual to disclose their disability (Wilton, 2006). Collins and Miller (1994) define self-disclosure as “the act of revealing personal information about oneself to another” (p457). Disability disclosure is therefore concerned with revealing information regarding a disability to another person.

When deciding whether to disclose a disability, an individual must consider when and to whom to disclose the disability to, alongside determining the value of the disclosure, the potential positive and negative responses from others and the value of the accommodations that can be achieved (Rocco, 2001). If there are perceived barriers to disclosing a disability, such as the negative attitudes of colleagues and employers, (Gilbride, Stensrud, Ehlers, Evans & Peterson, 2000) or fear of discrimination or stigmatisation, (Munir, Jones, Leka & Griffiths, 2005), an individual may not be gaining access to all the facilities available to them and be at a disadvantage in the workplace. Additionally, the organisation may be affected by under disclosure through unexplained turnover, sickness absence and underperformance (Brunner, 2007).

This article aims to provide an overview of the literature regarding disability disclosure within employment settings by examining 1) attitudes towards disabled employees, 2) attitudes towards different types of disabilities, 3) disclosure during recruitment processes, 4) disclosure whilst in employment, and 5) disclosure related to different disabilities. The
implications of the literature are then briefly discussed.

Attitudes towards disabled people

Gilbride, Stensrud, Ehlers, Evans and Peterson (2000) indicated that negative attitudes are often identified as a substantial barrier to those with disabilities to gain employment. Wright (1983) suggested that negative attitudes towards people with disabilities may be due to an expectation discrepancy, whereby individuals who do not have a disability may hold low expectations of people with disabilities.

When investigating attitudes towards disabled staff in the workplace, Berry and Meyer (1995) investigated emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses to situations involving disabled colleagues. At the start of the research, participants completed ‘The Attitudes Towards Disabled Persons Scale’ (Yuker, Block, & Youngnng, 1966) which included responses based on specific characteristics of individuals with disabilities and opinions on how such individuals should be treated. For the research, participants were informed that the disability of the individual would be immediately obvious. Based on hypothetical work related scenarios, participants completed a ‘Multiple Affect Adjective Checklist,’ (Zuckerman & Lubin, 1965) to ascertain how they would react in the situation they had been presented with. A questionnaire was also completed to establish cognitive and behavioral responses to the situation. The results of the research suggested that females had a more positive attitude towards those with a disability than males and the younger participants in the sample reported feeling more anxious and were more hostile towards disabled individuals, than older participants.

When considering the differences between those who had positive attitude towards people with disabilities as opposed to those who held negative attitudes, the results indicated that when negative, the participants reported anxiety, depression and hostility more than those who held positive attitudes. Further to this, those with negative attitudes were more likely to want to avoid the situation and have a greater desire to escape. It was observed from the research that when considering contact with a colleague with a disability, negative responses corresponded to the attitude held towards disabled individuals at a general level and were also related to the amount of discomfort participants expected to feel in the situation.

From the research, Berry and Meyer (1995) proposed that if an individual does not have contact with colleagues with disabilities in the workplace, they may not expect to have future contact with such colleagues. This lack of experience may result in a desire to escape from situations where they would be in contact with a disabled colleague.

Alongside considering colleagues attitudes towards disabled colleagues, it is necessary to consider the attitude of those employing or managing a disabled member of staff. In a review of the literature concerning employer’s attitudes towards potential workers with disabilities, Hernandez, Keys and Balcazar (2000) differentiated between global and specific attitudes. They defined global attitudes as ‘evaluative responses concerning a general topic that typically do not involve declaring planned actions or intentions,’ (p5) and specific attitudes as having ‘narrow scope that may include a statement of intended behaviour.’ (p5) Through reviewing the literature, they found that the attitudes of employers towards individuals with disabilities varied depending on how attitudes were defined, with a general consensus that positive results were more likely to be found when assessing global attitudes, whereas negative results were more closely related to specific attitudes. When considering the studies that were in line with specific and negative attitudes, the review purported that employers questioned the personality attributes of disabled individuals, expressing concern over the amount of supervision that may be required and the ability to benefit from instruction. Doubts were also raised over productivity, flexibility and promotability.
Attitudes towards different types of disabilities

In further review of attitudes towards disability, Hernandez, Keys and Balcazar (2000) suggested that a preferential hierarchy exists between different types of disability. Utilising a similar method to Berry and Jones (1991), Kanter (1988, as cited in Hernandez, Keys and Balcazar (2000)) generated hypothetical situations to investigate the intention to hire among managers. The results showed that workers with intellectual disabilities living in the community were more likely to be hired than workers with intellectual disabilities who had previously been institutionalized. Related to these results, Johnson, Greenwood and Schriner, (1988) found that employers had less concerns towards workers with physical disabilities in comparison to individuals with intellectual, psychiatric and communication disabilities.

When conducting similar research, Jones, Gallagher, Kelley and Massari (1991) suggested that individuals with a physical disability were perceived more positively than individuals with multiple disabilities and those with severe intellectual disabilities. Although there may be a reluctance of employers to employ individuals with or recovering from psychiatric illness, Jones et al (1991) highlighted the benefits of doing so to include an individual who can be better adapted to handle stress, learnt through rehabilitation and treatment.

Disability disclosure during the recruitment processes

In order to examine if employers differentiate between different types of disabilities, Pearson, Ip, Hui, Yip, Ho and Lo (2003) created an experimental design utilising real job vacancies to overcome the socially desirable responses which may influence employers input to disability research. The main focus of the research was to investigate whether those who disclosed a disability at the application stage would be offered the same number of jobs as those without a disability.

Over a three month period, the researchers responded to advertisements for clerical positions with similar job descriptions and requirements. For the 409 jobs that met the criteria, four applications were sent for the position, each containing identical information, except disability status. Four types of disability status were stated on the application, including no disclosure of a disability, a hearing impairment, recovery from reactive depression and walking with the aid of a crutch. The results of the research found that the applications that did not disclose a disability received the most positive response, followed by having a hearing impairment, and thirdly having a mobility impairment. The least number of positive responses from applications were received when depression was disclosed. Pearson et al (2003) therefore concluded that applicants who did not disclose a disability at the application stage were more likely to be offered an interview than those disclosing a disability, despite being matched on qualifications and demographic information. Glozier (1998) also concluded from research with potential employers that job applicants stating they have had recent depression may experience stigmatisation that could negatively affect their chances of success in a recruitment process.

The research outlined above therefore suggests that disclosing a disability at the application stage could be self defeating strategy on the part of the disabled individual as employers showed a preference to recruit non-disabled applicants. The studies highlighted above however were not based on applications where there is a requirement to disclose a disability on an application form. If a potential employee fails to declare a disability at the application stage when asked to do so, it may become awkward and embarrassing to disclose at the interview stage. Further, lack of disclosure may impact on job security when in a role if the employer discovers the individual has deliberately withheld disability information during recruitment stages. Opposing the negative possibilities of...
disclosing a disability during recruitment processes, Reynolds, Nicholls and Alferoff (2001) suggested that due to some employers guaranteeing interviews to those who are qualified as having a disability, disclosure at the application stage may be a tactical and beneficial decision.

When investigating disability disclosure during the selection process, it is necessary to extend this to consider the implications for those who become disabled whilst in employment. Reynolds et al (2001), in a qualitative study, found that there was much variation in retraining and redeploying individuals who had become disabled during employment depending on the type of job sector and type of disability.

**Disability disclosure whilst in employment**

Cunningham and James (2001) found that when organisations were auditing disability within their organisations, some disabled employees were reluctant to state that they had a disability and to provide information on their disability. It was suggested from the research that the employee may be distrusting of how the organisation would use the information after the disability disclosure. From interviews with members of the organisations, one respondent commented that having a disability was “not a positive thing to own up to”, (Cunningham & James (2001), p107.) Similarly, in consideration of training and employment of disabled individuals, Reynolds et al (2001) reported that some individuals had not taken part in in-service training due to a reluctance to ‘come out’ as dealing with a disability.

Wilton (2006) discussed how the issue of disability disclosure is of central importance when considering accommodations that are required to be made to the workplace and working practices for disabled staff. At a basic level, it is the responsibility of the employee to bring to the attention of the organisation that accommodations need to be made. It is therefore suggested that the level of security an individual perceives they have in disclosing a disability will determine the amount of access they have to accommodations. Through conducting in-depth interviews, Wilton (2006) found that participants saw disability disclosure as a problematic area. It was considered that non-disclosure may have been employed as a strategy by individuals to overcome negative consequences of revealing a disability, such as job loss. However, it was proposed that in the long term the costs of pain, exhaustion and fear of discovery of the disability could be detrimental to the individual. Therefore it was suggested that the benefits of non-disclosure should be weighed against the costs that may occur in the future.

Stanley, Ridley, Manthorpe, Harris and Hurst (2007) also proposed that the decision to disclose a disability is based on a weighing up and trade off of the risks that are associated with disclosure. Using a sample of disabled students and practitioners working in social work, nursing and teaching, they gathered information of experiences of disability disclosure. The results indicated that disclosure experiences were found to be positive, negative and mixed. Information gathered during the research also suggested that for the majority of participants, disclosure was not a single event and usually involved a series of decisions and negotiations.

The reasons for disclosure varied across participants from feeling that they had no choice, to it becoming a necessity to obtain adjustments. A factor that increased disclosure was related to a gain in confidence after gaining experience or establishing a successful track record alongside managers and colleagues attitudes towards disability. The attitude of the disabled member of staff towards being labelled disabled was a further factor that influenced the disclosure process. Additionally, disability legislation appeared to give participants confidence to disclose and also empowered them to negotiate accommodations and adjustments with the organisations. When asked to consider ways in which disclose could be increased, participants believed it could be achieved by creating more disabled friendly
environments, including support and points of contact when considering to disclose and by providing disability awareness training.

**Disclosure related to different disabilities**

As indicated, some employers may perceive a preferential hierarchy of disability (Hernandez *et al.*, 2000) and the choice to disclose may depend on whether the disability is immediately visible to other people. For individuals with non-visible disabilities, the decision whether to disclose was seen as complex and dependent on the perception of how the employer would respond to the disclosure. (Wilton 2006). The research outlined below therefore considers different non-visible disabilities in relation to disclosure.

Banks, Novak, Mank and Grossi (2007) investigated disclosure amongst those with a psychiatric disability. The results suggested that those who did not show psychiatric symptoms at work were less likely to disclose their disability. Additionally, the primary reasons for disclosure were to facilitate accommodations, as suggested by Wilton (2006). Also disclosure of disabilities was used to obtain access to training and information for personnel staff, such as disability awareness training, so that the correct support could be offered to the disabled employee.

Also, in investigation of disclosing a psychiatric disability, Goldberg, Killeen and O'Day (2005) found that those participants who had utilised a vocational rehabilitation programme to gain employment were more likely to disclose than those who had sought employment independently. A further factor that influenced non-disclosure among the participants was the stage of recovery they were in, with those further along in the recovery process being less likely to disclose. Additionally it was considered that an individual may choose to disclose a psychiatric disability once they have been in their current position for a long period of time and once they feel they can trust their employer and also colleagues. The reasons for non-disclosure considered by the participants were related to a greater ease of blending in with other members of staff, previous negative experiences with disclosing psychiatric disorders and the potential for full time employment. Although non-disclosure offered some protection from negative consequences such as being stigmatised, being treated more harshly and receiving uncomfortable attention from others, it also presented challenges in the form of explaining gaps in employment history, having to fabricate stories to hide the disability and less access to accommodations for participants in the research.

When investigating the disclosure of HIV status to others in the workplace, Harmon (1992) identified five factors that were associated with the disclosure. These were: 1) how ill the individual was, 2) how much colleagues already believed or knew, 3) how knowledgeable colleagues in the workplace were about HIV/AIDS, 4) how supportive the work environment was, and 5) the anticipated negative consequences of disclosure. Fesko (2001) found that those who had not disclosed or partially disclosed their HIV status in the workplace had done so based on an evaluation of personal factors, including their personal acceptance of the diagnosis, the desire for privacy and feeling that health status was not relevant to work performance. However, those who had not disclosed did cite social isolation and feeling uncomfortable about being untruthful as downsides associated with non-disclosure. Kalichman, DiMarco, Austin, Webster and DiFonzol (2003) further found that HIV/AIDS disclosure decisions were based on a balance between the need for social support in coping against the potential losses that disclosure could bring.

In investigation of disclosure and invisible chronic illnesses, Vickers (1997) observed that in some instances, disclosure may be a necessity or forced rather than personal choice. This can be illustrated when utilising examples such as asthma attacks, epileptic seizures or diabetic hyperglycaemia, where non-disclosure is no longer an option due to the attention that
has been drawn to the event. The cited examples also bring to mind the consideration that if an employer or colleagues are not aware of an invisible illness, the correct response to an illness related emergency may not be followed. Additionally, frequent workplace absences may precipitate the disclosure of a non-visible disability due to the need for an explanation to the employer. However, it must also be contemplated that an individual may disclose an unseen disability as a form of attention seeking or to gain support from colleagues. In evaluation of the pros and cons of the disclosure of an unseen disability, Vickers (1997) proposed that although it may be an empowering experience in which support from colleagues and adjustments from the employer can be made, the disadvantages of negative attitudes and stigmatisation must also be considered.

Wilton (2006) found that those with sensory or physical impairments were most likely to disclose their disability when compared with those with non-visible disabilities. It was suggested that this may be due to a greater need for physical accommodations within the work environment, however it may be the case that such individuals are forced to disclose as their disability is immediately visible to others. The research has also suggested that individuals with physical disabilities have more positive disclosure experiences than those with non-physical disabilities. (Stanley, Ridley, Manthorpe, Harris and Hurst 2007)

Summary

Through a review of the literature regarding disability disclosure, it appears that despite legislation such as the Disability Discrimination Act 2005, some organizations may be reluctant to employ individuals with disabilities. In addition, there appears to be reluctance on the part of the disabled employee to disclose a disability due to the perceived negative consequences of doing so.

In an attempt to overcome the potential problems associated with negative attitudes towards disability, it has been suggested that greater disability awareness is needed, with training delivered by disabled individuals at an equal or higher level of employment to the audience (Berry & Myer (1995); Daruwalla & Darcy (2005)). This would suggest that a greater awareness of disability for employers and colleagues would create a more conducive environment for individuals to disclose. Specifically from the literature review it would indicate that a greater awareness of non-visible disabilities such as psychiatric disorders is needed to educate employers and colleagues.

In my role as Work Psychologist, I have attempted to apply such principles when working with both employers and employees in retention cases. When an employee has become disabled whilst in employment, I have found that an important part of the retention process is to educate the employer on the disability, specifically related to the work they are undertaking.

In addition, the information and implications of this literature review have been used to guide a development session for Disability Employment Adviser (DEA) colleagues within Jobcentre Plus. The main points addressed through the development session were the importance of considering individual circumstances, such as the type of disability, the requirements of the job, the influence of the disability on work and the potential consequence of non-disclosure.

References


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