Combating Prejudice in the Workplace with Contact Theory: The Lived Experiences of Professionals with Disabilities

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Abstract

People with disabilities often confront barriers in exercising their right to work. Social model scholarship has recognised that attitude is a key factor in the disablement of people with impairments. This study reports on 28 semi-structured interviews with professionals with disabilities. Drawing from their lived experiences and roles in the disability rights movement, the professionals with disabilities interviewed in this study provide unique perspectives on the instances of attitudinal discrimination. The interviewees discuss the tactics they employ to reduce the negative impact of erroneous stereotypes and the successes of such tactics. Many of the tactics employed by interviewees reflect strategies discussed in contact theory scholarship. This study focuses upon contact theory and considers the similarities between this theory and the interventions of interviewees. Through positing interviewees' tactics in the literature this study is able to analyse possible positive and negative consequences of such interventions.

Introduction

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities explains in article 27 that persons with disabilities have the "right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen … in a labor market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities" (Harpur 2009, 2011). Persons with disabilities across the world regularly have this right denied to them (World Health Organization and World Bank 2011, 233). Despite legal and policy interventions, improvements in technology, education and the ability to work, persons with disabilities continue to be substantially over-represented in unemployment statistics (Bagenstos 2004; Vision Australia 2007). The high unemployment rates of persons with disabilities are caused

by numerous factors, ranging from inaccessible public transport, inadequate health services, to discriminatory work practices that (Basas 2009; Harpur 2009). This study will focus upon one of these barriers: attitude.

Scholarship recognises that attitude is a key factor in the disablement of people with impairments (Abberley 1999; Barnes, Mercer and Shakespeare 1999; Finkelstein 2001; Oliver 1996). Social model scholarship distinguishes between impairment and disability in order to emphasise how it is not a person's impairment which makes a person disabled but the way in which society is structured that turns a person's impairment into a disability (Oliver 1990, 11). Some discriminatory attitudes are difficult to detect by regulators and even by the discriminator themselves. Sturm has argued that "cognitive bias, structures of decision-making, and patterns of interaction have replaced deliberate racism and sexism as the frontier of much continued inequality" (2001, 458). Through simply perpetuating social practices and patterns, employers can accordingly create barriers for people who diverge from the artificially constructed "norm" (Green 2005, 635; Malin 2008, 176-178; Rhode 2007. 617). These exclusionary practices often result in barriers being created in society that disable people with different abilities.

There is a difference between living equality and wanting equality. A person lives equality when they believe all people are equal despite their different abilities and when that person takes positive conduct to ensure they do not create barriers for people with different abilities. A person merely wants equality when they construct equality in a way that reinforces existing prejudices. This can occur where a person claims to want persons with disabilities to have equal opportunities but expects people with impairments to act and achieve "disabled". A person who wants equality may hold an erroneous belief that persons with disabilities have less potential to succeed than people without disabilities. Accordingly, they are content to provide persons with disabilities fewer opportunities and to challenge them less, based on the false assumption that people with disabilities are less able in all aspects of their professional lives (Campbell 2009, 19). This discriminatory perspective has been labelled the 'soft bigotry of low expectations' (Stephenson 2006, 178).

The operation of the soft bigotry of low expectation has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Garrett and Liebman observed that:

> Today, much workplace discrimination takes forms that are difficult to prove, or to classify as such even when all the facts are known. Typically, actions that systematically disadvantage minorities and women are informal, discretionary, and undocumented. Often, they are spread across a number of supervisors and co-workers and occur in settings in which private employers can hire and fire workers at will based on idiosyncratic evaluation methods, performance standards, and workplace culture (2004, 314).

People have a right to work in an environment that is inclusive and should not need to fight for this right at every turn. Unfortunately society continues to disable people based on how their abilities diverge from the socially constructed corporeal standard.

Despite the barriers created in the labor market, some people with disabilities are extremely successful in the obtaining and retaining employment. Based upon 28 semi-structured interviews, this study will focus upon three key questions:

1. Have the careers of interviewees to this study been negatively impacted by

discriminatory attitudes or assumptions of employers and work colleagues?

2. If yes to question 1, what tactics have the interviewees employed to reduce the negative impact of such attitude or assumptions?

3. Utilizing existing scholarship and the lived experiences of the interviewees, how effective are the strategies employed in question 2

Method

To explore the impact of contact theory on combatting discriminatory attitudes in workplaces, we did a study of the workplace experiences of professionals with legal blindness. Professionals who are legally blind were selected for this study, as people in this category have an extremely high unemployment rate. In Australia for example 69% of people who are visually-impaired are unemployed which is approximately fourteen times higher than the unemployment rate for people without any disability (Vision Australia 2007). Persons with vision impairments are a useful group to analyse because adaptive technology enables people with this impairment to work, and, because this population typically receives an education which furnishes them with reasonable social, cognitive and communication skills. In the Vision Australia report, for example, data was gathered from 1864 respondents who were blind or have low vision. This report found that "people who are blind or have low vision are more likely to obtain tertiary education qualifications" (5.7). The Report found that approximately 6% of unemployed respondents might be unemployed because of "reasons of retirement, education, homemaking or as a lifestyle choice". This means that 63% of persons with vision impairments in the Vision Australia study are employable yet unable to find work. Accordingly, it is probable that discriminatory attitudes are playing a significant role in preventing so many employable people from securing work.

Interviewees for the study were accessed through both gatekeeper organizations and through purposive sampling. The focus was upon obtaining interviewees who were experts in the issues surrounding disability discrimination at work, both as subject matter experts and as disability rights advocates or leaders in the disability community. Out of the professionals who participated in this study, there were three key groupings of interest (note a interviewee may fall into more than one category below if as they may be a lawyer involved full-time in advocacy):

- 10 lawyers in total, with 7 from Australia and 3 from the United States;
- 6 educators, with 4 from Australia and 2 from the United Kingdom;
- 10 interviewees who are involved with advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities in a full-time role in Australia, 2 from the United Kingdom and 1 from the United States.

As the 28 interviewees were experts, semi-structured interviews with open questions were employed, as most appropriate for this level of professionals. Semi-structured interviews were adopted as 'elites respond well to inquiries about broad areas of content and to a high proportion of intelligent, provocative, open-ended questions that allow them the freedom to use their knowledge and imagination' (Marshall and Rossman 1999, 113). In addition, when interviewing persons with disabilities it is critical to maximise the freedom of interviewees to guide the direction of the research (Kitchen 2000, 40).

The interviews were recorded, transcripts created and interviewees were provided the opportunity to provide additional comments or expand upon their comments in the

interviews. Several interviewees took the opportunity to provide follow up e-mails or contacts. Finally interviewees were provided draft copies of key findings and recommendations from the study to ensure accuracy and to enable them to provide further comments.

Data

Have The Careers Of Interviewees In This Study Been Negatively Impacted By Discriminatory Attitudes Or Assumptions Of Employers And Work Colleagues?

Twenty-five interviewees provided examples of how the soft bigotry of low expectations has impacted negatively upon their work lives. This has occurred in the recruitment stage and once the professional with disability has commenced work with an employer.

A number of interviewees had very strong evidence that they had been discriminated against because of their disability during recruitment processes. Seventeen interviewees stated that they were invited to fewer graduate job interviews than their able bodied counterparts were, when leaving university. This occurred even though interviewees had equal or better grades then their colleagues who had no impairments. Several interviewees had work experience and received subject prizes for topping their university subjects. Despite these qualifications some interviewees reported that they were invited to fewer graduate interviews than their less qualified sighted colleagues. One interviewee, who is a long-standing disability advocate, explained:

> Many people assume you can't do it and if you don't get an interview then you do not have the opportunity to explain how you can do the work.

An American lawyer who was involved in disability rights advocacy further explained:

> Despite being reasonably accomplished, and I like to think reasonably efficient and, I hope graceful, inevitably society is governed by people who have been taught about our capacity. They will act upon their beliefs even where it is wrong. Occasionally it spills over into denying us opportunity. Generally I can prove to them that their fears are unfounded. Certainly initially there is reluctance and there are some institutional barriers I have not been able to overcome. … Institutional barriers … when I worked for a government department it was hard to get into management. The department prided itself on being an open employer. It however employed most of us ad entry or lower level positions [sic]. You certainly did not see blind people in proportion to their numbers in upper level positions.

It is difficult to determine conclusively why these interviewees received fewer opportunities than job applicants without disabilities. Based upon the resumes of interviewees and their ability to communicate during this study, it is reasonable to conclude that interviewees' disability was a major factor in their less favourable treatment.

Attitudinal discrimination does not stop once a person with a disability has been made a job offer. Is there a soft bigotry of low expectation in workplaces impacting upon professionals with legal blindness? Data collected for this study indicate yes. One of the interviewees in this study stated:

> People with disabilities need to keep proving themselves. They need to work harder than other people. There is a soft bigotry of low expectations. We need to keep raising the bar. Being disabled … at the moment it is inevitable that you will need to do more to prove your abilities.

Interviewees provided various examples where employers and work colleagues made incorrect assumptions about their abilities, which reduced their opportunities to reach their full potential in their careers.

Tactics Employed By Professionals With Disabilities In This Study To Combat Discrimination In Job Interviews

Fourteen interviewees reported that they adopted proactive strategies to demystifying disability to potential employers. These interviewees explained that even if employers do not ask about how they can fulfil the functions of the job with their impairment, interviewees indicated that they explain to potential employers how their adaptive technologies work and how their impairment does and does not impact on their ability to perform the inherent requirements of the job. This, in the words of two interviewees, "demystifies disability" to potential employers. This helps employers see how the interviewee can indeed perform necessary tasks and it enables potential employers to make more accurate decisions on the value the interviewee could bring to the employer.

Often employers will not ask about how a person with a disability can manage and excel at work. One interviewee speculated that employers were reluctant to mention the applicant's disability in the interview due to fears of litigation if he or she were not awarded the job. Interviewees explained that if they do not address employers concerns, they believe employers will simply not make a job offer.

Tactics Employed By Professionals With Disabilities To Combat Discrimination In The Workplace

Once persons with disabilities have successfully navigated the job interview process they then need to convince work colleagues of their capability. One interviewee who is an Australian lawyer explained:

A major problem is that there are people that patronise you. They think you cannot have the skills that a sighted person would have. Yes I have some limitations, but I can still do a very good job. … Some colleagues just make up their mind before I meet them. Those that get to know me at close range; we get along fine. People in the middle distance that have had no contact with blindness can be more problematic.

Over all, interviewees indicated that they had considerable success in rebutting their colleagues' erroneous low expectations of their capacities through maximising the quality of their contact.

While the soft bigotry of low expectations can be addressed, unfortunately this

can take substantial effort on behalf of interviewees. One interviewee working in academia observed:

> When I was first trying to get casual tutoring work senior academics were not sure how I could run the tutorials so gave the work to other people. Eventually I received teaching opportunities and won prizes for my teaching. For a while though I wondered if I would ever get an opportunity to prove my abilities.

One interviewee who has worked for government and in management in disability service organizations explained:

> At times work colleagues attitudes have held me back. It is hard to prove, but I have had the sense that people have doubted that I could do the role. I have had to almost make allowances for their opinion and had to do extra. I used to not be given some opportunities or work because people were unsure what I could do. There were always plausible reasons for not giving me the opportunity.

Discussion of the Tactics used by Professionals with Disabilities in this Study to Combat Prejudice

Professionals with disabilities in this study have attempted to maximise their contact with potential and actual employers and with colleagues to reduce prejudice. This part will draw from existing scholarship and interviewees' lived experiences to ascertain the effectiveness of such tactics.

The transformational power of contact between people from dominant and minority groups has been recognised in the literature. Contact theory was first developed to reduce prejudice based upon racial differences: "[C]ontact theory posits that socially constructed stereotypes and hostility can be improved by close contact between members of different races", (Waterstone and Stein 2008, 1367). Scholars have analysed and extended the operation of contact theory so it can now be utilized to combat prejudice impacting all manifestations of attribute discrimination including bigotry based upon ability (Weber, 2007).

While combating overt forms of discrimination is crucial to achieving equality, equality will not be reached unless more subtle forms of discrimination are abolished (Sturm, 2006, 250). Research performed by Waterstone and Stein went beyond simply considering contact theory in terms of overt discrimination and considered how contact theory could address invidious, unconscious discrimination. Waterstone and Stein made the case for why people with psycho-social disabilities "should and can be integrated into the workplace" (2008, 1352-1353). They argue that the integration of persons with psycho-social disabilities into the workplace would have positive benefits for society. The authors assert that "empirical evidence demonstrates that stereotypes about mental disability are malleable and amenable to change through inclusive workplaces" (2008, 1367). Accordingly, integrated workplaces would help reduce prejudice in society and render the community more inclusive for all people. If people with mental disabilities are excluded from the professions, society may miss out on the valuable contributions of people in this group. Historically, some of the world's greatest leaders have had mental disabilities, such as Ludwig von Beethoven, Winston Churchill, Charles Dickens, Albert Einstein, Abraham Lincoln and Isaac Newton (Waterstone and Stein 2008, 1372). Society cannot afford to lose the

contributions of potentially great contributors to society and the world of work, simply because of prejudice and uninformed stereotypical assumptions, not based in reality.

Contact Theory And Job Interviews

Contact Theory has been credited with reducing prejudice in society (Estlund 2003, 74-76; Silvers and Stein 2002). The next section will analyse the impact of contact theory in the working lives of interviewees.

While devising strategies for dealing with possible prejudices and lack of first-hand experience with disabled workers can be usefully addressed in job interviews, it is nonetheless difficult to alter ablest beliefs in as short period of time as such interviews are allotted. Job interviews usually involve, at most, a few hours contact. Some interviewees have recognised this limitation and have focused upon areas of law in which there are eminent professionals with the same disability as the interviewee. Interviewees explained that they mentioned such professionals during the job interviews in an attempt to counter (and anticipate) implicit negative stereotypes that the interviewers may hold. Research supports the notion that contact with eminent professionals with disabilities can have a profound impact upon the interviewer. Bagenstos found that bias is mitigated when people "are in the presence of authority figures who are members of minority groups" (2006, 16).

Interviewees explained that this technique serves to help "normalise" disability for the potential employer. One interviewee explained an experience with normalising disability to potential employers. This interviewee was invited for an academic job interview with a selection panel and presented to the faculty. During the interview process the academic described how he or she could manage all aspects of the role with their impairment and invited the interviewing panel to ask further questions; no additional questions were asked, and the applicant was not made an offer by the university. One year later, the applicant met one of the panellists at a conference. In the informal environs of the conference, this panellist commented that "surely being blind would make it difficult to teach". In response, the academic listed five other teachers of law who were totally blind, as well as a number of attorneys of law who do court work, and also named a number of blind politicians around the world. The panellist was surprised. When invited to reflect upon this experience for this study, the interviewee commented that it would have been helpful to mention all the people with blindness to the panel to further normalise blindness in the mind of the panellists. As the panellist the applicant with whom this exchange took place was dean of teaching, that individual's erroneous beliefs probably had a significantly negative impact upon the entire recruitment panel's perspective on the interviewee. The interviewee indicated they had mentioned how they could cope, but would in the future be far more prepared and give far more detail in interviews to combat prejudice.

Contact Theory And Attitudes

Interviewees employed a range of strategies to maximise the transformational quality of colleagues' contact with persons with disabilities. People do not rate people on their actual performances but on how the decision-maker perceives their potential to perform. The perception of performance is therefore critical to career success. Once a person with a disability has secured work, the increased contact with employers and work colleagues increases the ability to use contact

theory to rebut prejudice.

To manage perceptions, all employees negotiate their identity with their employers and work colleagues. If the employee in question has an identity that is perceived as desirable, then negotiating a positive image is relatively easy. If however the employee diverges from how society typically constructs its notion of an ideal worker, then effecting a positive perception can be more difficult. People who have a disability often need to combat the soft bigotry of low expectations before they can start making a positive image. This additional work to combat prejudice is referred to as extra identity work (Carbado and Gulati 2000, 1264).

Twenty interviewees indicated that they engaged in extra identity work to combat negative assumptions about their impairments. This approach largely resulted in interviewees ensuring they did everything they could as well as possible. One interviewee described an attempt to be 'sharp' whenever interacting with colleagues or the community. Other interviewees noted a tendency to respond to employers' and colleagues' negative assumptions by over-achieving at work.

Employees with disabilities can make considerable effort to address prejudice in the minds of colleagues, but ultimately it is necessary to have workplaces that promote equality. Research has identified optimal contact as most effective in reducing prejudice (Allport 1954). Optimal contact exists where and when people with and without disabilities have equal status, common goals, where there is intergroup cooperation, and where the contact has the support of relevant authorities. The experiences of professionals with disabilities in this study support the hypothesis that significant transformational contact is only likely to occur where management and colleagues are interested in promoting equality.

Many workplaces will have anti-discrimination policies, as well as management that formally supports equality. There is a difference, however, between workplaces that claim to support equality and those that actually make substantive efforts. The extent of support can be evinced by how people at work respond to people with disabilities. For example, if an employer is unsure which tasks a person with a disability can perform with adaptive technology, does that colleague make an effort to contact the person with a disability to inquire, or does that colleague simply act without consultation, making often unfounded assumptions? Where it takes additional effort to determine what their colleague with a disability can do, some people simply decide not to pick up the telephone and have a brief chat. An interviewee who worked in government explained:

> Co-workers would exclude me from doing things that I could have done… It is not discrimination, at least at the conscious level, but it is a real problem.

One interviewee worked in a group where senior staff distributed tasks to junior employees. The interviewee was a junior employee. The interviewee had explained to senior employees how he operated and tried to provide them as much information as he could. On several occasions the interviewee asked for work. The interviewee approached senior staff and asked why he was not getting work from them. The interviewee thought that perhaps it was the quality of his work. Senior staff indicated they were extremely happy with his work but they were not always sure what he could and could not do. One senior employee said that they did not know if the interviewee could do the work or not so gave it to

another employee. On another occasion a different senior employee acknowledged wanting to give certain work to the disabled employee but thought it would be too time consuming for the interviewee. Both senior employees were wrong. The problem was that erroneous assumptions held by senior employees had reduced the amount of work flowing to the interviewee and thus his level of output was well below his potential. Eventually the interviewee resigned from the job and left the industry.

There were a number of other examples provided by interviewees on how erroneous assumptions at work had reduced the potential of disabled employees to achieve their potential. The operationalising of this assumption was especially frustrating for interviewees, as there was no need for this barrier to exist. The removal of this barrier did not involve costly architectural reforms or substantial effort. The removal of this barrier simply required people to change their attitude and judge interviewees upon their merits and not upon erroneous beliefs. Even when interviewees attempted to inform work colleagues of their capacities this did not always help.

Contact Theory And Work Systems

The point at which contact theory has the least benefit is where employers have already developed exclusionary work systems. The previous section focused on the issue of simply changing the attitudes of employers and colleagues. This section will consider the difficulty of changing employers' and colleagues' attitudes and actions.

An employee with a disability may obtain a job and develop productive relationships with colleagues, but if the workplace is not fully accessible then the employee will struggle to succeed. One of the key strategies employed by the United Nations and disability scholars to reduce workplace exclusion is through the principle of universal design (sometimes referred to as "inclusive design"). Universal design is a concept that requires society to identify and remove barriers to full social inclusion. CRPD art 2 defines universal design to mean "the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design." CRPD article 27(1) explains that persons with disabilities have the right to work in an "inclusive" workplace. Where this right is breached, then states have an obligation to ensure that "reasonable accommodation is provided" to persons with disabilities (CRPD arts 4 and 27(1)(I)). Reasonable accommodations can be distinguished from inclusive design. Reasonable accommodations occur where an inaccessible environment is altered to enable persons with disabilities to use the environment. Universal design does not involve modifications to environments after it has been developed; rather, it focuses upon creating an environment that is fully inclusive from the outset.

Where a workplace already employs persons with disabilities, contact theory would indicate that those employers would be more likely to implement work systems that maximise universal design principles. Fortunately, interviewees in this study indicated that some employers were moving towards embracing inclusive design. Interviewees who worked for disabled persons' organizations (DPOs) and universities seemed overall to operate in workplaces that are more inclusive. Universities for example need to provide accessible education for students with disabilities. This means there is a group on most university

campuses who are experts in accessibility—or at least an individual with such knowledge and authority to bring about increased access. Interviewees reported positive outcomes where human resource management can be convinced to utilize such resources.

While some decision makers have embraced universal design principles, the majority of decision makers appear to focus upon reasonable accommodations rather than universal design, and the issue of reasonable accommodation often only reaches the agenda of decision makers once a person with a disability has requested the accommodation. Even where employees with disabilities raise access concerns with their employers, this does not always motivate employers to alter their conduct or adapt the environment.

Outside universities and DPOs the principles of universal design are less frequently considered. Interviewees in most for-profit organizations and in many government agencies reported that their employers' created barriers to inclusion and would only consider accessibility issues after systems were finalised. Most of the employers who did not embrace universal design reportedly only seemed to consider access issues if an employee with a disability made a formal request. Even where access is considered, usually the response of employers was to ignore access issues until the system is finalised. This approach led one interviewee to remark:

> The major barriers to employment are the up-take of technology and willingness of employers to take on persons with disabilities. Being blind requires employers to contemplate inclusiveness in technology purchases and occasionally require a more accessible approach to work tasks.

It is often very simple to avoid practices that create barriers for people with disabilities. For example, interviewees explained that often people used images as signatures in e-mails or published materials as secured PDF files rather than adopting accessible approaches. As screen readers cannot read images, the decision to insert data as a photo rather than as text means people without eyesight are unable to access this information without first saving the image as a file and then running that file through software to convert the data to an accessible format.

In addition, many software packages do not adhere to inclusive design principles. One interviewee explained that employers purchased software that was inaccessible without serious alterations. The law firm where the interviewee worked retained an information technology firm to create a script to enable its employee to use the software. In another situation the employer in question gave the work to other employees, which reduced the interviewee's efficiency and might impact upon future promotions. Another interviewee was not provided support and simply had to make do with a different system as best as possible. In several cases the interviewees were asked to find the solution themselves. In most cases something could be worked out, but the burden is placed upon the individual to find a way around the inaccessible system adopted by the employer.

The approach of considering access after a system is in place can be extremely problematic in instances where the system cannot be rendered accessible after the fact. A number of professional software packages are entirely inaccessible.

One such software package that was discussed by interviewees used images to communicate data instead of text. Users of this program needed to click on an image to move between screens. As screen readers read text and cannot read images this package is entirely inaccessible. If these packages are purchased by firms, then this will be a massive barrier to inclusion. Interviewees and disability person organizations have already started lobbying this company; however without litigation the success of such lobbying is uncertain. This inaccessible software package is already being rolled out commercially and accessibility features will not be included in this version. Currently this software is only in the United States but in the past these packages have been modified for international markets.

It is substantially more difficult for interviewees to use contact theory strategies to combat work systems and technologies that exclude them. Many interviewees explained that they focus upon building up a good network in their workplace, cultivate a positive image and remain continually committed to achieving excellence. While these strategies enable persons with disabilities to reduce the negative impact of exclusionary work practices, they have had a limited impact on rendering systems more inclusive.

Conclusion

Persons with disabilities are often not able to exercise their right to work. Their careers are negatively impacted by negative stereotypes and erroneous assumptions. Despite the disabling effect of prejudice, some persons with disabilities become professionals and have successful careers.

This study has reported on 28 interviews with professionals with disabilities about their experiences and responses to discriminatory attitudes at work. Drawing on their personal experiences and their experience as a leader in the disability rights field, the interviewees to this study explained how bigotry and erroneous assumptions had negatively impacted their working lives. To combat the negative impact of discriminatory attitudes interviewees employed various tactics. One tactic analysed in detail in this study was the impact of strategies that use principles from contact theory.

One barrier persons with disabilities face at work is the soft bigotry of low expectations. This bigotry manifests itself where people possess incorrect information about the capabilities of persons with disabilities, and make hiring or supervisory decisions based on such misinformation. Often people may support the notion of equality as an abstract concept, but may also believe persons with disabilities have less potential for work (both specifically and generally) than they actually possess. Where this occurs, a person who promotes equality may (often unwittingly) practice ableism. The experiences of the interviewees in the study demonstrate that applying contact theory can assist in altering the soft bigotry of low expectations. Through proactive strategies interviewees explained how they have reduced prejudice of potential employers in job interviews and work colleagues once they obtained employment.

Though applying contact theory assisted interviewees to obtain work and to have more positive experiences at work, the application of contact theory had less success in motivating employers to embrace universal design. Even where interviewees attempted to raise inclusive design principles with their employers, many employers insisted on the reasonable accommodation approach. In other words, some

employers ignored the issue of access at the design stage and only considered making reasonable accommodations once the system has been implemented. It appears employers' contact with persons with disabilities had minimal impact on shifting this unfortunate approach to developing work systems.

Interventions drawing on contact theory principles are not a silver bullet that can reverse prejudice and create an inclusive society. Persons with disabilities will continue to be disabled by the discriminatory attitudes of employers and colleagues. Despite these limitations, however, this study recommends that people disabilities consider adopting some of the tactics of the interviewees to this study to improve their experiences at work. Reducing the extent to which society disables people with impairments is a complex process. If individuals can alter the attitudes of some employers and colleagues then they will improve their own career prospects and play an important role in the struggle for equality.

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