

# FROM APPLICATION TO ADVANCEMENT:

## Workplace Barriers for Differently-Abled People



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In the great variety of workplace settings, there are a number of different qualities that employers expect in candidates. Sometimes, these qualities are relevant to the job, but there are a number of instances where the qualities sought after seem to go far beyond what is typically performed. This kind of workforce gatekeeping is most harmful for people who might have a physical, sensory or social disability that prevents them from meeting a boilerplate set of demands.

Job applications include phrases like “ability to lift twenty-five pounds” or communicate “normally,” and these are often used to the detriment of people who cannot perform all the same functions that conventionally able-bodied people can. When people are abled differently in any small way, they face barriers in the workplace that their abled counterparts do not—during the hiring process, while on the job and with career advancement.

People who are differently-abled experience difficulty in finding employment. As mentioned previously, one of the greatest problems in job descriptions is that they require abilities that are not essential for the job. According to an article from Pacific Standard, if you go to HigherEdJobs.com, a web tool to find careers in academia, and “search for ‘25 pounds,’ you’ll find 654 entries right now that require various degrees of physical ability, often accompanied by other statements mandating ‘normal’ modes of communication.”

The result of this is that a lot of differently-abled people who are perfectly qualified for the job end up being passed over due to excluding ability requirements. Another obstacle to employment are the physical barriers which may discourage a differently-abled person from applying to a particular job. Some examples of these include the lack of an elevator or wheelchair ramp, or not providing modified

equipment which would allow any person to perform in the position.

RISE Services, Inc., a human service network for differently-abled people, states that “if a person has severe dyslexia or visual impairments, they need to be provided with a computer that is capable of reading the screen to them.” In many workplaces, these accommodations can be difficult to ask for, let alone be obtained, and thus serve as an additional barrier to employment.

Differently-abled people are also faced with attitudes and stereotyping, teasing and being patronized once they do get hired, which makes it more difficult to keep a job. Many people have judgments and assumptions about differently-abled persons, which prevent the latter from having a positive experience.

For example, a person might be denied resources if the employer does not believe they have autism, a learning disability or other “invisible” disabilities—ones which are not immediately apparent physically, such as being in a wheelchair. Even though this

is illegal because of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, discrimination like this occurs all the time. This is especially the case with “invisible” disabilities, which are questioned more frequently than visible ones.

Additionally, differently-abled people are often on the receiving end of a great deal of teasing after they get hired. Narayan Seva Sansthan, a polio rehabilitation clinic, states that people who participate in teasing often “find superiority in bullying the weak and underprivileged.” When a differently-abled person encounters a lot of teasing in the workplace, the quality of their work might suffer, which could result in disciplinary action, or they might feel as though they need to switch to a less demanding, lower paying job to avoid the disrespect.

Lastly, differently-abled people deal with patronization in the workplace that may not be readily apparent for those who believe they are helping. To some differently-abled people, hearing things like “I know what you are going through” or “I know this must be hard” are not beneficial. These would simply not do justice when considering the great amount of trouble that differently-



abled people, hearing things like “I know what you are going through” or “I know this must be hard” are not beneficial. These would simply not do justice when considering the great amount of trouble that differently-abled people go through every day. While this might not seem like a big deal to a conventionally abled person, such phrases can be a form of outcasting if repeated enough times in a condescending manner.

Additionally, differently-abled people experience difficulty when it comes to career advancement. A 2017 article titled “Exploring career advancement challenges people with disabilities are facing in the South African work context” details the career advancement challenges that can be found in people with disabilities. The authors found that differently-abled people generally experience challenges in career advancement and reach career plateaus. More specifically, the study found that “human resource practices, *especially promotion opportunities*, discriminate against employees with disabilities.” It also found that “there is prejudice against invisible disabilities, and as a result, employees are reluctant to declare their disability.”

From this, it can be concluded that there is still a long way to go before differently-abled people are given the opportunities that they deserve. Because this study also found that managers and colleagues who lack knowledge about their disability had an adverse impact on their careers, it is essential that human resource practitioners and managers begin to recognize the influence that they have on the career advancement of individuals who are living with a disability.

In order to overcome these barriers, it is important to embolden people who are differently-abled. Specifically, it is essential to destigmatize and normalize asking for and getting accommodations or assistance. On Labor, a blog devoted to workers rights, states that people “might be uncertain whether they really want to claim the ‘disabled’ label due [to] a complicated cocktail of emotions, including internalized stigma, fear of a negative reaction, guilt that they are ‘less disabled’ than others, and reluctance to do the emotional labor of advocating for oneself.”

Many employees are hesitant to claim their ADA right because of the pitfalls of mandated disclosure. Therefore, it is essential that managers and coworkers promote a non-judgmental atmosphere in the workplace. Another possible solution is to affirmatively invite employees via a regularly distributed questionnaire or email, to request or discuss reasonable accommodations.

Another way to combat ableism in the workplace is to become anti-ableist. This does not only mean avoiding offensive actions and speech, but also a shift in the thinking of conventionally abled to make essential changes in their lives and the lives of others. There are a number of proactive things one can do to accomplish this. One easy but necessary way people can begin this process is to learn to stop staring at folks. If this happens by mistake, they should then apologize and stop staring. Simple things—like apologies and acknowledgements—can go a long way. Second, it is important to avoid racing to help someone with a disability. While well-intentioned, this can create obstacles for folks. Instead, it is better to respectfully embolden differently-abled people so that they feel secure to make a request for themselves.

Lastly, it is important to stop debating whether someone is less abled. No one should have to defend their disability. “Differently-abled” does not mean unable.

As society progresses in the 21st century, it is essential that the barriers that differently-abled people face in the hiring process are recognized and these people feel supported, respected and able to advance in their careers. Once this occurs, it will lead to more support for folks who are often left with their voices unheard.

While differently-abled people have gotten more protection legally from the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, they still face difficulty within a culture that stigmatizes their disability. While it is difficult to legislate job environments, managers, coworkers and customers can do their part in emboldening differently-abled people and becoming anti-ableist. When this happens, workplace culture can evolve to ensure that everyone feels that they are valued and understood.

