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REVERSING THE GAZE: ONTARIO PUBLIC LIBRARY MANAGERS' PERCEPTION OF AND EXPERIENCE WITH ACCOMMODATION FOR DISABILITY

Abstract

Library workers with disabilities remain underrepresented within libraries. This research investigates this problem by turning its gaze towards library managers who provide accommodations in the workplace to their staff. Preliminary findings indicate a strong interest in providing accommodation in the interview process and in the workplace, but a tendency not to signal that openness. Ideas for better signalling desire and willingness to accommodate for disability are recommended.

Introduction

People with disabilities are underrepresented within library employment. In looking at employment statistics, the figures are quite grim. The Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians (CAPAL) found in their most recent census that just under 6% of their members identify as having a disability (2018). The American Library Association (ALA) reported an even smaller representation with only 2.9% of their members identifying as having a disability (2017). These statistics are in contrast to the rate of disability within the general population. In Canada and the US, the rate of disability is 22% and 13%, (Government of Canada, 2018; Erickson, W., Lee, C., von Schrader, S., 2022).

The starkness of these figures is complicated by their inaccuracy as reported totals represent only those who either feel comfortable enough to identify or have no choice but to do so. Some library workers try to “pass” as non-disabled out of fear that disclosure will negatively affect their careers (Brown and Sheidlower, 2019; Pionke, 2019; Oud, 2019).

The Accommodations Predicament

Seeking accommodation for disability within the workplace is a complicated undertaking. It is a negotiation between two parties with a power dynamic weighted heavily in favour of the organization that can take place during the interview process, but more generally happens once employment has already been established. The first is generally the more high-stakes situation

between the two. In the vast majority of cases, an organization produces a job description that is then shared with the public. Those who then believe they fit the criteria submit their resumes. To be blunt, the organization shares its expectations of applicants while the applicant works to show how they fit that criteria. The applicant is generally not in a position to outline their expectations of an employer. If accommodations are sought after employment has been obtained, the power dynamic is still weighted in favour of the organization. In the end, the organization has the power to acquiesce or deny the request for accommodation.

For both groups there are a series of calculations being made. The organization considers the request in light of such concerns as legal requirements, costs, staffing, belief, and morale. Provincial and federal law outline some specifications on the rights of employers to accommodate for disability. Beyond legal mandate, each organization has its own considerations around such concerns as costs, alterations of workloads, and the morale of staff members. An unknown in this calculation is how much belief comes into frame; belief that the request is legitimate.

For the individual seeking accommodation, they are weighing the possible positive and negative consequences of their request (Prince, 2017; Dong, Warner, Mamboleo, & Zalles, 2017). In the best cases, disclosure results in accommodations that allow the staff member to more successfully do their work. Appropriate accommodation can reduce stress, give a clearer understanding of expectations, ensure support, and improve the person's self-image through self-advocacy (Prince, 2017). But there are legitimate fears around disclosure. People fear stigmatization and they may want to maintain certain barriers that disclosure would dissolve (Toth & Dewa, 2014). An individual may be concerned that they will be perceived as 'needy' or 'not self sufficient.' There can be concerns that disclosure will result in stigmatization and negative work situations due to disclosure (e.g. demotion or being overlooked for a promotion) (Prince 2017). Considering disclosing and seeking accommodation can result in the 'predicament of disclosure' where there are both potential benefits and potential disadvantages to doing so (Prince, 2017).

To add to the complexity, seeking accommodations is no guarantee that they will be granted. Statistics Canada notes that "Of those who required workplace accommodations: 59% had all of their needs met, 19% had some of their needs met, and 21% had none of their needs met" (Morris, 2017). Additionally, those in precarious labour situations are even less likely to have their accommodation needs met (Shuey and Jovic, 2013). As an additional caveat, acquiring accommodation sometimes comes only after significant delay or pushback leading to low morale (Pionke, 2019; Gewurtz, Langan, & Shand, 2014; Schomberg, 2018).

The Literature

The library literature long had interest in accessibility for persons with disabilities, but the focus is more often on patrons with disabilities rather than disabled library workers (Hill, 2013). The literature has only recently started to provide some insight into understanding disabled library workers. The literature here includes both research and lived experience. Both types of literature share many commonalities. There is a fear about how colleagues and managers may react to a disclosure of disability and request for accommodation (Burns & Green, 2019; Pionke 2019; Pionke 2022; Schomberg, 2018). For library workers and patrons there is a noted divergence of experience noted by disabled workers in comparison to their non-disabled peers. Disabled library workers have “less confidence that their workplace is inclusive, values diversity, and is understanding of disability-related issues” (Oud, 2018) and their experience shows a “fissure in our policies, practices, and processes, as they lack inclusivity as a basic standard” (Williams & Hagood, 2019; p 493).

This focus first on accessibility for users of libraries and only more recently on accessibility related to library workers means the focus for change results in a dearth of work that interrogates systems and structures that need change. O’Neill and Urquhart (2011) provide one of the few perspectives on investigating library management’s understanding of accessibility. Their work found that library managers were aware of their duty to accommodate and that most understood the necessity of accommodation, but that understanding of accommodation related to a narrow scope of disability.

Research Question

The research here seeks to turn the focus from the experience of those asking for accommodation and onto the group with the most direct power to provide accommodation, library management. We ask, “What friction points exist in the accommodations process as perceived by public library management?” in order to investigate the accommodations process within Ontario public libraries.

Reversing the Gaze

In this research, we employ the framework of “reversing the gaze” (Strega and Brown 2015) to critically examine the accommodation process within public libraries in Ontario. Traditional research on accommodations overwhelmingly focuses on the experiences of individuals seeking accommodations, often placing the burden of change on those same people. While centering their voices is important, this approach can overlook the systematic barriers created by those in positions of power.

Research that focuses solely on the experiences of those requesting accommodations can unintentionally overlook the friction points and complexities faced by those responsible for enacting accommodations. As Strega and Brown (2005) note: “We suggest that it is only when we reverse the gaze and investigate and problematize the other side of the equation — that is, the

behaviours, discourses, and perceptions of the dominant — that we create possibilities for change that are transformative rather than incremental.” (p. 6). In focusing on the experiences and perspectives of those providing accommodation, we aim to understand the barriers they encounter and identify opportunities to make the accommodation process more effective and equitable.

Much like those with invisible disabilities often feel a burden of proof when seeking accommodation, traditional research often places a burden of change of those who experience disability rather than those who are in the position to enact change. Potts and Brown (2015) observe that “Most research is organized with a gaze facing the wrong way, toward those who suffer from inequities rather than those who benefit from them or those who are indifferent.” (p. 24).

Method

This paper reports on an ongoing series of interviews currently being carried out. The research team is conducting semi-structured interviews with 10 public library managers in the province of Ontario. Currently three interviews are complete and under analysis. Interviews are approximately one hour in length and include questions around accessibility and accommodations in relation to job advertisements, the interview process, how accommodations questions are received, and what kinds of accommodations are in place currently. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using an open coding process.

Preliminary Findings

Participants

Participants as of January 20th have included two library workers in management positions in small and mid-size systems (population between 10,000-150,000) in Southwest Ontario. Further interviews are scheduled in February. Neither indicated any desire or need for accommodation themselves. Both had had experience providing accommodations to workers they supervise, but only one had had the experience of interviewing a candidate who had asked for accommodation during the interview process.

Formal vs Informal Accommodation

The interviews focused on teasing out the line between formal and informal accommodations. Informal accommodations include any accommodations made at the discretion of the manager with no formal processes involved. Formal accommodations would be those that involve more than just an individual manager’s discretion, may involve a human resources department or union, and generally require some sort of documentation, usually in the form of a doctor’s note or other proof of claim.

Participants noted that accommodation for disability existed in both informal and formal ways. The line marking where the former gives way to the later is somewhat murky with the main

characteristic being when the accommodation starts to strain the organization. This strain could come in different shapes like a requirement for adaptive equipment that falls beyond the discretionary resources of management or in the discontent of other staff members as they feel their workload increase in response.

The Interview Process

“I’ve interviewed many, many people over the years, and I have never had anybody disclose anything during the interview. Um, the disclosures that have come to my attention were always after the person has been offered the job.”

While there were possibilities for providing accommodation within the interview process, there were few outward signals to prospective candidates that the organization would be one in which it was safe to disclose the need for accommodation. Accessibility and accommodation do not seem to factor strongly into the creation of the initial job advertisement.

In discussing the interview process participants noted their willingness to be accommodating and their desire to have a more diverse organization. As one noted, this “is not just a legal requirement...we want to do this.” Participants shared a willingness to adjust the interview process to accommodate. Prospective candidates could ask for a break in the process and in the one case of someone requesting accommodation to get the interview questions in advance.

Discussion

By reversing the gaze with this research, we have started to tease out some of the friction involved in the accommodations process in libraries. On surface, it seems like the two groups of focus here - the participants in this research and disabled library workers who might need accommodation - would find each other since they share similar perspectives. The participants in this research are interested in having a diverse staff. They recognize that disability does not detract from someone’s ability to be competent in a role. These managers are likely not unusual in this understanding. Yet the wariness around disclosing disability and seeking accommodation by library workers (Burns & Green, 2019; Pionke 2019; Pionke 2022; Schomberg, 2018) points to a significant misalignment between the two.

Participants had a level of autonomy around accommodation requests allowing for a range of informal and formal processes. This discretion is important but also could lead to uncertainty for the staff member as to when an accommodation goes from one to the other. Similarly with the interview process, participants noted a variety of ways it could be made accessible.

The unknowns in the accommodations process as explored here seem to fall predominantly towards the library worker as they consider requesting accommodation in the interview process or after employment has been established. Library managers may want to accommodate and be able to provide a variety of accommodations, but job applicants and current staff do not know

this until after a relationship has been established. The onus for broaching the topic of accommodation falls to the staff member.

Recommendations

Given the findings so far, we would like to offer some recommendations to library managers who want to encourage disabled library workers to apply for positions and who want to be supportive of library workers they supervise who might need accommodation. The main recommendation would be to find ways for the organization to signal that it is open and willing to accommodate.

This could take the form of considering the way a job ad is written to ensure inclusivity. The Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work (CCRW) advises that job descriptions not only mention accommodations are available but that organizations could provide a specific point of contact for accommodation requests. To more clearly indicate that the organization is inclusive, the job description could also include job benefits, “that support a diverse workplace, such as flexible work hours, parental leave, and mental health support (2024).

A second recommendation is focused on the interview process. Beyond a statement that candidates can receive accommodation, it might be helpful to provide specific examples of possible accommodations (e.g. breaks, interview questions ahead of time). Specificity such as this could provide reassurance that accommodations have been considered important by the organization.

Third, is a general call to be open about accessibility practices and possibilities with all staff. If accessibility is a common topic and includes both patrons and staff, disabled library staff may be able to better gauge the safety of disclosing within that environment.

Conclusion

So far, the research tends to show two groups who have the same values. Disabled library workers know they can be an asset in the workplace. These library managers are enthusiastic about wanting to accommodate. Allowing for them to better find one another requires a bit more bluntness on the part of library management. Being more explicit in their desire to be accommodating could help relieve some of the burden from job applicants and current staff and help to identify the organization as one where it is safe to disclose.

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