

It takes ingenuity and persistence to succeed, disabled workers say

But people are selective about how much they tell their bosses, new survey by Ryerson and the Royal Bank reveals

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A new report on the realities of working life for disabled employees talks about how hard they must work to succeed, how their conditions often attract “the stare” from co-workers and how managers sometimes put bottom-line considerations ahead of accommodation.

But, primarily, the report talks about the enormous pride they derive from working in a competitive, professional corporate environment where their contributions are recognized and valued.

The joint report by Toronto's Ryerson University and the Royal Bank of Canada examines the strategies people with disabilities employ to succeed at work.

“Our data confirms that employees with disabilities are persistent and ingenious in balancing the complex demands of working in the corporation,” said co-author Catherine Frazee, co-director of the Ryerson RBC Foundation Institute for Disability Studies Research and Education.

The most discouraging finding was that people with disabilities often feel the need “to hide” in the workplace, said co-author Kathryn Church, a professor in Ryerson's school of disability studies.

“They do so to facilitate their own integration, and to prevent negative reactions, but also to secure privacy against unwelcome curiosity,” according to the report, released Thursday.

“Practising concealment is a ‘second job’ layered into their work . . . A strong example comes from employees who use the distance and invisibility provided by email and phone interactions to establish able-bodied virtual identities.”

The researchers, who were granted access to employees with disabilities and managers at the Royal Bank over the course of three years, found that employees were selective about how much they told their bosses about their conditions.

Some quietly limited their prospects for career advancement and promotion because they felt they could not keep up, or they had reached a point where “preserving their bodies and quality of life became more important than corporate rewards and career development,” the report said.

The researchers also found that co-workers and managers often felt at disabled workers might be slow, making them a potential liability in terms of team functioning and productivity.

“By contrast, we discovered that disabled employees are ingenious about workload management (for example, inventing short-cut programs and taking work home) and concentrate on high quality performance.”

Ms. Frazee, who uses a wheelchair to get around, said attitudes still prevent many people with disabilities from achieving their full potential.

One of the aims of the report is to provoke more open discussion, said Ms. Frazee, an academic, an advocate for people with disabilities and former chief commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

“There is a contradiction between the corporation's drive to build a global business and its commitment to build a diverse work force,” the report said.

“Study participants, in particular managers, expressed concern about how to maintain their primary orientation towards generating revenue with developing practices that support a disability agenda,” the researchers found.

“The tension this creates is not necessarily unhealthy, but the two aims often pull in different directions. In their [the managers'] view, the 'immediate bottom line' often wins out.”

For all the straight talk, the disabled participants in the study made clear that they feel fortunate to work at the Royal Bank and supported their employer's efforts to learn more about their diverse needs, the report said.

The researchers said successful disabled employees are skilled at learning which co-workers and managers they can trust to ask for help when they need it.

“They have a strong sense of personal responsibility and will resist any kind of 'buddy system' that is demeaning or infantilizing,” the report said.

The most enlightened managers are often those who have friends or family members with disabilities, and the most successful disabled employees are those who build networks, educate those around them, negotiate for what they need to perform their jobs and maintain a sense of humour.

“Keeping it light” helps them communicate their needs without being confrontational, the authors wrote in the report, entitled *Doing Disability at the Bank*.

The bank has already established itself as a leader in recruiting and accommodating people with disabilities, the authors noted.

Royal Bank executive Jim Westlake said the report provides a framework to further improve the working environment so people with disabilities can “leverage their abilities and contribute to organizational goals.”