Too Many Spoons: Library Workers and Disabilities

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"Persons with Disabilities Need Not Apply"

A desk attendant gestures in my direction where I am waiting for an interview at a library on campus. I am nervous. My hand is shaking over my assistive device.

Beside the desk attendant stands an impeccably dressed, tall woman who adjusts her glasses. "Where is she sitting?"

"There, near the gray couches," the desk attendant answers. She leans over and says, "It's that person with the assistive device," as if she's trying not to out me as a leper.

Any person with a disability reading this who has applied for jobs and gone on interviews has experienced some version of the above exchange. You arrive for an interview, something you feel fortunate for, and think for a split second "They want me! I could be hired here!" Only once you get there, staff members look you over, silently deciding for themselves how much your disability limits what you can and can't do, walking too quickly and expecting you to keep up, and worst of all, making judgments without speaking to you. The above experience has happened to me at academic libraries, public libraries, and other institutions.

Joanne Oud, a librarian at the Wilfrid Laurier University Library in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, has examined this topic in detail. Her findings show that librarians with disabilities form a substantial minority within librarianship, "with estimates of 3.7 percent in the United States and 5.9 percent in Canada."[1] She further points out that although most North American employers prohibit discrimination and that accommodations for disabled employees are assured, the legal difficulties and human rights commission complaints paint a different picture. Essentially, library employers say they don't discriminate. They do a great job patting themselves on the back for running diversity and inclusion seminars, but when push comes to shove, my experiences mirror those of other disabled librarians—we regularly get mistreated on the job.

When I was in my Master of Library and Information Science degree program, I used to believe that in spite of my visible disability, that I would be able to find gainful employment after graduation. Onward and upward, right? Not quite. I can't count the number of discouraging comments I received from fellow students and in some cases, the pitying looks of professors.

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[1] Joanne Oud, "Systemic Workplace Barriers for Academic Librarians with Disabilities," *College & Research Libraries* 80, no. 2 (2019): 169, doi:10.5860/crl.80.2.169)

Some of them directly asked me how I could possibly do a full-time job. When I spoke to the Disability Services team about this issue, the answer was mostly a non-response or, at best, a trite assurance that if I did my best, all would be well. In some cases, when workplace accommodations came up, some of my nondisabled colleagues would scoff and say they, too, wished they could have the luxury of "being lazy" and "not working as hard as the others." Sally, a library school graduate with cerebral palsy, wrote a letter to the editor in the January 1995 issue of *Library Journal* in which she spoke up about the difficulties disabled candidates routinely face with job applications and getting interviews. In response, she received a postcard that "accused her of whining and suggested that perhaps she wasn't getting job interviews because she wasn't qualified."[2]

This experience is, I am sad to say, not unusual. Both work colleagues and patrons alike show signs of discomfort when faced with a visibly disabled librarian. Nowhere did I feel this more distinctly than in my first public library job. The branch supervisor didn't like my displays of initiative. She didn't like people who got shelving done quickly and correctly. She didn't like people who went the extra mile to help patrons. She didn't like pages performing readers' advisory to help people find other items to check out. She especially didn't like pages providing tech support to patrons. For someone to do this while in extreme and visible pain that she observed in the break room, she could not abide. When I explained my disability to her, she told me it was nonsense and that someone so young could not suffer from such a disorder.

Although they explained that this library system, like many, has hierarchy-based systems that dictate which employees can and can't do certain activities at work, they found nothing wrong about fighting with me about my disability and accusing me of lying. My other colleagues, save for one person, didn't believe I am disabled.

When I got to university and pursued assistant library positions to help supplement my tuition and living expenses, most managers did not value what I had to offer. Instead, they saw me as a walking disability. When I eventually succeeded in securing positions, patrons weren't much more tolerant. I drop my mobility device frequently because of poor hand-eye coordination. The pitying looks I got at this made me angry. Some students thought it was okay to tell me how "pretty" and "colorful" my assistive device is or how cheerful I seem. None of them were aware how much of a micro aggression this is, and I didn't know how to draw it to

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[2] Cara Barlow, "On My Mind: Don't Just Serve People with Disabilities—Hire Them," *American Libraries* 26, no. 8 (1995): 772, accessed February 21, 2021, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25633704)

their attention without making them feel uncomfortable. Never mind that they were the ones causing my discomfort.

What, then, of disabled people whose disabilities are not visible? Disability-related stigma is very real. Oud's research shows that "straightforward requests" for furniture or technology-related accommodations mostly go well, "but people who needed changes to work patterns or hours tended to report more negative experiences."[3] Librarians who need to take time off for mental health issues are still treated with an attitude of "suck it up" and told they are exaggerating their symptoms. It is for fear of this reaction being aimed at me, or for colleagues thinking I am a special little snowflake to request accommodations, that I rarely, if ever, voiced my concerns.

Society teaches disabled people to be docile, put on a happy face, and to put non-disabled folks at ease. It also constantly sends the message that we don't belong and should remain out of sight, so we can be out of mind.

Most of my instructors, through persistent reminders, would assist me during class or understand if I needed to be excused because my pain had become crippling. While I appreciated this, it came at the cost of having to present them with papers from the Disability Services department—like I had to get a special dispensation from the Pope. I understand the necessity for documentation. I do. However, every time I had to do this, it felt like I had to prove I am disabled. To say that it was demoralizing would be an understatement.

Then there's the sticky issue of do I disclose as a disabled person, or not? In most job applications, I have felt pressured not to. Some librarians have different reasons for the choice to disclose, explaining that it can help avoid future confusion with colleagues if they confront it head-on, but in all cases, we take on the risk of things going south. On the occasions that I have brought it up, I pushed aside my fears of what the interviewers might think. I assured myself to do my best even though the process and travel to get to these interviews left me exhausted. When I finally got hired for a full-time position, I thought the environment would be more tolerant, that my colleagues would be respectful, and that I would be able to request accommodations that I needed. Among some of the things I heard from other people in the first months were:

"You don't look so disabled."

"You don't have a sign over your head. You should come with a warning label!"

"You walk around so easily; I would never know you're disabled."

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[3] Oud, "Systemic Workplace Barriers," 185.

Granger Macy speaks about Loden and Rosner's list of the three most common things nondisabled people believe about their disabled colleagues, which are:

- Physical impairment equals intellectual impairment.
- Charity cases. Fortunate to have jobs.
- Can't carry own load.[4]

While it's true that having limited exposure to disabled people leads to a gaping lack of awareness in what to say, how to behave, and so on, and there is only so much that diversity training can be done, this causes difficult situations time and time again. In my situation, it escalated. After one particularly offensive incident, I let my temper get the best of me and posted to social media while maintaining some discretion. Although I told one of my superiors about a prior offending incident and they offered to speak to the colleague who made the hurtful comments, the second time, I snapped. I was on poor terms with the higher-ups, and did not feel safe enough to bring up this incident. I know that I should have come to them, and that I should have handled things differently. But what I endured over the next month and for the rest of my time there marked one of the worst, most traumatic periods of my life.

When I brought up my concerns over how I had been treated, in tears, in extreme pain, the reaction was "Suck it up. Get over it." It should come as no surprise that while at this workplace I suffered panic attacks, scolding, being spoken to like an imbecile, and all this while away from friends and family in a different city, alone, and feeling like I had no resources.

Managers and supervisors need more training, but not more of the same diversity and inclusion seminars. Not more of the same things that make the employer look like they're taking action, but that in effect add up to *re*-active responses to a burgeoning problem. Unfortunately, evidence shows that if managers do not have direct experience with a disability themselves or with someone in their lives, they fail to understand these problems. The other most common reactions are indifference and hoping a problem will go away on its own. In some rare cases, as with my experience, they blame the employee and take on a defensive stance. It becomes another "headache" for them on top of the other things they're dealing with.

I haven't even arrived at how the pandemic has magnified these issues. Suddenly, my manager's assertions and those of other managers across the board, that employees are not allowed to work from home turned out to be false. They had the technology and means to do

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[4] Granger Macy, "Accommodating Employees with Disabilities: A Matter of Attitude," *Journal of Managerial Issues,* 8, no. 1 (1996): 80, accessed February 21, 2021, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40604090

this all along, but only implemented it when the overwhelming majority—nondisabled workers—needed this shift with lockdowns and shutdowns.

I see nondisabled librarians raising valid points about how library boards and higher-ups don't value library workers enough. The expectation for libraries is that people still come into physical workplaces on the front lines while ignoring the growing consensus from medical experts that workplace transmission is absolutely real. Poor ventilation systems, cramped quarters, inadequate personal protective equipment, and other factors have all put many lives in danger, and continue to do so.[5]

Now think about how it feels to read job postings as an immune-comprised individual who sees requirements including "must be able to lift 20 pounds," push carts around, or do other physically exacting work. "Remote options not available" is something I see a lot, or sometimes the posting will say the successful candidate will be able to split their time on-site and working from home fifty-fifty. In some cases, no mention of remote work is made at all.

In other words, "persons with disabilities need not apply."

Let's shift back to before the pandemic. It consisted of: send an email to the Human Resources department of this job you're interested in and otherwise qualified for, and you can ask whether they can work around your disability. What you will hear back is radio silence or, if you're lucky, a canned response about how the library values and welcomes applications from all minority groups and does not discriminate.

Except they do.

They like to pretend they don't discriminate, but they do.

They like to pretend that your colleagues won't be disrespectful, but they are.

They like to pretend that they will provide workplace accommodations, but will surround you with lies, excuses, and do everything to make you feel like you have done something wrong. So, in the face of such conditions, what can disabled librarians do?

1. **You are your own best advocate.** I know that I have just said many library systems will try to make you feel bad for practicing self-advocacy and sticking up for yourself, but unfortunately, the only way forward is *through*. As soon as you start at a new position, get in touch with Human Resources straight away. Disclose that you have a disability and need support. Be as specific

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[5] *COVID-19 transmission among workers considerable during early outbreaks*. (2020, May 19). Harvard School of Public Health. Retrieved February 21, 2021, from https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/press-releases/covid-19-transmission-among-workers-considerable-during-early-outbreaks/

as possible. Ensure that someone reviews Health and Safety protocols with you in the first week. Set up a discussion with your immediate supervisor during which you can address some of the issues that may come up, such as colleagues asking what causes your disability, disclosure, limitations on what you can and cannot do, and anything else that's important to you.

2. **Don't feel tempted to hide your disability.** Whether you have a visible or non-visible disability, ask your manager if they, you, or someone else can raise a discussion with your immediate colleagues. You do not under any circumstances have to tell them the underlying disorders or causes of your disability. That is and always should be up to you. It could be as simple as a supervisor sending an email. Many companies now require sensitivity training in the workforce. If your organization offers this, speak up if you are comfortable. Many of your colleagues will not be aware that something is offensive unless it's discussed in a supportive setting. Awareness is a large part of facilitating a safe workplace experience for you.

3. **Reach out for support**. You do not by any means have to go it on your own. One of the many messages that society forces disabled folks to internalize is that we can only depend on ourselves and not to be a burden on others, which is one of the most harmful and cruel things that we face on a daily basis. Do not give in to that fear. Be vocal early on about your need for support. If you have friends or other supportive folks in your life, talk to them through this job. It will take time to make new friends at your job. Surround yourself with positive people, even though right now that is virtual for the most part, and if you're facing challenges, tell them about it.

4. **Don't let your colleagues turn you into inspiration porn.** One of the many things that disabled people go through is the desire of non-disabled folks to turn us into inspirational memes, to wonder how we got out of bed that morning and congratulate us on how "brave" we are even though we are doing our best to navigate each day, often in excruciating pain. If someone subjects you to this behavior, speak up and tell them you do not appreciate it. We do not have to tolerate this kind of ableist nonsense.

5. **Be realistic, but do not be the person that gets in your own way.** So many times, I have seen job postings that have made me think that I would be a great fit—except for the requirement of lifting 20 pounds, or a job that requires a lot of travel from different campuses, or something else you know will put you at physical risk. It is hugely important to listen to your body and mind. Be aware of your limitations, and if you cannot do something, don't beat yourself up over it. By the same token, don't talk yourself out of a position because it seems too daunting. Keep up your search for positions that offer more flexible options. Nor more than ever, your health and well-being should come first.

Finally, my parting advice is not to lose hope. I know that right now, that seems like the daintiest and most precious sentiment. That I am being unrealistic, or that I don't know how precarious employment has become for library workers. I promise that I am aware of those things on a daily basis. It can be extremely demoralizing to be faced with a sea of so little options and so many disappointments. It is a difficult road, and systemic ableism does not get dismantled overnight, but we must advocate for our rights. We need much support as we have always needed, yes, but we can get there. Persistence will win out in the end.

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