

## Research In Focus: A Weekly Digest of New Research from the NIDILRR Community

### Working Women with Disabilities Share Strategies for Countering Stereotypes in the Workplace

*A study funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR).*

Working women with disabilities (WWD) face disadvantages compared to working men with and without disabilities. Studies show the average WWD is paid only 83% as much as a working man with a disability and 67% as much as a working man without a disability. Negative attitudes and stereotypes about WWD may contribute to these disadvantages. Past research has found that both women and people with disabilities may be judged as weak, dependent, or incapable by others. WWD may find it challenging to prove their capabilities to coworkers and supervisors, as a result of being both female and people with disabilities. Because of this, they may struggle with decisions regarding whether, and when, to disclose their disability or request accommodations in the workplace. In a recent NIDILRR-funded study, researchers asked WWD to describe their experiences in disclosing disabilities and receiving accommodations at work. The researchers wanted to find out how WWD made decisions about disclosing their disability, the benefits and costs of receiving accommodations on the job, and the techniques that WWD used to manage negative attitudes from others at work.

Researchers at the project Working It Out Together: Working Women with Disabilities and Employment held seven focus groups with 42 WWD. The participants were 22-61 years old and had a variety of disabilities, including both visible disabilities (such as paraplegia) and invisible disabilities (such as psychiatric or learning disabilities). All of the participants were working at least 20 hours per week when they joined the study. The women worked in government and non-government fields, including some in senior or management positions. During the focus groups, the participants answered questions about their work history, career goals, and accommodations and supports they received on the job.

The researchers found that the participants used a variety of strategies when disclosing their disability at work. Some participants chose to disclose as early as the application or interview process while others chose to wait until after they were hired or not to disclose at all. More than half of the participants reported that their disability affected their choice of workplace. Generally, the participants described disclosure as a “double-edged sword” that allowed them access to accommodations, but also opened them up to negative attitudes and discrimination. Among the participants with visible disabilities, some opted to wait until coming to a job interview to disclose their disability. These individuals felt that delaying the disclosure allowed them to get a “foot in the door” with potential employers before being judged by their disability. However, others with visible disabilities mentioned disability on their resumes in order to avoid interviews

or discussions with employers with negative attitudes who would not see them as good candidates for a job. Among the participants with invisible disabilities, some chose not to disclose their disability at all in order to avoid discrimination, while others felt they needed to disclose their disability in order to receive workplace accommodations. In addition, some participants with multiple disabilities chose to disclose some disabilities, but not others.

The participants also described workplace accommodations as another “double-edged sword.” On one hand, using accommodations allowed the participants to work at their highest level. On the other hand, some participants felt that using accommodations exposed them to negative attitudes and stereotypes by reminding colleagues of their disability. They also felt that procedures for requesting accommodations could enable employers to discriminate against them if the employer felt that providing accommodations was a burden.

Finally, when asked how they managed negative attitudes from others at work, some of the participants described a strategy of “going the extra mile,” or working extra hard to perform at a higher standard than their coworkers without disabilities. The participants described doing this in order to prove to their colleagues that they were as capable as their coworkers without disabilities. The “going the extra mile” strategy was mainly used by the participants with higher-paying, higher-status jobs such as management-level government jobs. By contrast, many of the participants with lower-paying jobs focused on managing their conditions and the expectations of their employers in an effort to maintain their jobs, rather than taking on extra assignments or trying to perform better than their coworkers without disabilities.

The authors noted that WWD may face unique challenges in the workplace due to the combination of negative stereotypes about women and about people with disabilities. WWD may feel motivated to avoid negative attitudes and discrimination by making careful choices to disclose their disability or ask for accommodations. The authors emphasized that disability disclosure is a personal choice that will differ for each individual and work setting.

The authors also noted that participants in this study felt that disability antidiscrimination laws, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), may not adequately protect WWD from discrimination. Under the ADA, an employer may deny accommodation requests that would place undue strain on company resources or would change worker quotas or productivity goals. WWD may fear an employer could use such a claim to deny them employment. In addition, WWD may be reluctant to request accommodations under the ADA if they worry that doing so could make them appear less capable or reinforce stereotypes about WWD among their colleagues. WWD may benefit from counseling on their rights and responsibilities under the ADA and the trade-offs involved with disability disclosure. Employers may benefit from information on disability accommodations, including the relatively low cost of most accommodations in the workplace.

### To Learn More

Research In Focus covered similar research on the pros and cons of disclosure for people with multiple sclerosis in the workplace: <https://naric.com/?q=en/rif/Disclosing%20a%20Multiple%20Sclerosis%20Diagnosis%20at%20Work%20May%20Have%20Pros%20and%20Cons>

Individuals with disabilities are not required to disclose their disability to an employer unless it is part of the accommodation process. Learn more about your rights and the responsibilities of an employer by contacting the nearest ADA Regional Center at 800.949-4232. Visit the ADA National Network for a large collection of resources related to employment, access, and the ADA at <http://www.adata.org>

For young people with mental health conditions, knowing whether and when to disclose their condition can be a challenge. Learn more in this factsheet from the RRTC on Learning and Working During the Transition to Adulthood; <https://escholarship.umassmed.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1077&context=pib>

### To Learn More About this Study

Moloney, M.E, Brown, R.L., Ciciurkaite, G. & Foley, S.M. (2018) ["Going the Extra Mile": Disclosure, accommodation, and stigma management among working women with disabilities.](#) Deviant Behavior, 2018. This article is available from the NARIC collection under Accession Number J78290.

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