

Occupational Therapists' Views of Colleagues With Seen and Unseen Disabilities

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Background

Workplace discrimination and negative or unsupportive attitudes of colleagues continue to be barriers encountered by occupational therapists with disabilities. However, the views of employers and employees towards colleagues with disabilities had received little research attention¹. Consequently, this UK study aimed to explore this gap in the literature.

Methodology

- Online survey sent to 106 occupational therapists in London, UK, via a university placement database over 3 weeks in 2016.
- Quantitative and qualitative data, incorporating 4 vignettes.
- Data collected included participants' demographics; involvement in recruitment; and knowledge of legislation and policies.
- Data analysed using SPSS and thematic analysis.

Findings

- **Response rate: 42%** (44) participants.
- Participants: **32%** (14) had a **seen and/or unseen disability** (e.g. lower limb prosthesis, mobility impaired post-stroke, dyslexia, mental health issues, epilepsy).
- Work settings included: inpatient, physical, mental health, community, social services, and a charity.

1. Disability disclosure

- Majority of respondents **61.4%** (27) stated it **'depends on the type of disability'** whether a person with a disability should **disclose to their manager**.
- Majority of respondents **55%** (24) stated that employees should **not be obliged to disclose to their work colleagues**
- Reasons for **non-disclosure to an employer or work colleague** include: fear of: stigma, discrimination, being treated differently, judgement, exclusion, and prejudice.

2. Recruitment equality:

- **Respondents involved in** aspects of **recruitment 66%** (29), 19 of these were not managers.
- Recruitment process is accommodating for people with a disability, **59%** (26) agree.
- Employing someone with a disability, **potential benefits: 68.2%** (30) agree; **potential issues, 65.9%** (29) agree
- Issues: increased work absence and work load of others; cost and feasibility of adaptations; not fulfilling demands of the role and patient safety.

Benefits of employing someone with a disability



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3. Disability Legislation and Policy Awareness:

	Aware	Did not know
Disability support services	50%(22)	47.7% (21)
Inclusive and diversity policies	54.5%(24)	43.2% (19)
UK disability legislation	90.9% (40)	9% (4)

Discussion

- Occupational therapists were largely supportive of colleagues with seen and unseen disabilities.
- Diverse range of occupational therapists involved in recruitment of staff.
- Lack of awareness of disability support services and inclusive and diversity policies.
- Participants identified several perceived issues with employing someone with a disability. However, previous research contradicts this¹⁻³.
- High prevalence of negative language associated with disclosure implies that there are negative consequences disclosing a disability in the workplace.
- Managers want occupational therapists with disabilities to disclose, otherwise it can be 'very difficult for a manager and colleagues to offer any necessary support'.
- Therefore, there needs to be more open discussion between employees with disabilities and their managers in relation to the employees' needs and their abilities.
- Need greater commitment to encourage people with disabilities to train as occupational therapists.

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