



Seeing the Unseen:

Empowering and Understanding
Invisible Disabilities in the Workplace



Welcome

This session is about us— colleagues, teams, and supervisors— not students.

You are in the right place whether you're diagnosed, undiagnosed, questioning, or here to support those around you.

Session norms:

Assume positive intent

Protect privacy

Use inclusive language

Presenters



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Part 1: Setting the Stage

What are we actually talking about?



Definitions: Neurodivergence

“**Neurodivergence**” is a broad, non-medical umbrella term used to describe people whose brains process, learn, communicate, feel, or behave differently from what is considered “**neurotypical**” (neurocognitive functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards)

Some examples: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, Dyspraxia, Tourette Syndrome, etc.

Definitions: Physical Disabilities

Physical health conditions or impairments that substantially affect a person's daily life but may not be outwardly obvious to others. Someone may appear nondisabled while still dealing with pain, fatigue, mobility limitations, neurological symptoms, or medical needs.

Some examples: Traumatic Brain Injury, Multiple Sclerosis, Epilepsy, Crohn's Disease, Ulcerative Colitis, Fibromyalgia, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Endometriosis, Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, Lupus, Diabetes, POTS, Migraine, Celiac

Definitions: Mental Health

Mental health conditions that may significantly affect a person's emotions, thinking, behavior, energy, relationships, or daily functioning but are not outwardly obvious to others.

Some examples: Depression, Anxiety Disorders, Panic Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Bipolar Disorder, Eating Disorders including anorexia, bulimia, or binge eating, Borderline Personality Disorder, Schizophrenia (especially in periods when symptoms are less externally visible)

Definitions

Many of these conditions co-occur.

Some examples:

ADHD + degenerative back conditions

TBI + PTSD + depression

Stroke + anxiety

Language Matters

- How we talk about this has real impact
- Casual phrases like "I'm so ADHD" or "that's so OCD" are diminishing, even when they feel harmless
- These phrases reinforce a long history of dismissal and misunderstanding around invisible disabilities

Identity-first vs. person-first language:

"Disabled person" (identity-first) vs. "person with a disability" (person-first)

The Visibility Problem

Race and gender have gained visibility in our field. Why has disability lagged behind?

How do you get people in the room who aren't diagnosed, don't want to disclose, or don't yet have words for their experience?

A diverse team produces better outcomes, and that diversity includes people with disabilities

This is not a moral argument alone; it is a practical one

Survey Snapshot: Who We're Talking About

22 survey respondents

7 of 22 currently not employed

17 of 22 need accommodations

Most respondents reported co-occurring conditions



Part 2: The Employee Experience

Strengths, struggles, and stories



Reframing the Narrative: Strengths First

Laura's Story

Breanne's Story

The late diagnosed/realized experience: recognizing a skill you were told was a flaw

There are different ways to complete a task and they can all be correct, don't penalize the how before examining the what

What We Carry

The core desire: to be productive, valued, needed, and respected — while navigating real limits

People with invisible challenges still want and need to work.

Flexibility isn't charity; it's good management.

Survey Snapshot: The Hidden Labor of Self-Accommodation

- Of those who responded, 81% of employed respondents had to modify their own work environment when employer support fell short
- This labor is rarely acknowledged or compensated

“

I'm capable of performing nearly any task for 1-3 hours. But depending on the combination and intensity of physical and cognitive fatigue, I will require a 1-3 hour nap immediately following.

Survey respondent — on fatigue and daily capacity

“

Just a general understanding that I will be more productive if I work starting at at 830am instead of immediately at 8am

“

[I needed the] ability to see doctors and go to therapy

Survey respondents — on flexible schedules



Part 3: The Disclosure Question

Navigating the choice to share



Why Disclosure Is Complicated

- Disclosure is not a single moment: it is a decision people revisit across roles, supervisors, and time
- There is no legal or moral obligation to disclose in most circumstances
- Employees disclose because they need support, not because they owe an explanation
- **Real and documented barriers:** being seen as "less than", fear of affecting career trajectory, fear of not being believed

Survey Snapshot: The Ask Gap

14 of 22 asked for accommodations

6 of 14 were fully granted

6 of 14 felt truly supported in asking

3 of 14 were made to feel bad about the request

“

This experience made me feel overlooked and uncertain about my standing, and it highlights how easily individuals with invisible disabilities can fall through the cracks when there is a lack of communication, awareness, and support.

Respondent whose disability leave was discontinued without their knowledge due to a lapse in communication between their doctors and the disability provider

For Individuals: Thinking About Disclosure

If You Want to Disclose

- What do I need? Start with the accommodation, not the diagnosis
- Who do I trust? HR disclosure differs from supervisor disclosure
- What is the culture here? Have I seen others disclose safely?
- What are my rights? Know FMLA, ADA, and your institutional HR policies

For Individuals: Thinking About Disclosure

If You Can't or Don't Want to Disclose

- Use "stealth accommodations": ergonomic tools, lighting, breaks, headphones, remote work
- You can describe needs without naming a diagnosis: "I'm managing a medical condition"
- Disclosure is not all-or-nothing
- Focus on sustainability, not just surviving the workday
- You don't have to be exceptional to deserve support or access



Part 4: The Supervisor's Role

Accommodations, communication, and teams



Reframing What "The Work" Actually Is

- Challenge and unlearn the assumption that work looks one specific way
- Distinguish: "This person cannot meet the needs of the job" vs. "This person meets the needs differently than I expected"
- Ask what matters more: the work itself, or the norms around how it gets done?

Practical Accommodations: Environment & Schedule

- Flexible scheduling and start times
- Written agendas in advance, async meeting options, camera-optional
- Communication preferences: written vs. verbal, response time clarity
- Quiet/low-stimulation workspaces
- Lighting options: lamps, dimmable lights, natural light access
- Medical appointment flexibility (with grace, not surveillance)

Practical Accommodations: Tools & Technology

- Ergonomic seating, sit/stand desks, monitor arms, keyboard trays
- AI tools and software support (*many employees are already self-funding these*)
- Remote and hybrid options: commuting itself consumes energy for many with physical disabilities
- Captions, recordings, breaks during long sessions
- Many accommodations improve conditions for everyone (the curb cut effect)

Managing Team Dynamics

How does a supervisor answer team questions about another employee's accommodations without revealing private information?

Create a culture of "we support each other's needs" without requiring disclosure

What happens when a diagnosis means the employee genuinely cannot meet core job requirements?

Survey Snapshot:

Granting the Request Is Not the Finish Line

- 14 of 22 respondents asked for accommodations. Only 6 were fully granted.
- Even when granted, 4 respondents described an awkward relationship with their employer afterward
- The relational dynamic after the request matters as much as the decision itself

“

My employer is now saying that soon I have to make a decision to return, resign, or retire because they can no longer continue to extend my medical leave — all while their decisions to provide treatment continue to be left pending, ignored, or time-delayed.

Survey respondent — on institutional pressure during medical leave



Part 5: Case Study

Small group discussion



Case Study: Labels and Stigma in a Staff Meeting

Scan the QR code to access the case study in a Google Doc.



Find a group of 4 people. How might you respond as Bennet?



Part 6: Building the Culture

Beyond individual accommodations



The Systemic Gap

- We need structures for those who want to disclose and those who don't: a both/and approach
- Individual accommodations are necessary but not sufficient
- Disability justice asks: **How can we design work so more kinds of people can participate successfully?**

Shifting Default Assumptions

- This requires unlearning how we work together: separate impact from moral judgment
- Assume positive intent as a team norm: when someone is late, misses a meeting, or behaves differently. What is your first assumption?
- Instead of "you're unreliable," try: "I've noticed meetings start 15-20 minutes late when you're involved. The impact is that the team is delayed and coverage gaps happen."

Inclusive Culture in Practice

- The goal is sustainable success, not surveillance
- Be clear about what is genuinely non-negotiable — then collaboratively problem-solve around everything else
- Disabled people are resilient, critical, and bring important observations. A diverse team makes the work better.

What the Data Shows About Culture

- Across respondents, those who fared best had one thing in common: a direct supervisor or individual relationship that worked
- Culture is built person by person, team by team, before it becomes policy



Close: Takeaways, Q&A & Resources



Revisiting Our Learning Objectives

- What neurodivergence and invisible disability actually mean in the workplace — and how co-occurrence is the norm
- What ND and chronically ill employees carry, including the hidden labor of self-accommodation
- How disclosure works, why it's complicated, and how individuals and supervisors can respond well
- Practical accommodations and the culture conditions that allow people to thrive

Key Resources

Resources/References:



We'd love more survey responses!

Do that here:



You've made it to the end.



Questions? Find us after the session or reach out!

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Thank you so much :)

