

iConference 2019 Session for Interaction and Engagement (SIE)

Title: Beyond Representations: Developing Inclusive Workplaces for Faculty and Staff with Disabilities

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Key Presenters: Table facilitators/experts in specific areas of disability studies and practice will be invited based on the finalized list of workshop topics.

Abstract:

Despite continuous attempts to increase the participation of disabled faculty and staff in information science workplaces, both recruitment and retention efforts fall short. Organizational cultures can range from welcoming to marginalizing, which is determined by a combination of policies, attitudes, support mechanisms, etc. This session engages the audience in an honest dialogue about disability at the workplace and offers hands-on activities that contribute to developing an inclusive climate in academic departments and information organizations. The goal of this session is threefold: 1) to generate constructive ideas for improving the recruitment, retention, and promotion of disabled faculty and staff; 2) to demonstrate how these ideas can be implemented through hands-on scenarios; and 3) to engage in introspection into our own perceptions of disabilities at the workplace through a sharing circle exercise. The session is intended for administrators of all levels and anyone interested in disability at the workplace.

Keywords: disability; diversity management; faculty; information professionals; information science; workplace inclusion

1. Purpose and Intended Audience

In North America, disabled people are underrepresented in the workforce overall, but the lack of disabled faculty and staff is especially jarring. Only 47 percent of Canadians with disabilities reported being employed in the 2012, compared to 74 per cent of their non-disabled counterparts (Statistics Canada, 2012). In the U.S., an estimated 26 percent of adults have some type of disability (CDC, 2018), but as few as 1 to 3 percent of academic faculty report living with a disability (UCB Disability Rights, 2017). Attempts to quantify disparities in disability inclusion may be misleading, however, since many faculty and staff choose not to disclose their disability, fearing negative consequences for their career prospects (e.g., Dick-Mosher, 2015; Grigely, 2017). As Dali (2018a) notes, “co-workers’ knowledge about someone’s disability may skew or ruin the entire nature of labour relations. And the nagging doubt will always be there...will they exercise undue caution and have second thoughts about this person’s productivity, dependability and commitment?” (p. 1262). Bullying and social exclusion, added to physical and/or mental health challenges, can be particularly marginalizing (Vickers, 2015). Although this issue is gaining momentum, we need to advance beyond discussions toward practical implementations and specific measures that will create more inclusive workplaces.

The goal of this session is therefore threefold:

1) to generate constructive ideas for improving the recruitment, retention, and promotion of disabled faculty and staff; for informing inclusivity training; and for advancing curriculum and research collaborations on disability;

2) to identify the critical areas of working life in which people with disabilities feel excluded, marginalized, or disadvantaged and to guide participants toward practical steps for implementing change through a series hands-on (“critical incidence”) scenarios; and

3) to engage in introspection into our own perceptions of disabilities at the workplace through a sharing circle exercise.

Designed primarily for information science academic leaders and administrators of all levels, this session will also be of interest to graduate students, faculty members, and practitioners interested in disability at the workplace. Although this session is focused on the North American situation, we are hopeful that issues and proposed solutions will resonate with international participants. We welcome input and insights from around the world.

2. Proposed Activities

The session will be broken down into three parts with a concluding general discussion:

Pecha-Kucha: A brief overview of the historical context and current state of disability at the workplace in information science and higher education will start the conversation.

Round table activities: Critical incidence tactic will be used to identify the aspects of academic or professional life where disability becomes a factor: hiring/job interviews; promotion/keeping up with the triad of research-teaching-service; teaching online; teaching on campus (regular classroom vs. smart classroom); participating in scholarly communication (e.g., using journal management software and teleconferencing); attending conferences; communicating with students (e.g., if you have certain types of physical disabilities).

Every table will be assigned a facilitator, an expert in a specific area of disability studies or practice; facilitators will start an activity with a short enticing introduction of the problem. Scenarios will be derived from everyday situations. Participants will generate tangible outcomes and concrete solutions or outline a series of specific steps and measures—something that they can take back and implement in their respective workplaces.

Example: University policies on accommodations and work modifications for people with disabilities. Facilitator will introduce their group to the main issues related to policies, their context, limitations, and problematic language (e.g., accommodation vs. inclusion) and supply participants with sample policies from U.S. and Canadian schools. Participants will be invited to identify the problematic areas in these documents; outline how employees with disabilities will be affected; and propose language and policy change that will remedy exclusionary or discriminatory practices.

Sharing Circles: Gratefully acknowledging and respectfully adapting a cherished Indigenous tradition of sharing circles, the organizers will invite participants to engage in introspection into their own perceptions of disability and to analyze how their attitudes affect leadership and management practices, peer relationships, decision making, and the general climate and culture in their workplaces. Done right, it is a powerful and transformative mindfulness and self-awareness exercise.

Materials and Room Arrangement: We will need an accessible room with a flexible furniture layout and a variety of media for participants to work with: Bristol boards/easels; laptops/tablets; Google docs for group work; assistive technologies as required.

Follow up: We will secure permission from participants to publish a conference report about and the main findings from this session in the October 2019 (vol. 3, no. 4) issue of the *International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion*, a special issue on engaging disability (guest-edited by Kim M. Thompson, with Paul T. Jaeger and Keren Dali serving as Associate Editor and Editor-in-Chief for the journal, respectively).

3. Logistics & Time Distribution

Session: 90 minutes

General welcome, introduction (5 minutes)

Pecha-Kucha (7 minutes)

Round table activities (20 minutes)

Reporting back and an interim discussion of results (15 minutes)

Sharing circle (30 minutes)

Concluding remarks and wrap-up (10-13 minutes)

4. Relevance to the Conference and Significance to the Field

Underrepresentation and lack of support for disabled people in academe is a major problem for all fields in terms of understanding, teaching, researching, and simply including considerations of disability. Efforts for including disability cannot stop at the stage of recruitment; increasing the numbers of disabled faculty and staff, on its own, will not get the job done. A serious work of diversity management and inclusion practices after hiring ensures a welcoming, supportive, and healthy organizational climate that will allow the whole team to thrive (Dali, 2018b). Very often, disability inclusion efforts are limited to well-intended discussions, conference panels, scholarly publications, and so on. In line with the iConference theme--Inform. Include. Inspire--this SIE goes beyond discussion by encouraging participants to begin taking concrete, practical steps for implementing change in their organizations and to engage in mindful introspection into their own attitudes toward disability and the effect of these attitudes on organizational practices and inclusive culture.

References

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