

LR: Hidden Disability Challenges in the Workplace

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A report shows that in 2020 in developed countries like the US, only 38.4% of individuals with disabilities were employed compared to 75.8% of those without disabilities (Shockey, 2023). In developing contexts like Vietnam, the disability gap in full-time employment rates was 53% for men and 43% for women, with only 8% to 27% of this gap explained by observable factors such as education or experience (Mizunoya et al., 2016). In addition to the physical barriers faced by disabled workers, systemic challenges such as discrimination and misconceptions further widen the employment gap. Scholars found that 74% of working-age individuals with work disabilities and 91% of those with severe work disabilities were not participating in the labor force (Hogan et al., 2012), indicating the persistence of these barriers.

Hidden disabilities, unlike visible ones, often go unrecognized, which affects the way employees are perceived and treated in the workplace. Workers with invisible disabilities face unique challenges in disclosing their conditions, which significantly impacts their health, social relationships, and work performance. They may choose not to disclose their condition due to fear of stigmatization, and this can prevent them from accessing necessary accommodations (Santuzzi et al., 2014). This contrasts with visible disabilities, where social perceptions are more immediate, often resulting in direct but sometimes misguided accommodations. Workplace accommodations are critical for people with hidden disabilities, yet the lack of visible markers often leads to misunderstandings. Research suggests that invisible disabilities require specific organizational strategies, including heightened awareness and training, to ensure inclusive workplace practices (Syma, 2019).

Discrimination and bias towards individuals with hidden disabilities are often rooted in employers' misconceptions and fears about productivity and competency (Ayari, 2022). Studies have shown that individuals with disabilities, including hidden ones, face significant barriers in recruitment and promotion. These biases often result in unequal treatment, lower pay, and fewer promotion opportunities (Revillard, 2022). In addition, hidden disabilities are linked to workplace stigmatization, which can lead to isolation, reduced social relationships, and increased attrition rates. Employers may also fail to provide adequate accommodations due to a lack of understanding or awareness of hidden disabilities. This reinforces the cycle of discrimination, as employees are often forced to work without necessary adjustments, further exacerbating their challenges in maintaining productivity and mental health (Jones, 2016).

In the UK, the Equality Act 2010 plays a pivotal role in protecting employees with disabilities, including hidden ones, from workplace discrimination (Fell & Dyban, 2017). The law requires employers to make reasonable adjustments for disabled workers to ensure they are not disadvantaged compared to non-disabled colleagues. However, the implementation of these legal requirements is often inconsistent, particularly for those with hidden disabilities (Percy, 2018).

The ambiguity surrounding invisible disabilities sometimes makes it harder for individuals to prove that they qualify for workplace accommodations under the Act. Legal interpretations of what constitutes "reasonable adjustments" can vary, and this may lead to disparities in the level of support provided to employees (Pendo, 2016). The need for better frameworks and clearer policies is echoed by various disability studies, which emphasize that legal protections must be more rigorously enforced to ensure fair treatment in the workplace for individuals with both visible and invisible disabilities (Haile, 2016).

While there are legal protections in place, such as the Equality Act in the UK, the social and organizational challenges faced by individuals with hidden disabilities persist. Discrimination and bias, coupled with the lack of visibility of their conditions, make it difficult for these employees to access necessary workplace accommodations. Enhanced awareness, education, and stricter legal enforcement are necessary to address these disparities and create more inclusive workplaces (Kuznetsova, 2016).

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