The Architecture of Inclusion

Workplace Accessibility and Job Satisfaction

Presenter: Salimah LaForce, Project Director

Center for Advanced Communications Policy(CACP)

Georgia Institute of Technology

Contact: salimah@cacp.gatech.edu

Our Team: Researching Accommodations & Success

Project Leadership

- **Salimah LaForce**

Project Director & Presenter

salimah@cacp.gatech.edu

- **Karen Milchus**

Principal Investigator
Expert in Work ACCESS & AT outcomes

Co-Investigators

- **Frances Harris,** PhD

Project Director | Contingent Employment

- **Nathan Moon**, PhD | Co-Investigator
- **Michelle Ramsey** | Co-Investigator
- **Melissa Garcia** | Graduate Research Assistant
- **Dara Bright**, PhD | Consultant

Rehabilitation Research & Training Center (RRTC) on **Acc**ommodations, **E**mployment **S**upports & **S**uccess for People with **P**hysical **D**isabilities (ACCESS-PD)

Goal: People with physical disabilities, vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselors and employers will have **increased knowledge about workplace accommodations and options for types of employment** that will result in fewer unmet needs for accommodations, better accommodation outcomes, and improved employment outcomes.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the session, participants will be able to:

1. Evaluate the primary drivers of workplace satisfaction.
2. Understand the business value of inclusive workplace practices.
3. Evaluate the difference between reactive and "proactive" workspace design
4. Identify and mitigate the "hidden costs of No" (denied accommodation requests)
5. Develop actionable strategies to empower supervisors as frontline advocates.

What do we mean by “Physical Disability”?

- Physical disability is defined as a functional limitation on a person’s mobility, speech, dexterity, or stamina.
- A person may also have concurrent disabilities, such as vision, hearing, cognitive, or psychiatric.
- Examples: arthritis, spinal cord injury, limb amputation, cerebral palsy, Parkinson’s disease, and many more…



The Diagnostic Disconnect

Top Disability Diagnoses

- Lower Body: 57.1%
- Speech: 30.2%
- Upper Body: 27.0%



Uncorrelated
(r = .195, p = .122)

Top Functional Limitations

- Difficulty Walking: 44.4%
- Stairs: 30.2%
- Lifting: 30.2%

Why ACCESS-PD Targets Limitations: Diagnoses don't map 1-to-1 to workplace barriers. Functional focus drives actionable, generalizable accommodation solutions over diagnosis-driven thinking.

Employment Gap Excludes 41 Million Disabled Adults

The Employment Deficit

- 41.5 million American adults have a physical disability.
- They are half as likely to be employed compared to individuals without disabilities.
- Median annual earnings are about 27% lower for employees with disabilities.

The Importance of Accommodations

- 75% of employees with disabilities cannot perform all of their job duties without accommodations.
- 15% have been fired or laid off in the past because they could not obtain needed accommodations.

Mixed-Methods Research Weaves Lived Experience and Survey Data

Phase 1: Narrative Interviews

- Conducted in Year 1 to capture deep "lived experiences" of employees with physical disabilities.
- Uncovered critical themes surrounding barriers, technology abandonment, and self-advocacy.
- Directly informed the design, terms, and focus of our quantitative survey instruments.

Phase 2: The WATS Survey

- Work, Accommodations, and Technology Survey (WATS) launched with 63 verified, highly educated respondents.
- Combined established, standardized measures:
  - WHO-HPQ for job performance
  - WPS for workplace participation & inclusion
  - JSS for broad job satisfaction domains
  - CEPS for non-traditional / contingent work

The interviews in brief…

- Work practices and experiences are influenced (in both directions) by self-advocacy, self-accommodation, and physical access.
- AT/accommodation use enables more efficient work and balancing of personal and professional needs.
- Employer attitudes about and knowledge of AT/Accommodations influence workplace participation, performance, and satisfaction (in both directions)

Workplace Accommodations Types

Category	Representative Examples
Work Arrangement & Scheduling	Remote work; Flexible start times; Frequent breaks; Extra travel time
Vision & Sensory Supports	Captioning; Screen readers (NVDA, AIRA); Lighted magnifiers
Digital & Computer Accessibility	On-screen keyboard; OS accessibility settings (PC & smartphone); Alternative keyboard techniques
Speech, Writing & Cognitive Supports	Speech-to-text (Dragon); AI tools (LLMs, Otter); Smart pens; Task & calendar tools
Input & Control Access	Switch access; Slide advancers
Physical & Task Supports	Reachers; Lapboards
Mobility & Transportation	Stand-up wheelchair; Modified vehicle; Accessible transportation
Workspace & Built Environment	Adjustable furniture; Accessible entrances, restrooms, parking; Accessible classroom/office layouts
Presentation & Work Technology	Laptop; Projector; Screen

In Their Words: Voices from the Interviews

Well, right now, because I'm in rehab, they would say *We'll have rehab pay for it*, and then rehab would say, *no, no, have your work pay for it*. And I'd be like…Look, I'm not the rope; this is not a tug-of-war… You all figure yourselves out. I'm done.

The office itself wasn't that accessible, but they are finally making accommodations, like they just put in an automated door. They just did that. I like the work environment. If I say there's something that I need for accommodation purposes or just something to make my work life better, they are so *** about getting it so there's no big-to-do process with HR. It gets done.

The only pushing I did in that direction was when they redid the bathrooms in our building. They put in faucets and sinks that I couldn't use without a lot of difficulty…

I remember the conference room had this big circular table with all these chairs, so I always had to be forced to sit in the back whenever we had conferences or trainings.

The bathroom was not accessible. It was very small. And if I was to get my chair in there, I couldn't even turn around to shut the door, let alone pivot to, you know, even get on the. To be honest, for many years, I would say 9 out of the 10 years that I was there. I requested an accommodation to leave 10 min, 15 min early at the end of the day. To go home so I could use the bathroom…

Audience Engagement: 5-Minute Workspace Audit

Take 5 minutes to evaluate your current organization:

Physical Workspaces: Think about your office layout and someone who uses a large power wheelchair.

Are your common areas, entry doors, offices meeting rooms fully navigable, or does a person have to ask for help just to grab a cup of coffee?

Process Transparency: Think about a new hire with an invisible disability (e.g., chronic illness and pain, ADHD)?

Is your accommodation request process written down and visible, or handled case-by-case?

Internal Expertise:
When a supervisor receives a request for a specialized tool, do they have access to an internal or external expert, or are they left to guess?

Physical Access is the Strongest Driver of Satisfaction

Robust Statistical Correlation

- **Environmental Access Sum and Job Satisfaction share a massive correlation: $r = .877$, $p < .001$.**
- 84.1% of employees in our sample report being generally satisfied with physical working conditions.
- Over 93% state that physical and office equipment accommodations enable functional independence.

Proactive Accessibility Works

- 85.7% of physical accommodations were already present when the employee started.
- Pre-existing accessibility completely eliminates the burden of filing formal requests and waiting for approvals.

Streamlined Technology Acquisition Drives Advancement

The Impact of AT Mastery

- Perceived effectiveness of the AT process and acquisition is strongly correlated with satisfaction: $r = .663$, $p < .001$.
- 93.7% of employees report that their assistive technology directly contributes to overall job satisfaction.

Career Growth & Cost Barriers

- 90.5% believe using AT improves opportunities for career advancement, rather than just survival.
- **Cost Barriers: 30.2% of those who need but do not have certain AT say it is too expensive to purchase out of pocket.**

Disability Inclusion Policies Predict Satisfaction and Retention

The Role of Policy

- Perception of Disability Inclusion Policies correlates strongly with satisfaction: $r = .543$, $p < .001$.
- Written policy reduces ambiguity; 16.7% of surveyed organizations have no written accommodations policy at all.

Supervisor Advocacy

- **88.7% of respondents state their supervisor actively advocates for their job accommodation needs.**
- Advocacy translates to accessibility in daily operations (meetings, presentations, communications).

Accommodation Denials Mask Long-Term Retention Toll

High Denial Rates

- 40.8% of surveyed employees experienced at least one accommodation denial.
- **0% quit their jobs immediately after a denial. This leads employers to falsely assume denials have no consequence.**

The Hidden Costs of "No"

- 25% missed work or assignments as a direct result of being denied basic tools.
- 20% tried to perform work without the accommodation, severely eroding productivity.
- **88.9% state accommodation approaches impact their desire to remain with the company.**

Blueprint: Actionable Strategies to Optimize Inclusion

1. Design Proactively

- Shift from a reactive, request-only culture to a proactive physical and digital design mindset.

2. Empower Supervisors

- Provide supervisors with written policies and training to lead with active, constructive advocacy.

3. Streamline Acquisition

- Minimize technology acquisition friction and establish formal guidelines to handle specialized AT needs.

Conclusion

By investing in accessibility, you build a resilient talent ecosystem, improve performance dividends, and secure long-term retention.

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