



Health Science Inquiry

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Dr. Arif Jetha is an associate scientist at the Institute for Work & Health. He is also an assistant professor (status) at the University of Toronto's Dalla Lana School of Public Health. Dr. Jetha's program of research aims at understanding life course differences in the employment participation of people living with chronic disabling conditions. He is specifically interested in understanding early labour market experiences and their impact on key transitions across life. His research takes a systems perspective to understand the role of policy-level factors and organizational conditions in the prevention and management of work disability. Dr. Jetha earned his PhD in behavioural sciences and public health at the University of Toronto, and an MSc in health community and development from the London School of Economics and Politics. He also held post-doctoral fellowships at the Liberty Mutual Research Institute for Safety and the Institute for Work & Health.

Arif Jetha, PhD^{1,2}

¹Associate Scientist, Institute for Work & Health

²Assistant Professor (status), Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto

Are we overlooking a vulnerable generation of workers? How to Support Young Adults with Chronic Disease and Disability in the Labor Market

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When we think about young adults, we tend to visualize people in good health with a vibrant, active lifestyle. We don't often think about the difficulties faced by young people who live with disabling chronic health conditions, and often lack the knowledge to support them as they enter the labor market. This lack of awareness may have a significant impact on those starting their career with a chronic disease or disability that has no visible signs or symptoms, or is characterized by symptoms that fluctuate in severity such as arthritis or depression.

Research conducted at the Institute for Work & Health in Toronto, Canada helps to illustrate the needs of young workers living with chronic disease and disability, and the challenges they face accessing support within their workplaces.

A survey of young adults living with psychological, learning and physical disabilities found that extended drug coverage, the opportunity to modify the way jobs are performed and flexible scheduling arrangements are most useful supports for finding and sustaining employment [1]. Many of these needs are also reported in studies of older workers with disabilities [2].

Notably many young people in this study indicated difficulties accessing the most needed workplace supports. Out of the more than 150 young adult participants surveyed, three in four touched upon the reluctance to talk about the details of their health condition at work and how this was a barrier to accessing job accommodation and health benefits. Close

to the same proportion of participants thought that their jobs, which were mostly in sales and service sectors, could not be accommodated. Two thirds also talked about negative attitudes towards people with disabilities in the workplace as a reason for not getting help.

Barriers to accessing workplace supports may be intensified for those living with a condition not visible to others or characterized by unpredictable flares of symptoms [3]. Interviews and focus groups conducted with people living with arthritis found that having a condition imperceptible to others enabled them to conceal their condition from others. Yet, many of the young adult participants in the study were worried that their disease would ultimately worsen as they progressed in their career, and acknowledged that they would ultimately have to request formal accommodations or modifications to sustain employment.

Being at an early career phase was also related to a reluctance in requesting assistance out of fear of losing their jobs, limiting opportunities for career advancement or having their colleagues minimize the impact of their health condition. As one young adult study participant described it: I think there's always the misconception that people don't get impairments until later in life and so that can always be something very difficult either to convey to your employer or to your colleagues [who think] maybe you're getting special treatment or you're just a big complainer.

Adding to the findings described in both studies is the changing nature of the labour market that young adults encounter as they start their career. Market pressures, cost cutting and changing social policies in industrialized countries has meant that full-time or permanent jobs are less available to the current generation of young people starting their careers [4]. As a result, young adults living with chronic disease and disability are faced with the challenge of managing their health in non-standard employment situations where formal job accommodations and benefits may not be readily available and job security is a constant concern.

There are several takeaways for employers and policymakers. Primarily, the current generation of young workers living with chronic disease and disability may require employment supports that can be tailored to their needs to encourage engagement in the labor market.

On a positive note, among the most needed workplace supports are those that are low cost, such as flexible scheduling arrangements. Being able to start late or leave early on some days, to work from home on occasion, or to take breaks can make a difference in enabling young people to attend medical appointments or self-manage their health conditions. Offering a work environment where young people have the latitude to modify the way they perform tasks is another low-cost strategy. We suggest that employers provide opportunities for workers to figure out their own ways to complete tasks, identify work-arounds for limitations, or ask for help without repercussions. These are also examples of arrangements that older workers with more job tenure often report feeling more comfortable in accessing [2, 3].

In certain sectors in which young people often work, such as sales and services, it can be difficult for an employer to offer scheduling flexibility or enable an employee to choose the way in which they perform their job tasks. As an important first step, we recommend that communication practices between supervisors and young workers be strengthened as a way to start a dialogue on employment needs and the identification of relevant support strategies. Strengthening communication may be especially important for those living with invisible episodic conditions who may struggle with the decision to talk about their limitations or request formal accommodation [5].

A supportive workplace brings out the best in its employees – not only young adults living with chronic disease and disability, but also in a broader range of workers facing different life circumstances. Therefore, responding to the needs of young workers will also enable organizations to better respond to a range of other issues, including productivity loss, staff retention, morale, and workplace hazards that can contribute to injury or illness [6].

Young adults with chronic disease and disability face a gap with regards to the workplace supports that they most need. This gap can be exacerbated when their conditions are episodic and invisible. By providing flexible strategies and solutions, employers and policymakers can play a critical role in helping young adults living with health conditions find employment and thrive in their working lives. The impact can be important not only for labor market activity, but for quality of life.

References

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