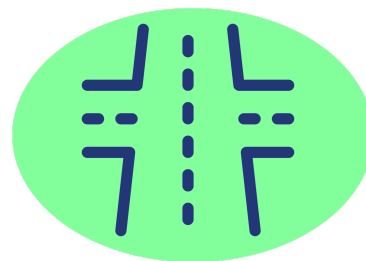


RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Online Course: Advance Intersectional Equity for Disabled Employees



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Introduction

The research in this document was compiled to inform the development of Accessible Employers' [online learning course](#), Advance Intersectional Equity for Disabled Employees (2025).

Intersectionality explained.

Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in 1989. It describes how different identities coexist and can intensify the experience of prejudice and oppression (Leonard, 2022).

Crenshaw's founding work on the topic explores the impact of intersectionality in the law system, highlighting the DeGraffenreid versus General Motors court trial as an example. In this trial, five Black women attempted to sue General Motors for perpetuating "the effects of past discrimination against Black women" (Crenshaw, 1989, p.141). This employer did not hire Black women before 1964. Then all Black women hired after 1970 lost their jobs during a seniority-based layoff. The court noted that no discrimination occurred because women were hired prior to 1964. It failed to recognize that no Black women were hired during this time.

The courts then attempted to combine DeGraffenreid's case with another race discrimination case against General Motors, failing to see the purpose of the suit - a complaint specific to discrimination against "Black women". The courts ultimately dismissed DeGraffenreid's case, explaining that the plaintiff's could not experience discrimination for being "Black women", only for being "Black" or being a "woman" (Crenshaw, 1989). Since laws were in place to protect Black people and women, they felt Black women were adequately protected.

Crenshaw describes this as a "single-axis approach". By this understanding, people are only protected by the systems in place if their experiences align with those of the most privileged members of a marginalized group (for example, Black men and white women). When we bring disability into the "single-axis approach" discussion, we consider ableism in the policies, laws, and programs that are meant to promote equity and inclusion. We also consider how many policies, laws, and programs for disability inclusion benefit the most privileged members of the disability community - cis-gendered white men with disabilities.

Disability plus another marginalized identity in the workplace.

The disability community is incredibly diverse, with the backgrounds and experiences of people with disabilities encompassing a broad spectrum (Palumbo, Wool, Loftus, Lovich, & Terzioglu, 2024). For example, there are Black and Hispanic people with disabilities, queer people with disabilities, and immigrants and newcomers with disabilities (EARN, 2023). Disabled people come from different cultures, speak different languages, have different citizenship statuses, use different pronouns, have different upbringings, hold different family responsibilities, and have different socioeconomic privileges (Feminuity, n.d.). There are endless identities that make each person who they are. These identities can be visible or invisible, static or dynamic, self-defined or imposed by society (Feminuity, n.d.).



When multiple identities marginalize a person with a disability, the workplace becomes a challenging place. For example, members of certain racial and ethnic groups may feel less safe at work because their marginalized group has historically had less legal and social protection in harmful situations (as seen in the DeGraffenreid versus General Motors case) (EARN, 2023). When these folks also have a disability, their experiences compound. Such compounding experiences can lead to greater feelings of insecurity, vulnerability, and exclusion.

The experience of disability also varies with different cultures. This is another important consideration when looking at the workplace experience of multi-marginalized employees. For example, if an employee comes from a culture that associates disability with shame and stigma, they will be less likely to disclose their disability and request needed accommodations (Babik & Gardner, 2021) (EARN, 2023).

There is another important relationship between disability and other types of marginalization. According to EARN (n.d.), people with “marginalized or historically devalued identities face specific challenges that can affect their mental health and well-being... people in these communities may also experience historical and systemic trauma, such as discrimination and oppression that can contribute to mental health challenges” (EARN, n.d. Para. 1-2). In other words, the experience of having a marginalized identity can cause people to experience mental health-related disabilities. It can also exacerbate pre-existing challenges.

A Boston Consulting Group report summarizes findings from a survey that went out to 28,000 employees from 16 countries. They found that 25% of the workforce had a disability or health condition. These employees felt less happy, motivated, valued, and respected at work than their non-disabled peers. They also felt their opinions did not matter. Researchers analyzed these results further and found that the respondents from this pool who also had another marginalized identity felt these effects on a greater scale (Palumbo, Wool, Loftus, Lovich, & Terzioglu, 2024). The existence of at least one marginalized identity on top of disability intensifies negative workplace experiences.

Another study done in Canada examines the serious problems faced by disabled people who are also women, Indigenous, racialized, immigrants, and LGBTQIA2S+. Findings reveal major workplace challenges for these multi-marginalized workers.

Such challenges revolved around:

- Working for employers who do not understand disability,
- Failing to receive workplace accommodations,
- Feeling forced to comply with work tasks/activities that are detrimental to health because of challenges related to disability,
- Having employers try to terminate employment because of disability.



For Indigenous and racialized disabled people, racism was the biggest issue. For women with disabilities, it was feeling powerless when dealing with male, non-disabled colleagues and Supervisors (Government of Canada, 2022).

A second Canadian study looked at the employment experiences of men and women with disabilities. Their results revealed that women were more likely to work from home and require other workplace accommodations. They were also more likely than men to take a leave of absence because of their disability (Schimmele, Jeon & Arim, 2021). The compounding experience of being a woman with a disability resulted in a greater need for action and accommodation to manage the challenges faced.

A visual for disability and intersectionality at work.

A TED Talk video spotlights Kimberle Crenshaw as she speaks about the intersection of being Black and being a woman. She introduces a helpful “intersecting roads” analogy that can be altered to showcase the experience of being an employee with a disability who is multi-marginalized. The analogy illustrates a crossroads, where one road represents anti-racism policy/practice and the other represents anti-sexism policy/practice. These policies and practices are well designed to understand and protect the experiences of those who meet the precise conditions on which they were developed - Black men and white women.

A Black woman exists at the intersection. When an accident occurs at this location and harms her, she does not receive the same protection and care from the policies and programs that are available because they are not designed for her. The policies are like ambulances that are equipped to save the lives of Black men and white women. By this analogy, the Black woman can only receive care to the extent that her injuries align with those of what a Black man and white woman would exhibit (TED, 2016).

When we re-imagine this analogy for employees with disabilities in the workplace, one road represents anti-ableism workplace policy/practice and another represents workplace policies/practices that protect another type of marginalization - for example, racism or sexism. An employee with a disability and another marginalized identity exists at the crossroads. When an accident or incident occurs, they are only protected to the extent that their experience aligns with the most privileged of each group.

Research Themes

This section reviews key themes from the research that warrant further exploration with the working group for the online course.



Acknowledging intersectionality while seeing people as “whole.”

The Business Disability Forum issued a survey that asked employees with disabilities if they felt their “protected characteristics” prevented them from getting needed workplace support. “Protected characteristics” were described as things like age, religion, faith or beliefs, gender or gender identity, sexual orientation, race, or ethnic group. A key finding was that employees did not appreciate being asked workforce-related questions from the perspective of having a certain characteristic or experience. They saw themselves as one whole person, inseparable into different categories. For example, they preferred statements like, “I am a Black disabled woman” versus “I am Black and disabled and a woman” (Business Disability Forum, (n.d.).

Another source describes the dangers of focusing on one characteristic of a person or segmenting people into categories based on a commonality. Leonard (2022) describes how we unintentionally “flatten” people when we focus on the singular characteristics that are visible to us. With this perception, we fail to acknowledge the richness of each person’s experience with multiple identities - some of which change over time.

With this in mind:

1. How do we address intersectionality without breaking down someone’s experience into separate identities or “protected characteristics”?
2. How can employers address intersectionality in a way that honours the experience of the employee as a whole person without implementing singular strategies to address discrimination against all different parts of their identity?
3. To rephrase, how can they create a workplace that's inclusive and accessible to the “Black disabled woman”, without breaking down her experience into three separate things - racism, sexism, and ableism?

Employer actions for addressing intersectionality.

A Feminuity article speaks to the need to shift diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts beyond a gender-only approach (n.d.). Authors begin by discussing the shortcomings of workplace data collection efforts. Although having a base understanding of who makes up your workforce is valuable, demographic data collection alone will not help you understand the intersectional experiences of your workforce.

The article talks about data collection as one strategy to understand your staff. They promote data collection in addition to the creation of a psychologically safe work environment where employees feel comfortable and confident sharing their stories and asking for what they need. Ultimately, it’s the storytelling that employers need to work towards. Through stories, employers will understand what each employee needs to feel safe, understood, and valued at work.



But the authors are adamant that you cannot invite stories without first understanding the demographics of your workforce and building conditions for psychological safety.

For this reason, this section on employer actions for addressing intersectionality is separated into three sections:

1. Collecting demographic data of your workforce - and implementing other data collection and tracking efforts,
2. Creating conditions for psychological safety at work, and
3. Inviting storytelling from your employees who have intersectional experiences.

This sequence provides a structured approach to addressing the complexities of intersectionality in the workplace. All other employer actions from the research fit into at least one of these sections.

Collecting demographic data - and other data collection and tracking.

The first action in many diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives is to launch a demographics survey to staff to “quantify the problem...” (Feminuity, n.d., para. 3). These surveys explore demographic questions and “feelings of inclusion, support, fairness, and commitment” (Feminuity, n.d., para. 3). The idea is that employers collect data to understand the difference between employee sentiments based on demographic characteristics (for example, men versus women). Although this is an important step, it fails to capture intersectional experiences.

For privacy reasons, data that can potentially identify someone is hidden or removed. When we think about who makes up most staff teams, we think about cis-generated, white men. Any departure from these characteristics will significantly lower the sample size. By the time someone identifies as having multiple marginalized identities (for example, a racialized queer woman with a disability), the sample size will be so small that this individual becomes identifiable. Their data is no longer anonymous. Statistical best practice is then to remove the dataset. When this happens, employers lose this person’s data and story. They have no way of recording or understanding the intersectional experiences (Feminuity, n.d.). And what you can’t record or understand, you can’t address.

Demographic surveys are still an important action to implement, but employers need to understand the limitations. There must be additional practices in place to capture intersectional experiences so they can be addressed. This is where the next two sections become critical.

However, before diving into topics related to psychological safety and storytelling, we must touch on the importance of other types of data collection and tracking in the workplace.

According to the Valuable 500 report “Nothing About, Us Without Us”, a critical step in addressing the misrepresentation of disability in media is to “measure, test, and learn” (Valuable 500, n.d., pg. 28). Although this action speaks specifically to disability representation and accessibility in media, it is very relevant to the workplace. By committing to measuring, testing, and learning, employers acknowledge that their work in increasing inclusive and accessible workplaces is never done.



Another example of the importance of data collection and tracking comes from Servicenow. This organization has implemented Pay Equity, a program where employers “track and manage pay equity using a third party that analyzes base salary, bonuses, and commissions. Service now uses [this] information and adjusts compensation packages where necessary” (Servicenow, 2023).

Data is a critical tool that allows employers to understand their workforce, monitor, manage, and continuously improve their inclusion efforts, and ensure fair and equitable practices are in place.

Creating conditions for psychological safety.

Team Primary Care developed a Psychological Health and Safety Toolkit for Primary Care Teams and Training Programs (2024). The toolkit is organized into seven themes that speak to psychological safety indicators. Although these indicators are written specifically for health care workplaces, they are relevant to other contexts.

A description of each indicator follows. Included under each indicator are other relevant practices pulled from the literature.

Themes of psychological safety include:

1. Organizational and team culture - indicated by:

- Civility and respect - staff are respectful and considerate of everyone in the workplace (for example, employers take action to build awareness across their staff teams of the needs of people with disabilities and other marginalized identities and challenge preconceived notions and unconscious biases) (The Office of Diversity and Human Rights, n.d.) (Devex, 2018) (Valuable 500, n.d.) (EARN, n.d.) (Fassnacht, 2021).
- Psychological and social supports - co-workers and supervisors are supportive of employee’s psychological health and safety, and respond appropriately with employee-centric programs (for example, vacation time, health leave, and wellness time) (Palumbo, Wool, Loftus, Lovich, & Terzioglu, 2024) (Leonard, D. (2022) (EARN, n.d.) (Fassnacht, 2021) (Servicenow, 2023).
- Engagement - staff enjoy work and are motivated to do well.
- Involvement and influence - staff are included in discussions about the way in which their work is done and have a role in relevant decisions related to their jobs.
- Recognition and reward - staff efforts are acknowledged and appreciated (for example, worker/team celebrations, recognition of good performance and years served, and milestones reached).

2. Workload management and work-life balance - indicated by:

- Employers ensure employee tasks and responsibilities are realistic for the time they have.



3. Clear leadership and expectations - indicated by:
 - Leadership communicating clearly and effectively.
 - Leadership ensures employees understand their role and how they contribute to the organization.
 - Leadership provides helpful feedback on expected and actual performance.
 - Leadership ensures employees are aware of important changes.
4. Psychological protection - indicated by:
 - Staff are comfortable asking questions, seeking feedback, reporting mistakes and problems, and proposing new ideas.
 - Leaders working to protect staff from stressors that could harm their mental health (for example, harassment, bullying, discrimination, violence, and stigma).
 - Leaders committing to reviewing existing workplace policies/programs for accessibility with an intersectional lens and incorporating intersectionality when they create new policies/programs (Business Disability Forum, n.d.) (Feminuity, n.d.) (EARN, n.d.).
 - Leaders implementing strategies to facilitate respectful communication and interaction between team members and supervisors (EARN, 2023).
 - Leaders prioritizing staff training programs and opportunities for on-going learning on topics related to diversity, accessibility, and inclusion (EARN, 2023) (Business Disability Forum, n.d.) (Servicenow, 2023).
5. Protection of physical safety - indicated by:
 - Leaders protect staff from physical workplace hazards (for example, staff's safety concerns are taken seriously, sufficient training is provided, staff can refuse work if they find it unsafe).
6. Protection from moral distress - indicated by:
 - Employers showing staff support during adverse situations.
 - Leadership ensures staff have the human resources and equipment they need to perform their jobs.
 - Policies/guidelines are in place to address morally distressing events.
7. Support for psychological self-care - indicated by:
 - Staff being encouraged to care for their own psychological health and safety (for example, they are encouraged to take breaks and use vacation time).



Inviting storytelling from employees.

When data collection practices are underway and conditions for a psychologically safe work environment are in place, the last employer action is to invite storytelling from employees.

As we have seen, data collection can mask the experiences of employees with intersectional identities. When their data is removed for privacy reasons, employers lose important insight into their experiences. Employers need to invite these stories in another way. Feminuity says, “it’s vital to create a space where employees feel a sense of psychological safety and can share their experiences. It is as important as collecting employee engagement survey data in the first place... Stories breathe colour and texture into the data and help us truly understand people” (Feminuity, n.d., para. 27-28). Employee stories will provide the best solutions to intersectional workplace barriers (Feminuity, n.d.).

Lynneta Smith of Servicenow shares how the Servicenow organization formed a Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging Community with an intentional focus on intersectionality (Fassnacht, 2021). Within this community, there are eight Belonging Groups, which provide a safe space and connection hub for employees with shared identities. These groups unify collective voices and drive culture change and action at Servicenow (Fassnacht, 2021). This is one example of how an organization has created space for storytelling. Employee resource groups, committees, and other advisory groups are another important practice (EARN, 2023) (Leonard, 2022) (The Office of Diversity and Human Rights, n.d.) (Valuable 500, n.d.) (Servicenow, 2023) (Servicenow, 2020).

Servicenow offers another program that creates space for employees with intersectional experiences to share their stories. It’s called Self ID. This program is completely voluntary, providing the opportunity for employees to self-disclose aspects of their personal identity if they have not done so previously. The process is completely secure, allowing employees a safe space to tell their story and request what they need (Servicenow, 2023).

Conclusion

The above themes provide a great foundation for working group discussion. It will also be helpful to get the group’s input on how to build out an intersectionality graphic that shows the intersecting roads analogy for a disabled employee who has another marginalized identity.



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