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Disabled or “just getting old”? How perceptions of activity limitations can affect workplace realities

Incentives for early retirement, so popular during the 1990s, have become a thing of the past, replaced in recent years by the opposite preoccupation: how to keep workers working longer. One prominent government official recently selected the upcoming labour shortage as Canada’s most certain and pressing social policy issue in the mid-term.

An ageing workforce creates challenges of its own. For many workers, age is accompanied by physical problems that make it harder or impossible to do their job. Lower employment rates among older, disabled working-age adults suggest that disability remains a barrier to labour-force participation among older workers, despite anti-discrimination legislation that obliges employers to provide “workplace accommodations” - a workplace adapted to the needs of disabled employees.

For these policies to apply, however, functional limitations at work must be defined as “disabilities”, and therefore perceived as such. Perhaps older workers, and their employers, attribute their limitations to “natural ageing” rather than to disability? Perhaps this makes them less likely to believe they need, or qualify for, adaptations to their workplace? These are the questions tackled by sociologists, Julie Ann McMullin and Kim Shuey, in a study of *Ageing, disability and workplace accommodations* based on data from Statistics Canada’s 2001 *Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS)*.

The study sample included close to five thousand employed adults, aged 20- 64 years, whose “everyday activities are limited because of a health-related condition or problem”. Pain (74%) and mobility (67%) were the most common limitations reported; among the other problems mentioned, one quarter of the sample had hearing difficulties, and one tenth had problems with sight. People often reported more than one problem (2.5 on average), and close to a quarter had severe or very severe limitations.

The researchers used logistic regression analysis to assess whether workers who perceive their problems as a

Table 1. The profiles of employees aged 20-64 years with a disability Canada 2001

Attribute	Per cent
Gender: Female	50.5
Age group (years)	
20-29	12.6
30-39	21.0
40-49	32.5
50-59	28.0
60-64	5.9
Source of limitation	
Aging	8.0
Class indicators	
University-educated	17.4
Low income household	12.1
Occupation	
Business	18.3
Service	24.2
Trades/Industry/Manufacturing	26.0
Other	28.2
Severity of limitation	
Mild/moderate	76.1
Severe	19.8
Very severe	4.2
Type of limitation	
Hearing	25.6
Sight	10.5
Speech	7.7
Pain	74.0
Mobility/agility	66.7
Other	28.7
Mean Number of Limitations	2.5
Sample size	4,222
Source: Canada Participation and Activity Limitation Survey 2001	

consequence of ageing (8%) rather than of more specific causes (illness, disease, accident etc.) are less likely: 1) to acknowledge a need for adaptations in the workplace to be able to work and 2) to have this need met, once acknowledged.

The first analysis showed that the more severe and numerous the activity limitations, the more likely people were to report a need for workplace adaptations. Younger people were also more likely to do so. In fact, the closer individuals were to retirement age, the less likely they were to acknowledge their need.

Even taking these factors in account, however, individuals who attributed their functional limitations to age, rather than to more specific causes, remained significantly less likely to report that they needed an adapted workplace. As the second analysis showed, those who did acknowledge this need were also significantly less likely to have their needs met.

Some employment sectors appear to accommodate disabled employees better than others. The business sector rated highest, and the sales and services sector lowest, in terms of meeting workers' needs. Some employees are also better at expressing their needs than others. University-educated individuals were more likely both to acknowledge their needs and to have them met than those without a university education.

One long term effect of perceiving disability as an outcome of ageing is that older workers may leave the workforce because of their reluctance to recognize or declare their disability. In coming years, as the baby boom generations approach retirement, this situation is likely to affect a larger proportion of the labour force, exacerbating the labour shortage already built in to Canada's population structure.

Can anything be done to counter the consequences of these perceptions? Although more detailed research into this issue is essential, the study findings clearly support measures already taken by some prudent employers in Canada, who proactively ensure that *all* employees, declared disabled or not, are provided with a physical environment adapted to their needs.

Note: Summary prepared by Heather Juby, Knowledge Transfer Coordinator of the RDC National Coordinating Committee, based on: McMullin, Julie Ann and Kim Shuey. 2006. Ageing, disability and workplace accommodations. *Ageing and Society*. 26: 831-847.

Data for this study came from the Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS). The analysis was conducted at the Statistics Canada Research Data Centre. The Research Data Centre program is part of an initiative by Statistics Canada, SSHRC, CIHR and university consortia to strengthen Canada's social research capacity.