

Hidden challenges: an invisible disabilities learning activity

Hidden
challenges

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to describe an experiential learning activity designed to sensitize students to the prevalence and challenges of disclosing invisible disabilities in the workplace. It provides an impactful learning experience about a widespread phenomenon that receives little attention in textbooks.

Design/methodology/approach – The exercise assigns a hidden disability to some participants who interact with others who act as trusted friends. The interactions help participants develop their ability to interact sensitively with those who may have hidden disabilities. They explore the advantages and disadvantages of disclosing hidden disabilities at work. Guiding questions help focus deliberations during which participants consider the influence of their assigned role.

Findings – A plenary discussion follows where students share the outcomes of the simulation. Debriefing questions and suggested answers help instructors deepen student learning on the topic. A follow-up assignment allows participants to summarize personal learning about the subject and solidify the learning outcomes.

Originality/value – Most workers with nonapparent disabilities hide them, although disclosing them may help their employers provide helpful accommodations. This learning activity helps increase awareness and understanding of hidden disabilities in work settings and supports learning about disclosing and accommodating disabilities in the workplace. Instructors can use the activity to support understanding of employee rights, equity and accommodations in large or small classes, in-person or online, synchronously or asynchronously.

Keywords Simulation, Experiential learning, Inclusion, Workplace accommodations, Invisible disabilities

Paper type Technical paper

She was always fighting a battle, but her smile would never tell you so.

– Nikki Rowe

Imagine a work meeting where you are straining to participate due to feeling dizzy, struggling to follow the conversation, feeling exhausted or experiencing chronic pain. But no one can tell. Disabilities affect an estimated 20 to 25% of the population (Lang, 2021), and those invisible to others are more prevalent in the workplace than apparent ones (Smith, 2022). Invisible disabilities affect as many as 98% of disabled persons (Morgan, 2020) but receive little attention in management textbooks. Yet, providing inclusive solutions that respect individual privacy has been shown to increase employee loyalty (Morgan, 2020),



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augment productivity and well-being (Tillotson, Laker, Pereira, & Bhatnagar, 2023) and promote retention (Ford, Newman, & Ford, 2023).

The growing field of equity, diversity and inclusion calls for deepening knowledge about pertinent issues that deserve more attention (Jaeger et al., 2015). Research estimates that 88% of workers with nonapparent disabilities hide them due to fear of bias and stigma (Tillotson, Laker, Pereira, & Bhatnagar, 2023), concerns about personal privacy (Kulkarni, 2021) or of not being believed (Tarvainen, 2019). Thus, many workers hide their condition (Aimone, 2019), even though disclosure may help them work more comfortably and feel less isolated (Jain-Link & Taylor Kennedy, 2019).

This learning activity aims to increase participants' awareness and understanding of hidden disabilities in work settings and support students' learning about disclosing and accommodating disabilities in the workplace. The exercise may be run in large or small classes, in-person or online, synchronously or asynchronously. Instructors can use the activity to support learning about employee rights, equity and accommodations in Human Resource Management (HRM) courses or to develop sensitivity about implicit bias in Organizational Behavior courses.

Instructions

This exercise involves a simulation where participants act as a trusted friend or someone with a hidden disability, asking for perspectives about disclosing their disability. During small-group exchanges, participants consider their assigned role to answer guiding questions. They discuss how their role informed their perspective. A debriefing follows, during which the instructor leads a plenary discussion. The activity concludes with a follow-up assignment or discussion forum through which participants solidify their learning.

Learning goals

By completing this exercise, participants will:

- describe the scope and prevalence of invisible disabilities in the workplace by conducting an online search;
- recognize the challenges and benefits of disclosing a hidden disability by acting out an assigned role;
- identify reasons why employees may want to hide a nonapparent disability at work;
- list ways organizations can help employees with hidden disabilities while respecting their desire for privacy; and
- analyze what they learned about invisible disabilities in the workplace by completing a written assignment.

Preparation

The activity requires little preparation. Its experiential and reflection portions are intended to deepen learning about hidden disabilities. Instructors should review bias and accommodation in a short lecture or posted document before running the activity to ensure students have a common understanding. They may ask students to read about those notions in their course materials.

The role-play may be run in pairs or groups of three participants. Instructors use their best judgment to form groups. Larger groups may generate richer perspectives, but pairs will better reflect an intimate exchange between friends. Instructors prepare to assign one

student per group to “Role 1” and the other group members to “Role 2.” Instructors may assign roles in class or set up restricted information in the learning management system and make it visible at the appropriate time.

Role 1: You will research hidden disabilities and choose one of them to disclose to one or two trusted friends, playing Role 2. You will play the role of a person with this hidden condition. Although you have learned to live and work with the disability, there are times when you may benefit from specific accommodations. But you are also concerned that revealing your disability would negatively affect how people perceive you at work and intrude on your privacy. You have decided to disclose the condition to one (or two) trusted friend(s), playing Role 2. You and Role 2 will explore the pros and cons of disclosing your disability at work, and Role 2 will help you decide whether to do so.

Role 2: You will research hidden disabilities and review course materials about accommodations for disabilities. Your role is to be a trusted friend of the person assigned to Role 1, with an invisible disability. Role 1 will reveal their condition to you and ask your perspective about disclosing their disability at work. This intensely personal condition may affect their work life and career. You and Role 1 will explore the pros and cons of disclosing Role 1’s condition at work, and you will help Role 1 decide whether to do so.

Instructors should prepare to provide the following questions to guide group exchanges:

- Identify the potentially negative consequences of disclosing the hidden disability at work.
- List potentially positive outcomes of disclosing the hidden disability.
- After weighing the pros and cons, should Role 1 disclose or hide the disability at work? Why?
- How did your assigned role influence your perspective?

Materials and technology

The exercise can use available technology or low-tech alternatives. Instructors may present the instructions orally, write them on a board or a presentation slide, as printed handouts or on the learning management system. The written assignment may be submitted online or in hard copy.

Timing and running the activity

Table 1 outlines the steps in the activity and the timing for each step.

Instructors introduce students to the types and scope of hidden disabilities and that their private nature can be challenging for individuals and their managers. Instructors invite

Step	Description	Min
Introduction	The instructor introduces the topic and asks students to conduct an online search about the scope and types of invisible disabilities	10
Setting up	The instructor creates teams, assigns roles and distributes instructions to participants	10
Role-play	The instructor provides guiding questions and asks participants to play their assigned roles and answer the questions within their group	15
Debriefing	The instructor facilitates the discussion as suggested in this paper	25
Total time		60

Table 1.
Timing of the exercise

Source: Table created by the author

participants to conduct an online search by suggesting key phrases, such as “hidden disabilities at work,” “employees with invisible visibilities,” or “nonapparent disabilities.” Online searches will quickly generate numerous sources and help students appreciate the phenomenon’s scope.

Alternatively, or if an online search is not possible, instructors may provide a short overview of the phenomenon and give examples of conditions that are considered invisible disabilities. They include attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, anxiety disorder, anorexia/bulimia, autism, bipolar disorder, chronic pain, gastrointestinal disorders, diabetes, depression, chemical dependence, personality disorder and many more (Lang, 2021). They can be physical or psychological but not apparent.

The next step requires the instructor to organize students into pairs or groups of three and assign roles to them. The instructor then provides the guiding questions to help students discuss within their groups.

Debriefing

Instructors should engage the class in an exchange about the outcomes of the small-group discussions. They should point out that having a hidden disability may not affect a person’s job performance. Still, the condition may require additional effort to accomplish their work, and accommodations may facilitate and support these workers. However, disclosing a hidden disability involves risk, as others may not recognize it as authentic. Moreover, declaring means breaking the personal barrier and dealing with workplace attitudes, policies and practices.

During discussions, some participants may declare their personal hidden disabilities to their peers. Instructors should inform students that such disclosures must be confidential. No one should disclose someone else’s disability – that choice belongs to the individual.

The following questions may help guide the discussion:

Q1. Give examples of invisible disabilities someone may want to keep private. Given the desire for discretion, how could you, as a manager, help employees with hidden disabilities?

Answers will vary, depending on how students perceive different conditions and the risk of revealing them. For example, some participants may feel that gastrointestinal problems or diabetes might be easier to reveal than dyslexia or bipolar disorder. Others may argue the opposite. Some students may think hidden conditions are private, whereas others may be comfortable disclosing them. Students often point out that the risk of stigma and potential negative bias will discourage people from revealing their hidden disabilities.

Research has found that manager support is the most critical factor in determining whether to disclose a hidden disability (von Schrader, Malzer, & Bruyère, 2014). Organizations can provide training to help managers become aware of the types and pervasiveness of nonapparent disabilities, communicate acceptance for differences and value employees’ unique characteristics. Collaborating with employees to find personalized solutions may help reduce perceptions of stigmas (Tillotson, Laker, Pereira, & Bhatnagar, 2023) and communicate to employees they are valued.

2. Should someone disclose their hidden disability before applying for a position? Explain your perspective, considering the advantages and disadvantages for the individual and the employer.

Opinions must consider the advantages and disadvantages for the individual and the employer. To avoid negative bias, individuals may indefinitely choose not to declare anything if they are confident they can accomplish the job. If accommodations are required, students may debate the point at which employees should reveal their needs. Students

should be encouraged to compare the effect of hidden disabilities on different job types and contexts. Instructors can also underscore that organizations that adopt best practices for supporting people with disabilities tend to have higher economic profit margins than less proactive organizations ([Accenture, 2018](#)).

3. How can employers create a safe environment for employees with invisible disabilities to request and obtain required accommodations?

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) [1] requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations for all employees with disabilities, whether visible or not apparent ([U.S. Department of Justice, 2020](#)). Organizations can institute privacy policies and procedures for disclosures. For example, the Sunflower Scheme helps those who choose to wear the symbol to signal to others that they have an invisible disability. Instructors may inform students about this program by playing the video about the [Invisible Disabilities Sunflower \(2021\)](#) initiative [2]. Organizations can help people disclose their disabilities by detailing job competencies, providing information in accessible formats during recruitment and selection and allowing psychologically safe opportunities to inform employers about potential accommodations ([Prince, 2017](#)). Instructors can point out that straightforward solutions such as providing written and verbal instructions, reducing distractions or planning rest periods may accommodate many invisible disabilities ([Solomon, 2020](#)) and benefit all employees without emphasizing hidden conditions.

Follow-up assignment

Instructors should end the session by giving students a short assignment to capture their learning and ability to apply what they have learned. For example, I ask my students to write a one-page essay with three objectives:

- (1) describe the new knowledge they learned from the activity;
- (2) illustrate with an example why the knowledge is important; and
- (3) describe how they will apply what they learned in their present or future jobs.

Variations

Instructors may run this exercise in person or online, synchronously or asynchronously. To run the activity synchronously, they assign teams within the learning management system or videoconferencing application. Instructors post the instructions and guiding questions online and make them visible at the correct time. The group discussions are conducted in breakout rooms or full-group calls in the videoconferencing application. Students complete the follow-up assignment and upload it on the learning management system.

To conduct the exercise asynchronously, instructors give background for the activity in a video or written description. After dividing students into discussion groups and assigning roles through private chat, instructors invite them to exchange virtually. Students post their answers to the guiding questions within assigned groups and participate in a full-class discussion forum to promote intergroup sharing. Instructors post the debriefing questions in a discussion forum, where participants can develop richer perspectives through a full-class exchange. They ask students to complete the postactivity assignment as an individual deliverable or in a discussion forum, which lets students see what others have learned and suggested, promoting student-to-student learning. The instructor summarizes the shared ideas in a written statement or video.

Prior experiences with the activity

I used the exercise in an undergraduate HRM course and an online MBA HRM course. The activity aroused my students' awareness about hidden disabilities and helped them relate it to various course topics. The discussion generated points I used in subsequent lectures to remind students about the pertinence of invisible disabilities for inequity and diversity management, selection, health and safety, and performance management. Furthermore, my students used examples from this exercise to answer exam questions about selection, accommodation, performance and workplace well-being.

Conclusion

This activity is a relatable way to arouse students' awareness about hidden disabilities and their challenges for employees and their employers. It requires little preparation for significant learning outcomes. The simplicity of the exercise, combined with its experiential component, provides context around which instructors can engage students in debates about this important topic. Instructors can run the activity in class or online, synchronously or asynchronously. Overall, this exercise provides a rich and impactful learning experience about a widespread phenomenon that participants will likely find relevant in their work and personal lives.

Notes

1. www.ada.gov/resources/disability-rights-guide/
2. www.youtube.com/watch?v=qWPqg3PJ0D4

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