

Inform Podcast
Episode 11: Talking About Your Disability at Work — Transcript

Fiona Murphy

I hadn't actually been taught how to confidently reveal my disability to potential employers. And I feel like that's something that could be taught to people with disability because even if you're born with a disability, you're not necessarily born with the skills to self-advocate and reveal it, particularly if it's an invisible disability.

Kirby Fenwick

Hello and welcome to Inform, a podcast where you'll be hearing from people with disabilities, as well as industry experts, on a range of topics. I'm your host, Kirby Fenwick.

In this episode of Inform, we'll be exploring how you might talk about your disability at work. We'll discuss the legal obligations and the legal protections you have. We'll look at the reasons why you might want to talk about your disability at work and we have some great advice if you're thinking about having that conversation with your employer or colleagues.

Joining us today is Fiona Murphy, who you heard from at the beginning of the episode. Fiona is a deaf writer who also works as a physiotherapist. Her memoir, *The Shape of Sound* is forthcoming from Text Publishing in 2021.

Also in this episode, we'll hear from Daniel Valiente-Riedl. Daniel is the general manager of Job Access, which is the national hub for workplace and employment information for people with disability, employers and service providers.

Choosing if and when and how you might talk about your disability at work can be tricky to figure out. It's probably not a surprise to learn that while there are approximately 1.5 billion people with a disability around the world, only 12% of people with a disability choose to disclose it.

Fiona Murphy

When I was younger, I didn't think that I would actually tell anyone ever or ask for help. That was a kind of an insurmountable sort of idea that I didn't think that I would ever get to the point of having confidence of doing that.

Kirby Fenwick

In 2018, Fiona wrote a personal essay for the website Eureka Street that discussed her experiences talking about her disability. 'Disclosure,' Fiona wrote, 'is widely perceived as an invitation for questions about your body, from how it functions and to how it deviates from normal'.

Fiona Murphy

So, I find it an ongoing challenge something I definitely need to get better at. And I don't think there's a right or a wrong way of asking for access. Neither is there a right or a wrong way of disclosing your disability. But there's definitely a personal toll that

needs to be, you need to kind of acknowledge along the way as well, because it does take a lot to be open and honest to people.

Kirby Fenwick

Getting to the point where she felt comfortable and confident to talk about her disability at work has been an ongoing process for Fiona.

Fiona Murphy

This isn't taught consistently to particularly to children with disabilities, what your rights are, and also giving people the skills and confidence to talk openly about their disability because it can be extremely scary and confronting to do particularly when you're having to educate others about what your disability means and having to justify what you can and can't do.

Growing up, I tried to be as normal as possible. I thought for a long time that this was a personal choice that I was making to kind of fit in with my classmates. So, I kind of didn't want to signal that I was having trouble hearing in certain situations. And often if I didn't hear something, I would just pretend to, to have heard something and kind of play along with things.

For a long time, I didn't realize that it's extremely common for people with invisible disabilities to downplay or make invisible their condition whatever it is as to kind of normalize themselves and almost make their disability invisible.

Fiona Murphy

The disability scholar Rose Marie Garland Thomas is, made this really quite clear to me. She's written quite a lot about disability and what it means to be disabled in that even though you could be born into a disability, it's not often talked about how to be disabled as in it's okay to have a body that is different from everyone else's. And it's okay to ask for assistance and help because you're not asking for more than anyone else you're just asking to be included.

And that idea was quite revelatory to me.

I'd always been taught to kind of just blend in and try my best and work really hard, but I had never really been taught about access. It was only in my late 20s that I actually heard about what access is. And it was more through the disability community itself and learning from other people with disabilities, of how to ask for access, and that it's actually my right to ask for access that I'm not asking above and beyond what is reasonable.

Kirby Fenwick

For most of her life, Fiona kept her deafness a secret, particularly in professional settings but also in personal situations. It was something that took a toll.

Fiona Murphy

I kept my deafness a secret until I was about 30 years old. During that time, I was reluctant to talk about it in professional and personal situations and the impact of having an active secret like that was incredibly corrosive to my sense of self-worth. To the point that I thought it was a really bad thing to be deaf and I couldn't actually

see anything positive in being deaf, but it was only being part of the disability community and the deaf community that I began to acknowledge and see that there are so many good and positive things to disability and deafness that I really started to question was it worthwhile keeping a secret and what was at stake.

Kirby Fenwick

This experience with the disability community and deaf community prompted Fiona to make a conscious effort to talk more about her disability. She began with her friends and family.

Fiona Murphy

I felt the stakes were a little bit lower and people would be a bit more understanding to have complicated conversations. That's not to say those conversations were easy, for a lot of people they had no idea that I had hearing loss at all, so it was quite a shock to them.

But at least I could get a little bit of confidence to workshop and figure out how to own my story as someone with a disability.

I used to kind of workshop and practice answering the same questions that I would get from people of why are you deaf? You don't sound deaf, you don't look deaf. Where are your hearing aids? And I would work so hard to try and draft and workshop really clear, confident answers.

Yet it was never satisfying to the, whoever was asking me the questions like there was no amount of homework that I could do to make those situations easy quick, and for them to go away.

They're the kind of conversations that linger often because the person, the stranger, the work colleague, the friend has a sense of curiosity and also a sense of entitlement to know because a lot of people see disclosure as an invitation to ask anything and everything. They don't actually see how much work has gone into building up the courage to actually disclose your disability. So, it can be incredibly exhausting,

Kirby Fenwick

Deciding to take those conversation she was having with friends and family to the workplace was a big decision, and it's one Fiona has only taken recently but it wasn't without its own complications.

Fiona Murphy

So, I felt it was quite important to start talking about it a little bit more openly. I wasn't unusual in keeping my disability hidden, but it caused an immense amount of physical and psychological stress, keeping it a secret, particularly because when you keep your disability a secret, you're having to work so much harder than everyone else in the room because you're trying to assimilate and act normally, which is impossible in some instances and it's also is incredibly tiring keeping disability is secret.

So, I definitely didn't start telling employers until the last 18 months or so, and even then, I made sure that I had every reason why they should employ me on my CV and

in the interview so that they had no excuse not to hire me. So that was still an incredible amount of work to kind of even prove that I was worthy to have a job. But I, I hope that one day that I don't feel like I need to work that hard to prove my worth. But at the moment, I'm just proud to have gotten this far.

Kirby Fenwick

The reality is that there are many reasons why you might choose not to talk about your disability at work.

Fiona Murphy

And that's mainly because of the stigma attached to it. As the research shows, and what I experienced, there's quite a lot of fear around whether you'll be viewed as capable to do a job, even if you know you are capable of doing a job and can prove it. There's a lot of potential judgment that could happen from employers who don't want to take the risk of employing someone with a disability.

Kirby Fenwick

Daniel Valiente-Riedl, the General Manager of Job Access agrees that the reasons you might not want to talk about your disability at work are varied.

Daniel Valiente-Riedl

There may be many, many reasons why people may not choose to share information about a disability or their condition with their employer or co-workers. And some of these may include the fear of discrimination, a stigma, and in turn, risking loss of work opportunities. We also have internalized stigma, or self-stigma, those things that we feel about, internally about our own disability.

Maybe people want to just maintain that privacy, there are people that don't want to talk about their private life. The job may be short term, a casual or a contract position so it's not reasonable to talk about your disability. The person may not have a diagnosis or may not consider the condition to be a disability because we have to remember that disability is a judgment, it's a judgment in point. The condition also may not be relevant to the workplace.

Kirby Fenwick

It's important to know that you have no legal obligation to disclose or share anything about your disability unless it impacts your work.

Daniel Valiente-Riedl

There is no legal obligation for you to share any information about your condition unless it affects your ability to carry out the primary task of your job. If an employer or co-worker asks a question, they need to clearly explain why they're asking the questions. And the reasons for asking may include implications for workplace safety, the need for physical adjustment, or assessing technology in the workplace or when an employee requests flexible working hours or opportunities to work off site.

Kirby Fenwick

Daniel says that under the Disability Discrimination Act, you can't be treated less favourably than a person without a disability. And if you do share information about your disability, your employer is required to keep that information confidential.

Daniel Valiente-Riedl

Your employers and co-workers cannot ask questions about your lifestyle. They also cannot ask general questions about your health or disability, such as how you acquired your disability and for managers it's also important to think about why are we asking these questions? Are we asking them to support the individual or are we asking them simply because we are curious?

Kirby Fenwick

While there is no legal obligation to share information about your disability at work, Daniel says there may be situations where it's useful or important to do so.

Daniel Valiente-Riedl

I think that it is a different conversation about when should a person with a disability share information about their condition. You should tell them, you should tell your employer about your disability, if it is likely to affect how you can work or how you can do your job. You should also mention your disability only if it affects the ability to work safely and ensure the safety of your co-workers. If your disability doesn't have an effect on your ability to do the job or work safely, you are entitled not to mention it.

Talk to your employer about your condition if you are worried that you cannot do the job now or that something may change in the future.

Mentioning your disability creates trust and an open relationship with your employer and co-workers. It allows you to talk about how you will perform your tasks to the necessary standards as well. It allows you also, you and your employer to discuss teamwork and changes to the workplaces that may be able to help you do your job.

Discussing disability openly as well, it opens up the possibility for employers to be supportive, that also helps other employees when they see an employer that is supportive, they are more likely to be open about any issues that they may have, because they know that there is a supportive culture within that workplace. So, it doesn't just help you but also might be able to help others as well.

Kirby Fenwick

This is a something that Fiona agrees with, that talking about your disability can really broaden the conversation around accessibility in the workplace.

Fiona Murphy

And I think it just opens the conversation to the point where, even if you don't identify as having a disability, it's giving you a chance to have a really frank conversation with your boss, about your circumstances in your life. You may be going through a period of time where you're a carer for someone with a disability, and you might need just flexible working hours to do that or you might be going through, you might be pregnant for the first time and you may need some allowances around that to do your job well. I don't think it's a bad thing for managers to ask that to everyone.

It's not out of the realm of reason to think that there are numerous people within their place of work that have access requirements. So, I think it really should be a question

that's asked to all employees. Do you have any access requirements? What do you need to do your job well? I think there should be standardised questions. I don't think it should be something just for people with disabilities to have to really self-advocate for again and again.

Kirby Fenwick

If you decide that you do want to talk to your employer or colleagues about your disability, there are supports available to you

Daniel Valiente-Riedl

So, there are a range of free supports available to help people with disabilities to get work, keep their work and be more productive. And one of those services that you can tap in of course is Job Access.

Job Access is the national hub for disability employment. So, we believe that Job Access is an enabler. It is a free service that exists to remove barriers to employment, in the easiest way possible, for people with disabilities, employers and service providers.

Our national call services are delivered by a team of frontline professionals who provide free, confidential and expert advice on a range of matters related to employment and disability employment. So, I really encourage everybody to pick up the phone and speak with the Job Access advisor

Kirby Fenwick

Deciding to talk about your disability and share information with your employer and colleagues can be a challenge. But Daniel and Fiona have some great advice for how you might approach those conversations and how you can take care of yourself while you do.

Daniel Valiente-Riedl

people may be curious about your condition and how to manage it. And it is up to you how much you want to say. Be as open and honest as you feel comfortable with. It is your decision. If people do not respond well, remember that is not your responsibility to change people's attitudes towards disability. Some colleagues may be more introverted or awkward, or they may just be too busy to talk.

If you work with someone that has a disability, you could ask them how they talk to colleagues. You could talk to co-workers about your condition, what tasks you find easier or harder to do, what you need to do to do your job, how you may be able to cope and behave at certain times, and what help you may need.

Help people understand the kind of situations you plan for and manage. So, something simple that provides the context of why you may need something.

There are various ways that you could help your colleagues understand how they need to work with you. For example, you could write an email introducing yourself and mentioning what support you need to attend a meeting or do your work or offer to write a blog for the staff intranet, or a newsletter, Ultimately, it is your decision how

you will do it and your managers should be able to support to maintain your confidentiality.

So, you should not feel under any pressure to discuss your disability, but it may help you plan what you are going to say. For example, your condition has recently changed and it is only now that is affecting your work. Your work may have changed and it was not a problem before but it may be a problem now. Or you only just felt able to talk about your condition now. The reality is that ultimately, it is up to you when you decide to have these conversations.

Fiona Murphy

I think it's really exciting when you want to disclose your disability. It's a really empowering move. And I've gotten so much out of being more open about my deafness and my sense of confidence has improved dramatically.

Fiona Murphy

It's a difficult conversation, one that is worth practicing with a close friend or a family member, just to kind of run through it a few times, just get rid of the cobwebs so you know how to explain it to someone who may not have heard your disability before. Or they may just really be looking for specific information from you. Quite often managers or employers are thinking in a really different way, such as the cost and benefit analysis, which is a really tricky thing to think about when you're trying to disclose your disability

It should always be your choice to disclose your disability and you should always feel like you're in control of that situation. It is your right, whether you disclose your disability or not. So never feel pressured into giving information that you don't feel comfortable giving, particularly if it's about your body and it is personal. So always feel whatever you disclose is completely up to you and that's legally and personally it is up to you.

I think it is quite important to take care of yourself before, during and after these conversations about disclosure. It can take a lot out of you in terms of building up the confidence and having the conversation with someone.

And finally, even though the Disability Discrimination Act can be quite confusing to navigate, and there can be quite a lot of interpretation of what the act actually means. There are a lot of help and resources available to help you understand what your rights and responsibilities are. And the Australian Human Rights Commission is a process where if you at any point feel like you have been discriminated by an employer or an institution, you can put forward a complaint so you have a lot of support to help navigate the system

Kirby Fenwick

Thank you for listening to Inform, a production of Independence Australia. Inform is hosted and produced by me, Kirby Fenwick. Our managing editor is Alison Crowe.

Our thanks to Fiona Murphy and Daniel Valiente-Riedl for sharing their stories, experience and knowledge.

You'll find links to the resources mentioned in this episode, plus more, in the show notes at informonline.org.au

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