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Disability disclosure and workplace accommodations among youth with disabilities

ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Many youths with disabilities find it challenging to disclose their medical condition and request workplace accommodations. Our objective was to explore when and how young people with disabilities disclose their condition and request workplace accommodations.

**Methods:** We conducted 17 in-depth interviews (11 females, six males) with youth with disabilities aged 15-34 (mean age 26). We analyzed our data using an interpretive, qualitative, thematic approach.

**Results:** Our results showed the timing of when youth disclosed their disability to their employer depended on disability type and severity, comfort level, type of job, and industry. Youth’s strategies and reasons for disclosure included advocating for their needs, being knowledgeable about workplace rights, and accommodation solutions. Facilitators for disclosure included job preparation, self-confidence and self-advocacy skills, and having an inclusive work environment. Challenges to disability disclosure included the fear of stigma and discrimination, lack of employer’s knowledge about disability and accommodations, negative past experiences of disclosing, and not disclosing on your own terms.

**Conclusions:** Our findings highlight that youth encounter several challenges and barriers to disclosing their condition and requesting workplace accommodations. The timing and process for disclosing is complex and further work is needed to help support youth with disclosing their condition.

**Keywords:** youth, diversity, social inclusion, workplace accommodations, disability disclosure
Although there are 3.8 million working age Canadians with a disability only 47% of them are employed [1]. Individuals with disabilities are significantly more likely to be unemployed compared with individuals without disabilities, even though there is compelling evidence for a business case for hiring people with disabilities [1-3]. The employment rate for youth with disabilities aged 20-24, is 63% compared to 81% of youth without disabilities. Meanwhile, for youth aged 15-19, 40% of those with disabilities are employed compared to 51% of youth without disabilities [4]. Even more concerning is that 34% of youth with disabilities aged 16-24 are neither working nor in school [5]. Many youths with disabilities are willing and capable of working, but encounter many barriers in looking for accessible employment. Among those who are employed, they often encounter challenges in maintaining their position because of such issues as stigma and discrimination from co-workers, lack of workplace accommodations, transportation barriers, and lack of training [2,6-9]. One of the most common challenges that people with disabilities report is disclosing their disability to employers and requesting workplace accommodations [6-8]. Receiving accommodations (e.g., modified equipment, flexible work schedules, telecommuting, modified workspaces, etc.)[7] is important because these supports can optimize labour force participation while enhancing worker productivity, quality of life, social inclusion, psychological and physical health [7,10-14]. Although research shows that there are several benefits of disclosing a condition and receiving workplace accommodations (such as enhanced social integration, job retention, and creating an atmosphere of acceptance)[6,7,14], less than one in five people with a disability receive accommodations [15,16]. This trend is often due to a fear of disclosing their condition, and the stigma or job loss they may encounter as a result [17,18].
In Canada, workplace accommodations are supported by human rights and accessibility legislations, stating that employers have an obligation to provide employees with reasonable accommodations without causing undue hardship to the company [19,20]. Contrary to what many employers believe, most workplace accommodations are fairly straightforward to provide and most are at little to no cost [13,14]. However, many employers are often unaware of how to have effective disclosure discussions and provide accommodations to people with disabilities [21,22]. Given that people with disabilities need to disclose their condition to receive accommodations, it is important to better understand disability-related disclosure processes (e.g., timing and how to go about it).

A recent systematic review explored the barriers to disability disclosure for young adults in the workplace which included: disability type and severity, lack of self-advocacy skills, fear of stigma and discrimination, and employer’s lack of disability awareness [7]. Some facilitators of disclosing and requesting accommodations included: knowledge of supports and workplace rights, training, self-advocacy skills, effective communication with employers, and co-workers’ positive attitudes towards people with disabilities [7].

Our study aimed to explore when and how youth with disabilities disclose their disability and request workplace accommodations. Our research addressed several important gaps in the literature. First, there is a lack of research focusing on workplace accommodations for young people with disabilities [23]. Most research focuses on return to work among adults while little is known about youth who are new to employment and who also may have had their disability for some time. Second, our findings shed light on the social realities of young people with disabilities in the workforce, where they remain “theoretically invisible” [24]. Developing an understanding of disclosure and accommodations experiences can help young workers to
succeed in finding and maintaining employment (especially at a critical career early stage), job satisfaction and performance, promote physical and psychological health and prevent secondary injuries. Enhancing employment of people with disabilities can help support healthy behaviours, improve mental health and quality of life, and inform workplace health and safety [25-27].

**Theoretical perspective**

After conducting a comprehensive systematic review of the literature on disclosure and accommodations amongst youth with disabilities [3] we found that there were very few relevant theories that were being applied to this topic. One that was most promising included the communication accommodation theory [28,29]. This model incorporates social psychological theories on stereotyping and communication accommodations [28,30]. This theory suggests that individuals adjust their communicative behavior to create and maintain either closeness or distance [28,30]. To do this, people draw on their knowledge of the context in which the interaction takes place including the social and cultural norms, their own communicative needs and preferences and their perceptions of their partner’s communicative characteristics [30]. The theory attributes non-accommodation among people with differing abilities to able-bodied person’s reliance on stereotypical rather than individual features of people with disabilities [30].

For example, people who lack experience in working with those who have a disability often view them as dependent, unproductive and/or needing accommodations [30,31]. Attitudes and behaviours that are based on these stereotypes can lead to stigma and discrimination; and therefore, some people with disabilities may be reluctant to disclose their condition to others [3,31]. On the other hand, some people may find that disclosing their condition, and indicating their openness about it can help to reduce or avoid stereotyping [3,30]. Given that communication is a two-way process, those without disabilities may discourage or prevent
people from interacting in a way that would be destructive for all involved [29,30]. Therefore, employers and people who are working with those who have a disability should endeavor to gain a better understanding of their strengths, needs and preferences [31,32]. This theory can help us to understand the facilitators and barriers that youth encounter when disclosing their condition and requesting workplace accommodations in the workplace.

Methods

Objective and design

Our objective was to explore when and how young people with disabilities disclose their condition and ask for workplace accommodations. We used a qualitative design involving in-depth individual interviews with youth who have disabilities. Qualitative methods are increasingly used to generate evidence-based guidelines and recommendations [33]. We obtained institutional ethical approval and written consent from all participants prior to the interview.

Recruitment

We purposively sampled 17 young people (11 women, six men), aged between 15-34 years (mean age 26), who were currently employed or looking for employment and who had a disability. We used the World Health Organization’s definition of disability (i.e., impairments (problem in body function or structure), activity limitations (difficulty encountered by an individual executing a task or action) and participation restrictions (problems experienced in life situations)) to define our inclusion criteria [34]. Our sample size is considered suitable for a qualitative study to capture the depth and breadth of workplace disclosure and accommodation issues [35,36]. To identify potential participants, we collaborated with community disability agencies who help young people with disabilities. We mailed and emailed flyers and information
letters to potential eligible participants. A research assistant then screened participants for inclusion. A time and location for interviewing participants was then arranged.

Table 1

Data collection

Interviews followed a semi-structured guide and asked youth about their strategies for finding and maintaining employment, their experiences of disclosing their condition (e.g., roles, stigma), asking for accommodations, experiences of inclusion in the workplace and any advice they have for others (see Supplementary Table S1). Our interview guide was informed by a recent and relevant systematic review and conceptual framework [7]. We pilot tested our interview guide with a youth who has a disability to ensure the comprehensiveness and clarity of our questions.

A research assistant who had experience and training in qualitative research with young people conducted all of the interviews, which took place from October 2016 to May 2017. The interviews lasted between 13.4 and 42.3 minutes with an average of 29.3 minutes. Three interviews were conducted in person and 14 over the phone, at the discretion and preference of the participant.

Data analysis

We used a narrative, thematic analysis to understand our data [37]. Specifically, we used a topic-centered narrative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of participants’ experiences of when and how they disclosed their condition. Within this approach, the focus is on first-person accounts and captures snapshots of events that have occurred and are linked into current discussions as exemplars [38,39]. This method involved familiarizing ourselves with the data, generating initial codes, revising and defining themes [40]. We developed themes that were reflective of the narrative of participants’ shared experiences and overarching stories [38].
All interviews were audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Our research question guided the analysis, while using an open coding, thematic approach [40]. Two authors who have backgrounds in youth rehabilitation, employment and transitions, read through all interviews independently before comparing and contrasting themes and key meaning units (codes) around disclosure and workplace accommodations. Two additional authors, with research experience in management and industrial/organizational psychology, read and discussed a sample of the transcripts with the team and the themes that emerged. The research team then compared and contrasted the themes until there was agreement in the coding scheme [35]. We also reflected on how our background training and experience may have influenced the development of the themes and noted this in our audit trail. A research assistant applied the coding scheme to all of the transcripts in NVivo, and pulled relevant quotes that represented each theme, while considering the whole context of the interviews [41]. We used several strategies to ensure the rigour and trustworthiness (e.g., transferability, dependability, conformability) of the findings including peer debriefing and rich descriptive accounts with quotes reflective of the range of participant experiences [36]. The first author verified the application of the themes and accuracy of the quotes that were selected to reflect them. Doing so helps to ensure the reliability of the coding framework [36]. Our team felt that thematic saturation was achieved and we are confident that our sample size was sufficient [40]. We used a peer debriefing process where we had informal discussions after each interview and formal team discussions after all of the completion of the interviews, which helps to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings [40]. We also kept a log of decisions made through the data analysis process. Further, we used thick descriptive quotes that reflected the themes and participant’s experiences [40]. Finally, our team has
extensive experience in vocational rehabilitation, disability disclosure, and workplace accommodations.

**Sample characteristics**

Our sample included 17 youth (11 females and six males) between the ages of 15-34 with various disability types, including visual impairments, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, hearing impairments, acquired brain injury, Charcot marie tooth disease, narcolepsy/cataplexy, lupus, and acute disseminated encephalomyelitis (see Table 1).

Fifteen participants were currently employed (10 full-time, five part-time), whereas two participants were unemployed but looking for work at the time of the interview. Five participants were in school (one in high school; four in post-secondary), and nine youth were also involved in volunteering (see Table 1). The industries that youth were employed in included: banking, research, government, sales, teaching, healthcare, law, media, retail, youth programs, and web design.

**Results**

First, we describe the professional development opportunities youth received in their jobs. Next, we outline when, how, and to whom youth disclosed along with the challenges and facilitators in doing so. Then, we describe the accommodations that youth received, or needed but did not receive. Finally, we outline youth’s perspectives on what an inclusive work environment looks like and how this can help them to feel comfortable disclosing their condition or seeking accommodations.

**Professional development**

Some of the strategies and methods youth utilized to gain employment included online postings, employment training programs, internal postings, school postings, co-op placement, or access
through a mentor or family member (see Table 1). Three youth said they received insufficient job training due to a lack of funding, disability-related issues, and improper management.

Nine youth expressed that they received professional development opportunities in their employment (see Table 1). One female, aged 26 with muscular dystrophy, who worked full-time in the banking industry, said: “you are not stuck in the same role for a long period of time. They…try and help the employee grow a lot of skills” (#6). Another female (aged 28 with a hearing impairment) who worked full-time in healthcare, discussed her options for professional development: “if I wanted to continue my education…[or] take a special workshop that was relevant to the work that I was doing here, there's funding available for that, so there’s a lot of opportunities for professional development” (#5). Some youth did not receive professional development at their job, but knew that such opportunities existed. For example, one male (aged 24, with a visual and hearing impairment) who was employed full-time at a media company shared, “at this point it’s not too defined what those avenues would be just yet; however, in terms of opportunity, I think there it definitely exists” (#3). Six youth did not receive professional development at all from their employers, or lacked opportunities. Five of these youths were female, including four who had visual impairments. One female, aged 32 with a visual impairment, who worked in the government, claimed that although there were opportunities at her work, she felt that her disability hindered her career development. To illustrate, she said: “I could advance to the next level…but for me, in particular, being visually impaired, it’s pretty hard because you have to work faster…and I don’t think I can” (#8).

Disability disclosure

Youth described the timing and process for disclosing their disability (if they chose to disclose), whom to disclose to, along with facilitators and challenges in doing so.
Timing of disclosure

The timing of when youth disclosed their disability to their employer depended on things such as disability type and severity, comfort level with disclosing, type of job, and industry sector (see Table 1). Three youth disclosed before their job interview, in their cover letter, or before the interview took place. Their reasons for early disclosure (before the interview) were due to their disability being visible and therefore, not as noticeable to employers; and/or to receive accommodations they needed for the interview. For example, a male, aged 26 with cerebral palsy, who was employed full-time in law explained, “I mentioned in my cover letter than I would probably need some accommodations to be successful in my employment” (#4).

Meanwhile, an additional female, aged 32 with a visual impairment, who worked full-time in the government sector said, “when you apply for government jobs…they ask you if you need accommodations. Usually, I just took that opportunity to be like yes, I do and this is why” (#8).

Six youth disclosed their condition the interview, either because their disability was visible and they wanted to address it, or to discuss what accommodations they needed to be successful in the position (see Table 1). For instance, a male aged 30 with a visual impairment, who worked full-time in accounting described, “during the interview, I came prepared with the accommodations that I required, and I disclosed it during my interview…I wanted to show them the confidence that I have; the package of assets I can bring to the table” (#12). A further three youth disclosed their disability to their employer after they were hired. Reasons for the timing of these disclosures included: needing accommodations for training, or to perform their job. For example, one female with muscular dystrophy, who worked full-time in the banking sector, claimed, “after the interview process, when I got hired, I went to request those accommodations” (#6, female, aged 26).
Other youth were unsure about the timing of disclosure and how that might affect their employment or the way they would be treated in the workplace. For instance, an unemployed female, aged 18 with cerebral palsy, explained:

I don't think there's really any situation where I would disclose before the interview, at least not in my resume or my cover letter. I'd rather be called in based on my achievements…Although in some situations I might put it in my cover letter, but I've never done that so far. (#14, female, aged 18)

Similarly, a female, aged 27 with a visual impairment who worked full-time in a temporary teaching position, expressed confusion about the correct timing of disclosure, stating: “do you bring it up in the interview? Do you bring it up after you are hired? I just don’t even know when, like how you are supposed to do that?” (#9).

Furthermore, three youth pointed out that disclosure was an ongoing or continuous process and they would discuss it when the need arose. A trend among these youths included that their disabilities were not as visible or noticeable to employers and co-workers, and thus, only disclosed if their disability came up or if they needed accommodations. For example, a visually impaired female, aged 29 working part-time in the government stated, “for me, disclosure comes up when I have a need that I have to ask for otherwise, it’s maybe not relevant at that time” (#11). Another female with cerebral palsy, aged 27 who worked part-time work in a youth program stated: “I only [disclose] when I need something. Like when a situation just comes up, then I say it” (#13, female, aged 24). One male, aged 27 with narcolepsy who worked full-time in web-design, said that he only disclosed “if it comes up in conversation or if they see me sleeping or something” (#2).
Five youth did not disclose their disability to their past or current employer (see Table 1). Reasons for non-disclosure varied. Some youth reported it was unnecessary because they felt that their disability did not affect their job, or it was unnoticeable. For instance, one unemployed male, aged 22 with Charcot-marie tooth disease, said he did not disclose in past jobs because “it’s a physical disability, but it isn’t really that noticeable…I didn’t really think I would need it” (#15). Similarly, an additional youth, male, aged 19 with cerebral palsy, who worked full-time in research said that for him, disclosing is “just not relevant…I have a fairly mild disability; it’s not really noticeable unless you really look, and it doesn’t really affect anything so I don’t bring it up” (#17). A female, aged 26 with a visible disability (muscular dystrophy), who worked full-time in the banking industry, felt it unnecessary to disclose because it was obvious she had a disability, claiming “I use a wheelchair on a daily basis, so I didn’t necessarily disclose, but it’s pretty apparent” (#6). A different youth was hired at her current retail job through an employment training program for youth with disabilities, and since the employer would know she had a disability from the program, she felt it was unnecessary to disclose. It was interesting to note that four of the five youth who did not disclose had non-visible or less visible disabilities. Since employers did not automatically notice their disability they felt they could get away with not disclosing (i.e., hiding), especially if their disability was mild.

Twelve youth disclosed their disability to their employer (see Table 1). Strategies and reasons for disclosure included advocating for their needs, knowledge of workplace rights, and having accommodation solutions. One female, aged 28 with a hearing impairment who worked in full-time in nursing, emphasized the importance of advocating for her needs, “it all comes down to me being forthright about what I need so that they can support me…so the onus is out there to provide that accommodation to me” (#5). Another youth, (male, aged 26) who worked in
full-time in law, utilized the first two disclosure strategies (which were advocating for one’s needs and knowledge of workplace rights) when he mentioned, “it’s best to be as up front as possible, because then an employer has a duty to accommodate” (#4). Other youth (male, aged 30 with a vision impairment) came prepared with accommodation solutions, such as one male youth who worked in banking who explained: “the approach I took was that I know what kind of field I’m in, these are the accommodations that I will need to be successful…so I came very prepared” (#12).

When youth described who they disclosed their disability to, twelve said they disclosed to their manager or supervisor. Two youth disclosed to management to get accommodations, but had not disclosed to co-workers. For example, one male, aged 27 with narcolepsy, who worked full-time at a web design company, said that he only disclosed his disability to “the important people” at work such as his supervisor; although “if [a coworker] flat out asked me if a had a disability I would tell them, but if I don’t have a reason to tell them…I wouldn’t” (#2). Similarly, a female (aged 24 with cerebral palsy) who worked part-time at a youth program, said that her coworkers “don’t know that I have cerebral palsy or hearing loss, they just know…that I have hearing aids; so, if I’m ever at a point where it gets too loud I can leave the room for a couple seconds” (#13). This particular youth was comfortable disclosing about the device she used, and therefore one of disabilities that was more visible so that she could make informal accommodations; however, she did not want to disclose that she had a second, and less visible disability (i.e., cerebral palsy) to avoid further stigma. Further, a female (aged 27 with a vision impairment) in a temporary full-time teaching position, explained, “everybody around me knows, but it’s more like higher management doesn't know…I would still rather wait until I am permanent in order to disclose it” (#9). Since this youth was in a temporary job role, she felt
uncomfortable disclosing to her supervisors until she was offered a permanent role with more job security.

Facilitators of disclosing
Youth described several facilitators to disclosing, including job preparation, self-confidence and self-advocacy skills, having an inclusive work environment, and realizing the potential benefits of disclosing. We found that all but one youth who had participated in an employment training mentoring program prior to employment had disclosed to their employer. Six youth reported that job preparation and education (i.e., knowing their rights) helped them with disclosing (see Table 1). For example, one female (aged 28 with a hearing impairment) working full-time in nursing said, “professionals really respect you if you learn to find your voice, and whether that’s through your mentorship, whether that’s through your undergraduate clinical placements; if you are just starting out in your academic career looking for places that have co-ops” (#5). Another male employed full-time at a law firm, stated, “employers have a legal duty to accommodate you, and…most people want to accommodate you, but importantly, someone won’t just know your needs…it’s definitely best in my experience to be as up front as possible” (#4, aged 26). This youth’s experience and education in law facilitated his disclosure because he was familiar with employers’ legal obligations regarding workplace accommodations.

Additionally, seven youth highlighted the importance of self-confidence and self-advocacy for enabling disclosure. For instance, one male with a visual impairment, who was employed in the banking industry, expressed: “I’ve taken courses in marketing so I’ve learned in marketing your brand—if you’re not confident in your own brand, how do you expect other people to be confident in you? So, you have to show confidence in yourself and then the rest of the world will take care of itself” (#12, male, aged 30).
Further, seven youth highlighted how inclusive employers helped them to feel comfortable disclosing. Ways that employers created an inclusive environment that facilitated disclosure included having an open and positive demeanor, being understanding and accepting of everyone’s strengths, and by indicating that they are open to accommodations or have an accommodations team to assist with the process. To illustrate, one female, aged 18 explained, “Certain people are going to be very open and seem pretty positive, so that makes me feel like I can disclose…my disability, or not even my disability but the limitations it’s going to bring out, without it impacting my chances of getting a job” (#14). Two youth who both worked and volunteered in a hospital setting explained that their employers were understanding and supportive to all employees’ strengths and abilities which facilitated their disclosure. Six youth told us that if employers indicate their openness to accommodations in the job posting, or during the interview, then they will likely to disclose, especially if they had an accommodations support person to assist them with disclosing and requesting accommodations (see Table 1). To illustrate, one female with muscular dystrophy who was employed in the banking industry said: “[working from home] was different to what my manager was used to in the past; so, there was a little bit of resistance at first…luckily, I had the support of the accommodations team and the occupational therapist to help me explain and provided support to something that is very normal” (#6, female, aged 26).

Eight youth described that understanding the benefits of disclosing (e.g., employers knowing your limits and what to expect of you, receiving accommodations, and helping employers to have a diverse workforce) facilitated their disclosure decision. For example, a female with an acquired brain injury, who worked part-time in retail explained that an advantage of disclosing to her employer was that “they know what to expect of you and they know when
you make a mistake…you weren't lazy; you weren't holding back from your job, you literally just made a mistake because of your disability” (#1, female, aged 27). An additional benefit of disclosing was receiving accommodations. For example, a male with a vision impairment working full-time in accounting stated: “there's no point of hiding [your disability] because if you make employers aware of it, they'll at least accommodate you…if you don’t make them aware of it…it’s going to impact your performance” (#12, male, aged 30). One female with a vision impairment who is employed full-time in the government explained that the value of disclosing included that it can help you get a job. She said: “it’s actually kind of beneficial for you to disclose your disability because…you might be more likely to be hired because they need to hire people with disabilities” (#8, female, aged 32).

Seven youth described their disability as a strength because it added to the diversity of the workforce, and they also mentioned several advantages of having a disability in the workplace such as being more creative, compassionate, innovative, and good problem-solvers. For example, one unemployed female, aged 18 with cerebral palsy who volunteered at a hospital described that having a disability makes one “more compassionate, more empathetic, more able to relate to people and just more adaptable” (#14, female, aged 18). Meanwhile, a male with a vision impairment, employed in the banking industry discussed the importance of a diverse workforce in that it would enable varied perspectives, and reach a more extensive market (#12, male, aged 30). A female, aged 28 with a hearing impairment who worked as a nurse described, “because I'm deaf I'm really good at picking up on nonverbal communication…my disability is considered a strength because signing, I can talk to the patients that already know sign language” (#5, female, aged 28). Finally, three youth expressed that having a disability equipped them with
strong problem-solving skills because they gained experience adapting and finding solutions to problems and situations in life that able-bodied individuals do not face.

**Barriers to disclosing**

Challenges to disability disclosure included the fear of stigma and discrimination from employers and co-workers, lack of employer’s knowledge of disabilities and accommodations, negative past disclosure experiences and not disclosing on your own terms. Ten youth reported they encountered stigma and discrimination in the workplace. For example, one female with lupus and worked in sales described how their “manager was kind of like, ‘I know you have a disability, but what is it?’ I explained it to him and he's like, ‘Oh, ok. So, can you work?’…I don't know, it was just really weird, but I was warned ahead of time that this is how he is and not to be offended by it” (#7, female, aged 24).

Some youth felt embarrassed about disclosing, while others feared being vulnerable to their employer or encountering discrimination. For instance, one female with muscular dystrophy who worked in an at-home business in sales, revealed her discomfort with disclosing because “I didn’t want to get in the way or cause issues” (#16, female, aged 19). Moreover, a female with cerebral palsy who worked part-time in a youth program expressed, “I don’t want that to be the first thing people look at...when I’m trying to find employment…You don’t want to be known as the person with cerebral palsy, and you don’t want to be helped” (#13, female, aged 24). Another female with an acquired brain injury, who worked in part-time retail said, “going in and talking to someone about my disability—I find that very challenging because I thought…they wouldn’t want me” (#1, female, aged 27).
Other youth described the difficulties associated with employer’s lack of knowledge about disability. For instance, one male with a vision impairment who was employed full-time in accounting explained,

getting [employers] to understand that with accommodations that I require that I’m able to do my task just like anybody else. It’s just getting them to understand that. I think that was the biggest challenge (#12, male, aged 30).

Other hurdles that some youth encountered included negative past experiences of disclosing or not disclosing on their own terms. For instance, one female with a vision impairment, who worked full-time in a temporary teaching position recalled a past employer was insensitive regarding her disability. She explained, “my employer would constantly bother me that I always looked angry and I tried to explain to him that I’m just squinting; and then he just thought it was funny and he brought it up every day for a year straight…He clearly had no sense of when to be quiet” (#9, female, aged 27). Another female with cerebral palsy, who worked part-time in a youth program, described an incident where her supervisor thought she was ignoring her because of her hearing impairment; So, she had to disclose. She said, “she was great about it and we didn’t have problems, but I felt like I had to tell her in order not to get in trouble” (#13, female, aged 24). A further example included an issue after a female who had a hearing impairment and worked full-time in nursing. She disclosed in her work placement,

they [supervisors] didn't communicate with me that they thought it [disability] was going to be an issue. They went over my head and talked to the head of the school, before they even took it back to me, and I found that that was really disrespectful because it completely doesn't allow me to have autonomy, or allow me the chance to say…this is my solution; this is how I think we can overcome this together, there was never any of
that collaboration. (#5, female, aged 28)

In summary, youth encountered several barriers and facilitators to regarding the timing of when they disclosed, and to whom they disclosed.

**Accommodations**

Nine youth received formal accommodations from their employer, including working from home or flexible hours, accessible software, accessible workspaces, visual aids, and accommodations for the interview and/or training (see Table 1). We found that more females in our study received accommodations than males, and youth with visual impairments received accommodations than youth with other types of physical disabilities. Some youth received formal accommodations through an accessibility team or department. For example, a male with a vision impairment who worked full-time in banking explained:

Once I was successful in that first interview, we had a second meeting which focused on accommodations…we went through what a day in the life would be like, and what accommodations that I would require and would they be enough or would there be anything else I would suggest…and, with the help of the accessibility team, all of those accommodations were put in place prior to me starting (#12, male, aged 30).

Another female with a vision impairment, who worked full-time in the government described the accommodations she received in her job:

I asked for Zoom Text which is a magnification software…and then also, I got an ergonomic assessment…for my posture and everything so that I don't have to lean over and look at the screen, which is what I would have to do normally. (#8, female, aged 32)

Eight youth described having informal or self-accommodations in the workplace, which included accommodations that are provided by the youth themselves, or temporary solutions
provided by employers and/or youth, such as getting written versus verbal instruction, carrying a book to aid memory, working during non-standard work hours, and using their own equipment. For example, a male with cerebral palsy who was employed full-time in a research job who did not disclose his disability, discussed how he dealt with accommodations: “99% of the work I do doesn't require adapting; so, the very rare times it does, I figure it out. You just think about it, ‘How can I do this differently and still get the job done in a safe way?’” (#17, male, aged 19). A different female with a physical disability, who worked in nursing received some formal accommodations, but discussed instances when she self-accommodated: “if I am at a patient room by myself in the nursing station and there is a code brown, or a hold and secure, for example…it has to be up to me to make sure I have the accommodations in place so I can be safe for my patients” (#5, female, aged 28). One female with a vision impairment, working part-time in research, asked for accommodations but did not receive formal accommodations from her employer. So, she developed her own. She explained:

I did ask for accommodations but, here's the thing, I'm just using my own equipment…they didn't want me to use it, but they can't accommodate me otherwise either…If it wasn't for that then I wouldn't be able to do what I'm doing right now (#10, female, aged 34).

Six youth did not receive accommodations in the workplace. Reasons for a lack of accommodations including feeling they did not need them and did not disclose; and also, stigma/discrimination from employers. Youth with visual impairments noted more difficulties with accessing accommodations in work, school, and volunteering. Reasons for this included that accommodations are more extensive and costly, especially for volunteering positions who do not
want to pay. Some youth with vision impairments also discussed encountering stigma because their disability was visible to their supervisor.

Other youth did not need accommodations due to the nature of their disability. For example, a male with Charcot-marie-tooth disease said, “I didn't really ask for any accommodations because it's a physical disability, but it isn't really that noticeable so I didn't really ask for any of it” (#15, male, aged 22). Other youth lacked accommodations or had to advocate for them. For example, a female with a visual impairment, who worked full-time in the government, shared the following experience of struggling with an employer to receive appropriate accommodations that she needed:

I said, I need this software…It's one that I use and it's one that every person who's visually impaired uses because it's the best one. This happened to me several times and they're like, can you not use Windows Magnifier? No, I can't use Windows Magnifier. If I could, then I wouldn't ask you for what I asked. Why would you tell me what I need when I know what I need? It just makes me angry. (#8, female, aged 32)

Eight youth told us about the process of requesting accommodations as evolving and changing over time, mainly due to changes in health, job roles and responsibilities, or adjustments needed to original accommodations. Within such an ongoing disclosure and accommodation process, youth described the importance of having open communication with employers. To illustrate, a female with a vision impairment who worked part-time in the government revealed: “it's really important to have that conversation ongoing or to be open to it because everyone’s needs are so unique and even for me, when I'm in new situations, things will come up and that patience is really important” (#11, female, aged 29). Other youth, a male with cerebral palsy, revealed how revisiting accommodations especially within a new job is
important: “you never know what accommodations you need until you start a job…So, I think having that continued dialogue is very important” (#4, male, aged 26). Finally, one female with Lupus who worked full-time in sales, described the evolution of accommodations when returning to work after a health-related absence. To illustrate: “Because I haven't worked full-time in a while, things changed so I have an open dialogue with them now and I can ask for accommodations that I need” (#7, female, aged 24).

**Inclusive environment**

Having an inclusive work environment played an important role in youth’s workplace disclosure and accommodations experiences. Six youth described how social activities in the workplace and networking with co-workers was important for developing an inclusive work environment. For example, a male with narcolepsy who worked full-time in web design said, “Another thing I like about my job is there is a ping pong table…and they have sports after work, which I love. Great company to work for” (#2, male, aged 27). For this particular youth, the perks and social atmosphere of the job made it a great place to work. Other elements of an inclusive work environment involved employers’ having knowledge, experience and comfort in working with people with who have a disability. For instance, five youth mentioned that their employer hired other people with disabilities. To illustrate, a female with an acquired brain injury, who worked part-time in retail reported, “If I felt like I needed extra time or whatever, then I would let them know, and they would be more than willing to find that for me, because they had other people with disabilities working there, so they have experience” (#1, female, aged 27). Five youth described how they have good communication and rapport with their employer. Some youth emphasized the importance of employers affirming their openness to accommodations in the job posting or interview process. For instance, a female with cerebral palsy who worked part-time in
a youth program, recommended that employers “block stereotypes and just open your mind up, allowing accommodations to be a normal thing…just making [youth] aware that we are open to accommodations. I think a lot more people would be open about it” (#13, female, aged 24).

Nine youth described that their employer was understanding, respectful, and non-judgmental, while six youth claimed that their employer asked them what they needed. For example, when discussing the characteristics of inclusive employers, a female with a hearing impairment employed in nursing explained: “It also makes a difference what kind of managerial team you have. If they’re supportive, because everyone has unique strengths, and whether or not they are in an environment where they actually bring out those strengths is really the key” (#5, female, aged 28). Similarly, a female with muscular dystrophy, employed in the banking sector said: “I am lucky enough that it is a supportive team and I’ve been lucky that all the managers I’ve had at [company] and all the teams have been a supportive culture” (#6, female, aged 26).

Further, a female with a vision impairment, working in a temporary research job, discussed the difference between an inclusive and non-inclusive work environment, stating “it depends on the employer, on the staff—some of them are hesitant…it all depends on how the person feels towards a disabled person and their beliefs and all that stuff” (#10, female, aged 34). In summary, youth described how having an inclusive employer or work environment helped them to feel comfortable with disclosing and requesting accommodations.

Discussion

This study explored when and how youth with disabilities disclosed their disability and requested accommodations in the workplace. Exploring this topic among a youth sample is important because they often find it challenging to disclose their condition and request workplace accommodations [7]. Having workplace accommodations are important because they allow
youth with disabilities to optimize their participation in the workforce, while extending job retention, productivity, and an increased disability awareness in the workplace [7,42]. Our study addressed several important gaps in the literature by exploring disability disclosure and accommodations in the workplace from the perspective of youth with disabilities. Most research on disability disclosure and accommodations focuses on adults, therefore our study findings can help to inform unique employment strategies and facilitators for youth with disabilities transitioning into employment.

Our results highlight youth’s strategies and reasons for disclosure which included advocating for their needs, having a knowledge of workplace rights, and accommodation solutions. Consistent with other research on young adults with various types of disabilities, facilitators of disability disclosure included individual factors such as having a knowledge of supports available to them and rights in the workplace [7]. These findings are particularly important for youth who may not be aware that they need to disclose to receive workplace accommodations, which is often a different process than receiving accommodations in school [43,44]. Previous research also shows that being aware of your needs and having self-advocacy skills are important for requesting accommodations [7].

Our findings highlight several facilitators to youth disclosing their condition, which included job preparation, self-confidence and self-advocacy skills, and an inclusive work environment. Previous research has found that individual facilitators such as self-confidence, knowledge of supports, and workplace rights can help to facilitate disability disclosure in the workplace [7,21,45]. We also found that youth who attended an employment training or mentorship program more often disclosed than youth who did not attend any employment training. This is consistent with literature that explored the effectiveness of mentorship programs
and the use of employment training programs that promote self-advocacy, job skills, and confidence as a facilitator to disability disclosure in the workplace [7,43-45].

Our results showed that many youth were unclear about the optimal timing for disclosing and the process for doing so. Similar to other studies on youth with neuromuscular disease, our findings showed that many youth are uncertain about when, how and to whom to disclose their condition to employers [48]. The timing of when youth disclosed their disability to their employer depended on such things as disability type and severity, comfort level, type of job and industry. Our research is also consistent with other studies showing that disclosure is an ongoing process because roles change over time as does the nature of the disability itself [49,50].

Our findings demonstrate that youth’s obstacles to disability disclosure included a fear of stigma and discrimination, lack of employer’s knowledge of disabilities and accommodations, negative past experiences of disclosing and not disclosing on your own terms. Stigma and workplace discrimination are a common barrier to disclosing [8,12,51]. Some studies show that stigma and discrimination may vary by type of disability [52,53], which may be a result of the visibility of the condition. Stigma and discrimination from employers and co-workers is often a result of a lack of knowledge, experience and disability confidence working with people who have a disability [7]. Lacking knowledge can lead to discomfort around those who have a disability and potentially discriminatory attitudes [54]. Other research suggests that youth who have a hidden or less visible condition may be more reluctant to disclose for fear of discrimination [7,55].

Our results revealed youth had both formal and informal workplace accommodations. Sundar [56] defines formal accommodations as personal assistance, technology or changes in physical environment, whereas informal supports are determined through workplace culture,
communication, and tacit norms [56]. We found that some youth did not receive accommodations because they felt they were not needed or because they were concerned about potential stigma and discrimination from their employer. Specifically, youth with visual impairments noted more difficulty accessing accommodations in work, school, and volunteering, as well as an absence of professional development opportunities. These findings are consistent with research showing that youth with visual impairments had significantly higher unemployment rates compared to youth with other types of disabilities, and that such difficulties related to access to print material and other accommodations [57].

Our findings also showed that having an inclusive work environment, or employer played an important role in youth’s workplace disclosure and accommodations experiences. Youth in our study were comfortable disclosing or asking for accommodations if they knew their employer had previous experience in working with people who have a disability. Literature on employer attitudes of hiring youth with disabilities shows that employers who have experience working with people with disabilities are more likely to hire and have positive attitudes towards them, which could explain why youth are more comfortable disclosing in disability-friendly environments [58,59]. A scoping review [60] suggests that disclosing an invisible disability in the workplace can be a very risky decision with potential advantages and disadvantages, but that progressive management and inclusive workplace practices can promote a setting to facilitate disclosure and effectively implement accommodations [60].

In reflecting on the communication accommodation theory, we see how it can help to inform the disability disclosure interactions between youth and employers [28,29]. For example, able-bodied employers who showed resistance or stigma in hiring youth or providing accommodations may have drawn on stereotypes of youth with disabilities as helpless and
unproductive, rather than focusing on their strengths and abilities [30]. Addressing disability disclosure is a critical tool to enhancing inter-ability interactions [30]. Research consistently shows that people tend to feel more comfortable around those who are similar to ourselves and uneasy around those who are different from us [31,61]. This type of behavior can lead to stereotypes, discrimination, social exclusion, and negative work environment where people would not feel comfortable disclosing [31]. Disclosing a disability and sharing private information can make people vulnerable to those to whom they are disclosing and they are often concerned about stigma and discrimination [3]. Inter-group communication between those with and without a disability can affect a person’s social identity and their communication patterns with others [29]. Therefore, adjusting to the social context can affect a person’s decision to disclose their condition.

Our findings show that some youth with uncomfortable disclosing to their employer due to fear of potential discrimination. Meanwhile, youth who disclosed and received accommodations often demonstrated self-advocacy skills, confidence, and knowledge of accommodations and workplace rights, which in turn could have altered their employer’s perceived stereotypes [28,30]. Research shows that having social contact and communication with people who have a disability plays an important role in shaping people’s perspectives of the realities of living with a disability and beneficial impacts on attitudes towards them [31,62]. Employers should work to improve their knowledge of and experience with people who have a disability so that they can reduce stereotypes and potential discrimination towards them and instead, create an inclusive environment where they feel comfortable disclosing their condition [31].

*Limitations and future directions*
It is important to consider the limitations of this study. First, we included a broad range of disability types to capture the breadth of experiences in disclosing and receiving accommodations. Future research should consider exploring whether there are differences in disclosure between various types of disabilities. Second, we had an over-representation of females in our sample and thus, the findings should be interpreted with caution. Future studies should explore potential gender differences in disability disclosure and accommodation requests. Third, our study focused only on youth who were currently working on looking for work. Their experiences may be different from those who are chronically unemployed or those who have stopped looking for work. Future research should consider any potential differences in disability disclosure by gender, type of disability, amount of work experience, and industry type. Finally, our theoretical perspective that we drew upon has not been widely used and further research is needed to understand how it can inform disclosure decisions.

Conclusions

Our research addresses an important gap in the literature by focusing on the experiences of disability disclosure and workplace accommodations for young people with disabilities. Most research focuses on return to work among adults. Our results showed that youth’s strategies and reasons for disclosure included advocating for their needs, being knowledgeable about workplace rights, and accommodation solutions. Facilitators for disclosure included job preparation, self-confidence and self-advocacy skills, and having an inclusive work environment. Challenges to disability disclosure included the fear of stigma and discrimination, lack of employer’s knowledge about disability and accommodations, negative past experiences of disclosing, and not disclosing on your own terms. The timing of when youth disclosed their disability to their
employer depended on disability type and severity, comfort level, type of job and industry. Our findings highlight that youth encounter several barriers to disclosing their condition and requesting workplace accommodations. The timing and process for disclosing is complex and further work is needed to help support youth with disclosing their condition.

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Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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Table 1. Overview of sample characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID #</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Disability type</th>
<th>Employment status (industry type)</th>
<th>How they got job</th>
<th>Disclosed (how/when)</th>
<th>Accommodations</th>
<th>Inclusion in the workplace</th>
<th>Received professional development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Youth 1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Acquired brain injury</td>
<td>Employed part-time (retail); university student</td>
<td>Workplace program</td>
<td>No (employers were aware from the employment program)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Inclusive workplace (hire other PWD)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Youth 2</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Narcolepsy and cataplexy</td>
<td>Employed full-time (web design)</td>
<td>Workplace program</td>
<td>Yes (after hired; to the ‘important people’)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Good social activities / networking</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth 3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Visual impairment / hearing impairment</td>
<td>Employed full-time (media company)</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>Yes (during interview)</td>
<td>Accessible software for computer</td>
<td>Company open to hiring PWD</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Youth 4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Cerebral palsy</td>
<td>Employed full-time (law)</td>
<td>Through school posting</td>
<td>Yes (via cover letter)</td>
<td>Assistive technology (voice dictation software), accessible workspace</td>
<td>Feels included in workplace; inclusive and helpful employer</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Youth 5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hearing</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>Governme</td>
<td>Yes (during</td>
<td>Visual</td>
<td>Strength based</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>Career Experience</td>
<td>Supportive Environment</td>
<td>Notes</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Muscular Dystrophy</td>
<td>Full-time (banking)</td>
<td>Internally, already at company</td>
<td>Yes (after hired)</td>
<td>Working from home 2 days a week</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Lupus; Acute Disseminated Encephalomyelitis</td>
<td>Full-time (sales); in university part-time</td>
<td>Employment training program</td>
<td>Yes (during interview)</td>
<td>Breaks when having pain; rotating tasks from sitting to standing</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Visual Impairment</td>
<td>Full-time (gov’t)</td>
<td>Co-op placement out of PSE</td>
<td>Yes (before interview)</td>
<td>Zoom Text; ergonomic assessment for desk; work from home</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Visual Impairment</td>
<td>Full-time temporary (teaching)</td>
<td>Internal, already at school board</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Visual impairment</td>
<td>Employed temporary part-time (research)</td>
<td>Through mentor</td>
<td>Yes (during interview)</td>
<td>Screen reader, recorder [self-accommodations]</td>
<td>Feels included by ‘some’ employers/co-workers</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Visual impairment</td>
<td>Employed part-time (gov’t); in graduate school</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>Yes (once hired)</td>
<td>Electronic version of printed material, accessible software</td>
<td>Fun and positive environment</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Visual impairment</td>
<td>Employed full-time; (accounting)</td>
<td>Moved up from internship [got from recruiter]</td>
<td>Yes (during interview)</td>
<td>Screen reader; printer; headphones</td>
<td>Accessibility team for accommodations</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Cerebral palsy; hearing impairment</td>
<td>Employed part-time (youth program); casual part-time (teaching)</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>Yes (before interview; partially)</td>
<td>Interview questions to be provided beforehand</td>
<td>Open to accommodations (in job posting)</td>
<td>Part-time Yes; Casual No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Cerebral palsy</td>
<td>Unemployed; in high school</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>More likely to apply to inclusive company</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Charcot-marie-tooth</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>More likely to disclose if company is inclusive</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Accessible Parking</td>
<td>Understanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Muscular Dystrophy</td>
<td>At home business (sales); volunteering</td>
<td>Yes (during interview)</td>
<td>Accessible parking; ramp</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Cerebral Palsy</td>
<td>Employed full-time (medical research); in University</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: PWD = people with disabilities