

**Transcript of CFICE Podcast:  
A conversation about disability in the workplace**

Kristina: Thank you for joining us. My name is Kristina and I am a Communication Research Assistant with the Community First: Impacts of Community Engagement Project. I'm pleased to introduce our newest podcast, "A conversation about disability in the workplace". We hope you enjoy.

(Music interlude)



*From Left to Right: Nicole Bedford, Kawsar Mohamed, Kristina Reed*

**Nicole:** Kristina and Kawsar, what brings us here today?

**Kawsar:** Well, to talk about the difficult question of employment and disability.

**Nicole:** That is a huge question, Kawsar. Ok, so I guess we got to start with a bit of context. Why don't we introduce ourselves first? My name's Nicole Bedford and I am the project manager and Communications Coordinator for the Community First: Impacts of Community Engagement, otherwise known as CFICE, project. Basically, our research project studies partnerships between community organizations and academics and we try to look at how to make those partnerships



better and more valuable to the people who are involved, particularly community because we are community-first. And I'm here in the capacity of being an employer.

I have employed the lovely Kristina and the lovely Kawsar for working for CFICE's Communications team and also for our *Community Campus Engage Canada* working group, which is becoming its own entity, but that's a whole other discussion.

So Kawsar, why don't you introduce yourself.

**Kawsar:** My name is Kawsar Mohammed, I am the Administrative Research Assistant for the CFICE project and hopefully for the CCEC initiative that's coming up. I have a visible disability, so in regard to that, that's why I'm here.

**Kristina:** Hi my name's Kristina Reed and I am a Communications Research Assistant for the CFICE project, and I am here in the capacity of being someone with an invisible illness.

**Nicole:** So, tell me a bit about that. What does it mean to have an invisible illness?

**Kristina:** So often times when we talk about disability, we always tend to base it on what we can see of another person. So predominantly for me in particular, I have a chronic illness, so my illness is not always as visible in terms of I'm not in a wheelchair, I don't have visible supports in my day to day, so often people look at me and don't think I'm sick but really I am, but it's something that I work with on a daily basis. So, for me in particular, I have Cystic Fibrosis.

**Nicole:** So Kristina you're kind of the instigator of this conversation, so what makes you so passionate about this?

**Kristina:** Well I think that, when coming into working for CFICE, I felt that it was important for us to have a conversation about disability because it's often a topic that people are hesitant to talk about because they don't want to offend but also there's a worry about whether or not somebody with a disability can handle a certain amount of work and I feel with us being here today, and why I am so happy that Kawsar is here as well is being able to really share about our experiences of having both visible and invisible disabilities and talking about, you know what, how have we had a conversation about our illness because our conditions do affect our work but figuring out you know what, it isn't something that limits us but gives us different abilities that can really be a benefit in the workplace. And I really wanted to show that it can empower us in the workplace and I want other people to feel that way too and to know that even though they may not be quote-on-quote "healthy", that doesn't mean that they can't fully contribute in a workplace and it is possible to do your best in your workplace and fostering that kind of relationship with an employer and having the conversation where you know what, this may seem scary but it's not that scary. And really figuring out how can we have that conversation and bringing more people into the fold.

**Nicole:** So let's rewind just a bit. How did you guys come to work at CFICE?

**Kawsar:** I'll start with that. I came to work at CFICE through the Carleton University, the CUAEL program.

**Kristina:** Yes

**Kawsar:** I forgot exactly what it stands for but I'll remember it during our conversation. And as a student with a disability, they approached me they told me that there are opportunities and that the Ontario government is funding them to create, well not create, but get students with disabilities into jobs, for experimental learning. And I was very interested because I thought, hey great, this is a good way to get my foot in the door in work that I want to do. So they would send me positions that they had and I looked at the ones that I was interested in, sent my resume and it so happens that CFICE gave me a call and it's something that I really love and hey here I am.

**Nicole:** Well you were definitely a top candidate, I have to say, because I reviewed your resume. So I came to it because I was going through the Carleton intra-net and found this opportunity online and I hate to admit it but I am often looking for opportunities to maximize the amount of talent that we have on the CFICE project, with the remaining amount of dollars that we have and the CUAEL program offered a subsidy of 15\$ an hour for the students, which was a huge help, in terms of being able to hire more capacity. So that was initially what drew me to hiring through the CUAEL program and there was also the added benefit of giving opportunities to people who would not necessarily have them otherwise.

**Kristina:** So I came to work for CFICE, the same as Kawsar, through the CUAEL program and what initially drew me to CUAEL in the first place was the fact that it was specifically geared towards people with disabilities because I think that often times we don't talk about the kind of accommodations that people with disabilities need and this program was very centred on making sure that people with disabilities felt comfortable but also empowered to get into the workplace and wanting to give them the tools that they need to be able to look for employment after they left Carleton and the fact that it was on campus was even better. So I decided to apply and my position right now is also in my degree, so I'm studying in my field, which is exciting, nerve wracking at times but has been really rewarding as a result.

**Kawsar:** If I wanted to add to that actually, I found it really interesting coming into an interview where the employer already knew I had a disability and it made it that much comfortable. Unfortunately, that it has to be this way, but hey what can you do. Because it so happens that I had other interviews before and I was going in you could almost see the surprise on their faces, the employers, that oh you're a person with a disability, it so happens that sometimes I went for interview and the building was not accessible. So pretty much you had to sometimes tell people in advance hey listen I'm in a wheelchair, so if I'm coming for an interview just so you know. So, it was really refreshing sometimes to come in and have the employer already ready for you and already knowing that you have a disability. It's a great program, but I also noticed that most of the jobs available through this program was at Carleton University jobs, maybe

because it was summer and the other people didn't have time to apply. Would be interesting to know how that changed, but it was wonderful, a wonderful project.

**Nicole:** Yeah I had heard from the people who run the program that it has been nice for the students who are participating in the program, to be able to go in with the employer already knowing, like you said. But I find that also interesting because the reality is, we didn't actually know. So, we knew that we were hiring through a program, people with disabilities but we had no idea what disabilities people would be coming with and some of the candidates that we interviewed were very forthcoming about disclosing that and others were not at all. So you didn't actually fully know. As we mentioned earlier you have a visible disability, but I had no idea that you were coming up in a wheelchair no clue.

**Kawsar:** Really?

**Nicole:** Yeah because it wasn't listed anywhere, they didn't share that information. I do think it was great though that you know the program does prep you for that and it's one less barrier for the employer to have to worry about with respect to hiring candidates right?

**Kawsar:** That's interesting actually, I didn't know that they didn't let you guys know. But for us, we thought "oh hey this employer already knows of our disability", I'm sure you guys knew it was a program for

**Nicole:** yeah yeah

**Kawsar:** oh but I didn't know it was not specific which is great actually. Yeah it's good to know.

**Kristina:** Well I think that speaks to the need to have this kind of conversation about what does accommodation look like in the workplace and I think that sometimes when we don't necessarily think about "you know what, is my workplace accessible?" Like for me, I am an able bodied person but I wouldn't off the top of my head think "oh is this washroom accessible for somebody in a wheelchair?" And it's important for us to think about that and I think that this project was a good starting point in figuring out ok how can we look at our surroundings and how can we make it accessible and what do accommodations look like.

**Nicole:** And I think that's been a huge learning curve, like for myself especially, so I mentioned earlier that I didn't know you were in a wheelchair and when I had gone through the form because the form that CUAEL provides you check off whether your space is accessible, I didn't even think about the bathrooms and I freaked out after we interviewed Kawsar because I thought "here's this amazing candidate and now I have a workspace that I said was accessible and it totally is not and how can I make sure that we provide the accommodations for this amazing candidate" and I was so embarrassed to have not noticed that and I felt ashamed to not know that but it was also an amazing learning opportunity because now, now I was confronted with now, how do we work through this. And the answer that I was thinking about from the very beginning is it's not up to me, whether Kawsar decides she can work in this space

or not, it's up to her. She's the top candidate and I need to give her the decision whether this space is ok enough, to her. And we did find accessible washrooms in the building but they are not accessible really in terms of convenience or anything like that, but I guess Kawsar, you made the decision.

**Kawsar:** Yeah I can speak to that, it's very interesting that you say that because that is something that is very rampant. Like you can't really ask people who do not have a disability to understand what exactly a person with disability needs so you have to pretty much ask them ok "is this ok for you?". It so happened that the environment that I was going to be working on was sufficient enough for me because I can manage myself easier than maybe someone else that would be... not have the capacity to develop... to move around like I do. There's a lot of things that we don't realize sometimes when it comes to employment and people with disability, that there is barriers that we need to get over. So it's time to stop being politically correct and dancing around the issue and we need to start having tough conversations. Ok so, we have to build that comfort level where the employer can come and talk to the person with a disability and ask them "ok what do you need?" and the person with the disability can tell them, "this is what I need". Instead of being afraid to hire that person and pushing them back and maybe they are the qualified person but because they have the disability they won't be hired. Instead of doing that, talk to them. Say "ok this is what I have, this is how my environment of employment is. Are you comfortable with it?" Give them the choice to say "yes I am comfortable with it, I can do it" and "no I'm not comfortable with it", instead of being afraid afterwards that you're going to offend them later on.

**Nicole:** Well I think you touch on a really good point, I think all of us are afraid to have that conversation. In terms of an employer's perspective, it's scary to talk about these things because first of all you are not allowed to actively ask about these, like a disability in an interview setting. You're not allowed to ask about religion, you're not allowed and there are reasons for that so that discrimination hopefully does not happen. But if we're not allowed to ask about these things then how do we know whether or not we can accommodate them like especially in an interview setting, like if you're a top candidate but you have an undisclosed disability, how do I know as an employer that I'm actually going to be able to provide accommodations that are appropriate for you, unless we talk about it.

**Kristina:** That's so true, and building off of that I think that for me having an invisible illness there are times where I haven't disclosed my condition until much later because I think for the longest time I always had this worry that if I get too sick, then they'll limit the amount of work I can do. And I always felt this need to show them what I can do at the beginning, set the standard, and then let them know and then have that conversation later on of being "even though I have this condition, I am still able to perform to the level that you need me to." But I've been learning over the years that that's not the way to go about it and it's important to foster a level of trust with your employer because a reality for anybody with a disability is you are going to get sick. And it's figuring out ok, how can we have that conversation of "I am committed to doing this work to the best of my ability but there are going to be times where I am going to need to tap out and take care of myself but I also need you to trust that when I



take those times it is because I really need it.” And I think that sometimes in the disability community, there’s a need to overcome the stigma but sometimes we push ourselves too much in that process of trying to overcome people’s assumptions about what we can do and that also doesn’t help in the end either. So there’s definitely fear on both sides because there’s a fear of well whenever you hear about certain conditions people have pre-conceived notions of what it looks like and oftentimes it’s the worst case scenario. For my condition, cystic fibrosis manifests in different ways and there are those of us who are on all different parts of the spectrum and I don’t present like a lot of people with cystic fibrosis that would be on tv or in the ads. So I’ve had to figure out a way of, ok how can I address my condition but also talk to my employer about you know what, “let’s not google it first and let’s have a conversation about how my condition impacts my work but not to its detriment but helps it” and it’s something that I’m working with and it’s not something that’s hanging over me but it’s something that I’d dealing with on the day to day and it’s not something to be scared of and that it’s something to work with.



**Kawsar:** Like you said, assuming, we always assume what the other person is going to be thinking or is going to do and therefore we are always afraid. So stop assuming and hey talk, say even if, as a disabled person, tell them “listen, I know I qualify for this position as you can see through my resume or you wouldn’t have called me for an interview if you didn’t see it.” And

say, but this is what I need to function properly. And the employer themselves they could ask the question “hey I didn’t know you were disabled but you are a qualified candidate and I would like to have you on my team. What is it that you need for you to be able to function properly.” If we could just have these honest conversations, everything, everything would have worked out. But everyone is afraid or assuming what the other person is thinking. Stop assuming, have conversations I say.

**Nicole:** What about the aspect of like when, so in different circles people will say “well the person should not be responsible for educating you for example. Like I’ve heard that a lot as a reason why not to ask people with disabilities for example about their experiences and things like that. Like because it’s up to you, if you see for example, that you’re in a wheelchair, it’s up to me as an employer to research the things that you need. What about when people say those things?

**Kawsar:** Well disability is a case to case thing, like a name of a disability doesn’t mean that every person with that disability is the same. So the whole thing of employers “it’s up to you to research” is the problem I find because it impedes in employers being comfortable with hiring people with disability. No, ask all the questions you ask, I will never be offended because this is my reality. I am a person with a disability, I’m in a wheelchair, it’s my reality and I am not ashamed of it. So because you are asking employers not to ask you’re implying almost that they’re going to hurt the feelings of the person with disability, like the person with a disability is ashamed or uncomfortable with their disability. Most time people with disability have accepted their disabilities and they’re comfortable. If they’re looking for a job, they just want to live their life and have employment and make money right, pretty much. So comfort has to be set, that’s what I say. We have to make employers comfortable enough to ask the questions they need to ask to hire these people and people with disabilities need to be comfortable enough to come into an interview and not think a) because I am a person with a disability I am not going to get this job, so comfort.

**Nicole:** And I think one of the things that you mentioned was something that made me think, it’s about treating people as individuals and talking to a person as an individual as opposed to talking to them as a part of X group or whatever.

**Kawsar:** Yes, definitely

**Kristina:** And building off of that, I don’t think it’s one person’s responsibility versus the other. It has to be a collaboration. It has to come from an employer who is willing to listen but then also from someone who’s applying for a position saying, you know what, really owning it, being like “this is my life and I am willing to work in this environment and I’d like to find a common ground for how that can work”. And I think the one topic that always comes up, is taking sick days and taking time for doctor’s appointments. Like I know for me, sometimes my doctor’s appointments are really not at the best of times during the day, sometimes they are right in the middle of the day, so when it comes to booking work hours that can sometimes be problematic. And that’s why I think it’s important to have it be a conversation where both are on the same

level and having you know what at the end of the day, if I need to change something about my schedule, who are you going to? You're going to your boss and you need to establish that level of trust and that's it. Because they are depending on you and I think that would be same for a regular quote on quote "healthy" person. Your boss is still depending on you and it has to be an active conversation of "I'm trying to get the job done but I need to take this time so that I can get the job done." And making sure that's coming back to both sides need to continue to be open to hearing it and figuring out ok, what's a middle ground? How can we make this work?

**Nicole:** So let's talk about your experiences in this employment situation for example because I have two questions. One of the things you mentioned was having the conversation with the employer and building trust, so question #1 from me would be, what kinds of things have you done to help build trust with your employers, either myself or others in order to feel comfortable having that conversation? And part 2 of that question is that you guys are both very passionate about this work. You are knowledgeable about yourselves and about the world around you and you are strong women I would say, based on my experience, you're not afraid to speak your mind. What about people who may have disabilities and who aren't as self-confident or aren't as capable of advocating for themselves? What about individuals like that and employers working with individuals like that?

**Kawsar:** Well that's one of the reasons why we're having this conversation because I find, for myself, it has never been a problem for me to go in interviews and impress my employers. Because like you said, I can do that. But there are some people who are shy, who are more introverts and who cannot express themselves as good as I can express myself and that's just facts. That's why we're having this conversation because we need to start, because that person when they come into an interview they've already surrounded themselves in a bubble kind of thing. So when the employer also surrounds himself in a bubble, there's no conversation that's going to happen and that's going to be comfortable enough to create that link where the employer is going to be comfortable enough to hire this person. That is why I say that one or the other needs to break that bubble for the communication to start. So if the person with disability, because they've lived so long with this disability and they feel like ok maybe I'm not going to be hired because of this disability and if an employer sees that, the employer has to in a way have the comfort level to say "you know what, I see through your resume that you are a qualified person" and try to make it comfortable, the situation. Vice versa also. If the person with disability is more open than the employer, if he sees that, it's the responsibility of that person with a disability to say "hey I can tell that you're a little bit nervous about this who aspect so let me just put you at ease. This is what I can do, ok and these are my limits. I can work around these limits easily and this is how I can do it." Try to start the conversation and make the comfort level I always say comfort. Taking it back to being comfortable and having those conversations.

**Kristina:** I would say that, even when it comes to even application processes, one of the things I'm seeing a lot more now is, on applications it's saying "do you need accommodations?", ok what does that look like? And I think that for people who are a little bit more on the shy side,



it's a good start as a kind of intermediary because often times if you ask somebody point blank "what do you need to be able to work in a workplace?", if you're very shy you're not going to be able to come up with it right there on the spot. And I think that it gives time for people for people with disabilities to think about, "ok what are some things that I would need accommodations for in a workplace". And I think it allows us to almost problem solve a little bit ahead of time, so to kind of prepare ourselves. You know, I'm a big supporter of knowledge is power and I think that taking a step like that and saying ok "what accommodations do you need?", it gives us time to prepare something. And I think that also helps us when we are confronted with the question "what do you need", we're then a lot more at ease to be able to say well "I've thought about it and these are some of the things that I would need in my day to day.

**Nicole:** I really like your suggestion of putting it right in the application process, I mean if we had in the application that question of "do you need any accommodations in order to perform this position? If so, what do they look like?". I mean that's preparing the employer right up front of "do we even have an accessible bathroom" for example, for real, so that they can inform the candidates as well so that opens up that conversation. One of the scary parts about that though, is that I mean that we're talking about here, how people might be pushed out of participating because of needing accommodations because the reality for most employers is that they are looking to get the job done as quickly and as efficiently and as cost effectively as possible right? So accommodations can be a scary for employers because they think "ok am I going to have to buy additional equipment.... what is this going to mean for me and what is this going to mean for the rest of the team as well?" Like an organization that is a small charity for example, might not be able to afford an interpreter or a sign language interpreter for an employee who may be potentially deaf, you know for example. So I can see the positives of it but I can also...what are your guys' thoughts in terms of those kinds of barriers?

**Kawsar:** With regards to putting it right on the application?

**Nicole:** To the disclosure right up front process

**Kawsar:** Well you can see it as an employer, I see it as hampering people with disability at the same time. Because sometimes what happens is, when you disclose that you need accommodation right away, the employer knows that you have disability.

**Nicole:** Uhuh

**Kawsar:** So people with disability are sometimes afraid that if they disclose it right away, their application is going to be passed over. So I personally don't find that it should be on an application. I think that you put in your resume just as anyone else. If you're qualified for the job, you go in for an interview. And that is when the conversation should happen. We have to stop being uncomfortable with disability. It's not something to be ashamed about, it's something that happens to people, it exists, it's a reality in our life. And hey just have that conversation, be comfortable. A person with disability will never be offended, I personally find,

will never be offended if an employer is true and kind but also interested in hiring this person. But if the employer is interested in hiring them and they want to know the information, they need to hire them. A person with a disability will be comfortable with that and they will tell them exactly what they need. And maybe there are resources out there, that you don't have to buy or spend a lot of money on, I'm sure there's a lot of resources that exist within Canada that you can get. So it's just a matter of research and it's a matter of having that conversation, once you ask the person with disability "Ok what do you need? You need an interpreter? Ok so how can we find that?", I'm sure that person might even know how to get that resource. So it's just a matter of conversation being comfortable with each other, I keep repeating the comfort issue again and again.

**Kristina:** Well I guess building off of that, the whole idea of you know what, having the conversation, you brought it up before Nicole of how do we have it when employers are often times looking for something that is cost effective. I hate to use the word incentivize but it's how can we change approaches to having it be, that you know what, it's not an extra cost to get an interpreter or to put in a ramp. And having it be that you know what, it's an important thing to do. And it's how can we change employers perspectives of having them be more aware. Because it's great, it's super duper important and I agree with you, for them to be willing to have the conversation but then it's the whole thing of the practical application of it and how can we move from the conversation to practical application. And to that sense of awareness of looking at a workplace and saying "ok how can I make this more accessible for people who, wherever they sit on the spectrum". So I'd be curious to hear your thoughts.

**Kawsar:** Well I find that really interesting and those kind of , I would say eureka moments for employer is when they have someone with disability on their team. They're going to start thinking, their imagination is going to open up and they're going to look around see things differently than they would have before, which is an important thing. So this will open up the doors for example if that interview place that I went to and I asked them if it was accessible when I got there and they said no, I'm sure that they started thinking about it and saying "hey how come our building is not accessible", do you know what I mean? Just that contact that I had with them, that very fast contact. So imagine if that person with disability is actually working for you, you will realize things that you might need to change and might be actually beneficial for you in the future. So I find that once you immerse yourself within that conversation and you start hiring them, a person with disability, you're gonna notice that hey there are resources that can apply too, there's ways that can make things easier. My office space is not really that accessible what can I change?, you know what I mean? I don't think that anyone is against including people with disability within the working environment, it's just a matter of them seeing that they are able to do it.

**Kristina:** It's interesting that you said that, nobody is against including people, it's just how to include people. Because I think with our situations right now, we are both very vocal, but then the conversation comes to, well what about people with for example developmental disabilities, where they're still growing up and they're looking for employment. And I think that sometimes employers don't often consider the other opportunities that there could be for

people who sit on different parts of the spectrum. Because sometimes people with disabilities won't always be fully vocal and they won't always be able bodied but it doesn't mean that they aren't capable of doing a job. And it's figuring out well ok how can we then say, ok it's important to include them but then also important to make sure that you're creating that kind of a space.



**Kawsar:** If I add to that, it's important that you say that, but you also have to realize that disability sometimes, there's certain types of disabilities that will hamper you from doing certain types of jobs.

**Kristina:** True

**Kawsar:** We have to understand that. So it doesn't mean that the employer is forced to hire someone that they know will not be able to do the job. Like we don't wanna say hey just because you are interviewing someone with a disability, you have to hire them or you're gonna be a bad person. No, you hire a person that can do the job that you are hiring for, point period.

**Nicole:** Ok I have a question about that.

**Kawsar:** Ok

**Nicole:** Because one of the things that I think others might argue, individuals with developmental disabilities, as an example, might not actually get hired at a whole bunch of positions to which they apply due to the fact that they don't have previous experience, for example. Then how do we encourage employers to take the risk of hiring somebody, because hiring somebody without experience is a risk to begin with but then I think that there's that extra added barrier for people. Of taking that risk, being the first person to hire the person with development disability for example or a physical disability. Like how do we encourage people to take that leap of faith so that they then start changing their minds and their imaginations and then the people who are applying for jobs have the experience necessary to show they are the right candidate for the position.

**Kawsar:** Ok what I would say, for employers, the advice that I can give them is that when you are going into this interview, try to have, try I say (it could be that it's not possible) that unconscious bias that you have, put it on the backburner. Have a talk with this person, ask them "ok this is the job, this is what you need to do and this is what you need to do and this is what you need to do. Are you able to do them? If not, is there resources that would help you do this job?" If it's a yes, then give them a try, give them a chance to prove themselves. If it's no, well then it's no, it's as simple as that. Be very open like with yourself and say ok am I saying no to this person because just I don't want to take the chance or am I saying no because they really cannot do the job that I need the to do. So if you're honest with yourself as an employer, you will make the right decision.

**Kristina:** One common thing and Kawsar you can correct me if I'm off base with this, that I think is very similar along the disability spectrum is that a lot of us have routines. We have routines of care, we have routines of actual work, we're creatures of habit to be perfectly honest and I think that when it comes to for example, people with developmental disabilities, it's having employers say "ok well what does their routine look like?" and figuring out "can that work in my workplace?" For example I have a friend whose her brother is in a wheelchair and the first thing his employer asked him was "well what if you need to use the washroom?" (he doesn't have as much mobility in his hands), well he said "well I have somebody that comes", he has a caregiver that comes and sees him or his dad comes to see him and his employer kinda went "oh, ok well that makes sense". And I think that it's that step of ok there's a lot of worry of what happens, I think we always think of the worst possible case scenario, that we don't think about that ok well I have that in my head, but they've already thought about that. And it goes back to that whole thing of ok what's their routine? How do they approach it? Ok can that work in this situation? And it's been great because he's now been working at this store for months and he's been employee of the month and it's been great because they had that conversation of "ok well what is your routine? Let's problem solve here, if this happens, what am I doing?" And that's taking active steps to figuring out ok in a way it's this kind of synergy of communication but it's also active application. And he's been doing a great job and I think it's taking that step of "ok help me learn" and then figuring out "ok we can do this together."



**Kawsar:** That's very interesting because she asked the tough question, "well how about if you need to go to the bathroom?" A lot of employers might have said, "ok that's offensive", if I asked, right?

**Nicole:** I would have felt that way, I never would have asked that.

**Kawsar:** Exactly, but the thing is the fact that she asked. He already had the answer her, you know what I mean? So people with disabilities know what they need, they will let you know what they need. Don't be afraid to ask those questions, don't be afraid to be offensive. There's nothing offensive about asking "hey how about this?" because if it's a concern, it's a concern.

**Nicole:** Yeah that's a good point. So because we work for a project that does community-campus engagement, let's bring this out of the realm of employer/employee relationship and talk about, are there any differences when it comes to having partners or bringing on individual participants with disabilities, between doing it for CCE kind of work, community-campus engagement kind of work, or employment situations? Are there differences?

**Kristina:** I think that having a disability lens is really important in CCE, in both because it can apply in both academia but also in community organization work. Because both share the need for the level of outreach that they can have. And they both have the same question, "how can I reach more people?" And I think that there's a need in society right now to have personal perspectives brought into the conversation. Having it be ok I am somebody with a disability, talking about the disability lens or I am a woman talking about a female lens. And I think that there's a need for that right now and ***I think that it's important that when we have conversations about disability, it needs to be coming from people who have disabilities.*** So in the case for community organizations, I do think that it's important to include that lens because people with disabilities are impacted by every aspect of life. They're impacted by within our hubs, they're impacted by the environment, they're impacted by health; the disability community is impacted a lot in violence against women and in poverty and in economic differences. We're impacted by it all, just the same as a regular person and it's important to recognize that you know what, we do have some things that affect us as a community ourselves, but there are a lot of issues that are far reaching for both people with a disability and for people who don't have one.

**Kawsar:** What I would say, one of the point that Kristina touched upon is the fact of having, when you're starting a CCE project let's say. It's important to have, especially if it has to do with disability, it's important to have people with disability involved in those projects because they know what is needed. I often find that there is projects that start, people they want to do something for people with disability, but most of the people that are working on this project have no disability whatsoever so it will be harder for them to understand what exactly is needed. So in terms to community campus engagement, research would be great. Find out what is the types of research that we can do within the community and that the campuses can get involved with regards to people with disability, with regards to technology that might be coming up for people with disability

**Nicole:** Well this is kind of speaking with respect to projects that pertain specifically to individuals with disabilities but what about your economic CCE? I can't think about a project right now, which is terrible. Well the CFICE project is a great example, we don't specifically look at, we don't really look at anything specifically with persons with disabilities in mind. Right? That's not the focus of the research, but as Kristina pointed out already, it's important to have a disability lens when you look at things because then your research, whether it's in poverty reduction or in food security, is going to have even farther implications for the society and the people within that society who are of diverse abilities. So I guess when I ask what's the difference with CCE versus employment, I think that one of the things that I would think of is, unlike an employee situation, in CCE the idea should be that we are coming to the table without the same power dynamics that you have between an employer and an employee. So I think there's a lot of fear around talking about disability in an employment situation because an employer can get in trouble for any perceived discrimination against a person with a disability, so that's partly why they might avoid the conversation and an employee might have complex views around do I disclose my disability? Will they give me less work? Will they think I'm a lesser employee or whatever; or if I disclose will I lose out on opportunities? You know? So that power dynamic is real, it's very real and very clear in an employment situation. In a CCE partnership situation I'm not sure if that power dynamic would be the same, but what would be your thoughts?

**Kawsar:** Well I would say, no it's not the same, of course not. When you're doing a project like CFICE, we're doing different hubs. We have the food hub, we have the violence against women hub, like Kristina said. Disability can apply to every single hub that you can have. So to have a person with disability within your group is very important because they can highlight certain things that you might never have seen, to you. So it's not like an employer/employee dynamic but it's more of a partnership dynamic that comes into play here. So you wanna have that partnership, that group of partners be as diverse as possible. So you could have actually, policies or programs that would affect and would be beneficial to everyone within society.

**Kristina:** Kind of building off of that, with the partnership aspect. Something that's been brought up in a lot of CCE work is when campuses are looking to partner with community organizations, a piece of advice that's often floated is being open to hearing how they need help and that's a big thing. And structuring your approach based on what they're saying that their needs are and I think that CCE is an interesting example of how we can have the conversation about disability because we're constantly being reminded that you know what, you want to help? That's great but you need to make sure that your help is addressing the need, not what you think the need is. So I think that with CCE, I think that it could be an example of it in practice. Of course there's always kinks that need to be worked out but I think it's a good starting point, on how when it comes to these hubs and when they're conducting research and looking at different aspects of each of the hubs. That making sure that are we including a disability lens and because you know that can only help your research because you're getting everybody's perspectives and you're hearing from them and then figuring out "ok, I'm going to structure my research to incorporate their views in this." Because the best

research is one that encompasses a variety of perspectives because the one thing that we don't want is to having the same ideas recycled.

**Kawsar:** To add to that actually because of that work that's being done by CCEC, the resources that might be needed can come up.

**Nicole:** CCEC? Community Campus Engage Canada? ..for those who don't know the acronym.

**Kawsar:** Exactly, so the work that Community Campus Engage Canada is doing can have a impact on the resources that come up to help people not only for people with disability but across the board. Because we are not only dealing with disability right, so the more research we make, the more understanding we have, the more partnership that are diverse that happens, the more resources we can build and the more the social aspect of our society can improve.



**Kristina:** So to kind of conclude our conversation today, I think that it would be great to talk about what kind of recommendations we'd have for each other. Just a short reiteration, I think we've covered that throughout this conversation but I guess recommendations for each other and for that person listening to us who may have a disability, both either visible or invisible and what we would say to them the next time they decide to enter an interview room.



**Kawsar:** Well one advice that I can give, I'll give one advice to employers and one advice to people with disability. The advice to employers is I would say like Kristina said, don't google a disease or a disability, use that person as a google.

**Nicole:** That's a great suggestion

**Kawsar:** Don't do it because the things you'll find on the net, you might just be afraid. So don't google it, just ask the person what they need and what they can do. That's the advice I'll give an employers. And employees, what I would tell people with disability is when you're applying for a position, you applied for a reason because you know that you're qualified for that position, Have confidence in your ability and when you go in for an interview and you're presenting yourself, don't be afraid to put that employer at ease. If you can do it, do it and show him the resources that you have or the qualities or whatever you have that can make you do that job properly and why you are the best candidate for it.

**Kristina:** I would say that for my advice for employers would be, when you're looking at somebody with a disability you're thinking of the worst possible case scenario. Let me reassure you that we have already thought about it and we want to make sure that you see that we have thought it through. And we know our disability and to know we're not a risk, that we're just another human being and we're somebody that is willing to work with you. And it's ok to expect stuff from us because we also expect it of ourselves. But the same as with any other person in a workplace, we want to work with you. To the person listening who has a disability and who may be a little bit shy about talking about it, I would just say, realize that when you get sick and you're deciding "do I email my boss? Do I call them? What am I going to say?", remember that at the end of the day, you want your boss to be in your corner. And that means that the two of you need to work it out together because you want an ally, but to have an ally it takes work. And that means stepping out of your comfort zone and talking about the tough stuff, but also realizing that you know what, just as much that you're trying to work through your health journey, your bosses are there to help you, not to hinder you. But they can't help you if you don't tell them how they can. So just that idea of knowledge-sharing and you know that it takes two to make a relationship work. So yeah, that's just my take.

**Nicole:** I guess what I would have in terms of advice, for an employer, based on my own experience, you have no idea that your space is not accessible, so go in as a learner because you haven't encountered it already. And whether you're working with a person with a disability or a person that does not have a disability, the reality is, they are an individual and you're going to have to learn that dynamic no matter what. So approaching any employee with an open mind I think is very important because their skills and abilities won't shine through unless you're open to allowing them to grow. And to the advice I guess I'd have for somebody applying for a position would definitely be that you're probably more courageous about the things you need and about talking about your disability then your employer is. So they are freaking out, not knowing what to say, not knowing how to say it, not knowing the words that will be kind and they need your help to see that you have the courage to have this conversation, so that they can have the courage to have it too.





(Musical interlude)

**Kristina:** Well I just wanted to take a second to thank you ladies for taking part in this conversation. I thought that just to close off we could all say our names real quick. So I'm Kristina Reed

**Kawsar:** I'm Kawsar Mohammed

**Nicole:** And I'm Nicole Bedford

**Kristina:** And this is a CFICE Podcast