What about a career? The intersection of gender and disability

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This chapter explores the intersection of gender and disability identities in relation to the workplace. It takes an interpretivist perspective based on the study of disabled women's experiences of work and career. Over the last few decades, research on equality and inclusion has established itself as an important field within management and organisation studies; however, whilst both gender research and disability research have contributed with important findings and debates, most studies have focused on one aspect or category at a time, thus neglecting the importance of intersecting identities. Research that has explored the experiences of women and disabled individuals has revealed the difficulties and obstacles that both groups experience in successfully entering and progressing in their chosen career. Furthermore, statistics on employment show that despite the introduction of legislation and employment policies in recent decades, little progress has been made, particularly in relation to disabled people's quality of the employment experience (Harris et al., 2014).

In fact, while the Equality Act (2010) aims to promote equality and fair treatment for disabled employees, in the United Kingdom (UK) there remains a 32.2 per cent employment gap between disabled (48.3 per cent) and abled workers (80.5 per cent) (Mirza-Davies and Brown, 2016). In the UK the Family Resources Survey reports that in 2014 more than half (55 per cent) of the 11.9 million people who had a disability were women (Department for Work and Pensions, 2015a). Of these 6.545 million women, only 1.6 million (or 24 per cent) were in employment in 2015, a great improvement on previous years. As highlighted by a UK government press release in 2015: 'the number of disabled women in employment has risen by 86 000 over the past year, a 5.5 per cent increase on last year's figures' (Department for Work and Organisations, 2015b).

Although recent figures show that the employment gap for men and women who have a disability is less (3.2 per cent) than for non-disabled (9.4 per cent), additional research has identified that women experience far more disadvantages during employment than disabled men (Mirza-Davies and Brown, 2016). Specifically, research has shown that white women with a disability earn less than women who do not have a disability, but also earn less than white men with a disability (Woodhams et al., 2015). Furthermore, being a disabled single mother further reduces the rate of employment by 8 per cent (Palmer, 2010). Interestingly, although alternative routes to employment, such as self-employment, could provide more flexibility and independence, such as the ability to work from home, women with a disability are far less likely to be self-employed (9 per cent) in comparison to men with a disability (21 per cent) (Jones and Latrielle, 2011). Further research shedding light on the difficulties that women with disabilities experience in work and employment is crucial, particularly because, as Fevre et al. (2013) highlight, we need to enhance our knowledge about the 'day-to-day experiences of women in the workplace' (ibid., p. 290), and especially of women with disabilities.

This chapter reports the findings of an exploratory, qualitative study based on in-depth interviews with seven employed women who have long-term physical disabilities. Disabled World (2016) states that a physical disability is the result of both physical and mobility impairments that require an individual to make adaptations to the way they conduct everyday tasks. A physical disability can be the result of a number of conditions such as spina bifida, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy or heart defects. It can also be the result of trauma such as broken bones, nerve damage or strokes. The study focuses on the difficulties that women with a disability experience in the workplace, and the implications that these have on women's identity and their careers. The chapter provides an opportunity to give voice to a group of workers who are often silenced and sidelined by organisational practices that emphasise competitiveness, conformity and independent individualism. This study adopts an intersectional approach which explores how two social identities intersect (that is, gender and disability) within the socio-cultural context of the workplace. The concept of intersectionality, first coined by Crenshaw (1989), highlights the importance of considering and accounting for the impact of multiple identities that concur within all individuals. In the case of Crenshaw, her research focused on black women and wanted to highlight how their experiences differed from those of black men, upon whom most research on race was largely based. Following Crenshaw's work there has been an explosion of research that has investigated the unique position of black women; however, scholars (e.g., Kang and Bodenhausen, 2015; Nash, 2008; and Chapter 11 of this *Handbook* by Kahn, Achola and Povenmire-Kirk) argue that intersectional research should go beyond the categories of gender and race and consider the impact of many other identities, such as class, sexuality, disability and social status, among others. This chapter first gives an overview of current research on gender, disability and identities, before discussing the socio-political context of the study area and the research methodology. Subsequently the chapter reports the analysis of the interviews and discusses the impact of the study findings.

GENDERED AND DISABLED IDENTITIES AT WORK

For several decades management and organisation studies researchers (e.g., Brannan and Priola, 2012; De Simone and Priola, 2015; Gherardi and Poggio, 2007; Priola and Brannan, 2009) have documented the issues experienced by women as they join a profession or a career and attempt to progress and achieve success. However, gender research has somehow been guilty in representing women as a homogeneous group, often neglecting the in-depth understanding of specific groups of women. Similarly, disability researchers (e.g., Brown, 2014; Kavanagh et al., 2015; Woodhams et al., 2015) have generally focused on disability as a source of disadvantage and have been preoccupied with medical and/or social and economic issues associated to the isolation and/or integration of disabled individuals, and have neglected to study the differences between disabled women and men.

Research that explores the intersection of gender and disability emerged largely in the 1990s when feminist writers argued for the rebalance of the male-dominated models of disability (Thomas, 1999). Disabled women, differently from disabled men, are often labelled as 'inferior, passive and weak' (Begum, 1992, p. 72) and are reported to experience greater ostracism and isolation (Morris, 1991). These assumptions and stereotypes can have profound social and economic consequences and can impact upon the individual's sense of self and her work and career opportunities (Morris, 1991). In relation to the economic status of disabled women, largely quantitative research has investigated socioeconomic measures in relation to gender and disability, and several studies have reported greater socioeconomic disadvantage and lower wages for disabled women when compared with disabled men and non-disabled men and women. For example, Kavanagh et al. (2015) found that Australian women with disabilities are more likely to endure multiple forms of socioeconomic disadvantage (that is, low income, not being in paid work, and housing vulnerability) than men with disabilities.

Some authors also stress the importance of considering that individuals who have physical disabilities can also be vulnerable to experiencing emotional and psychological distress as a result of the impact of their physical conditions on their interactions with the social and physical environment. Research, in fact, reveals that when intersecting gender, physical disability and psychological risk factors, women appear more susceptible than men to emotional reliance, perceived devaluation, functional limitation and low self-esteem (Brown, 2014). In relation to harassment in the workplace and gender, race and disability, Shaw et al. (2012) found that the highest proportion of harassment complaints in the US were made by Hispanic and American Indian women with behavioural disorders. This demonstrates how additional intersecting identities can impact upon life and work experiences; in the case of Shaw et al., three intersecting minority identities (that is, gender, disability and ethnicity) seem to create an even further disadvantage in the workplace. Similarly, Grainger and Fitzner's (2006) study shows that employees are five times more likely to experience sexual harassment if they have a disability or a long-term illness. This can again have a serious impact on the way in which disabled women experience work and careers.

Morris (1991, p. 126) suggests that at the heart of the discrimination disabled women experience is the behaviour of non-disabled people who 'hide their fear and discomfort by turning us into objects of pity, comforting themselves by their own kindness and generosity'. Morris's argument echoes Ervin Goffman's (1963) seminal work on stigmatised identities, where he suggests that when a woman with a visible physical disability and a non-disabled person interact, there is a period of social awkwardness and tension as a result of each individual not knowing how to act with the other, and not knowing what assumptions are being made by the other. Morris's, as well as Goffman's, words highlight the fundamental reasoning of a binary argument according to which belonging to a category (for example, disabled, woman) entails the impossibility to belong to the opposite category (for example, non-disabled, man). Such beliefs benefit those who accrue power from these binaries and are thus not likely to relinquish them (Knights, 2015), and are associated to the view that disabled individuals are disadvantaged and in need of legal protection. Without entering into a discussion of different types and levels of disability and how these affect people differently, Begum (1992) stresses the importance of research that focuses on the experiences of disabled women in order to fully comprehend the combination of gender and disability identities. She emphasises that disabled women can face double difficulties as they often experience ableism exacerbated by sexism (see also Traustadottir, 1990; Gerschick, 2000). The study presented below explores the work experience of disabled women and their thoughts and feelings about career, work and workplace interactions.

THE STUDY

The study was based on semi-structured interview with seven British physically disabled women, who were in work or had recently retired (on the ground of ill-health). The interviews were carried out in the summer of 2015 and the participants were recruited though advertisements placed on a disability forum and on social media. The participants' ages ranged between 29 and 57 years. Table 12.1 provides more specific information about each of the women interviewed.
<Insert Table 12.1 here>

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim before being uploaded on NVivo for an initial coding. Once several codes were identified, a more in-depth thematic analysis was carried out. The analysis followed the five-step process used by Braun and Clarke (2006), these are: familiarisation of data, generate initial codes, search for themes, review of themes, and production of findings. This chapter will focus on the following three main themes identified by the thematic analysis: (1) experiences of discrimination; (2) disability and careers; and (3) workplace support. These are analysed and discussed below.

Experiences of Discrimination

Despite several decades of equality policies and legislation, the latest in the UK being the Equality Act 2010 (Disability Rights, 2014), disabled people still face workplace discrimination during recruitment and employment. Several studies (e.g., Burke et al., 2013; Hall and Wilton, 2011; Lindsay et al., 2014; Howlett et al., 2015; Priola and Brannan, 2009; Vedeler, 2014) show that prejudiced or stereotypical assumptions of gender or disability can affect the recruitment process (Good and Rudman, 2010; Harpur, 2012; Streets and Major, 2014) as well as the work experience of disabled women and disabled individuals in general. Most of the women interviewed in this study had negative experiences of job recruitment, which were considered the result of prejudice against their specific condition. Sarah, for example, shares her struggles in trying to get a job as a beauty therapist, following the completion of the appropriate qualifications. She tells that during a job interview she was questioned on how she could do the job with limited mobility in one leg, in spite of the fact that she felt able to do it and completed her training with no difficulty:

my one and only interview for a beauty therapist made me feel like all the three years [qualifying] were for nothing . . . to have someone who is older than you, who should know better . . . in the professional workplace, to make you feel as bad, really made me feel like I was so low . . . it made me feel awful . . . I really busted my arse off, you know, for those three years, for someone to just turn around, and ask me questions, and doubt my capability, and doubt that I know myself, it is disgusting. I did feel like I'm not the same as everyone else, I passed the same exams as everybody else, I've got the same grades as everyone else . . . but yet for some reason, I'm not entitled to try for that job. (Sarah, 29)

Perceived ableism and sexism can have a cognitive impact on women trying to enter employment, especially 'when members of a minority group are aware of negative stereotype regarding their abilities' (Streets and Major, 2014, p. 298). This was particularly poignant for Sarah, who, having qualified as a beautician, realised that others judged her suitability for the job based on her physical appearance, specifically on her 'non-perfect' body. The socio-cultural imperatives concerning visual appearance and attractiveness within the 'beauty' sector have forced Sarah to abandon her desire to work as a beautician following one particularly negative job interview. This was on the basis of the fact that she believed that the unfair judgement in terms of her suitability for the job would be widely common within the sector (Vedeler, 2014). Such experience has negatively affected her confidence in putting herself forward for other positions in the same sector.

Trying to secure employment can be more difficult if and when there is a conflict between the individual's self-identity and the projected social identity (Goffman, 1963). In fact, some of the women interviewed believed that disclosing their disability would, and had, impacted upon the possibility to be considered for a job they were qualified for. Linda, 46, for example, who has multiple sclerosis, argued that 'You don't disclose what you've got until you're offered the job'. Nevertheless, others believed that disclosure is important for establishing a relationship of trust between the employee and the employer from the beginning:

They take me on as I am, not as this pretend person . . . just be honest and tell the truth . . . purely because, you know, it's not fair to them . . . fortunately they took me on as a disabled person . . . I think being honest is a good way right from the beginning. (Sharon, 49)

Sharon's statement raises the issue of 'jobs for the disabled' versus 'jobs for the non-disabled'. There are obviously physical challenges for many disabled individuals, which will have to be accommodated within the workplace and there may be some jobs that some disabled individuals cannot carry out. However, many disabled individuals feel that they are equal to others in their ability to do the job they apply for, and thus ask for equal treatment. Deciding whether or not to disclose a disability on an application or during an interview is a decision based on the fear of discrimination, but also on one's assessment of one's condition. Many, in fact, considered themselves able to do the job, but are disabled by the physical and social environments. Disclosing a disability can have negative consequences for the job applicant; such consequences go beyond the missed job offer and can affect future job applications (Vedeler, 2014) and one's sense of self-worth.

Once in employment, many disabled employees experience discriminatory treatment or lack of support. In some cases these experiences result in changes of career, job, location or role (Baumberg, 2015; Duffy and

Dik, 2009). Accommodation and accessibility issues emerged as key basic factors that need to be eliminated for the individual to have the possibility to work in a safe environment. Some of the women interviewed discussed issues directly related to their job role, but other issues were related to the location and the structure or amenities of particular buildings, which often represented significant challenges for physically disabled workers:

we were originally in a newer building but they moved us in to the back of the city chambers, which is just an old Victorian building . . . full of swing doors that had security passes on them, which was one of the reasons why I hadn't managed to go back after my operation, because there was no way I would have managed, because you have to swipe your badge to get through the swing doors . . . which you then had to push, you know, so kind of trying to manage that on double crutches . . . there was no chance. (Jennifer, 41)

While all interviewees recognised that their organisation had provided them with the structural elements needed to perform their job role with greater comfort and ease – that is, lumbar support chairs, headsets or helpers – in some cases there were changes or non-routine tasks, such as changing premises, visiting a site with no lifts or ramps, no designated parking or the need to transport heavy machinery, that showed the lack of planning from employers (Kordovski et al., 2015). Once the physical barriers are removed from the workplace, the disabled person is no longer disabled as she performs her role duties; however, when such barriers reappear they are faced again by the disability. Organisational and individual support can reduce or neutralise the effects of one's disability; it is when such support is lacking or ceases to exist that often workers want to leave.

Three of the women interviewed had left their place of employment on early ill retirement. They were despondent about leaving their careers and jobs as they still had a great desire and passion for work, but felt that they had not received the physical support needed for them to continue working as their conditions worsened. The inability of many organisations to adjust their work schedules, routines, procedures and practices is often unearthed only when challenged by the inability of many to cope with them. In progressing with her request for early retirement, for example, Penny discovered her organisation's lack of clear formal procedures related to disability. The human resource (HR) department of her public sector institution admitted the lack of clarity of their policies and procedure and agreed to amend them to prevent future problems; yet, only after Penny tried to navigate the inadequate guidelines, claiming an unfair treatment of her case, did they agree to amend them.

Disability and Careers

In exploring the employment history of the physically disabled women interviewed it emerged just how much their disability had affected their career aspirations. Linda, for example, reported that she changed career according to the impact of her disability on the experiences she had in each job, retraining and seeking a position which appeared more suitable to her condition. In fact, from being a veterinary nurse, she retrained and worked as a teacher, before working as a radiographer. Two other women, who were fully qualified in their chosen fields, completely changed their jobs of electrical engineer and hairdresser, and took up office-based jobs because they presented less challenging physical demands while still providing some level of job security (Baumberg, 2015). Jennifer came to the realisation that her desire of being an electrical engineer was beyond her capabilities, soon after she first started her job: 'it was so much more manual labour what I was actually doing . . . although my mind was kind of technically minded that way and I really liked the job, physically there was no way that I could be climbing up in and amongst the machines' (Jennifer, 41)

Jennifer's example highlights the discrepancy between education and training and the realities of work. Having a scientific and technical mind she thought appropriate to study engineering, her first job made her feel inadequate on different levels, not only physically. Jennifer, in fact, further reflects that she was 'not only working through your female–male kind of barriers . . . but I was also trying to deal with a disability as well'. The male-dominated profession of engineering increased the perceived and experienced hardships of belonging to two minority identities (micro level) which then resulted in a great sense of inadequacy for Jennifer and in greater disadvantage at 'the macro social structural level' (Bowleg, 2012, p. 1267). While Jennifer felt that she could manage the feeling of isolation as a woman among men, her disability was arguably the most salient factor for her career change and the decision to accept a lower-paid position as an office clerk until she found her final occupation as a human resource assistant. Career changes appeared to have affected all the women interviewed, who endured strong frustration but also had to cope with depression and isolation. This was stronger for the women who had higher-level qualifications and for those who had great passion for their jobs. It also supports O'Sullivan et al.'s (2012) research which argues that changing careers due to a disability, from the one originally qualified for, to one in a physically safer environment, can result in individuals facing 'incongruity for the first time post disability' (ibid., p. 163).

The evidence that many of the women changed careers to suit their physical abilities reveals the importance that work and employment has on self-identity. Changing job, and particularly abandoning one's

desires to pursue a certain career, requires one to adjust one's sense of self. While on the one hand, moving to a different job allows the individual to maintain a positive concept of the self by successfully being able to perform a new job role and overcome disability limitations (Bogart, 2014; Dunn and Burcaw, 2013), on the other hand it also forces the individual to face these (physical and social) limitations and accept a job or career she had not initially chosen. The experiences discussed in the interviews emphasise the obstacles to employment deriving from the physical environment, and from social attitudes such as discrimination or lack of support, but they also highlight the disruption to employment and the emotional toll that the individuals' disability can have.

Support in Employment

Research findings highlight the issues that some disabled individuals experience at work, from a general lack of understanding from employers (Baumberg, 2015; Roulstone and Williams, 2014), to occurrences of bullying (Fevre et al., 2013), to the feeling of being expected to perform the job at an unsustainable level. Women also face greater difficulties in balancing work and family commitments (Anderson et al., 2010; Jyrkinen and McKie, 2012), and disabled women who are also mothers have to manage, experience and overcome more obstacles than non-disabled mothers or disabled men. Furthermore, disabled women struggle to gain promotion more than women with no disability (Cook and Glass, 2014; Sealy, 2010).

The women with physical disabilities interviewed were split between two different arguments regarding these problems. Some of them appeared to have made a choice, focusing more energy on their work than on their family life, where they sought and got emotional as well as physical support:

Yes I have got a family, and yes it's hard work, and no I don't do any cleaning up . . . and I don't prepare any meals, I don't do anything . . . I just lie on the settee and die when I get home . . . but I wanna work, so . . . my husband wouldn't think that, 'cause he sees the other side, the not so jolly . . . moments where I'm laid on the settee and don't move for two days. (Sharon, 49)

Sharon's occupational identity is more salient to her than her role in managing her household. She has support in doing household chores and thus feels that this support allows her to work as health advisor. A few of the other women interviewed argued that a lack of understanding and a lack of support mechanisms at work had repercussions on their life outside of work. Furthermore, not all had full support at home and so endured greater efforts in combining both:

People don't realise that you get tired really easily and you know so, if I was kind of going out to a meeting or going out to different places, yeah I'd manage it, but I'd be exhausted at the end of it, and if they were to ask me to do that several days in a row, I just wouldn't cope, you know. (Jennifer)

what annoys me . . . I'm not so much endangering myself, but it's the patients that I'm looking after, and you want to be nice and patient but when you are tired and stressed . . . I don't think they are looking at that point of view, and I think that's an integral part of it all, they've got to be more aware of that. (Judith)

Foster and Williams (2015, p. 15) suggest that established working norms based on targets, long working hours, overtime and training are often unfeasible for many disabled individuals, and that those who cannot meet these norms are often ill-treated by work colleagues (Ferve et al., 2013). Disabled individuals can be subject to 'flexibility stigma', in that they are viewed to seek, or others assume they need, workplace accommodations which can result in stereotyping, being deemed uncooperative, uncommitted, inflexible and poorly organised, all of which can impact upon their chances of being promoted (Foster and Williams, 2015). Penny, below, reflects on this:

one of the biggest things was that, to get promotion you need to produce high level papers, and because I was so tired at the end of every day . . . I couldn't put in the extra work, so at a weekend I just slept or rested, when other people were working. (Penny)

Pregnancy was discussed by four of the women interviewed as a crucial event which brought together their gender and disability and made them feel 'different' from their colleagues. The example below shows how the intersection of gender and disability highlights crucial employment experiences that only disabled women sustain. Both Sarah and Sharon became pregnant whilst working, and shared how the added strain on their bodies profoundly affected their ability to perform their job role:

I'm eight months pregnant . . . which an average normal person can struggle with . . . there should have been that help there for me . . . because I'd struggled with the steps or even the ramp to get to the toilet, I was up and down there all day which didn't help. (Sarah, 29)

Pregnancy, and the physical strain it places on more fragile bodies, was reported by some of the women interviewed as another key event that forced them to change job and career, because as their health deteriorated, they realised that their employer did not fully engage with the extent of this change.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has explored the personal experiences of disabled women within specific socio-cultural work environments. The findings show that there is a conflict between physically disabled women's self-identity and social identity, and this is brought to the fore by the intersection of gender and disability. Visual cues of one's identity, such as gender and a physical disability that makes an individual looks different from a non-disabled individual, appeared to affect work experiences almost as much as the limitations that a disabled body presented. This was particularly evident in professions based on aesthetics, such as beauty therapy, or in male-dominated, physical work environments.

Some of the women interviewed highlighted how, in order to be able to continue working or pursue their career they needed greater support in their private lives. For others, pushing their physical boundaries, although this enabled them to work, was not enough to perform their job role to the expected high standards and thus prevented their career advancement. The findings also highlighted the issues of visibility versus invisibility of the disability. While on the one hand, invisibility meant possibly less discrimination, particularly during selection processes, it also meant a lack of moral, and sometimes formal support. In fact, most of the women interviewed discussed the difficulties they had in finding out what external support was available to them: 'I had to find it myself, and the employers . . . didn't know about it either' (Linda, 46).

Another important issue raised by this study is of interest to policy-makers or organisations with the desire to implement future support services for disabled individuals. Support was a dominant theme to emerge in the analysis of the data and was found to significantly impact, both positively and negatively, upon disabled women's experiences of recruitment and employment. Material support is the basic infrastructure upon which moral and emotional support should be built, yet still some women reported the difficulties they had in getting the physical and material support they needed in their workplaces. The government and charitable organisations, such as the Shaw Trust, provide funding opportunities that support organisations and disabled individuals in employment. One such support mechanism available is Access to Work, which is a government scheme that gives financial aid to make any required accommodations in the workplace and help individuals to cover transport costs in order to get to their place of work (Access to Work, 2015). However, as Sayce (2011, p. 14) highlights, Access to Work is the 'Government's best-kept secret', as often both individuals and organisations do not know about its existence. The women interviewed for this research project suggested this was due to a lack of advertisement to individuals (for example, at front-line services that deal with issues surrounding disability) and a lack of awareness in work organisations. Linda (46) argued that 'the government didn't tell disabled employment, actively about Access to Work . . . if I hadn't found out about it for myself, I wouldn't have got the help that I did get in the end'. Such important schemes should receive greater publicity, as they generally make the difference between employment and non-employment for disabled individuals.

Although this study has involved only a small number of participants, it has raised several issues that should be further explored by research. The barriers that perceptions of disability create (social barriers) are as important as the physical barriers that may exist. Organisations should be prepared to address them by giving voice to disabled employees and involving them in decision-making regarding workplace policies and practices. Additionally, employers need to be aware of the difficulties that individuals may face whilst in employment such as harassment (mental, physical, verbal and sexual) or workplace bullying, which are experienced with higher frequency by disabled women when compared with non-disabled women and men. Organisations should aim at generating knowledge and awareness across different occupational levels so that any observed negative behaviour can be addressed within the workplace. Furthermore, maintaining an open channel of communication with individuals who have a disability will allow for more personal support to be developed, leading to the reduction or complete elimination of the existing social and physical barriers. Organisation managers and HR departments should also be aware of how even small changes can affect the abilities and resilience of individuals, and should address these along with adapting any support systems put into place when first employed.

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Table 12.1 Research participant demographics

Sarah, 29, **North-West England**	Spina bifida Disabled in right leg Double vision Hole in bladder	Barmaid Team leader at an office Volunteering as teaching assistant
Linda, 46, **South Wales**	Multiple sclerosis (MS)	Veterinarian nurse Teacher NHS radiographer Early ill retirement Volunteer with a MS support group
Sharon, 49, **North-West England**	Slipped disks in lower back Pernicious anaemia Anaemia	Hairdresser Driver Bailiff NHS health advisor (previous junior, currently senior) Volunteer at a mental health club
Donna, 57, **North-West England**	Partial paralysis to right arm as a consequence of polio	Seamstress Sales assistant
Judith, 57, **North-West England**	Limited arm movement in right arm from breast cancer treatment	NHS nurse on trauma ward NHS Nurse on surgery ward
Penny, 53, **North-West** **England**	Crohn's disease Arthritis Nerve damage in back	University lecturer Senior lecturer Early ill retirement
Jennifer, 41, **Scotland**	Rheumatoid arthritis Hip damage from operation	Electrical engineer Office clerk HR assistant in public sector Early ill retirement