INTRODUCTION

This paper presents some early findings from a case study of work-learning relations involving disabled employees of a major Canadian bank (herein referred to as The Bank). It focuses on discoveries made by the research team as a result of conducting four focus groups in two locations in June and October 2003. In keeping with the feminist scholarship of Dorothy Smith, the learning activities that we highlight are framed as forms of work that act as “the linchpin between the everyday experiences of people and larger institutional processes” (Luken and Vaughen, 1991: 41). The profile that emerges is preliminary. Even as we write, we are poised to expand our activities to run four to six more groups within this same corporate environment. At the same time, the focus groups as a whole comprise just one layer of a study that also includes individual interviews, participant observation and documentary analysis. Thus, while powerful in shaping our emerging knowledge, the group discussions featured here are not definitive. The emerging pattern of findings is open to reformulation.

The study described in this paper is part of a larger project funded to investigate initiatives in the new economy. With our colleagues in this network, we share an interest in the changing nature of work and the demands it makes on workers for lifelong learning. One of the unique aspects of our research, however, is an attempt to proceed from the standpoint of disabled people. While not required of other case studies, part of what we must do is situate our study within the context of Critical Disability Studies. A recent report on international trends in this field notes that in just ten years, between 1993 and 2003, the number of courses available to students has quadrupled (Cushing, 2004: 12). This growth is driven by scholars from a variety of theoretical perspectives and disciplines. They have begun to open up physical, mental and emotional variations to wide-ranging critical enquiry (eg. Albrecht et al, 2001; Gleeson, 1998). Using the knowledge arising from direct experience and the actions of the disability rights movement, they have explicitly challenged the domination of professional expertise, especially practices of medicalization.

One of the most influential alternatives is the “social model of disability” developed by British theorists in the 1970s and 80s. It posits that “it is society which disables people with

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1 We have given the corporation anonymity in order to err on the side of caution with respect to our agreement regarding project documentation. Also, when it is not named, we write with less censorship of our impressions and analysis.
impairments” (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999: 27). In other words, rather than being the inevitable outcome of a particular medical condition or diagnosis, disability is created by the physical, economic and social obstacles that limit or preclude the full participation of disabled persons in social life. While recognizing the strength of this approach, feminist disability scholars in particular have pointed out that a preoccupation with external barriers obscures the embodied experience of disability. They have argued for scholarship that includes:

all sorts of people, with all sorts of different mind and body characteristics – we are interested in multiple aspects of their lives: their pain, their everyday geographies, their struggles, their positions within capitalist wage-labour relationships… how social and physical relationships are designed and built to exclude particular minds/bodies (Parr & Butler, 1999:9-10).

The research team notes with interest this renewed curiosity about bodies. We note particularly the growth of scholarly attention to the “body troubles” of disabled people in the workplace and the management strategies they evolve in response. As Kim England puts it: “Some bodies disrupt accepted notions of ‘appropriate’ embodied employment and are constructed ‘out of place’ in the workplace” (2004:432). Our paper engages this discussion.

BACKGROUND

People with disabilities have been trying to do something about work since well before the emergence of the “new economy.” We know little about their fate in pre-industrial times but, with industrialization and the emergence of the factory system, they faced intractable problems in earning a living as (fairly) waged labor. These problems have persisted to a present in which, despite multiple attempts at reform, disabled people experience extremely high rates of unemployment (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999). (Conventional wisdom has it that for survivors of the psychiatric treatment system, for example, a cautious estimate is 85%). Disabled people who are employed are disproportionately represented in part-time, low-wage occupations (Berthoud, Lakey & McKay 1993; Kitchin, Shirlow & Shuttleworth, 1998; Payne, 2000), and discriminated against within the workplace. For example, in studying workplace interactions, Rusch et. al. (1995), found that employees with disabilities received less training and information than non-disabled workers. Meanwhile, disabled people who are not formally employed have often been exploited through unpaid or underpaid contributions to the economy. This situation has remained substantially the same for decades, intractable even to the turbulent emergence of the global economy.

Banks have been instrumental in the globalization process, primarily through acquisitions and mergers with companies in other countries The older, more traditional role of banks as a savings and loans enterprise has drastically changed in Canada since the 1970s, and more so since the early 1990s, when banks began transforming the roles they played in the financial sector. During a time of economic instability in the 1990s, many Canadian banks were rapidly and extensively restructured. They emerged from the recession as financial institutions with which to be reckoned. Gone are the days of banks earning income solely from net interest activities, such as household deposits and traditional bank loans, as national banks grow and diversify in non-
interest income activities, such as those related to the creation, management and trading of financial assets. For example, many banks offer services in personal investments and mutual funds, as well as in securities, mortgages, fiduciary services, insurance, and property development. To be even more specific, our Bank partner is organized around five “business platforms”: 1) capital markets, 2) investments, 3) global services, 4) banking, and 5) insurance. There is a “masterbrand” under which each platform has separate “competency brands” for Canada, the United States, and International.

And so, with expanded roles and responsibilities comes growth in employment and technology to service the needs of an expanding clientele. Enter customer service and call centres. According to Larner (2002), the growing interest in call centres indicates a shift in social and economic policies of the postwar era when governments focused on protecting the national economy. During that era, companies often remained within the boundaries of their home nation, promoting the national economy through investment and employment. Critics argue that companies, like those in the manufacturing industry, may have created employment and boosted the national economy but those jobs were often low waged and employed men. Downsizing, staff layoffs and branch closures have led to a high degree of job insecurity for workers. Lean staffing has yielded heavy workloads in an environment characterized by noise and frequent interruptions (Livingstone & Mitchell, 1999).

As globalization changes the structure and flow of state policies, institutional forms and governmental processes (Larner, 2002), once endogenous nations now encourage outside companies to set up shop, luring them with tempting incentives and tax cuts. As companies move more easily in and out of national boundaries, relocating departments and services throughout the globe, and are competing with more companies offering the same product, what often times gives the edge to one among the many is customer service, a service often emerging from a call centre located thousands of kilometres away from where the customer’s call originates.

Do disabled people have a place in this landscape? In Canada, the “Big Six” banks (Scotiabank, Bank of Montreal, Royal Bank, Toronto-Dominion, CIBC, The National Bank) employ a substantial number of people covered under the Employment Equity Act. More to the point, in 2001, they employed 31% of all workers with disabilities. Banking would appear, then, to be a field of opportunity. However, in a close study of Employment Equity data, Kim England (2003) discovered that the percentage of disabled people employed by the Big Six was well below the national benchmark. Very little progress has been made in terms of increasing their numbers; they have remained virtually the same over the past fifteen years. The restructuring of the 1980s reduced the total number of disabled employees within the Big Six. The impact was felt most keenly by disabled women in clerical jobs, and disabled men in national middle management.

The Bank that is our partner in this research believes that it has a role in raising the level of awareness of issues faced by people with disabilities. It perceives itself as a leader in developing products and services, and in supporting community based programs that include disabled people. It is now moving forward with concerted attempts to increase its hiring of disabled people. Part of the impetus for this study is to respond to The Bank’s initiative. In particular, we

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2 This information was current as of February 20, 2003.
want to investigate the current scenario that, in spite of good will on both sides, it is an ongoing struggle to increase the number of disabled people in The Bank’s workforce.

DIS/SOLVING METHODOLOGIES

The research team shares a perception that people with disabilities are seldom considered primary actors and knowers of the local practices that shape their worlds. In formulating our own project, we wanted a method of enquiry that recognizes the actualities of people’s lives. However, we also understand the importance of not being completely captured by experience. Institutional Ethnography addresses both of these concerns: beginning in experience but looking beyond it to discover the extra-local processes of management and administration that organize it. Situating our study within this evolving tradition helped the research team to clarify our fundamental orientation to the disabled employees in our study. While their public identification as disabled is essential to our project, it does not make them the object of our investigation. Our enquiry is focused on a financial institution, not a special population. We engaged people in conversation as expert witnesses positioned to provide insight into bank worksites. Learning from their embodied presence and participation, we seek to provide a fuller, more accurate account of society.

Entering the Field

Our investigation of The Bank was designed primarily around conversation: “standpoint interviews,” focus groups, and related follow-up interviews with relevant experts. However, in its implementation, the study has acquired an unanticipated source of data. We are referring to the direct contact that the research team has had with bank employees in order to initiate and run the project. While it is not our purpose to tell that story in this paper, we do want to mention three features of corporate environments that struck us early on, and continue to capture our attention: buildings, words and documents.

So, to begin, there are the buildings, the actual physical structures that we have entered and moved around in as we meet with our Bank partners. (Interestingly, they never come to us.) Our activities so far have taken us into dizzying skyscrapers and maze-like office complexes, elegant older structures and contemporary warehouses. We have felt amused, confused, curious, lost, intimidated, reassured, surprised and disturbed by and in these environments.

(Kathryn) The building is square and squat. Its only distinguishing feature is the well-known logo mounted next to a sign that announces “Call Center” in large letters. This must be the place. The receptionist greets us with a warm smile. She hands Tracy and me plastic “Visitor” tags to clip to our lapels; I secure Catherine’s to her suit jacket. A few minutes later, our local "handler,” breezes through the inside door. As Assistant Manager of the site’s Management Support Division, she is responsible for making sure that our visit goes smoothly. Inside, we find ourselves in a huge room with low ceilings, flanked on either side by rows of smaller glassed-in meeting rooms. Each is named after a different province. This odd Canadian-ization becomes even more intriguing later on when Tracy suggests that the participants from our first focus group orient toward their employer in a way that is “patriotic.” She puts a pointed label to our
emerging sense of people’s mixed and sometimes conflicting loyalties. The central space is jammed with open-concept cubicles, computers and people. Dimly lit, it hums with electronics and soft conversation. Most people are speaking into headsets; some are consulting in twos and threes. I look behind me toward the whir and click of Catherine’s chair, a sound I have come to think of as her second voice. Her face is completely alert, her eyes plump with observations. “My first impression,” she recounts later, “was of a casino.” (Fieldnotes, June 2003)

Slowly, we are forming a “map” of who is where doing what. Without speaking, it reveals several things about The Bank: its size and complexity; the wealth of its property acquisitions, especially in downtown Toronto; its multiplicity in terms of workplaces and forms. These settings form the context for people’s engagement in particular kinds of relations. We are conscious of their significance as, in casual conversation, employees map each other onto the grid of buildings that we are discovering; some are more prestigious than others. But we are also conscious that this organization is not strictly tied to place. For example:

(Kathryn) This Call Centre employs 700 people. It is open 24 hours per day, seven days per week. Phone calls come in from all over Canada – and beyond – at a rate of 14,000 per month. Each is automatically routed to the first available operator in any of three centres – the others being in Winnipeg and Mississauga. This means that, while you might live in Moncton, your call to The Bank is just as likely to be answered on the Prairies as it is down the street. Any given operator can access the details of your accounts but the system as a whole is detached from the particularities of place. It floats above and beyond the geographic boundaries of North America. (Fieldnotes, June 2003)

As we feel our way into The Bank, we are challenged to learn how to communicate across the differences that separate us from our partners. They are more familiar with research done by MBA’s from Business School; we are more familiar with marginalized groups than with elites. Thus, faced with our first big meeting, asking “What are you wearing?” of one’s co-workers was more than just a piece of feminine frivolity. Implicitly, we understood that self-presentation was crucial for a successful Bay Street encounter.

While each of us had a pretty good idea of how to dress (corporate), in other ways we were clearly not with the program. For one thing, Kathryn had prepared what she called a “(not) power point presentation” by drawing our work plan with different colored flow pens onto a long piece of brown paper. She then rolled it up and carried it over her shoulder to the meeting. In that environment, where internet technology rules and computer skills are god, she unrolled it and we actually stuck it to the boardroom walls with tacks and masking tape. This proved to be a crucial counter-hegemonic moment of textual mediation! By its very simplicity it enabled us to break open the meeting and tackle necessary revisions to our initial workplan.

Another striking feature of this meeting, and the study generally, was the language deployed by the managers around the table – a corporate lexicon that really wrinkled our brows. The fieldnote that Kathryn wrote afterwards records:

*The next step after this meeting will be to get everyone onboard by syndicating information about the study through the business heads for each platform of The Bank. Each business head has an electronic channels group to whom s/he will cascade the information. But the first step in the syndication will be to secure the*
approval and support of the Executive Champion of Disability Issues who would take it to the Executive Operating Committee.

These words are not typically part of our vocabulary. We continue to listen for and make lists of words that strike us as strange, and to discuss how they are used in practice. We are particularly startled by the consistency with which nouns are used as verbs (“to bucket,” for example). As we learn this new language, we also resist reproducing it. Additionally, we have to explain some of the words that we use that are not common with our partners. For example, recently we spent some time explaining that the term “key informant” did not refer to a corporate whistle-blower! All of this raises questions about how to write documents that can be read within The Bank, and highlights the double labour we find ourselves engaged in as we re/write our findings for academia.

The research team is also alert to documents produced by The Bank. In an environment where time for reading is at a premium, most communications are short and almost brusquely to the point. They make liberal use of “bullets” and read like a television sound-bite. And yet, they pack a punch. Prominent among these texts for us is the partnership agreement that the corporation requested as part of the terms for their participation. This document took a full year to create with draft after draft passing between Kathryn and a senior manager in Human Resources at The Bank. Kathryn’s primary concern was protection of academic freedom, while the senior manager’s concern was to protect The Bank’s reputation and ensure that it was not vulnerable to any legal liability.

Needless to say, we disagreed over who should have final approval of study documents. In negotiating this disagreement, the research team discovered two things it could not have known otherwise. The first was the degree of discretion that the senior manager used in working this through. In fact, she allowed two complete site visits while the agreement was still in process. If she had not taken that risk, the study might not have proceeded. However, the second was the degree of control exercised by The Bank’s lawyers. Although we never saw them, we certainly felt the effects of their work. They scrutinized every draft of the agreement, suggesting revisions and insertions which were, in our opinion, well beyond what was either required or reasonable. While our method was to prize the unexpected and stay open to discovery, theirs was to anticipate every possible problem and close every possible loophole in advance. On their end nothing was left to chance.

**Visiting Field Sites**

Our first visit to a field site introduced us to one of The Bank’s major call centres in Moncton, New Brunswick. Our first focus groups were with workers in this setting. As most people know from direct experience, call centres are centralized locations wired with a telecommunications infrastructure that allows companies a cost-saving way to service customers located anywhere in the world, seven days a week, 24 hours a day. In the world of banks, daily banking transactions, loans, investments, mortgages and other services can be initiated and processed via the internet (on-line banking) or telephone in minutes from the comfort of home, work, and now practically

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3 In addition to the terms used above, we are taken by phrases such as “driven by through-put,” “we can action that,” “getting buy-in,” “roll it out,” “leverage that,” “do the messaging,” and “garnish the information.”
anywhere with Wi-Fi (wireless fidelity) technology. Servicing a global customer base requires a large number of employees. Call centres can employ from as little as five employees to thousands, creating a fast-paced, technologically dependent workplace. Critics often cite how calls centres promote low wages and feminized forms of employment. Nonetheless, economically depressed regions or cities, like Atlantic Canada, the Scotland Highlands and Dublin, Ireland, together house hundreds of call centres and have created thousands of new jobs, often times resuscitating collapsed economies from a locally initiated economic redevelopment plan.

Tracy: *During my cab ride from the airport to the hotel, I pass through the downtown core and I am surprised by the number of hip shops and restaurants that glitter and shine along the main street, the array of buildings and hotels populating this city. It’s not what I had imagined a small Atlantic city to look like. My cab driver informs me that what I see before me wasn’t here over ten years ago.*

*Since the late 1990s, the historically economically depressed region keeps transforming itself, and Moncton surely leads the way. For more than a century, the backbone of the city’s economy came from the CN railway. By 1989, 1200 well paying jobs were eliminated when the CN repair shops closed, leaving the railway hub of the Atlantic provinces with no running trains and a heap of rusting train tracks. The government reacted to this devastation with an economic plan—create jobs at whatever cost. And they did. Under the tutelage of former Premier Frank McKenna, many top ranked employers left big, bright urban centres in Canada and the US for a small eastern province with less densely populated cities. Slick, smooth talking McKenna, a savvy business man at heart, knocked on many company doors offering an array of delicious goodies.*

*What most likely lured companies eastward, or northward from the States, and keeps them in New Brunswick, particularly in Moncton, are an elaborate telecommunications infrastructure and talented pool of workers. Moncton offers a bilingual, well educated and highly skilled workforce with businesses and colleges collaborating on training programs; Moncton has low corporate taxes and offers cheaper rates than urban centres can in electricity, rent and other overhead costs like wages and worker’s compensation premium, especially for call centres. Call centres especially like the province’s advanced fibre optic telecommunications infrastructure with support and services from the government and NBTel. With all of these juicy bites, no wonder Moncton houses over 60 call centres, creating more than 13,000 jobs in the past 12 years, offering women, and single-income homes, living wages.*

Our second field visit took place in downtown Vancouver. It gathered together people who work primarily in branch settings in the Greater Vancouver area. Even after years of North American banks expanding and investing in their telecommunications and computer capacities—developing multiple, cost-saving ways of servicing customers, for example through re-vamped ATMs, email money transfer, and internet kiosks, to name a few—there is, in America at least, a slow return to branch banking. More customers may do all or most of their banking online or over the phone, but many want the face-to-face, human interaction of long ago when performing more complex banking transactions. As a response to this growing need some American banks
are setting up hundreds of new branches throughout certain states despite years of hard selling virtual banking.

In the short run, a customer desiring to sit down with a branch manager and, perhaps, develop a personal investment portfolio may cost the bank more money than if this activity were done more efficiently over the phone with someone working for less money at a call centre. But some banks are investing in their roots, turning back to traditional community banking, with added non-traditional services, because, in the long run, these banks want to build and maintain a stronger, loyal customer base, and they are doing it one handshake at a time.

Tracy: We safely touch down after a rather turbulent flight outside the aerial boundary of Vancouver International Airport. We arrive in Vancouver a week after torrential rains destroyed bridges, washed out main roads and flooded houses. We arrive in Vancouver and it is pouring rain, a relentless shower that drenches us as we run towards our cab, unsheltered by the airport building.

The fires of the summer that torched hectares of forest and now the unremitting rain dominate news headlines. Few stories seep through the washed-out city, but those that do speak of changes in the political and social milieu of Vancouver. A news reporter leaks out a government document about more cuts to social welfare and squatters in a park are legally kicked out as condominium owners push to clean up their neighbourhood.

We prepare ourselves for a ride to the financial hub of western Canada. Our cab ride carries us to streets lined with high rises and skyscrapers fashioned from glass and steel and unprecedented modern architecture; row upon row of high priced boutiques and bistros fill up previously vacant commercial spaces. Sidewalks are bustling with shoppers and workers rushing to eat lunch, tourists wandering and wondering how this city exploded with such fervour.

We exit our cab and do not need to shelter ourselves under the rainless gray sky. We have arrived. Standing before us is a financial tower. Our eyes rise from the pavement, slowly climbing to the tip of its thirty-three floors. With breath caught in our elongated necks, we immediately notice the difference in place and space compared to Moncton. “Who do we think we are??” laughs Melanie, capturing perfectly the audacity of our arrival. Once through the revolving doors, we are confronted with a scroll-down menu that lists all of the tenants in the building. They include The Bank’s provincial headquarters, leasing centre, public affairs, risk management, a trust company, commercial markets, global services (corporate banking and financial institutions), and private banking. No doubt about it. We have entered the territory of managers, M.B.A. scholars and human resources personnel.

Organizing Focus Groups

In our early ruminations about this study, we speculated that its focus group component could take in people living with very different kinds of bodily experiences – visible and invisible. Given the rational, cognitive nature of banking, we suspected that most of our disabled participants would be living with mobility or other kinds of physical differences/restrictions
rather than with intellectual impairments and/or “mental illness.” We believed that this is what “disabled people” would come to mean for this study. However, as a starting point, we decided to relate to this term as an “empty category” (Making Care Visible Working Group, 2002). In other words, at least empirically, we decided not to suppose that we knew who “disabled people” were at the outset. Instead, we would wait for the category “to be filled as we learn” (MCVWG, 2002: xvii). We would come to know disabled people as we went along even as we came to know the work of learning that they perform.

Over the past two years, one of our major tasks has been to work with human resources managers at the national level of The Bank to organize the focus group component of our study. Using their insider’s knowledge of corporate organization, they connected us to managers in Moncton and Vancouver who, on the basis of our instructions, advertised for and organized the groups. That process required participants to select into one of two categories, identifying themselves either as a “disabled” employee or as a “non-disabled” co-worker.

Most members of the disabled group in Moncton had visible physical impairments, as evidenced by wheelchair use, for example. Others declared a disability during group introductions. These included visual impairment, hearing impairment and being “stone deaf.” One person attended as part of the team but did not declare a disability. These employees work not on the phones, as most workers in this setting do – but on email, responding to enquiries. Members knew each other well because they are all part of the same team, working the same regular daytime hours. Other employees in this same workplace do shift work, as the Call Centre operates twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. This arrangement accommodates their disability, alleviating transportation difficulties that come with night shift, for example. In a Call Centre, both the email location and the regular daytime hours reinforce the difference of this group of employees, setting them apart from other workers.

The Vancouver group was a distinct contrast to Moncton. Most participants were visually impaired – exceptions being one wheelchair user and one person with mild cerebral palsy. Most of them did their work over the phone – taking or initiating calls – and made extensive use of computers and adaptive software, specifically Jaws and Zoomtext. (These programs enlarge and enhance documents and/or read everything on the computer screen to the user.) Scattered over a variety of sites, these participants might know each other through work-related email correspondence but in general did not work on the same team. In fact, part of the excitement of this group was members getting to meet and talk with each other in person: to match a live voice with an email voice.

Members of the Vancouver group seemed much more integrated into the broader workforce – less set apart – than the Moncton group. Communication was noticeably faster here, the range of skills and experience broader. We point this out not to valorize one group over another but to underscore the point that one group of disabled people is not the same as another. In some
senses, they cannot be compared. Although research presses for generalities, the particularities of each group and each setting are important.4

We presumed, wrongly as it turned out, that “non-disabled” co-workers in both of these sites would volunteer to participate because they had some specific interest or regular contact with disability in the workplace that they wanted to explore. Instead, we found a mixed set of motives from personal interest and curiosity to a desire for increased diversity awareness. The co-worker groups surprised us by being more oriented to learning about disability from participation than in contributing expertise. Members tended to perceive our presence as a training opportunity that would enhance their employability. Barczak and Wileman argue that many employees participate in group projects or workshops that somehow contribute to their professional development and learning. Whether a project or workshop offers concrete benefits now or at a later date, or offers a more general “holistic perspective about a project and its importance to their company,” an employee will participate in many planned events in the workplace (2003: 468). Good performance in an event such as this is one of the ways that managers identify employees who are keen to move up in the organization.

Both co-worker groups were marked by a struggle to come to grips with disability. In one group, someone started off with the question “What is your definition of disability?” thereby provoking a lively discussion of a range of possibilities. In another group, a woman who lives with multiple physical challenges including partial sight and partial hearing, selected into the co-worker group because she does not identify as disabled. She then openly discussed her reasons:

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I\text{ gave up on qualifying as disabled. Now I’m going to work and I love what I do. I enjoy the interaction with everybody. He may be in a wheelchair; she may be in a wheelchair. But they can handle the same jobs that we do. I flatly refuse to label people.}
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These remarks were part of a discussion in which, while clearly respected, employees with disabilities were also consistently externalized as “they.” The line between “us” and “them” remained in place for these co-workers.

It shifted only after we introduced the issue of mental health. Then, quite suddenly, disabled employees as “other” disappeared. Participants began to enter their own experience into conversation: debilitating or life-threatening illness, stress and depression, children diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder, struggles with parenting and family crisis. Disability became, at some level, a personal experience.

A similar shift happened in the second co-worker group, as the conception of disability gradually broadened to include conditions and situations that are more invisible: temporary and fluctuating rather than indelibly marked on the body and thus not consistently claimed. This kind of

4 It is also important to note who was missing. To our knowledge, neither group included anyone with a cognitive or developmental impairment or a learning problem. Given how fundamental thinking, learning and communicating are in this environment, that absence could have been predicted.
disability experience is unlikely to be disclosed at the point of hiring and, depending on the extent of external support, may remain private. Interestingly, it may develop in relation to the work that the person was hired to do. For example:

*I was having a lot of trouble with carpal-tunnel, and I realized it was the positioning of my computer. So I spoke to my manager and the next day we were rearranging my office and we had people in drilling holes to put my computer up on a whole different set-up. For a week I went for massage therapy until suddenly I realized, Oh, my gosh, it’s just the way I’m sitting!*  

What we perceive here – what participants clearly drew to our attention -- is their knowledge that the category of “disability” is more fluid and less obvious or clear cut than is typically acknowledged. The visible/invisible and disclosed/hidden distinctions are only the start of a much more complex phenomenon.

Group discussions alerted us to generational differences between disabled employees that we had not previously considered. Some of our participants started out twenty or thirty years ago, and represent the pioneer experience of disabled people in the workforce. Their history and the strategies they developed to remain viable differ markedly from those of the generation of “hip” disabled. Consider the following exchange:

*Participant 1: I have been using this aid for -- I don’t know how many years now.  
Participant 2: I know! And you shouldn’t be using it any more! (Group laughter)*

We were reminded several times that disabled bodies change with use and the passage of time. Disability and aging come together at some point for most workers. So, for example, a person with low vision may find that they see less and less, or differently, over the term of their employment. Participants also noted that employees may experience an intensification of impairment, deterioration of their sight, for example, occurring as a result of working.

**Problematicizing the Bibliography**

In the social sciences and humanities, bibliographies serve a variety of purposes. During the initial planning stages of a project, for example, a bibliography becomes an exploration of the terrain that pre-dates your project; a literature review. And so, you familiarize yourself with what has been done before, that is, with some examples that may in fact inform your research question and methodology. Basically, then, a bibliography at this stage becomes the foundation of a

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5 In this instance, the problem was solved with relative ease between the employee and her manager – with the eventual addition of a new chair. But things are not always that simple. Nor is it easy to know how many people are affected by these types of difficulties. With steady demands for increased productivity and the intensification of work processes, “normal” bodies begin to break down and become disabled. From a management point of view, the impact is real but uncertain.
project. (For some it means becoming an “expert” by knowing the “canon” of literature in, for example, work and learning.)

In writing up the proposal and ethics review, Kathryn drew from her years and wealth of knowledge in Critical Disability Studies and other disciplines, as well as from new readings in a variety of fields. Her bibliography, then, informed her writing and framing of the project by situating it at the intersections of work and learning and disability. In fact, there was very little to go on. Historically, researchers have some knowledge of disabled people as “clients” of rehabilitation professionals in various kinds of retraining programs. We do not, however, know much about them as learners in the workplace. Indeed, because they are often portrayed as passive, and not engaged in growth or change, we tend not to think of them as learners at all—and certainly not as learners who take charge of what and how they want to learn.⁶

As the project progressed, finding literature that informed, enlightened, added to what we were uncovering through our interviews became a daunting task. When searching for context-specific literature, say about disability and work (specifically in the financial sector), we found numerous articles on rehabilitation and occupational therapy (Acton, 2003; Gilbert & Myette, 2003). But these fields are not what will inform our work; they medicalize and reduce bodies to functions and ailments to be overcome.

We decided, then, to begin from resources in which we were familiar and expand from there. For example, Tracy started exploring work-related articles in the journal Disability and Society, and located an article not about banking and disability, or about disability in the financial sector, but about disabled university students passing as able-bodied and how they manage the gazes of able-bodied colleagues (Olney & Brockelman, 2003). Ah ha! Some Vancouver participants in the disabled group talked about hiding and how they constantly teach, and in a way manage the gazes of, their co-workers. A literature connection is formed through the strategies of students and not where these strategies take place (meaning, learning and teaching occurring in different work settings).

Another example: A participant in the Vancouver disabled group describes how he hides his visual impairment to clients that want to meet him face to face. During a meeting, our participant will invite an associate to work alongside him and handle all of the administrative work while he converses with the client. For the literature review, we turn to publications on leadership and team/group learning written up in business management type journals and come across research projects that do not complicate the bodies that make up the workforce—race, gender, age, disability do not enter into the scope of these investigations. It is assumed that all employees enter the workforce on equal footing, presupposing all can and do fully participate (Barczak, 2003; Betts, Meadows, Walley, 2000; Brown, Maxwell, 2002; Brumback, 2003; Cartwright, 2003; Chan, Pearson, Entrekin, 2003; Holdsworth, Cartwright, 2003; Junemann, 2003). It is painful to read articles that crudely quantify our everyday experiences in such a way that strips away the messiness and complexities of our bodies, our material realities and our social relations.

⁶ Notable exceptions included a British study by Baron, Wilson and Riddell (2000) of people with learning difficulties who were employed in open labor market settings with ad hoc support (i.e. supported employment, and a case study of a courier company run by psychiatric survivors (Church, 2001; Church et al, forthcoming).
There can be a way to merge quantitative with qualitative approaches in a way that elicits the nuances, stark differences and the everything-in-between that play out in our working lives, but these articles fail to do so.

Feeling frustrated after reading these body-less articles, Tracy returns to an obvious starting point—the journal *Disability & Society*. She finds a leadership article about how a visually impaired principal of an elementary school in America creates a support network at his school (Zollers & Yueh-Hsia, 1998). Different work context but, again, his strategies may inform our theorizing.

We begin to understand, through our bibliographic process, that we are not seeking to know everything (a.k.a. becoming an ‘expert’) before our interviews; it’s not possible to anticipate what issues/concerns will come out from our conversations. We don’t walk a neat, straight path but, instead, wander and wonder as our messy process unfolds. How do we make sense along the way? By pulling out salient threads from what participants say during the interviews as well as what we say during our active listening sessions (detailed below). From these threads, we then search for literature that meshes with the raw lived experiences of our participants and our research team. In place of seeking to become experts before we enter the field, we are (informally) learning along the way as we cast out our net and discover what we catch. Lived experience, then, informs our bibliography and not the canon of work and learning.

Working from interviews, then, we decide to continue with our process and pursue a way of locating literature that flows with the lateral movement of our learning. In other words, we begin to look for articles not about disability and work necessarily but about (research) practices or strategies that compliment participants’ experiences, as well as our own, and that help us to capture our sense making process throughout this project.

For example, after our focus groups in Vancouver, and after our research team’s active listening sessions, Kathryn locates an article by Shauna Butterwick and Jan Selman (2003) who write about deep listening in a popular theatre project. Although drama doesn’t specifically enter into our methodology at this stage in our project, this article does compliment our practice, we discover, as we pick out phrases and intentions from their article that we then thread through our thinking and writing processes, enabling us to sort out and better understand what it is that we are doing and how we are coming to know as researchers.

Another example: Kathryn passes on to Tracy an article by Karen Elizabeth Jung (2002) on illness and educational equity that, after a long discussion in Kathryn’s office, pushes our understanding of how disability and bodies are constructed in Critical Disability Studies. This conversation takes Kathryn to a Canadian geography journal that had a special issue on disability. There is an article on disability and the Canadian banking industry (England, 2003). A further search by Tracy, of that particular edition, produces an embodied article about repetitive strain injury in the academy (Guelke, 2003); an article we would have passed by in the context of this project had we not delved into the illness/disability debate earlier through the Jung (2002) article.
A year ago, we would never have thought of entering geography as a source of literature for this project. It seems our scope of possible bibliographic resources is expanding, and in so doing, we are learning to be open to a diversity of disciplines as potential sources in building our understanding of disability and work. In a sense, we are developing an interdisciplinary approach to our bibliography, which reflects the many diverse disciplines that make up Critical Disability Studies.

**EMERGENT RESULTS**

The focus groups we conducted were audio-taped and transcribed so that the research team would have access to both voice and paper records of each discussion. Many researchers make text the focal point for “coding” and thematicizing of data, often using a software program such as NUDIST. In part because one of our members embodies her employment electronically, we take a different approach. Our method could more accurately be described as active listening and collectively talking/thinking through. Specifically, we have listened to each of the recordings as a team, pausing frequently to connect with, query, and elaborate upon what was said.

*Tracy: When the four of us are together in one room I am amazed at how we process our experiences – both in the context of the research and our own personal/professional experiences – how what each person says builds upon the experiences, analyses and streams of consciousness rendering from the other ‘team’ members. When Catherine makes a socio-historical link with what an interviewee said something sparks in you, Kathryn, then bubbles inside of me, which then tags at Melanie. An electrical current runs among us constantly jolting one or more of us, always alive in the room where we sit and fire off thoughts and impressions. It is like a minestrone, the right amount and mixture of herbs and spices, vegetables and broth; a hearty minestrone is made from senses that know.*

*Kathryn: This synergy you describe is a kind of “quadrangulation” that relies not just on what we know going in but on the transformations of that knowing as we listen and reflect. It relies not only on what we know individually but what we come to know together in interaction. It is so clear that our listening/speaking in these analytic sessions only begins with the dialogue of study participants, that as we listen we move/build far beyond what they say through the application of our various experiences, skills, conceptual/intellectual and emotional frameworks. It is not their words as data per se that are important, though we could not do this particular work without them, but what their words/stories as data spark and spin within us. “Doing a Listen” is a method that relies on human relationship and communication.*

Notes from these listening sessions form the first layer of our analysis. We have drawn on them extensively in this paper. In addition, the core team (Kathryn and Tracy) have done a detailed reading of the transcripts, combing through for key phrases, major points, and illuminating stories. These elements shape our findings, particularly as articulated by participants who
identified as disabled. We read their transcripts first, ensuring that they set the frame for this document. We then “filled in” with co-worker comments and insights.

The rest of this paper provides an initial sense of the “results” we are formulating in this way and hints at the texture of participant remarks. We have pulled the most salient aspects of people’s experience to the foreground, not as a simple list but in a pattern of connection that begins to reveal the tensions and contradictions of their situation. We have begun to name their experiences in ways that crystallize some core work-learning dilemmas: the work of keeping up; the work of waiting, and the work of hiding.

The Work of Keeping Up

The disabled employees we talked to inhabit work environments that consistently emphasize high performance, productivity, effectiveness and efficiency. These are not just empty words or vague aspirations. Located at the heart of The Bank’s corporate philosophy, they are made real in highly tangible ways through processes of quantification: counting, measuring and timing. Thus, focus group conversations were threaded through with reference to targets, scorecards, stopwatches, benchmarks, point systems, sales charts, and statistics.

While fundamental to how the corporation operates, there is a downside to these practices in the way they escalate the pace of work for all employees, and continually intensify expectations for productivity. As one person pointed out to general agreement, “They are always raising the bar.” It is common, for example, for employees to send or take work home.

What I do is forward all the emails to my home email address and then when I get home I read all those emails. Because I don’t have the time to read them when I’m on the phone dealing with clients; because one of the measurements is that you are to be on the phone at least 80% of the day.

Everyone uses this as a strategy for workload management but the practice is particularly important for disabled employees as it allows them to sort through in private what they may not be able to adequately process in the hubbub of the office.

It follows from this pattern that work consumes more and more of what used to be family or leisure time. “There is no such thing as an eight hour workday,” noted one participant. “It’s 9-10 hours and, of course, you are not paid for the extra.” Said another, “I can’t remember the last time I didn’t work a weekend.”

Asking for accommodation is not the route of choice for most disabled employees who are faced with this situation. They want “no concessions” for their disability; that would be “too much to ask.” So while there is recognition that the benchmarks are set too high, that the continual intensification is unreasonable, their position remains that they do not want to be treated any differently from anyone else.
I don’t want them to change my benchmark. But I stress myself out continuously! Pulling out my hair, trying to get to the benchmarks, but I know at the end of the day they know I’m trying and they don’t dare say anything. I meet half of them, maybe, but I am always striving to meet them all. I don’t want to be treated different.

One of the images that surfaces from this scenario is disabled-person-as-acrobat: twisting and turning (their lives) in order to meet the demands of the job. In this experience they do not necessarily differ from other employees. We are reminded, for example, of a co-worker who exclaimed, “Sometimes you feel like a circus performer!” What sets the two groups apart, however, is that disabled people in general are almost always in a position of “cheerful striving.” Consider these words by disability scholar Paul Longmore:

In order for people with disabilities to be respected as worthy [employees], to be considered as whole persons or even approximations of persons, they have been instructed that they must perpetually labour to “overcome” their disabilities. They must display continuous cheerful striving toward some semblance of normality. The evidence of their moral and emotional health, of their quasi-validity as persons [and employees], has been their exhibition of the desire to become like non-disabled people. This is, of course, by definition, the very thing people with disabilities cannot become. Thus, they have been required to pursue a “normality” that must forever elude them. They have been enticed into a futile quest by having dangled before them the ever-elusive carrot of social acceptance. (1995; internet publication)

Thus, the highly competitive organization of the bank puts particular kinds of pressures on disabled employees as performance measurements feed into already established fears about “measuring up.” They compound the continual sense of judgment that disabled people already feel about their ability to perform.

One key informant spoke openly about reaching a point where “keeping up” becomes both less possible -- even with elaborate compensation strategies -- and less important than other things in life.

All my life I’ve been studying up to the point where I found out I couldn’t see well. And I said you know what? Life is too short and I am not progressing. What am I living for? Because all I was doing was studying up until I was in my mid-30s. I said OK, that’s enough. Now to pick that up again would mean a lot more sacrifice. If I start to study (again) I won’t have a life outside of the working world. I am trying to balance my life while I still can partially see. I would like to travel a bit more and enjoy myself because I don’t know how soon it will be before I won’t be able to see as well. I’m trying to exercise more. I’m trying to do other things more.
The Work of Waiting

One of the findings emerging from this study is that organizations prefer the technological fix for disability. The use of adaptive equipment and technology (computers and computer software) is promoted by the bank – and in the employment sector broadly – as a good way to compensate for bodies that do not work as most others do.

This approach is experienced by users in much more ambivalent ways. On the one hand there is need, desire and admiration. We observed a moment in which one participant openly recognized the skills of another with respect to Jaws software; the amazing feat of listening to a client in one ear, listening to the computer in the other and somehow processing all of the information without making it seem like a struggle.

On the other hand, there is fear and threat. The fear stems from having to learn something new and possibly intimidating; the threat is connected to the consequences of not learning. If a disabled employee cannot master new software, for example, he/she may become identified as a problem, slotted into undesirable or dead-end forms of work, or, ultimately, terminated. As one participant warned another, “I just think if you don’t do something to improve your use of technology your manager will be doing something about you later on!”

Disabled bank employees learn how to operate in a highly competitive environment. Ironically, while the pace is fast, response to their needs can often be slow. This creates an interesting tension in that, as they busy themselves with “the work of keeping up,” they must simultaneously engage with exactly the opposite. They must do “the work of waiting.” We encountered some disabled employees who had been waiting for management resolutions to tricky interpersonal situations; e.g. one employee informally doing personal care attendant service for another. However, most of the stories that illustrate waiting involve the use of technology. Disabled employees find themselves continually waiting where waiting slows down their workday.

For example, working in a computerized environment exposes you to constant change: to software programs, to internal and external company web sites, to just about anything. But too much change, too fast and without understanding its ripple effects, ends up disrupting the rhythm of all workers, especially those who use adaptive technology. Changes made to the main operating system, so that a particular program processes more information faster, can sometimes become incompatible with adaptive technology, like JAWS and Zoomtext for visually impaired users. Here is a case of technological incompatibility as recounted to us by a team leader:

...he would be typing away [on Zoomtext] and all of the sudden, for no reason whatsoever, everything went small, like down to normal size.

The team leader researches into why this would happen and discovers that daily changes to the software, called “releases” caused his software to reduce in font size. Jaws software is proposed as the magic pill to fix the problem, but it takes some time to receive it.
Let’s get him this new software called Jaws…and that will fix the situation. Well that was about seven months ago and it’s still not used. Now we ordered the software, we had it but they’re not compatible, or there’s technology problems…when the system goes down he has to shut down all his applications, re-open everything again, and now the last that I heard about it, it wasn’t working because of the capacity of the compute.

Technological change can also impede an employee’s advancement within the organization. For instance, a visually impaired employee explains to us how he cannot participate in web-based programs for on-line professional development courses because Jaws is not compatible with these programs. Even knowing the “why” of the incompatibility doesn’t move him towards a quick(er) resolution:

...most of the employees throughout the bank have access [to these programs] and they need to do this professional development if they want to move forward within the company, and people that use software such as Jaws, like myself, cannot access it. It’s been two years that we’ve been trying to have the program read so that it’s accessible, and it’s just the way the program was created, before the bank purchased it; they didn’t follow industry guidelines.

Clearly, the relationship that disabled employees actually have with technology (as compared to the preconceptions of the non-disabled) is ripe for further investigation.

Breaking Co-Workers In

At the close of their research, Baron et al concluded that, for people with learning disabilities, “becoming a competent member of the workplace depends less on formally defined skills and their acquisition through training than on scarcely noticed processes of acculturation into social networks and their whole ways of life” (Baron et al, 2000: 50). Our data suggests something similar. Specifically, most workplace problems get worked out not technologically but socially through direct contact and good communication.

In one of our groups, participants articulated a difference between team leaders with whom they had direct contact and often good support, and more upper level managers who were more distant, and thus dealt with them more negatively. Management is often too distant to be affected by the impact of direct contact, a major strategy that disabled employees deploy in the workplace. Their decisions do not emerge from a point of contact, or a process of experiential interaction. A mediating factor in this circumstance is whether the manager has some kind of personal experience, perhaps as a family member or as a neighbor, with disability. Personal connections also create that necessary element of direct contact.

Disabled employees teach their co-workers person by person, moment to moment, encounter by encounter, in the day to day. As they do, they are confronted with the reality that most of their co-workers are ignorant of disability.
I guess a lot of people don’t realize that people can be visually impaired and not have a guide dog or a cane that identifies you.

And some people think I can hear because I have good speech. I can lip-read very well too. But sometimes when people talk to me, I don’t pick up, “Hey, what’s with him?” they wonder. Some people talk too fast and people are not aware what’s in disability. Like if they talk too fast, we don’t get a lot of it, so we have to tell them, “Could you repeat that?” or “Can you say that again?” And they’re like saying, “[sigh], Oh, God, I have to go through that twice!” And I’m like, I’m sorry, I’m deaf as a post but … what can I do about it, you know?

Even the people that work with me, people that are aware that I am visually impaired, I don’t know, like, I guess they forget it. People still hand me in meetings a piece of paper, like the agenda in a print format that I can’t read. And after a while, after working in the same team for a couple of years, it gets pretty frustrating, cause people know that I can’t read it, but I guess it’s because you can’t really tell by looking at a person that they are visually impaired. So that’s one of the most challenging things, I think.

Being visually impaired is more of a hidden disability, where people always forget that you can’t see well. At lunchtime – we have a pool table – I’m always shooting pool with my co-workers and people forget that I can’t see well. So it’s one of those disabilities that people always forget, they always assume that you can see.

To complicate matters, co-workers tend not to remember what they are told about how to interact with a disabled colleague. This throws disabled employees into a process of endless repetition, sometimes for years, even with people that they frequently encounter. Said one, wearily, “You are always breaking co-workers in.”

People are slow to change. In an environment like this, where there is a turnover rate, there are always new people in the building. You notice that you are forever... it’s a constant learning thing for everyone in this building, right? You encounter people who don’t know how to handle it or how to take it, or ...You have to explain the whole situation to them from the beginning. Like why can’t I do certain things or why can’t you ... well, this is why I don’t mind if people are willing to learn about it, I don’t mind if you don’t get it the first time, so what! It’s the ones that ... just go on their merry way and don’t ... you know. So that’s been my biggest thing here. In an environment with this many people, it’s an ongoing thing.

As we advance to the next stage of our work, we are curious about co-worker “forgetting.” It may be that, unless there are strong visual and/or symbolic cues, people tend to “read” most others as “normal.” And that may be a good thing.
Or it may be that bodily difference is so unsettling that, no matter how much exposure people have to it in the workplace, they resist learning about it. We tend towards this latter explanation. As disability theorists, we would suggest that this is not just the foible of one or two over-worked individuals (or “bad apples”) but a deep collective phenomenon in which we all participate. Consider for a moment Tobin Siebers’ exploration of the persistence of inaccessible architecture in spite of legislation mandating otherwise. He argues:

> Beauty, order and cleanliness in the built environment occupy a special position among the requirements of society because they apply to artificial bodies our preoccupation with our own body, including its health, integrity and hygiene. Only an analysis of this powerful symbolic connection will explain why prejudices against the disabled body persist in the built environment, and only then will disability activists be able to shift emphasis from the individual human body to the imaginary bodies undergirding architectural theory, employment law and conceptions of citizenship” (2003: 201).

Faced with a problem of this magnitude, no wonder focus group participants reminded each other to be proactive in the workplace; to persist with requests for what they needed.

**The Work of Hiding: An elaborate choreography**

Disabled employees perceive (and often experience) the public as insensitive at best and, at worst, openly hostile to their presence. Clients tend to “see the wheelchair instead of me” to the point of being unable to take the advice of an employee with a disability.

To the extent that it is possible, then, disabled employees prefer to establish client trust and comfort by staying hidden. They perform this work as a kind of “second job” layered onto the one for which they are officially paid. Similar to the “double day” that women often do (one job in the workplace and one at home), disabled employees do a very particular kind of double labour in the workplace. Depending on the circumstances, the choreography that ensues can be highly elaborate, characterized by invisible micro-decisions within each transactional moment in the workplace.

Remember the employee who tries to keep up by taking work home? He also described to us how daily procedural changes add more work to his already full work day.

> ...I’m visually impaired, but I’m not using any reading software or reading things, so I have to rely on my residual vision, so what I do is – we have procedural changes almost every week, every week we get some procedural changes, and other co-workers can read the documents. For me, I can read it on the screen but it’s not efficient enough when you’re on the phone dealing with a client when there’s a procedural change. What I need to do is take the document home, and take a long time to read it and try to memorize it – memorize them cause we have so many changes.
Savvy with computers, he then creates bullet-style notes for himself in order to create a “tip sheet” for the next day. During a conversation with a client, he can speedily pull up his more compact notes without taking up too much time searching for new forms, or re-located links. All of this, of course, goes unnoticed and unpaid. Sometimes his co-workers even benefit from his “double work” when he make copies for them. Here a co-worker recognizes the value of his “tip sheets” and his role as a team member:

...[he] is really good at self-spreadsheets, and he makes great job aids for our whole team. And he’s actually adapted a couple for me. So he’s a great team member.

Another example also comes from our Vancouver disability group. This participant makes “outbound calls,” that is, he solicits business for the bank based on the needs of the potential clients he contacts. Making money for the bank isn’t easy; there is the pressure of high benchmarks (or targets). Meeting these benchmarks means calling, and calling, and calling potential clients. Mass calling requires speed, persistence and a depth of knowledge about products and services. With deteriorating vision, our participant focuses his energy on making fewer calls with higher monetary potential thereby reaching his targets through quality and not by speed.

...basically, I don’t have the speed anymore. I used to be able to contact more clients, now I’m not able to contact more clients, but however, because of my experience, I’m able to get more quality calls, so that I’m able to generate business without making the same number of calls.

These examples reflect tremendous creativity and a form of unrecognized learning arising in response to the actualities of people’s daily experience. What participants shared was a submerged knowledge generated through trial and error, one that is not part of employee training at The Bank but that is vital to its disabled employees’ success. Its importance was demonstrated by the energetic excitement of the discussion, as participants learned strategies from each other within the context of the focus group itself.

Creating Virtual Identities

As we noted earlier, banking has gone electronic in a big way. Transactions that were formerly done face to face are now frequently done over the phone or via email. The shift has created new forms of employment but it has also created new working conditions for employees, and different relations between workers and their customers. Much of the relevant sociological literature is concerned with employee risk: with the negative effects of workloads that exceed the normal eight hour day, the pressure of escalating benchmarks, continuous technological change and electronic monitoring of employee performance.

In some centres, employees are required to log off and on when leaving their workstation and to give a reason for their departure (i.e. lunch break, bathroom break etc.). Surveys have revealed that, when their movements are traced like this, employees feel compromised in terms of
personal autonomy and privacy. The literature also informs us that restriction of movement can lead to work-related illnesses such as gastro-intestinal disorders, vascular problems and musculo-skeletal disorders as well as an increased susceptibility to urinary tract infections and infections due to colds and flu. Analysts are most unhappy with the industry where it fails to establish an infrastructure to deal with employee stress, fatigue and work-related illness. These are the situations that have generated the critique of call centres as “battery farms” or “electronic sweat shops” (Anton, 2000; Crome, 1998).

At the Moncton call centre, one group’s conversation touched on the darker side of call centre work. Members were very articulate, for example, in describing the strain of being reduced to just a voice in client interactions. As Guelke points out, what you gain for one body part, you may lose for anther.

Technological solutions like voice-activated software may reduce strain on one’s arms while exacerbating it in one’s neck or vocal chords: as the many errors in today’s newly emerging voice recognition word-processing systems require longer times at the computer monitor to produce the same output of accurate text for individuals proficient in rapid touch-typing (2003: 394).

Further, as one of our participants noted, a big part of call centre work is communicating in the absence of body language.

It’s like a disability in its own way. You don’t have that visual of the client, so you have no idea, are they being sarcastic? Or are they just trying to joke? Are they really that upset? And if I say one thing wrong, it’s just going to make them go – or are they going to be able to listen to the explanation and maybe I can help them. It’s kind of guess-work sometimes.

Several European studies demonstrate that employee turnover and absenteeism in call centres, in addition to work-related illnesses mentioned above, often stems from a lack of employee control in customer service conversations: when these calls should be taken; what should be said (Huws and Denbigh, 1999; Paul & Huws, 2002). We also caught a thread of this in Moncton.

There’s a fair amount of scripting beyond just, “Hello and welcome to the Bank”, to thanking you at the end, it’s like, Oh, you want to talk about this, well I haven’t mentioned these five points, and somehow in the conversation I have to make it sound like I’m respecting you while I’m saying that.

Interestingly enough, employees teach themselves how to cope with these features of their work. They learn how to detach or disemboby in order to cope particularly with the high emotional tone of some calls.

You have to learn to debrief, to keep yourself at a subdued level so that, when you do get calls that rev you up, you’re at a certain level inside, and if you’re not careful it might rev you up a little, but not to a point where you want to scream!
So I’ve had to teach myself that I can sit on my chair and sort of be subdued all day, so that if I do get this call in that’s really, really irritable, it’s not revving me up that high because I’m so subdued all day. But I’ve had to learn this!

For the most part, the employees who discussed these aspects of their job were (at least temporarily) able-bodied.

In a fascinating twist, employees with disabilities experience these same conditions in a different way. Many have discovered an unexpected advantage of the recent shift to telephone and email banking. Specifically, they find that they can do business in these modalities unhampered by client reactions to their physical difference. The comfort that disabled employees find in telephone or email interactions has to do with the protection they offer from what disability scholars call “the stare.”

Through the Internet, individuals can choose whether or not to identify themselves as disabled to those with whom they communicate (Weir 2000; Sapey 2000; cf Kitchen 1998b), thus virtually resisting ablest stereotypes that devalue people with visible injuries and illnesses (Guelke, 2003: 387).

There is an interesting parallel here with call centre workers in India who are being taught English with a mid-west accent and given corresponding “virtual identities” (a western name and personal history) as reassurance for their American customers and protection against racial insults (personal communication; Ursula Huws).

I like to be on the phone because no one can tell I’m blind. I think they’d pass out if they knew I couldn’t see – I’m collecting money from them! [group laughs] I feel a lot more -- I feel that I’m not getting [pause] judged. I take a little longer, but really, you can’t tell. Obviously. I mean, I’ve had a client go, “Eww, you’re looking at my file!” and I kind of chuckle away. [big group laugh]

When I’m making those calls to clients, I’m talking to clients, but they don’t see what I look like or whatever, my goal is to get them to warm up to me, so that they trust me over the phone, so all they hear is my voice, so I’m relying a lot on my voice to communicate to my clients. Now a lot of times, when there is a need for that client, they will call me back, and the first thing they want to do is they want to come and see me. So I’m always like [gasp!] you really want to see me? So that’s my biggest fear, oh you really want to see me.

Phone/email interactions provide disabled bank employees with the opportunity to construct an able-bodied virtual identity. Here, as in few other instances, people with disabilities can take some advantage over able-bodied people as they translate customer ignorance of their disability into employment success.
Creating Webs of Support

Disabled employees do the work of hiding primarily to buffer themselves from the public. However, they may also have concerns about co-workers. This situation is complicated by the fact that hiding successfully requires the involvement/collusion of colleagues. We noticed this immediately in the description that people with visual impairments gave of sharing meetings and paperwork with associates. Associates were also involved in reading the disabled person’s email, updating them on new internet postings, problem-solving about situations that arise, re/locating computer functions and doing site visits. At home, family and friends were involved in tasks such as reading study materials aloud or putting books on tape.

The message here is not that disabled employees can only succeed with able-bodied assistance. The message is that successful disabled employees maximize their personal performance by creating affiliations and alliances with their able-bodied co-workers. They skillfully double up to involve colleagues in staying informed and getting things done. On their own initiative, well beyond the operation of workplace teams, they learn how to build and maintain webs of workplace support.

While recognizing the work involved in this process we also acknowledge that any successful employee – disabled or not -- mobilizes this kind of resource. Rather than inventing dyadic workplace relations, it may be more accurate to say that disabled employees sensitize us to their fluid pervasiveness. They enable us to perceive the dance of two’s and three’s that form, dissolve and reform in the completion of many tasks through the work day. Either way, this insight is a major challenge to western notions of work organization based upon the autonomous individual. Thus, the disabled employee must keep their support network hidden; the work of nurturing it must remain invisible.

At the same time as they organize and depend upon informal support in the workplace, disabled workers are also uncomfortable with it. Like everyone else, they feel personally responsible for doing the job by themselves. It doesn’t take much for a “buddy” system to feel like “babysitting.” Workers resist the latter as demeaning and infantilizing.

*Some things are my responsibility, not my co-workers. I know sometime they help me, I ask help with some things, but as a long-term prospect, if I have to regularly ask help, you can’t always find someone to do it. I have people who work for me at my place, I would bring them and they would help me if I need it. That’s the way I see it. I don’t see it as the responsibility of the bank. It’s my responsibility to do as much as I can to be independent.*

*We have a responsibility to tell people what our needs are. I can’t always expect them to know what I need. People forget – that’s the reality. They have their lives to lead. And we have to tell them, OK this is what I need so I can do my job, I can see what you’ve given me. I can’t always blame my co-workers, there’s no point. They give you a piece of paper, it doesn’t work, OK fine, flip it over, use it as scrap paper, right? Move on!* (Group laughter)
CONCLUSION

In this paper we have begun to articulate the work-learning relations experienced by disabled employees of a major Canadian bank. A primary focus has been on significant dilemmas identified by study participants in focus group discussion. The strategies that disabled employees create to keep up in a highly competitive environment are a window into a much broader issue of work intensification for all workers. The waiting they do, particularly for “speedy” new technology causes us to ponder the efficiency claims made by large corporations. Additionally, the underlying social dimensions of this experience reveal the limitations of technology as a “quick fix” for disabled bodies in the workplace. Perhaps most significantly, the elaborate choreography of hiding so artfully performed by both disabled employees and their co-workers points beyond the (shifting) walls of The Bank to include the general public’s sense of which body/minds are considered proper to trust with our financial affairs. In other words, there is an “inside” and an “outside” to doing disability at The Bank. Disabled bank employees learn strategies to navigate (across) both.

In the months ahead, we will deepen the experiential base of our study by initiating discussion with four to six more groups. Drawing as well on the research team’s ongoing experience of being managed by The Bank, we will be looking more specifically at how texts/documents operate to shape these experiences. This will take us more explicitly into matters of corporate administration and management.
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