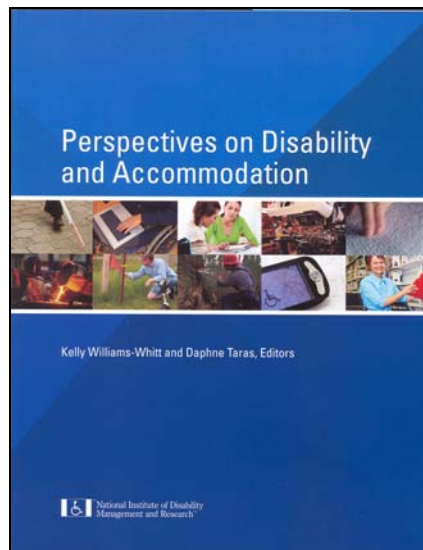




New Publication Gives Voice to Wide Spectrum of Disability Perspectives



A poet writes an essay on the pain of depression, thoughts of suicide and the help that medication afforded, allowing her to continue to write and live. A doctor calls for a common sense “reality check” on physicians being put in the middle of disability cases as “attendance police” for employers.” And an arbitrator advocates collaborative processes in place of legal dispute resolution avenues. These are just a sampling of the unique viewpoints from academics, practitioners and individuals compiled in 15 thought-provoking essays for the new publication, *Perspectives on Disability and Accommodation*, edited by Kelly Williams-Whitt, PhD, and Daphne Taras, PhD, and published by NIDMAR.

Kelly Williams-Whitt, associate professor, Faculty of Management, University of Lethbridge, Calgary Campus, is a former registered nurse who went on to achieve an MBA and was then encouraged by her professor at the time, Daphne Taras—as well as her own interest in labour law and accommodation—to complete her PhD. Williams-Whitt’s PhD research was the inspiration for a conference and eventually the book, *Perspectives on Disability and Accommodation*. Now colleagues, Williams-Whitt and Taras worked together on a pre-conference workshop, held in advance of an annual Labour Arbitration and Policy Conference in Calgary in 2006, that generated the essays for the new publication.

Taras, a professor and dean of the Edwards School of Business at the University of Saskatchewan, is a leading expert in Canada on human rights and labour law. During her past research into the duty to accommodate, she found there was a lot of attention being paid to religious accommodation, but that “in the order of magnitude of labour relations cases, arbitrations and disputes, it is disability all the way.” She observes, “It took awhile for it to become abundantly clear that disability at work overshadows any other type of accommodation.” It’s an issue that will only grow in importance, she explains, “Since almost any adult at some time in their life will face a disability.”

As the genesis of the book, the workshop was organized like an academic conference with expert speakers from a range of fields. “We found people who were ‘leading the charge’ and had the most relevant research,” Williams-Whitt explains. The successful conference was attended by academics, human resources managers, labour lawyers and union representatives.

From there, the pair handpicked the 15 essays for the planned compilation. That began a lengthy process of working with each author and editing the essays into a cohesive whole, aiming at the university/practitioner-level reader. “If it was too complex, we had to make it readable, or too simplistic, we had to scale up,” notes Taras. All changes then had to be worked through with the various authors.

The book “brings everyone together and is trying to start a conversation,” explains Williams-Whitt. She believes its well-rounded, multiple perspectives make it useful as a textbook in a university setting and as a



reference for practitioners, offering valuable advice on putting theory into practice.

From Legal to Medical, Personal to Political

The book is divided into three parts: Part I - Foundations of the Duty to Accommodate: Perspectives from the Legal Profession; Part II - Practicing Disability Accommodation: Perspectives from the Workplace; and Part III - Accommodation Partners: Perspectives from Outside the Employment Relationship.

While the majority of the essays arose out of the pre-conference workshop, Williams-Whitt and Taras also wanted to bring in the firsthand viewpoint of a person with a disability. The essay, "Suicide and Poetry: A Personal Story of Depression" by poet and writer Daphne Gottlieb, MFA, (no relation to Daphne Taras, whose maiden name is coincidentally Gottlieb), expresses the agony of a mental illness from the perspective of someone who lives with its effects everyday. Beautifully written, the essay outlines how medication, in this case, provided hope and the ability to continue working and functioning.

Taras says the "scales will fall off your eyes" when you read the chapter by Dr. Rick Zabrodski, "Disability Forms and the Physician: Why Doctors Hate Them and What Employers Can Do About It." Dr. Zabrodski takes on the issue of diagnosing impairment versus disability, and questions why doctors are put in the middle of workplace dispute resolution.

Gerry LeBlanc, program coordinator, STAC Injured Workers, explores the union's role in accommodation and barriers to success in his chapter, "Return to Work in the Unionized Workplace: An Advocate's Perspective."

In her own compelling essay, "The Social Capital of Disability Accommodation: Dealing with Difficult Cases," Williams-Whitt offers academic insight into how a "social capital approach" can help managers deal with complex cases involving multiple, unpredictable or invisible disabilities. She has found that research into social capital theory is striking a cord among human resources managers and disability management coordinators, who have told her "this is exactly what goes on."

Overall, advises Taras, "The book is very useful in briefing the reader in what is sensible. Legal principles can't really guide what you do when the 'wheels fall off the bus.' When it's complicated territory, you have to use a lot of ingenuity." She concludes, "There is a general plea in the book for people to de-legalize accommodation, just use common sense, and try to involve the person with the disability."

Williams-Whitt advocates that people in the field "read about disability accommodation, understand it and make it accessible to people." After spearheading this project, Williams-Whitt is continuing on the path of leading-edge research into disability accommodation, and is working now with a number of related publications and new research grants.

To obtain a copy of *Perspectives on Disability and Accommodation* please contact NIDMAR by email at nidmar@nidmar.ca, by phone at 778-421-0821, ext. 209, or go online at www.nidmar.ca/products.