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Mild Cognitive Impairment & Early Onset Dementia in the Workplace

A case study of the experiences, perceptions and needs of one employer's journey towards accommodating workers who identify as having mild cognitive impairment (MCI) or early onset dementia (EOD)

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BACKROUND

Due to work and leisure preferences, economic and financial constraints, greater longevity, and prevalence of knowledge workers, the expectation of full retirement from paid work at 65 is declining. The likelihood of experiencing cognitive decline from age-related disease is higher in workers who are chronologically older. Consequently, the likelihood of the earliest symptoms of mild cognitive impairment and/or early onset dementia (MCI|EOD) being detected in the workplace means it should be of interest to organizations.

There is a growing body of research that suggests employees identified with MCI| EOD will exit the workforce early. To ensure workers remain in the workplace as long as possible and to achieve equity and accessibility goals in a tight and highly regulated* labour market, employers' perspectives and constraints related to workplace accommodation must be understood.

* The Accessible Canada Act (ACA; Bill C-81) received assent in 2019 and requires sectors that fall under federal jurisdiction to remove existing disabling barriers and prevent the creation of new barriers for people with disabilities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the dominant organizational perspectives towards workers who are diagnosed with MCI|EOD and what factors impact their response?

2. What societal, industry, organizational and individual factors impact the length of time between recognition of cognitive impairment, disability disclosure and length of subsequent employment/exit from the workplace?

3. What technologies are, have been, or are planned to be used, or are needed by employers to predict, analyze or accommodate workforce aging/MCI|EOD?

METHODS

Exploratory, single, instrumental case study design

Partner Organization: Service focused, federally regulated, not-for-profit organization, with over 45,000 employees across Canada

Participants: Any employee of the organization, who understands its corporate culture, values, strategy or operations

Data collection
- Archival analysis of relevant corporate communications, policies, programs, education, training, and artifacts
- Pre-interview demographics survey
- Online, semi-structured in-depth interviews (~60 minutes each)

Thematic analysis: Members of the research team developed a coding manual and attached descriptive codes of analysis to segments of the texts. Over the course of multiple rounds of coding and discussions, the team negotiated differences in interpretation to finalize themes and sub themes

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Data Collection is in progress

N=26 interviews collected
40+ interviews anticipated

Mean participant age = 49 ±10
Mean years employed = 11 ±9

Job Categories
- Administrative
- Analyst
- Supervisor
- Manager
- Executive

8% | 23% | 27% | 4% | 38%

Occupations

IT	30.1%
Customer Support	23.1%
Human Resources	15.9%
Program Development & Eval.	11.5%
Internal Consulting Services	11.5%
Strategic Planning	3.8%
Governance and Oversight	3.8%

Survey findings

96% believe reasonable adjustments should be made for employees with MCI|EOD
31% believe employees with MCI|EOD are a concern for this organization
58% do not believe there is a policy in place to support employees with MCI|EOD

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Our empirical study[1] of the boundaries between the cognitive disability accommodation phenomenon and the **context** of a single, large, federally regulated employer in Canada, identified **many variables of interest** and some **emergent themes**.

- The organizational strategic goals regarding accessibility and disability accommodation are public i.e., website, reports, and inclusive, but **structures** to support disclosure, and solutions & technologies for employees living with **cognitive disability**, **are lagging** those for employees with physical disabilities.
- While, internal accommodation experts are available, **supervisors and middle managers assume corporate risk for identifying, addressing and monitoring the disability accommodation process** – most often with nothing but general management skills acquired at the time of onboarding. An internal adjudicator noted *"I think it really is luck of the draw...for a lot of the disability technology cases...as to who your manager is"*.
- **Notable variables that are protective** include managers' years of employment, experience, training, empathic personality, trusted relationships, discretionary time, personal or family history of disability, willingness to experiment, and network of resources.
- **Notable variables that present barriers to accessible workspaces** for those with cognitive disability include stigmatized beliefs, ageism, lack of appropriate supporting technologies, siloed and poorly integrated structures and systems, rules-based accommodation policies, accommodation staff reporting to labour relations

The organization reports little to no incidence of employees identified with MCI|EOD on the job and might be attributed to under-reporting, fear of disclosure, lack of assistive technologies, & divisional structures that do not allow accommodation of workers in jobs

LIMITATIONS

The sample is not representative of all job categories, occupations, or perspectives. Self-selection bias, 69% of employees sampled identify with a disability compared to the organizational average (10%) – reliability will be achieved through purposive sampling in remaining interviews.

NEXT STEPS

Upon completion of data collection and analysis, the research team will draw on findings to offer strategic insights/recommendations related to the organization's culture, systems & technological supports to achieve organizational equity and accessibility goals.
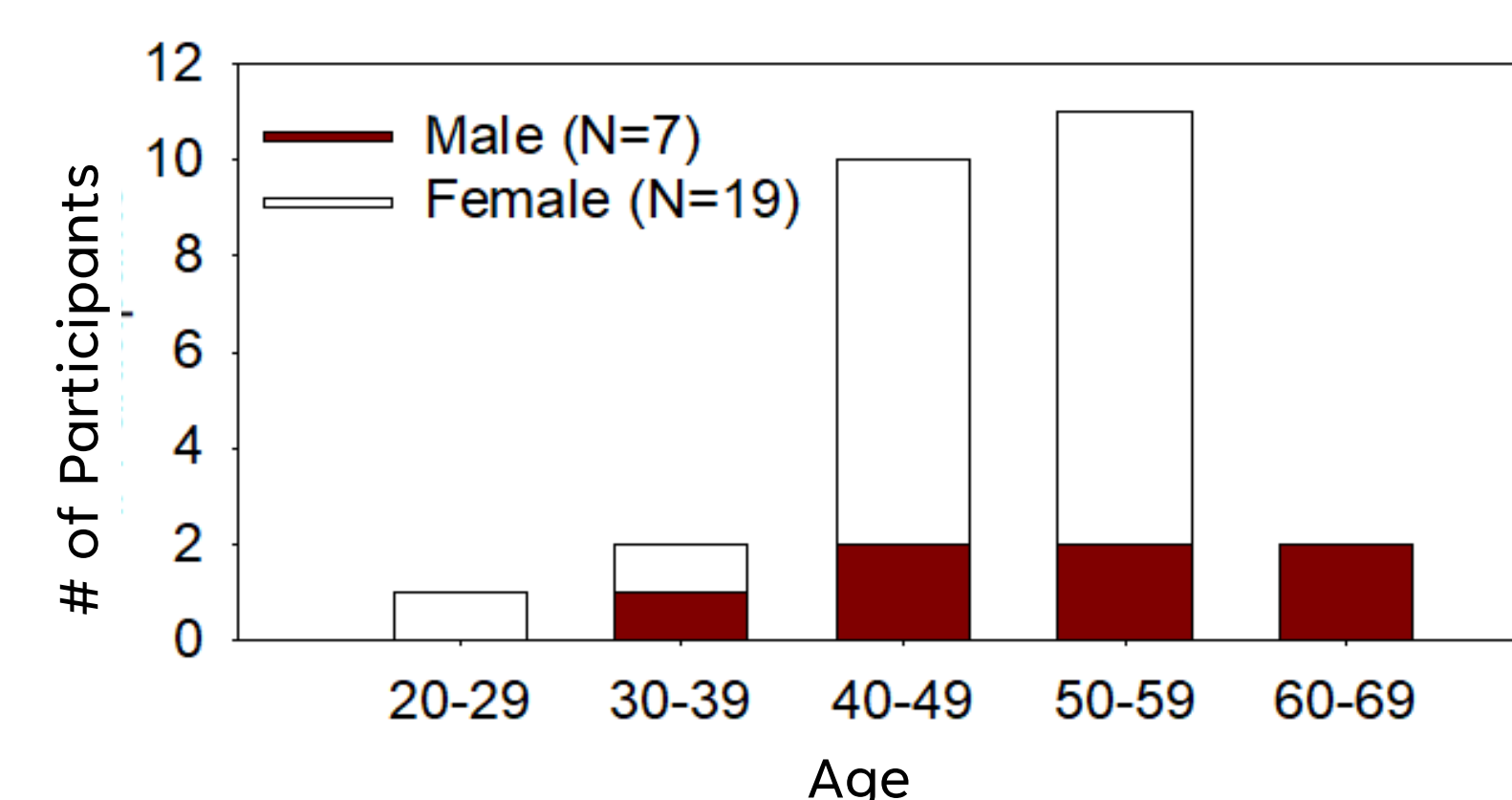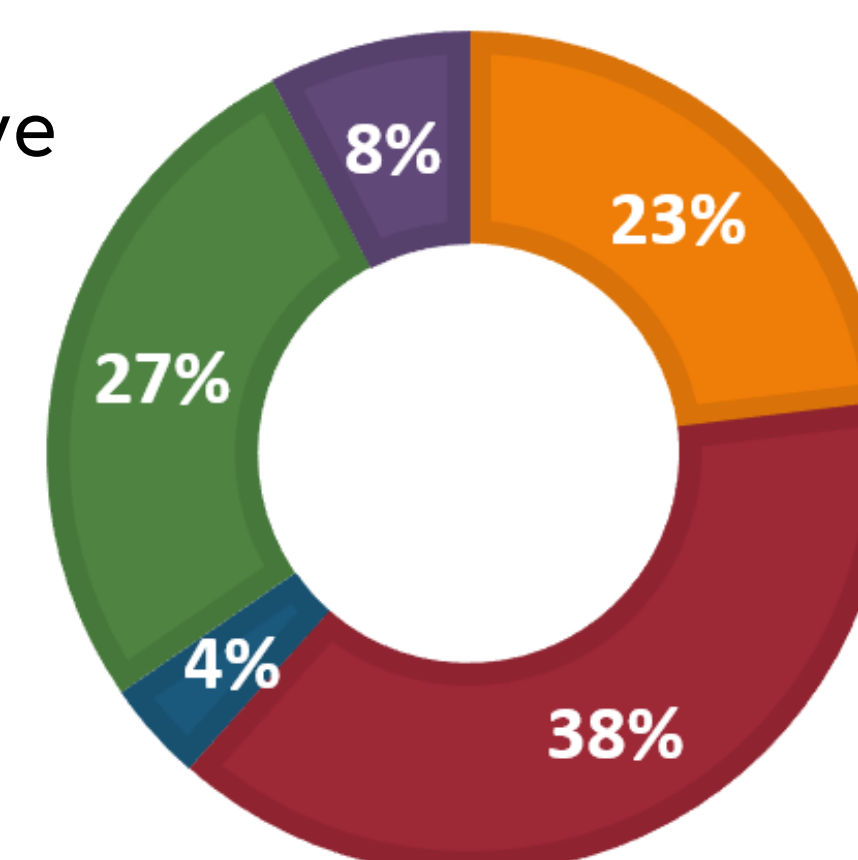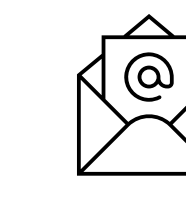
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