

Episode 7 — Marko on covering his disabilities

Sarah Kaplan: This limited series podcast is from GATE Audio. GATE stands for the Institute for Gender and the Economy at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, and I'm GATE's director. Our goal is to engage current and future leaders in rich conversations around inequities in our society and how we might address them. In this podcast series one of GATE's MBA Fellows, Narjis Premjee, explores the different ways that people cover and uncover their identities at work. Through interviews, first-hand accounts, and rich storytelling, Narjis ventures into the world of covering, why it happens, and what employers can do to make workplaces more inclusive. You'll be moved and inspired by her deeply personal takes on these issues, as was I. So up next, listen to what Narjis has to say.

Narjis: Welcome to covering in the workplace a podcast from the Institute for Gender and the Economy or GATE. I'm Narjis Premjee. In each episode I will be interviewing one individual on how they have covered in the workplace or perhaps never felt the need to do so. Today we will be speaking to Marco Radden. Marco supports Rotman's strategic management area at the University of Toronto. Before working at Rotman Marco worked at the Faculty of Pharmacy. He holds a Master's in Education from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at U of T as well as a postgraduate Human resource management certification from Sheridan College. Marco's story about covering in the workplace is with regards to his disabilities. Thank you for being with us here today, Marco. Would you like to begin by sharing your story of covering in the workplace?

Marko: I guess my story around covering my disabilities is that I have a couple of them. And it's interesting because some of them one of them I have almost no problem showing, whereas the other one I'm a little bit more wary of talking about because it's affected me more. I would probably say it's more recent and I'm still kind of figuring out moving forward for the rest of my life how it'll affect me. I'm a pretty open book in general and I have no problem talking about it to someone like yourself in a more safer inclusive environment. But, in terms of you know with a boss or a supervisor or with direct colleagues there's certain things that I sort of haven't disclosed as yet. And I don't know if I will or won't. I think that has to be the right time.

Narjis: And if you're comfortable sharing can you tell us about the ones that you have disclosed?

Marko: Yeah, I have ADHD, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. So, sitting still is very difficult for me and it's pretty obvious for someone who's moderately observant. With those little idiosyncrasies comes with I believe some strength as well. I'm very adept at receiving different types of stimuli and absorbing it whereas the concentration stuff is a little bit more difficult for me. So, when I'm doing something while having a conversation while reading something at the same time, I have no problem doing that in general. And sometimes I am doing a bunch of things at once and I sometimes address two people I'm speaking to and I think "I'm not ignoring you, just like, I have ADD so I can listen to you and do what I'm doing at the same time." You know what I mean? Sometimes people might feel offended if I'm like texting or writing something down while having a conversation. Especially my current role I'm sort of receiving people onto the floor so I might be meeting someone new for the first time while doing a bunch of things because that's sort of the admin role that I'm doing. I usually don't you know disclose to a random new person but just someone that I'm relatively comfortable with I let them know that I'm not I'm not ignoring them. So, I tried to add some humour as I don't want to call it a justification but it's sort of like more for them to have an understanding of you know of who I am.

Narjis: So, it seems like there are things that have worked in your favor in terms of you being able to multitask and all of that. Are there any professional challenges you've faced in the workplace as a result of uncovering this disability?

Marko: In terms of some challenges that I've had because of covering and uncovering a disability is that they sort of intersect and intertwine sometimes and sometimes they're mutually exclusive. It's

really hard to say a specific challenge. Concentration is always an issue. And sometimes if I'm doing something more in depth the multitasking strength I have it doesn't really play a part because the multitasking is more on a superficial level but if I'm trying to write an email that's a little bit more intense and has to be perfect and precise but there are conversations around me like people asking questions, that sort of makes things potentially a little bit longer to do. Reading anything more in depth is also difficult partially because of the of the disability as well. So, there's interviews like we're doing right now sometimes it's not as smooth as someone who may have the poise that I may lack sometimes. So, I try to pause, I try to have my own ways of circumventing the disability.

Narjis: Yeah, you're doing a great job!

Marko: And I think I probably haven't mentioned this, but I have an invisible disability or invisible disabilities. And I think that is a crucial difference because it's a little bit easier to see somebody having a cane or in a wheelchair or somebody who has vision challenges right? Those can be accommodated and those can be even understood a little bit more. I don't want to say easier but they're very visible. That's the best way to say it. They're visible. So, you can't hide from that. There may be confidence issues challenges psychological things associated with that which I think those things need to be accommodated and helped but people in my situation, I walk around people think I'm 'normal.' People think, you know, they don't see the struggles that I may have. And that is sort of from the step of being having an invisible disability to disclosing that or to getting help from that is a huge leap sometimes. Right? And that is where I think at least from my perspective I think those are the ways that organizations can start looking.

Narjis: Definitely. I think you were spot on the fact that invisible disabilities are something that are just naturally covered.

Marko: Those are the ones that need to be uncovered or at least accommodated in some way. It doesn't have to be covered to everybody. It can be covered to the appropriate people. For most accommodations you aren't even necessarily supposed to know what the disabilities are. It's sort of just 'what are the accommodations needed.' But there's even a gap in that sense because when I'm thinking about trying to ask for an accommodation there is probably going to be questions right? "Oh, but why do you need that?" Or like "how about, can we do this?" And it's like "you know I'd be more comfortable this way." And like there's always, even when people try, there's still always gaps. And it's like okay let's go to the next level and the next level so that these gaps are shrinking slower and slower to the point where hopefully they're so minimal, where people will be fully accommodated.

Narjis: I'm curious to know more about the transition. So, I'm guessing when you first went into the workforce, I'm not sure if you always covered, or did you cover in the beginning? And how did that transition happen where you started being more comfortable telling people? So, what motivated you or who motivated you to uncover this disability?

Marko: In terms of my transition, it's actually a really interesting story because I was only diagnosed as having ADHD almost as a self-diagnosis. But I was only formally diagnosed during my third year in my undergrad. The inflection point after has probably changed my career in a certain sense especially my academic career because I didn't understand my necessity for accommodations. I didn't understand what ADHD was really. A friend of mine, former work colleague, she actually told me that she was diagnosed and as an adult as opposed to a child. And once I was diagnosed, I was a little bit saddened in the fact that I believe I'm a pure easy case of ADHD. Any teacher would nowadays recognize it. Whereas I believe if I had these accommodations as you know grade one, grade two, I believe my complete career would've changed in a in a different way because I always had relatively high grades but a lot of the behavior like talking out of turn or not sitting still or being a little bit fun with my classmates, those things I think were chopped up to old school you know 'boys being boys' and maybe some of it was but I think some of it also or a lot of it was probably the fact that I do have a disability, a high functioning disability luckily, but it definitely affected potential outcomes. Especially because the earlier you catch something the better you could be treated or even knowing yourself moving forward right. So, in my third year I got a diagnosis, talked to the accessibility center which in

U of T is at UTM. But when I was doing my master's here at St. George both were amazing. Like they actually helped so much in terms of all my accommodations. They listened. They just completely changed my potential for dropping out versus graduating you know what I mean. So yeah, my grades shot up significantly. Once the accommodations were in place in the workplace like I said I'm still kind of struggling how to ask for accommodations and how to approach these things because it's so nuanced and it's hard to even pinpoint relevant accommodation. And with my undisclosed disability let's say that I'm still covering and that's a whole other kettle of fish.

Narjis: Tell me a little bit more about the accommodation process, the ones that you had requested from UofT for earlier, what was that process like?

Marko: It was basically me having a strong belief that I had something going on after doing like moderate research prior to this ask in this meeting. I got an assessment with psychologists I believe. It was expensive but luckily, I got a grant from OSAP to help pay for that. The report actually was really enlightening to understand like how I fit into the normalcy of I guess society in terms of audio processing memory and all these other factors. I was shocked how high they were relative to the grades I was getting. I was like "why am I so high in these like tests? But my grades are like really poor." Not that UofT an easy school. it's obviously difficult. And I think the strategies I would've liked to have had in place earlier if my accommodations were in place, if my disability was diagnosed. That being said after that my grades improved a lot and I was able to finish my undergrad at least with some confidence moving forward.

Narjis: Tell me a bit more about why do you think it's harder to get accommodations in the workplace?

Marko: I think it's definitely hard to get any type of accommodation whether it's disability accommodations or religious accommodations. It depends on the employer. Everything is so nuanced right? If you're at an amazing employer like a Bank or at U of T where this is like frontier sort of work that they're doing, it's a lot easier. But even then, knowing oneself and even asking the right accommodations are difficult because there's going to be probably follow up questions. And sometimes you don't want to seem like you're overstepping the bounds or like you're asking too much. One thing I want to also I guess point out in this context, this is sort of from my own heart, is that I believe for people with disabilities it's a lot more difficult to find full-time work. And that's sort of my challenge as I'm having no contract after contract. What also does is that you have to be a little bit more risk averse in in asking things. At least in my perception. Because, for example UofT is a unionized environment and once you're in the union you have a little bit more power in the sense of being yourself and maybe asking for these accommodations. And even though I have probably a lot more knowledge than the general public in terms of accommodations, I did study human resources. and I've went to conferences and lectures, and I've done the gambit in in terms of understanding these things but in practice there's still a huge disconnect between you know reality and when a policy says, 'yes we accommodate you.' There's still that that gray area and with someone who has contract work and in that sort of level you don't want to ask for too much you sort of want to just work hard and hopefully be appreciated and at some point, you get a full-time position. Same thing happened when I was working at the bank, similar issues with contracts and I don't want to ask too much.

Narjis: And what can the organizations do to create an environment where people are comfortable uncovering this? What policies do you think we can have in place and how can colleagues also help make it more inclusive?

Marko: From the policy perspective? I think it's understanding that pushing boundaries, going above and beyond, putting resources and I think this is the number one thing-putting money into these sorts of innovative ways of accommodating. (Inaudible) Obviously resort. People are running (Inaudible) people you know understanding the balance from an organizational perspective. It's very tricky. I think managers need to have a better understanding of talking to their employees. Maybe recognizing potentials and sometimes just asking the questions. I think if a boss asks me like "Hey is there anything I can do?" I think I'd be more open to disclosing or to saying "yeah. You know I wish I had this" or "I think I'm feeling run down in a certain way mentally or emotionally". And back to contract

work you know I don't have the opportunity to have a personal day that's paid. So, if I'm feeling mentally run down I either have to suck it up and then maybe be not as productive as I'd like to be. Or I'd have to take some time off and not get paid. And to me is huge because then it perpetuates, if I could have had a personal day or a couple personal days that were paid that could set up my next month to be a lot better. So, there's things like that that I believe policies can be in place for people to be more open to disclosing.

Narjis: What would you say you've learned about yourself as a person as a result of uncovering the disability you have uncovered?

Marko: I think the one biggest thing I've discovered and it's not just with disability, I think it's in life and it's with people being way more empathetic to other people. Even if it's some person that may not have necessarily a challenge it's more just about having that empathy and not harboring resentment. If someone said something to you that I perceive as disrespectful that is my own perception, right? People's actions are based on their own perceptions. And if my perceptions can just be a bit more chilled in the sense that everyone has a story and to not take it personally, to not internalize it, and to maybe do the opposite and be even more loving and more accommodating and more caring. Maybe ask a question with respect, not necessarily prodding or prying but maybe actually generally caring and that's sort of how I try to be with people. Way more than I was before, because I have more empathy.

Narjis: Is there anything that I haven't asked that you think is important to share and for people to know?

Marko: I guess one more thing to add is just sort of the fight for helping people with disabilities can happen in a lot of ways. Unfairness can be subtly through policy, through people not having empathy, even from my own personal experience I've only become more empathetic because I had to deal with stuff and stuff is relative it's a huge spectrum. But people who don't have these hurdles or these challenges, whether it's having a disability, or any other personal challenge that someone has they may not be able to have that level of empathy. I feel the higher up management, in academia, or in the corporate world, I think there's a lot less representation for people with disabilities. And I think even though stories are heard, and they have the disability day, which is great beginnings, the policy the funding the resources have to be set up from the top. There have to be resources for people on the ground do the work. And I think the number one thing for people with disabilities is having independence. The most fundamental thing about being independent is challenging respectful quality work. Where I work, with a job developer, I see a lot of roles for people with disabilities. A lot of them are token jobs, contract jobs, cooks, cleaners. I'm lucky in the sense that I have a relatively high education. A lot of people with disabilities may not have that opportunity just because education is so difficult for them. And those who do have disabilities some of them are on the other spectrum when they're so overly educated, and they still can't meaningful work so there's a huge dichotomy and it doesn't make sense. And I think I'm a little bit in that boat. I think that meaningful challenging respectful quality work will help people with disabilities be more independent, be more open to telling their story because they'll have some more confidence. And one thing, I can't remember who I was telling it could have been someone in one of these organizations, is that I think it's very difficult to get to this, but if organizations can accommodate the confidence, not just the disability, but the confidence gap in the person with the disability I think that will absolutely fundamentally change a person because that is where to me the biggest playing field is. And a lot of it may be self-received and self-identified that they don't have this confidence. I know I have had struggles for confidence which I did not have earlier in my life. And if that could somehow be accomplished and if that somehow could be accommodated, I think that would fundamentally change the game.

Narjis: And what do you think that organizations can do to boost that confidence?

Marko: Boosting that confidence from an organizational level is probably people based. I need people a little bit more senior than me to have these types of discussions with academics or psychologists. And I think people with disabilities it needs a multidiscipline approach because it affects a person in

their societal avenues and their psychological avenues and their educational avenues depending on the disability which is a huge gambit as well. I think there should be a multidiscipline approach to be able to actually somehow accommodate someone's confidence. And I think part of it is that person being able to fully disclose to somebody and somebody who has the resources and the power to fully actually help them. I've told some of my story to certain people and have had really poor responses. From friends to former bosses. A lot of it I think is because they maybe just don't know what to do. They don't have the power because of the policies because of the structure of organizations and because I think organizations run so lean that they don't have the time or the energy to fight these battles. So having either designated people who actually have actual resources and potential ability to create introductions or to create platforms for change. I think another thing that people can, or organizations can do to help people with disabilities is by helping them become more self-aware of themselves. So that they can actually speak out and have the actual strength to ask for accommodations because I've had a lot of time to become self-aware and I think I'm just that type of person whereas some people may not even have the opportunity to self-reflect and to be self-aware.

Narjis: I think you've shared a lot of things that organizations can do, and I think if organizations out there listening this is going to be very inspirational for them to put in these policies in place to actually bring change. I hope that's the end goal. So, I hope that happens. And also, just sharing your story about uncovering your disability I hope it encourages other people listening to be comfortable sharing their disabilities and getting those accommodations like you said. Sometimes positive responses do happen like in your case for U of T. So, I hope that people have the confidence of asking and organizations have the resources to actually provide.

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