

Wir sind UP – The Podcast

Guest: Katrin Völker

Title of the episode:

Disabled representative shares her story

Transcription:

A warm welcome to all listeners. In our podcast, we introduce you to students, lecturers and administrative staff at the University of Potsdam. These are people with and without disabilities, and we want to know from them how inclusive the University of Potsdam is as a place to study, but also as an employer.

***Moderation**

Hello and welcome to everyone to today's episode of "We are UP". I'm Erika and today I'm talking to Kathrin Völker. She is a trusted representative of people with disabilities at the University of Potsdam. The representative body for severely disabled employees at the University of Potsdam is committed to all employees with disabilities and employees with chronic illnesses. This includes both representing their interests as well as advising and monitoring the fulfillment of the employer's legal obligations.

***beginning of interview**

Now to you, Ms. Völker, please introduce yourself briefly.

Yes, thank you very much, Ms. Herbold. First of all, hello to the audience. My name is Katrin Völker, I am married, have two children and have been working at the University of Potsdam for almost six and a half years. I originally come from an administrative background here, I took on the role of representative for people with disabilities in November 2022 and have been fully freed up for this honorary position since May last year.

Thank you very much. I would now like to ask you a few questions about yourself as a representative for severely disabled employees and everything that goes with it. And my first question is, what motivated you personally to accept this position as a representative for severely disabled employees?

Yes, I was motivated to do so for two reasons. On the one hand, I applied for the advertised position because my mother, Dr. Karin Becher, a member of academic staff, worked with the HR department to initiate the directive for severely disabled employees at the University of Potsdam.

I am also very keen to stand up for the interests of the severely disabled and those with equivalent status, particularly because I have family and friends who are affected.

And according to the description on the homepage, you and your colleagues also provide assistance with the following topics: It says inclusion, prevention, counseling. Can you now specify what this means in practical terms for you and your work, i.e. what specific tasks and responsibilities does your position involve?

Yes, roughly speaking, I can say that I take part in selection interviews and appointment procedures, accompany workplace inspections, help those affected to fill out applications for severely disabled

persons or equal opportunities, but also to formulate the corresponding objections. I also take part in Senate meetings and staff council meetings of all staff council committees and, of course, I can also be approached about health in the workplace, particularly with regard to prevention.

Can you give me examples of successful initiatives or projects that have, for example, helped to improve working conditions for people with disabilities at the university or could you give me examples of measures, for example in workplace design, that you have already implemented or that you recommend in order to take the needs of severely disabled people into account?

Oh, I can list quite a few. For almost a year now, I have been working with occupational safety, in particular Mr. Lepszy and the Villa Quandt, which houses the Fontane Archive, to make it more accessible by installing a ramp at the rear entrance to make it easier for people with walking difficulties and baby carriages to get in. We have submitted the procurement application for these, the so-called EscapeChairs. These are evacuation chairs which, in the event of a fire, for example, can quickly and safely transport wheelchair users, but also people with sports injuries, cardiac or respiratory impairments, panic attacks or asthma out of the building. However, only 5 units are to be procured for the trial operation, as the purchase costs are relatively high. These will initially be used at the new Palais site. I have also started to apply yellow and black foil to the bicycle racks at the Golm and Neues Palais sites with yellow and black foil to make them more visible for visually impaired people. There are certainly several examples of workplace design. Firstly, the classic heightadjustable desk, but also the ergonomic mouse or simply enough freedom of movement, for example for wheelchair users. It is important to say at this point that the person with an impairment must of course clearly formulate what is required to carry out the work in question.

That's right, that definitely sounds like a lot of tasks and yes, a full schedule, but it's very good to know that efforts are being made and that we have your position at the university - that's really great. What would you say - what particular barriers or challenges do you face in your work, i.e. what makes your work more difficult?

Yes, sadly, the barriers in people's minds. I have to say that a severely disabled person or a person with an equal status is rarely seen as an asset for the University of Potsdam or the relevant team, but unfortunately still often as a burden. I experience this almost daily in the selection interviews that I attend, this stigma of disability very often leads to the assumption that those affected are not resilient or flexible and I think that a rethink is finally needed here.

Yes, that is a very important point. I would have thought that you might say that the bureaucracy at the university or in the administrative area in general...

Of course I struggle with that, but the fundamental thing is always this barrier in your head – there's a severely disabled person and they're never seen as an asset or a gain - they bring so much to the team or can bring so much to the team, but it's always portrayed, experienced and seen as a burden. I find that very, very sad.

So a lot has to happen in people's minds to achieve inclusion.

That's exactly how it is, right.

What should your work as a representative for severely disabled employees ideally look like in 5 years' time, i.e. what should change urgently and what should remain exactly as it is?

Well, I hope that in the next five years that a different way of thinking about disabled employees than that we have been talking about will have taken place and that it will be easier for severely disabled people to apply to the University of Potsdam and, above all, to get the job if they are suitably qualified. Especially with regard to the described inclusion agreement, which exists at the University of Potsdam, so that it not only exists, but is actually put into practice. But I enjoy the constructive cooperation with many departments, such as occupational safety, but also the staff council for technology and administration, the staff council for academic and artistic staff and also the inclusion team at the University of Potsdam, which includes myself, Robert Meile and Anette Guzman.

Thank you dear Ms. Völker for the informative insight into your work and also for the opportunity to take part in our format and I repeat again: It is very nice that we have you at the university, that your position exists and your commitment and I wish you all the best for your work and I would also like to thank the listeners, thank you very much.

*Outro