Barriers to Hiring Students with Disabilities in the Workforce

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To determine factors that influence hiring, 120 employers and potential employers of workers with disabilities in NorthEastern Ohio, USA, were interviewed by psychologists to identify the characteristics of individuals with disabilities that influence hiring decisions. Significant differences exist between those employers with and those without experiences in hiring workers with disabilities in their respective assessments of workers’ dependability, performance levels, and fellow workers’ likely reactions. Employers with and those without experience in hiring workers’ with disabilities expressed a strong desire for additional information regarding incentives for hiring and information that might ease their task in employing persons with disabilities. Implications for workforce readiness and transition into independent adulthood supported by employment are discussed.

Employer perceptions, workplace barriers, transition

INTRODUCTION

Employment offers a major, positive, life-change for those who otherwise would be served by agencies throughout their lives. However, only a minority of persons with disabilities currently are afforded integrated and competitive employment experiences. Historically, persons with disabilities have been largely underemployed or unemployed (McLoughlin, Garner, and Callahan, 1987). Nonetheless, it has repeatedly been noted that employment is itself a beneficial activity. Employment is the cornerstone of an independent life. The value of other independent living skills may, for persons with disabilities, be diminished if they cannot earn an income sufficient to support independent living (Stowitschek and Salzburg, 1987, p. 1). Current initiatives to improve the school-to-work transition for people with disabilities stem, at least partially, from the recognition of the importance of productive employment for an independent adult life.

Considerable knowledge exists about how to instruct persons with disabilities to carry out work tasks conclusively indicating that the majority of people with disabilities can work competitively, with performance levels approximating those of nondisabled workers. Yet, equally certainly the majority of workers with disabilities fail in competitive employment for social rather than work-performance reasons (e.g., Bellamy, Rhodes, Mank and Albin, 1988; Rusch, 1986; Wehman, Moon, Everson, Wood and Barcus, 1988).

Some human service agencies have unwittingly perpetuated a belief that those with disabilities constitute surplus individuals who are simply incapable of contributing productively to the labour force, or to society. Unfortunately, only a minority of human service agencies have a mission of demonstrating that clients can be productive in a profit-centred business environment. Consequently, their clientele too frequently have been restricted to non-competitive, maintenance- oriented, segregated environments. In turn, some
employers join these agency personnel in holding beliefs that restrict work opportunities for persons with disabilities. Thus, belief systems do limit the fuller incorporation of disabled personnel as workforce employees. Nonetheless, some employers’ concerns are reasonable. The degree to which these employer perceptions, real or imaginary, delimit the ability of potential employees in gaining workforce opportunities deserves investigation, and the resultant findings may be used as a guide when intervening to change the workforce preparation programs for individuals with disabilities.

This research was founded on existing knowledge from national surveys of employer’s perspectives about new hires. The foremost survey was conducted by the Committee for Economic Development (an independent research and educational organization of 200 business executives and educators) which was reported in the summary report: Investing in Our Children – Business and Public Schools (CED, 1985). No instances of comparable large scale research have been initiated in the past 15 years, and in the CED workforce update titled: The Employer’s Role in Linking School and Work, scant consideration was given to students with special education backgrounds. It appears as though recent economic downturns have resulted in less attention being given to this segment of the workforce. Unfortunately, the original CED report did not address the issue of placing persons with disabilities into the workforce. Nevertheless, their work illuminates employer’s general concerns about employability issues. The major findings of the CED survey of 1500 employers on hiring practices and requirements were:

(a) employers in all sizes of businesses place far greater importance for entry level success on positive attitudes toward work than on specific job-related skills (they rank as most important: striving to do work well, priority setting, and working well with others);

(b) hiring-personnel have similar priorities about entry level applicants;

(c) individual attributes held to be important for entry level success are broadly similar for small and large companies; and

(d) unlike large businesses, smaller enterprises rarely had any ongoing relationship with secondary schools’ vocational programs engaged in preparing their future workforce.

This research study investigated the factors that 120 Ohio employers consider when contemplating hiring disabled workers. Barriers to fuller employment were discerned from direct interviews of employers broadly representing Ohio’s diversified economy. Using a custom-designed interview schedule, employers completed a face-to-face interview with a psychologist skilled in collecting, clarifying, and interpreting verbal and non-verbal information from respondents.

METHOD

A draft survey format questionnaire intended to elicit responses about common employer concerns was reviewed and critiqued by outside consultants, and a pilot study to refine the instrument was conducted by three senior-level psychologists. In addition, a grid was prepared on which the employer was asked to show ways in which disabled people both resembled and differed from those without disabilities. The goal was to develop a structured interview with identifiable response categories that also allowed for open-ended responses. We specifically avoided abstract, non-behavioural, adjectival descriptors and placed emphasis on clarifying employer’s perceptions about employment roadblocks to full employment.

Responses were organized according to Personal Construct Theory (Kelly, 1955), the thesis of which is that the real entities, situations and events of the world are viewed as a series of
schema created by each individual in terms of aggregate experience. In our study, the purpose was not to determine the specific construct patterns of each employer type, but to assume the existence of such organizational frameworks and to assess their impact on perceptions of individuals with disabilities as actual versus potential employees. The procedure follows the work of several researchers (e.g., Adams-Weber, 1979; Neimeyer and Fukuyama, 1984; Reynolds and Jantzen, 1987). Reynolds and Jantzen (1987), for example, determined that experienced individuals tend to rate people more at the extreme ends of a scale of personality characteristics, while those without experience tend either toward non-commitment, or follow stereotypes in those dimensions where predeterminations are common. Adams-Weber (1979) found that as constructs of the rater are more differentiated it is easier to grasp diverse points of view.

**Piloting the Protocol**

Twelve pilot interviews were designed to elicit a maximum number of open-ended responses, and as a guide for the purpose of selecting those items to be used in the final version of the questionnaire for 108 further employer interviews. The pilot group comprised employers with three or more years of experience with at least three employees with disabilities (including representatives of each of the following employer groups: Education, light and heavy industry, banking, fast-food, supermarket, amusement park, utility, and small business).

Priority ranking’s of constructs dealing with employees with disabilities were identified. From the most potent of these constructs a set of bipolar Likert-type ratings was produced. The final version of the survey instrument was site-tested, and final modifications were incorporated. External consultants assisted in determining the final version used in the data collection stage. The final instrument’s format paralleled the pilot version, except that the repertory grid was replaced with a set of 12 bipolar opposite characteristics (e.g., Noticeable through to Not Particularly Noticeable), with instructions that employers be asked to break with a pencil mark a continuous non-scaled line drawn between the extremes. This break-point was later measured to determine the relative closeness to either pole (where the line was divided into 100 equal size units). Thus, a line broken 17/100 units along the ‘Noticeable’ dimension would be rated 17 per cent, for example. This approach is more sensitive to differences between groups (such as those noted in the previously cited work of Reynolds and Jantzen, 1987, and Adams-Weber, 1979) where subtle differences in perceptions between groups would not be recorded with a procedure such as the Likert approach that allows only five gradations of ranking. Thus, we incorporated a minor modification to the standard Likert procedure. This modification does not constrain the respondent into a discrete number of alternatives; rather, it allows the respondent to make an estimate of relative proximity to one of two bipolar alternatives.

**Final Version Administration**

We contacted an additional 108 employers in North Eastern Ohio, USA, representing a broad range of occupations including those with experience of hires with disabilities (N=48), and those without such experience (N=60). These businesses comprised an opportunity or convenience sample, in so far as they were selected by the psychologists scheduled to complete the interviews as meeting a proportional quota of business types (from the Ohio Chamber of Commerce Business Directory), and also as having a contact employed at that location known personally to the psychologist. We hypothesized that personal acquaintanceship with a potential interviewer would make for the greatest degree of candour from employers, and also that the existence of a contact would increase opportunities for gaining access to a business owner or manager willing to be questioned about a potentially
sensitive topic. This arrangement appeared to be functional in that no interviews were refused once the personal contact was made with the prospect. No quota was determined for a number of business with and without experience of employees with disabilities. In each case, arrangements were made for an interview with the owner (in small businesses), or the individual with responsibility for hiring (in larger companies). Each interviewer was assigned five to eight employers, provided with instructions, location, contact techniques, and inclusive dates set aside for the interview stage.

Interviewers questioned employers who had experiences with workers with disabilities (a criterion of ‘at least three workers within the prior three years’), and those who had no supervisory experience of workers with disabilities. Interviewees made the judgment about whether or not they had experience of workers with disabilities, and as such they provided their own definition of what constituted a disability.

Data analysis and interpretation identified response types, distinguished between issues that were of importance to those without such experience from those with experience of workers with disabilities (to compare myths with realities). Investigation was made of all items that were potentially open to multiple interpretations, with further contacts to determine the actual intent of the interviewee (as determined by interviewer). Categorizations were determined, and unclassifiable responses were eliminated. Perceptions of employers with experience of workers with disabilities were compared to those without such experience using the tenets of Personal Construct Theory. A basic assumption was that the former group would perceive the worker with disabilities as more similar to non-disabled individuals, than would the latter group.

**RESULTS**

The results of this investigation include several dimensions.

1. Interview responses compare the reactions of employers who had had experience with hiring people with disabilities (HD) with those who had no such experience (NHD) were analysed statistically.

2. Response-content to compare HD and NHD responses was examined. These data, taken together, provide an overview of the nature and extent of problems as well as potential for the employment of individuals with disabilities in the workforce, especially when the positive reactions of the HD are compared with the negative expectations of the NHD.

3. Negative responses of HD were analysed. Such information provided clues to the employers’ perceptions of actual problems that the disabled worker brings to the workplace (i.e., realities as opposed to unfounded myths). These data are useful in the vocational preparation for individuals with disabilities.

4. The relative significance of response patterns was examined. Responses were ranked in terms of the intensity with which opinions were held.

5. Significant differences between those with and those without experience of employing workers with disabilities were analysed. A review of response-types revealed a somewhat unexpected outcome. While experienced employers expressed many positive reactions, as expected, those who had never had any experience with disabled workers also offered a surprising number of positive comments. Although the majority of reactions of those without experience were negative, there were sufficient positive statements to draw a number of significant and optimistic conclusions.
Summary of Results

For a significant number of employers without experience in hiring workers with disabilities, their failure to be a hiring agent appears based on their lack of awareness of how to go about securing such individuals as employees. This pattern showed up clearly in their responses to questions dealing with how individuals with disabilities might come to be employed by their company. Of those with experience, one-half (50.7%) indicated that in locating appropriate new hires they would make use of human service agencies, while of those without experience, only 28.4 per cent even seemed aware of that avenue. A similar lack of information also showed up in NHD employers’ response to questions about governmental and social service financial incentives and other supports that were available to assist employers in securing new hires. For other NHD employers, it was clear that their positive attitudes were insufficient to overcome their misgivings. Both situations are amenable to effective educational programming through sensitive educational intervention and attitude clarification.

Among those who have had experience with workers with disabilities (HD employers), 81 per cent (69 of 85) of responses were predominantly positive to the question: “Describe some of the effects you think disabled workers (have had/might have) on your company”. Among those without experience (NHD employers) 53.0 per cent (35 of 66) of responses were predominantly negative. Typical differentiations between the groups involved the issues: absenteeism, attitude toward work, quality of product, and interaction with other employees. Employers experienced with workers with disabilities showed consistent satisfaction with the impact that such employees had brought to their organizations. Although a few negative comments were made, the majority of respondents praised workers with disabilities for their cooperation and generally good work habits. By contrast, those without experience of workers with disabilities believed that customers and other workers would find individuals with disabilities to be offensive in some undefined way.

Experienced employers made comments such as:

- All have made significant contributions to their work, unrelated to disability, filling bone-fide openings.
- Extra work effort on part of disabled employee.
- The excellent quality of their work affected others.
- High producer, hard worker.
- Cooperation, punctuality.
- Dependable, eager to work, prompt.
- Has helped owners and management come to a greater understanding and appreciation of the disabled.
- Set an example that a person could have a disability and still do a good job.

Inexperienced employers’ anticipations of problems included:

- Possibly taking someone else away from their job to assist the disabled employee.
- If they weren’t capable of doing work, it would interfere with efficiency of work.
- Additional training time. Inefficient.
- Possible inability to work alone...lack of (others’ ) patience in accepting their physical appearances or speech differences.
- Some customers may not want to see a disabled person.
- Offensive.
- Some clients might be uncomfortable.
Customers may be offended by a disabled person as they were when I hired a black employee.

In an effort to determine some of the ways in which an employer may have developed attitudes toward people with disabilities in general, one question asked:

*Can you recall any incident that has shaped your attitude toward workers with disabilities, or people with disabilities in general?*

As with other questions, a variety of positive and negative experiences were reported both by those who have never employed a person with a disability, and by those who had.

Examples of negative experiences among those who have not hired disabled workers include:

*Friend with son who is disabled who had difficulty with employment.*

*When I was 19 and a waitress, a deaf couple always tried to speak when ordering food. I could not understand them and usually wound up ordering the wrong items and they would get irate.*

*When I worked with an educable mentally retarded person in a hairdressers’ she ruined a customer’s hair, had to quit. It was a long time before the reputation of salon was re-established.*

*Difficulty with how you should behave towards them, it’s awkward sometimes.*

One example from the group who had hired workers with disabilities included:

*One almost got run over because couldn’t hear the engine. I’m not willing to work with the disabled again.*

All other responses (37 from HD, 22 from NHD) were either positive or neutral. The general consensus was that individuals with disabilities can and do make a consistent effort to act in a positive manner. More importantly, experience with such individuals generally creates an overall positive attitude.

Positive responses, confirming the benefits of hiring disabled individuals, included such comments as:

*I’ve hired the disabled through the Targeted Jobs Tax Credit Program and the employees are still working and doing well.*

*Hired an individual who coordinates services for the disabled; he brought awareness for their plight, and appreciation of them as individuals.*

*Coming in contact with disabled in other jobs made me realise disability needn’t affect work potential.*

*Positive attitude after seeing how they performed in the work setting.*

*I know a man who lost both legs, has never given up, still works hard.*

The clear and consistent message of such comments is that the opportunity to become familiar with individuals experiencing disabilities usually results in the acceptance of such persons as competent, ambitious, and anxious to succeed.

Beyond the effect that disabled workers might have on the company, and by way of looking more closely at areas in which problems were anticipated, employers were asked:

*Describe some of the effect employees with disabilities (might have or have had) on other employees.*

As with the issue of impact on the company, both those with experience and those without saw many positive outcomes from the hiring of workers with disabilities. Both types of
employer anticipated numerous positive aspects to hiring workers with disabilities; there are interesting differences in the pattern of negative comments across groups.

Negative responses from experienced employers:

- Resentment from employee getting injured all the time.
- Work wasn’t being completed by the disabled worker resulting in more work for others.
- It was felt that special consideration was being given...Other employees no longer wanted to help them because they needed so much time and took others away from their jobs.

Negative responses from NHD employers:

- Favouritism feeling on the part of some employees that the disabled worker is getting special consideration or treatment.
- Greater workload. Other employees would have to compensate for what disabled could not do.
- May have to go out of way and take time to help him. Taking more time with them.
- Greater load of responsibility for employees.
- Increased cost of health insurance.
- Dissension in union classification.

A factor common to both employer groups was that of actual or potential resentment by other employees. Once again, there is a need to address this issue both in vocational preparation, and in providing programs for co-workers designed to assist them in understanding and accepting workers with disabilities. The relative importance of the resentment-factor is illustrated by the fact that it was by far the most common concern expressed by those without experience (41.7% of responses), while among all those interviewed with experience only 8 per cent voiced such concerns.

By contrast, considerable enthusiasm was expressed regarding how workers with disabilities have had, or potentially could have, a morale-raising impact. Such workers are seen as representing positive examples not only through demonstrating their commitment, but also by (subtly and unintentionally) causing others to recognize their own imperfections.

A critical issue involves worker-types that employers find acceptable, as well as those who are especially difficult to place in specific operations. Thus, three related questions were asked:

- Would you consider hiring employees with disabilities?
- Are there any disabilities that you feel would be unsuited to your type of business?
- What are some of the important skills and/or attributes that you would use as criteria for employing an individual with disabilities?

The order in which disabilities were considered disqualifying was: Severe impaired sensory integrity (40%, 51 responses); severe intellectual limitations (23%, 52 responses); and physical limitations as in being wheelchair bound (22%, 41 responses). The balance of the responses was spread across a wide range of disabling factors.

Responses to the question regarding desired attributes yielded a surprising 32 per cent of responses (93 of 288) stressing skill level capacity to do the job successfully, while factors such as cooperative attitude (3%), honesty (3%), and other personality characteristics were deemed of lesser significance. Midway between extremes were factors such as enthusiasm, dependability, verbal and other communication skills, and appearance. My reaction to these results is one of considerable caution. There is, ostensibly, a contradiction between the expressed concern on other questions about the ability of employees with disabilities to
cooperate with fellow workers, and this pattern which practically ignores the issue. Two interpretations suggest themselves. First, it may be that during an interview, a respondent, having voiced concern on that issue on an earlier question, makes an assumption from that point on a cooperative attitude is a presumed. More reasonable, however, is the probability that for many employers a competent worker is worth the interpersonal problems that may be encountered. This issue deserves pursuit in future research efforts.

One question was designed to take advantage of the fact that the interviewee was in the best position to offer suggestions regarding the many otherwise unaddressed factors that employers may consider. We asked:

*Are there other things we should know about the factors that make employers more or less likely to offer employment to a worker with disabilities?*

Once again, responses fell into a number of relatively difficult-to-define categories. Prominent among them was the proposal that both employers with, and without, experience of individuals with disabilities in the workforce should be better educated about the process of locating and hiring employees with disabilities. Twelve per cent commented on problems navigating government regulations, accessing incentives, and other perceived interference.

### Statistical Analyses

A series of 14 bipolar descriptions of individuals with disabilities as employees was completed by both employer groups. Of these 14 pairs of opposites, six produced highly significant differences (two at $p<0.05$, four at $p<0.01$). In one instance (predictability of behaviour), a significant difference was found for employers from the manufacturing sector but not for other employer groupings. In all cases, those with experience in employing individuals with disabilities provided the more optimistic interpretations.

The four greatest differences (those at $p<0.01$) may be considered as a group. They include issues of potential hazard, hindrance to others, dependability, and the general category of good versus poor job candidate. A second sort included the four scores that were most extreme. Issues in this category related to absenteeism, function, appearance, and predictability of behaviour. With the exception of the manufacturing group on the predictability of behaviour item, none of these factors showed a significant difference between experienced and inexperienced employers as a complete grouping. However, in all instances, responses were toward the positive pole (i.e., more desirable), providing further evidence that negative views of workers with disabilities as employees (either actual or potential) represent a minority opinion.

The spread of scores for every category was extreme, with standard deviations ranging from the low 20s to the high 30s (across the scale calibrated in 100 equal units) suggesting that attitudes are widely disparate, and that a great deal of information is needed for an accurate view of the potential of individuals with disabilities as workers. This general finding was also borne out of the anticipated fact that across all groups the variance was smaller for the scores of the employers with experience of disabled workers than for those without this experience.

### Global Observations

Taken together, the specific information provided by the questionnaire items and the constructs determined by inspection, a number of useful factors were identified from analyses of the respondents’ comments.

- Employers, when approached by sensitive interviewers, were willing to share feelings and experiences about working with individuals experiencing disabilities.
Those responsible for hiring have quite specific notions about what they seek. Where weaknesses have been experienced, or were believed to be the case, employers were firm in their conviction that such characteristics or qualities must be avoided at all costs.

There was no categorical rejection of persons with disabilities as a class of potential workers. Objections, where they existed, were typically based on prior unfortunate experiences (both ‘on’ and ‘off’ the job). Employers’ stereotypical beliefs appeared potentially amenable to change. Their attitudes, while robust and fairly well established were largely based on rational interpretations. Thus, they were potentially susceptible to change through additional information, education or experience.

The private employment sector could, potentially, include very many specific employment opportunities for workers with disabling conditions unavailable elsewhere.

Private sector employers were alert to their need to be educated about strategies and incentives involved in hiring employees with disabilities. Overall, they appeared, whether or not already experienced in hiring disabled workers, open to receive education and other attitude-altering experiences.

A substantial proportion of employers who had experience of workers with disabilities would gladly extend this proportion of their workforce if appropriate strategies were made available to them. Employers were, for the most part, anxious to receive additional information about workers with disabilities. They made it clear that under the ‘right conditions’ they saw no deterrent to adding more such workers to their payroll.

For greater employment of individuals with disabilities into the workforce, it appeared vital that worker-placement systems be created, incorporating a sensitive match between employee and employer.

Some barriers to the further incorporation of disabled individuals into the workforce were real (e.g., some safety considerations). However, employers stated that many of these initial disincentives could readily be overcome with creative problem-solving and job-reconstruction.

Selected barriers to the further incorporation of individuals with disabilities into the workforce were the results of myths (e.g., that the public would show revulsion if assisted by a worker with a disability). It was clear that employers themselves were a prime and potentially persuasive source for disabusing those of their colleagues, largely employers without experience of disabled workers, who held these misconceptions. Experienced employers were able to report that many ostensibly negative factors (e.g., attendance, unreliability, etc.) were not serious long-term problems.

For workers with disabilities, there were many more problems potentially leading to termination associated with social skill issues, predominantly maladaptive responses, behavioral excesses, or a failure to act in socially appropriate ways, than there were failures due to skill deficits.

Many successful programs already existed for incorporating workers with disabilities into the workforce. These programs were, for the most part, located in national or regional mega-corporations. The lessons learned by these employers did not need to be reinvented.
DISCUSSION

The implication for these results and impressions for locations other than the setting in which the data were collected needs to be considered. While it is clear that (a) nomenclature describing workforce operations and expectations differ across national settings; and (b) governmental and social service supports vary even within national settings let alone across nations, there is no extant research that supports any contention that differences exist in employers’ perceptions about persons with disabilities serving the workforce, based on geography.

In the absence of data to the contrary, it is posited that the trends described here are potentially universals in terms of employer’s expectations, the myths they maintain, and the strategies that might be enacted to modify the existing barriers to fuller employment for persons with disabilities.

Several potential approaches exist for meeting the goal of fuller employment for persons with disabilities:

a) awareness-heightening presentations to community and trade association meetings where employers are assembled;

b) consultation with employee unions/associations in order to educate employers about their concerns regarding potential union resistance;

c) consultation with line-supervisors through job-coaching and job-analysis supports;

d) development of multi-media products emphasizing success stories relative to the employment of workers with disabilities;

e) consultation with employers’ accounting personnel on financial incentives available to those affording employment to persons with disabilities; and

f) some limited placement and referral to employers wishing a match with potential disabled employees. The intended result is the development of remedial, compensatory or educational and behaviour-change strategies for overcoming the barriers identified by these employers.

There is a clear need for shared responsibilities between the fields of business and educational or vocational rehabilitation. Both arenas have expertise that can contribute to developing enhanced national productivity. Whenever this can be done with concomitant improvement to the lifestyles and prospects for persons with disabilities the benefit is manifold. Without shared enterprise between the worlds of business and education or vocational rehabilitation there will be continued waste and inefficiency. With some of the roadblocks in potential employers’ perceptions now identified, matching remedial and compensatory strategies may be developed to ensure maximum placement in employment for individuals with disabilities.

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