

Attitudes of Employers Toward Hiring Individuals with Severe Visual Impairment

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There are 10 million Americans with visual impairment of whom 1.3 million are legally blind or have severe visual impairment. Over the past decade, the unemployment rate for the general population has remained stable at 4-6%; in contrast, for people with disabilities, the unemployment rate has reportedly risen, as more individuals reported being out of work. The unemployment rate for those with severe visual impairment was estimated to be as high as 70%. This article explored attitudes of employers toward employees with visual impairment. The findings of this study revealed that the potential barriers to hiring individuals with severe visual impairment are no longer discrimination or stereotypical issues, but more likely (a) a lack of exposure and (b) the work environment.

Keywords: attitudes, familiarity, disability, employment

The purpose of this article was to explore the attitudes of employers toward hiring individuals with severe visual impairment. The focus was on four key attitudinal barriers: (a) lack of exposure (familiarity to a person who has a disability) to individuals with severe visual impairment, (b) discrimination, (c) stereotypes/assumptions, and (d) the work environment.

There are 10 million Americans who are visually impaired of whom 1.3 million Americans have severe visual impairment and are legally blind (National Federation of the Blind, 2011). Of those who are legally blind, 536,000 are of working age (Brodwin, Parker, & DeLa Garza, 2010; Kirchner, Schmeidler, & Todorov, 1999). Unemployment rates in the United States have ranged between 4-10% over the past three decades, with a decline in unemployment rates to only 4-6% in the last decade (U. S. Department of Labor, 2007). However, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities has actually risen during the same period from 56.0% in 1989, to 66.9% in 2000 among men and 62.8% to 67.4% for women (Stapleton & Burkhauser, 2003).

According to the 2008 American Community Survey, the unemployment rate among people who are visually impaired was 56.9%, while the unemployment rate for nondisabled was 22.2% (Erickson, Lee, & Von Schrader, 2010). Even higher is the rate for those who are legally blind with an estimated unemployment rate of 70%.

There are several reports in the literature that demonstrate positive attitudes of employers toward people with visual impairment, stating willingness to hire persons with visual impairment, and the belief that people with visual impairment could perform skilled jobs (Black, 1970; Capella-McDonnall, 2005; Chi & Qu, 2004). However, with the reported high unemployment rate, there is a disparity between many of these studies and reality.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes of employers in hiring individuals with severe visual impairment. The focus was to understand the underlying attitudes of employers towards hiring persons with severe visual impairment. The following research questions helped guide the theme of this study.

1. Are employers' negative attitudes due to feelings of discomfort? Is it lack of exposure to people with visual impairment (e.g. fear and anxiety)? Is it existential anxiety? Are employers uncomfortable because individuals with visual impairment make these employers think this could happen to them?
2. Is it discrimination or prejudice?
3. Is it stereotypes, ignorance, or generalizations? Do employers assume individuals with severe visual impairment cannot do the job without basing this on objective information or even giving per-

sons with visual impairment an opportunity to try?

4. Is it concern for changing the work environment and the possible cost of accommodation? Is it concern for transportation? Is it concern for safety? Is it inconvenience – the simple fact that employers just do not want to consider hiring individuals with severe visual impairment?

Significance

“The significance of employers’ attitudes toward workers with disabilities links directly to the hypothesis of many researchers that positive attitudes facilitate successful employment, whereas negative attitudes build barriers which destroy both employee performance and related placement efforts” (Rochlin, 1989, as cited in Chi & Qu, 2004, p. 4). The barrier of employer attitudes was the focus of this article, specifically attitudes that would prevent employers from hiring individuals with severe visual impairment.

Literature Review

Employer Attitudes

Various studies have evaluated employer attitudes toward people with visual impairment, some of which have been negative; yet, several have been positive (Papakonstantinou & Papakonstantinou, 2010). Chi and Qu (2004) assessed employers’ attitudes toward hiring people with physical, mental, and sensory disabilities within the restaurant industry in Oklahoma. Objectives of the study were to (a) determine if employers’ attitudes differed based on different disability type; (b) discover the underlying dimensions of food service employers’ attitude towards employees with disabilities and, (c) examine the impact of restaurant employers’ attitudes on their hiring practices. Of 500 restaurants who were members of the Oklahoma Restaurant Association, only 70 (14%) returned the surveys. This study showed that employers who responded held more positive attitudes toward employees with sensory impairments and physical disabilities than toward employees with mental disabilities. Overall, the respondents indicated a relative high probability of hiring or continuing to hire persons with disabilities. Employers’ attitudes toward workers with physical and sensory disabilities had a positive impact on the probability of hiring people with disabilities; the more positive the attitude, the more likely employers were to hire.

Another study with similarly positive employer attitudes towards individuals with visual impairment was conducted among Iowa businesses and industries (Black, 1970). The purpose of the study was to investigate the hiring policies of Iowa businesses and indus-

tries with respect to employment of persons who are visually impaired. The findings focusing on employer attitudes were (a) over 97% of businesses and industries indicated a person who is visually impaired could do more today than 25 years ago, (b) 80% agreed that persons who are visually impaired could work in skilled and professional positions, (c) over 70% felt persons who are visually impaired could work at highly skilled jobs, and (d) 75% were willing to hire properly trained and qualified persons with visual impairments.

Another field where employer attitudes were evaluated was in teaching. The study focused on the general attitudes of school administrators toward teachers who are legally blind (Restad, 1972). A questionnaire was filled out by 553 elementary and secondary school administrators using a 10-item attitude scale. The responses indicated a positive attitude toward teachers who were legally blind. The two factors which resulted in differentiating attitudes were (a) the level of education of the administrators and (b) the degree of experience they had working with teachers who were legally blind. Administrators with the most education tended to be more positive in their view of employing teachers who are legally blind. Administrators with prior experience with teachers who were legally blind also were likewise more positive.

Wolffe and Candela (2002) also found positive attitudes towards employees with visual impairment by a variety of employers. The nine employers who were interviewed for this study represented large for-profit companies in the competitive labor market (with over 100 employees) that were considered “covered entities” under the Americans with Disabilities Act (2008). They were interviewed, in depth, to learn about their experiences with employees who were visually impaired. The majority of employers (89%) uniformly expressed positive attitudes toward their workers who were visually impaired. However, the intrinsic problem with interview style questionnaires is that employers may not be completely honest as compared to an anonymous form of questioning about attitudes.

Much of the literature demonstrates that employers have a more positive attitude toward workers with severe visual impairment (Papakonstantinou & Papakonstantinou, 2010). With regard to initially hiring these individuals, data is limited. In addition, the positive attitudes do not correlate with the high unemployment rate among individuals with severe visual impairment. A reason may be employers have little exposure or have never worked with employees with severe visual impairment, and thus are unaware of their capabilities. Another reason for the disparity may be with the instrument or wording of the questions to assess attitudes of employers in these studies. The questions may have been too obvious where par-

ticipants select more socially acceptable responses. Also, the questions may not have been precise enough to detect more truthful attitudes to help explain the low employment among people with severe visual impairment.

Barriers to Employment

There are a number of barriers that have been addressed by various researchers (Burkhauser & Houtenville, 2010; Crudden, Sansing, & Butler, 2005; Gilbride & Stensrud, 2010; Kirchner, Johnson, & Harkins, 1997). The barrier of negative employer attitudes was the first to be mentioned in all these studies. The next barrier was transportation. This was a major concern as public transportation was, and still is, often inadequate and poses a difficulty for those with visual impairment going to school and work. Limited accessibility to print and adaptive equipment were identified as other barriers to successful employment. Salomone and Paige (1984) found that insufficient (a) vocational training and (b) career planning were major barriers.

A study evaluating the Social Security Ticket-to-Work program found that most of the 267 employment networks surveyed, including vocational rehabilitation groups, had at least one concern about working with those who are blind (defined by authors to describe all levels of vision loss) (Capella-McDonnall, 2005). The Ticket-to-Work program provided a "ticket" to eligible beneficiaries who were considered, by Social Security, to be disabled and were receiving either Social Security Disability Insurance or Supplemental Security Income. This "ticket" can be used to acquire vocational rehabilitation services with the goal of returning to work. Services were provided by an employment network or a state vocational rehabilitation agency, acting as an employment network. The majority of respondents (69.5%, or 171 of the 246 employment networks who answered this question) expressed at least one concern about accepting a "ticket" from a consumer who is blind. The top three most commonly expressed concerns were "difficulty placing blind people," "lack of knowledge or expertise in blindness," and "transportation issues," thus reiterating similar concerns and barriers.

Attitudinal Barriers to Employment

The common theme in the literature as the primary barrier to employment of people who are visually impaired was employer attitudes. Assessment of the different employer attitudes or reasons for these attitudes has been discussed in the literature (Goertz, van Lierop, Houkes, & Nijhuis, 2010; Papakonstandinou & Papakonstandinou, 2010). One possibility may be employers' lack of experience with or exposure to a person who is visually impaired.

Exposure and familiarity. A study focusing on attitudes of employers which did discuss experience with people with disabilities and how that played a role in willingness to hire people with disabilities was conducted by Kimm and Brodwin (2005). There were a total of 668 employers surveyed through questionnaires delivered to local minority employers. The purpose of this study was to assess attitudes of minority business owners and managers toward people who have disabilities.

One of the major findings of this study involved familiarity or experience with disability. There were three categories of familiarity or experience to which an employer may respond. These included (a) has a family member with a disability, (b) has a friend with a disability, and (c) employs a person with a disability. Approximately half of the employers (53%) were classified in at least one of these three categories. Of those employers who are "familiar," 59% stated they would consider hiring people with disabilities if the prospective employees had the requirements and job skills (were qualified) for the positions. When comparing employers with family members with disabilities to employers without, a significantly larger proportion believed individuals with disabilities had the necessary work skills for employment ($p < 0.05$), and that it would not be extensively costly to hire people with disabilities ($p < 0.05$).

Attitudes of employers were more positive if they had friends, family members, or experience with employees with disabilities. Although 59% of those who were familiar would consider hiring people with disabilities, familiarity or experience alone was not sufficient in terms of willingness to hire people with disabilities since 41% were not similar. Uncovering the remaining attitudes that may prevent employers from hiring individuals with disabilities is important, particularly when considering persons with severe visual impairment since they have such a high unemployment rate.

Discrimination attitudinal barrier. Other attitudinal barriers to hiring persons with severe visual impairment include discrimination, prejudice, or simply lack of interest. Schira and Burton (1981) assessed attitudes of teachers and health occupation practitioners toward educating and working with individuals with disabilities. Of 1,649 teachers and health occupations practitioners receiving project-developed questionnaires, 87 teachers and 297 practitioners completed the surveys. Teacher and practitioner responses indicated that individuals with disabilities were offered education and employment in all health occupations areas, primarily at the entry level.

Stereotypes and generalizations barrier. Another attitude employers may have are generalizations – employers assume these individuals cannot do the job without basing this on objective information. Byrd, Byrd, and Emener (1977) conducted a telephone

survey of 25 employers in Tallahassee, Florida, regarding their attitudes toward hiring people with 20 different types of severe disabilities. Of the 20 disabilities, employers indicated the greatest reluctance (in the order listed here) to hire people with the following types of disabilities: alcoholism, blindness, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, paraplegia, mental illness, mental retardation, social disorder, deafness, and epilepsy. This reluctance in hiring indicates that employers believe people who are visually impaired compared to people with other disabilities are among the least employable.

Work environment barrier. Another attitudinal barrier may be concern for change in work environment if individuals with severe visual impairment were hired, such as cost of accommodation, concern for safety, or even the factor of inconvenience. Transportation was likewise one of the major concerns of employers in hiring prospective employees who were blind or visually impaired (Wolffe, 1999). Employers had concerns that they may not get to work on time, their hours may not be as flexible as someone who can drive themselves, and that they may not be as consistent or reliable as someone who can drive.

Safety concerns are another possible factor in employer attitudes toward hiring individuals with severe visual impairment (Wolffe, 1998). Employers may not understand that most of these individuals have adaptive techniques in dealing in situations to get around, monitoring children for teachers who are visually impaired, in using equipment, or in emergency situations.

Cost of accommodation is often a concern that arises when there is a lack of information regarding how to reasonably accommodate an employee (Kimm & Brodwin, 2005). Yet, companies reported that, as a result of making the accommodations, they saved an average of \$48,688 which amounts to \$29.85 for every dollar spent (Employers benefit from making accommodations, 1995). This is based on an ability to retain a qualified employee, increase work productivity, save on workers' compensation and insurance costs, and elimination of the cost of training a new employee.

Method

Participants

The study population included participants who were in charge of hiring employees. They included managers, assistant managers, supervisors, business owners, directors, and others involved in the hiring process. Participants were from a variety of businesses including retail, food industry/restaurant, healthcare, technology, finance, among others. Exclusions included businesses where the main service is specifically provided for clients or individuals with disabili-

ties since they would bias and skew the results. Examples of these places of employment are Department of Rehabilitation, Braille Institute, and other vocational rehabilitation businesses. Participants were at least 18 years of age. They were drawn from a convenience sample based on the local area surrounding Los Angeles, California and those available through a network database. The estimated target number of participants to be surveyed was at least 100.

Instrumentation

Data were obtained through use of a 39-item questionnaire. Items in the questionnaire were modified from previously published scales or specifically developed for this survey (Antonak & Livneh, 1988; Kimm & Brodwin, 2005). Serving as the foundation for this questionnaire was Kimm and Brodwin's Business Leaders Survey on Employees with Disabilities. This survey was designed to assess attitudes of business owners and managers toward people who have disabilities. It addressed concerns and expectations of employers regarding employees with disabilities, demographics, hiring issues, and actual hiring practices. The current survey was modified to be specific to employees with severe visual impairment.

Additional items were added to address the main research questions regarding employer attitudes toward hiring people with severe visual impairment: (a) due to some discomfort or lack of exposure to people with severe visual impairment (exposure), (b) due to discrimination or prejudice (discrimination), (c) due to stereotypes, ignorance, or generalizations, and (d) due to a concern in having to change the work environment, cost of accommodation, transportation or safety concerns, or inconvenience (work environment). These questions were derived from the Disability Factor Scale-General (Siller, 1969, as cited in Antonak & Livneh, 1988), Scale of Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons (Antonak, 1981, as cited in Antonak & Livneh, 1988), Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons Scale (Yuker, Block, & Campbell, 1962, as cited in Antonak & Livneh, 1988), Disability Social Relationship Scale (Grand, Bernier, & Stromer, 1982, as cited in Antonak & Livneh, 1988), and Attitudes toward Blindness Scale (Cowen, Underberg, & Carillo, 1958, as cited in Antonak & Livneh, 1988). The remaining questions were developed specifically for this study.

Scoring

Each survey question was in one of the four categories of attitude toward individuals with severe visual impairment. These were (1) exposure, (2) discrimination, (3) stereotypes, and (4) the work environment.

Procedure

Recruitment of participants included "walk-ins" to various businesses asking subjects to voluntarily fill

out the questionnaire on an anonymous basis. An online format of the questionnaire was also created and sent to various employers; anonymity was maintained.

Data Analysis

Statistical treatments were not used to analyze the data; the research involved a descriptive study. The purpose of the study was not to compare groups and find significance; rather, it was to find trends in attitudinal barriers.

Results

Types of Businesses Surveyed

Businesses surveyed included, retail, food industry/restaurant, healthcare, technology, finance, and other; in all, 213 businesses were surveyed. The number of businesses that were under the "other" category was large enough that it was further separated into additional categories for the analysis. These included real estate, transportation, legal, education, government, manufacturing, service/non-profit, construction, insurance/marketing/logistics/export, and other (security, fashion, interiors, day spa, media, and automotive).

The number of workers employed within the 213 businesses surveyed ranged from 2 to 420,000 employees, with an average of 15,694 employees. The overall attitude score for all employers was +0.70. The attitudes scores were sorted into each category of attitude: (a) exposure (familiarity), (b) discrimination, (c) stereotypes, and (d) the work environment. This indicated employers had positive attitudes in the categories of discrimination and stereotypes. The attitude category where employers scored highest (most positive) was in the discrimination category, with a score of +1.12. This was followed by the stereotypes category, with a score of +.92, and the exposure category, with a score of +0.49. The attitude category where employers scored lowest was the work environment category, with a score of +0.28.

Attitude Scores by Familiarity (Exposure)

The majority (75%, 160 of 213) of participants had some familiarity with a person with a disability, either a friend/family member, or previous or current employee. Less than half (39%, 83 of 213) of the participants had family members or friends with a disability, and approximately half (53.5%, 114 of 213) had a current or previous employee with a disability.

In comparing the attitude scores of employers with familiarity with a person with a disability to employers with no familiarity, the employers with familiarity had more positive overall attitude scores, +0.73 versus

+0.63. This pattern of a more positive score was seen in employers with familiarity, whether the familiarity was through family members/friends or through current/previous employees.

Attitude Scores by Type of Business

Employer attitude scores were also evaluated by business type, with the three most positive scores being for insurance/marketing/logistics/export (score +0.88), healthcare (score +0.85), and technology (score +0.78). The least positive attitude scores were from service/non-profit (score +0.36), transportation (score +0.38), and food industry/restaurant (score +0.47). All attitude scores were on the positive side of the attitude scale, but none were strongly positive overall, that is, a score higher than +1.

When attitude scores for the various business types were stratified by type of attitude, stronger differences in attitude scores were noted. Exposure (familiarity) attitude scores were lower than the overall attitude scores, most of which were between +0.25 and +0.78. The exception to this was legal-related businesses which had a very positive attitude score (+1.31) and the only one in the exposure category to be above +1.

The stereotypes and discrimination attitude categories had the most positive attitude scores, near or above +1. Almost all the scores were near or higher than +1 in the discrimination attitude category with the exception of three business types: transportation (score +0.41), service/non-profit (score +0.73), and legal (score +0.75).

The lowest attitude scores, indicating a negative response, were in the work environment category. Only two business types had higher scores. They included legal and insurance/marketing/logistics/export. Two business types were on the negative side of the attitude scale, food industry/restaurant and service/non-profit.

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrated that there was an overall positive attitude response (score +0.70) toward hiring individuals with severe visual impairment. This was similar to other studies in the literature that also demonstrated overall positive attitudes (Black, 1970; Capella-McDonnall, 2005; Chi & Qu, 2004; Kimm & Brodwin, 2005).

The study classified survey questions into four main categories of attitudinal barriers: (a) lack of exposure (familiarity) to an employee with severe visual impairment, (b) discrimination or dislike, (c) stereotypes, assumptions, or generalizations, and (d) work environment issues such as accommodations or safety concerns.

Lack of Exposure (Familiarity)

For the most part, familiarity with someone with a disability resulted in a more positive attitude score overall. Lack of exposure yielded more negative attitudes. This was similar to a previous study conducted by Kimm and Brodwin (2005) where they found that having familiarity to a person with a disability improved one's attitude score. The same finding was also true when attitudes were separated by attitude category. The exception was the stereotype category in which familiarity had much less of an impact on the employers' attitude scores. The stereotype attitude scores were the same, meaning that people may no longer view this type of attitude as a real issue or barrier. It may also mean that having familiarity to a person with a disability does not impact this type of attitude. Also, this attitude category and the discrimination attitude category both were more positive than the other two attitude categories, exposure and work environment. It may be that these latter two played more of a role in the attitudinal barriers to hiring individuals with severe visual impairment.

Attitude Scores by Type of Business

This theme was also evident when evaluating attitude scores from the various types of businesses. Overall attitude scores of each business type were all on the positive side of the scale; yet, none were strongly positive. The businesses with the lowest positive scores were transportation and service/non-profit. The service/non-profit group scoring the lowest overall was unexpected, considering the service nature of their business. Among the most positive overall scoring businesses were healthcare and insurance/marketing/logistics/export type businesses.

Attitudes have changed since Schira and Burton's (1981) assessment of attitudes of teachers and health occupations practitioners toward educating and working with individuals with disabilities. In that study, teacher and practitioner responses indicated a lack of interest and awareness of the difficulties of people with disabilities. This may mean that at the present time, people are more aware and educated regarding the challenges in securing employment for people with disabilities; most important, the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 (2008) may have helped improve overall attitudes.

Exposure attitude category. Under the exposure attitude category, all businesses scored lower than their overall attitude scores. The only exception was that legal business employers had more positive attitude scores, higher than their overall scores. The lowest scoring business was food industry/restaurant that was close to neutral but still positive. Businesses that scored lower in this attitude category demonstrated that exposure to or discomfort with a person

with severe visual impairment may play a role in hiring individuals with severe visual impairment. Employers may not have sufficient exposure and there may be some existential anxiety with these individuals, which serve as barriers. Legal being the only business that had a more positive score in this potential attitudinal barrier may indicate that they were more familiar with laws and requirements for individuals with severe visual impairment.

Discrimination attitude category. The discrimination category was the most positive scoring of all attitude types, indicating a strong lack of negative attitudes. All business types scored higher under this category than compared to each of their overall scores. High positive attitude scores indicated that discrimination was not likely a barrier in hiring individuals with severe visual impairment.

Stereotypes attitude category. When businesses were evaluated based on their stereotypes attitude scores, each business scored more positive than each of their overall scores. Thus, employers did not express negative stereotypes toward people with severe visual impairment. The lowest scoring businesses were real estate and food industry/restaurant. They may consider vision as a crucial factor in showing homes in real estate and inspecting food in food industry/restaurant and thus, do not usually consider hiring individuals with severe visual impairment.

Interestingly, the most positive attitude was scored by manufacturing type businesses, with a score +1.17. Studies have demonstrated that with more education, there were less negative attitudes toward individuals with disabilities (Restad, 1972). However, many jobs in the manufacturing industry do not require a college education; most have high school education or vocational training or on-the-job training, including managers, although executive level positions may require a college education (U.S. Department of Labor, 2008). It is likely that in this type of hands-on business using heavy machinery, people get into accidents or problems and develop disabilities, thus being more excepting of people with disabilities.

Work environment attitude category. The work environment attitude category was among the lowest scoring for all businesses, indicating negative attitudes. Most businesses scored low; only two businesses scored more positive, legal and insurance/marketing/logistics/export. A possible explanation for the more positive scores is that these businesses were more knowledgeable concerning work environment issues. These issues include providing accommodations, Workers' Compensation, and safety concerns. Although they scored higher than other business types, they were not strongly positive.

There were some business types that scored on the negative side of the scale, although close to neutral. These businesses included the food industry/restau-

rant and service/non-profit. For restaurants, this may involve work environment issues such as safety, wet floors, hot stoves, and time constraints to get orders out in a timely fashion. For service/non-profit, it is more difficult to determine an explanation for these types of businesses. Further studies are needed to confirm these findings.

Conclusion

Society has evolved since enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 (2008); before that time, stereotypes and discrimination were the greatest attitudinal barriers. Employers have become more positive in these areas. Presently, it seems these are not the main attitudinal barriers. Rather, the two main issues today appear to be (a) a lack of exposure (familiarity) to persons who have severe visual impairments, and (b) a belief by employers that these individuals do not fit into the work environment (not really knowing what accommodations are available for these individuals). Also, there is inadequate knowledge regarding safety in the work environment. According to this study, it is these two key issues that have evolved to be the potential barriers to employment for persons with severe visual impairment.

Society has overcome much of the barriers of stereotypes and discrimination that had overwhelmed people with severe visual impairment. Society now needs to work passed the barriers of lack of exposure and work environment issues to finally overcome the remaining attitudinal barriers which make it difficult for people with visual impairment to secure employment.

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