

Benefits of Returning to Work for Recipients of Social Security Disability Benefits

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It is proposed that persons who receive Social Security Disability payments and subsequently choose to work benefit both financially and psychologically. While it is acknowledged that persons that receive Social Security benefits and subsequently return to work endure physical and psychological overlay, multiple benefits ensue. This article offers approaches for individuals that receive Social Security benefits to return to the workforce, and it consequently offers probable benefits of returning to work for persons receiving Social Security Disability benefits.

Keywords: Social Security Disability Administration, return-to-work, physical overlay, psychological overlay

It is proposed that thousands of persons that receive Social Security Disability payments, as opposed to continuing to receive benefits indefinitely, subsequently choose to work, resulting in both financial and psychological benefits. It is proposed and acknowledged that persons that receive Social Security benefits and subsequently return to work endure pain, fatigue, difficulty walking or standing, sitting, or carrying objects, associated with their physical overlay. Similarly, many of those that return to work endure distress and psychological overlay. Moreover, these individuals must consider reasonable accommodation(s) in order to attain work and also continuing working once employment is obtained. This article offers strategies of individuals that receive Social Security benefits to return to the workforce, and it subsequently offers prospective benefits of returning to work.

Liu and Stapleton (2010) analyzed Social Security data of 591,493 beneficiaries from 1996-2006. A total of 38,546 recipients had their benefits suspended or terminated because of employment. Another 60,761 recipients participated in a Trial Work Period program (TWP) wherein they worked for nine months earning \$620 or more a month while receiving disability benefits. Their benefits ceased upon successful completion of the TWP.

It may be asked: What motivates an individual to return to work rather than remain at home and receive disability benefits? Olney, Compton, Tucker, Flores and Juniga (2014) pondered this question, seeking answers from twenty-two former recipients of Social Security Disability benefits. Eighteen were employed 10 years or less, and four were employed for more than 10

years. Disabilities of participants included blindness, cerebral palsy, traumatic brain injury, and quadriplegia. Methodology involved interviews and focus groups. Analysis of information resulted in the following major findings: a) the most influential factor was the support from family members, service providers and peers; b) a strong belief in the work ethic and value placed on employment success; and c) a strong drive to be self-sufficient reinforced by examples of other employed persons with disabilities and motivation provided by mentors.

Most probably, persons with low back or hip impairments may find sitting aggravates their disabilities. Individuals with leg, ankle, or foot impairments may find walking or standing aggravates their disabilities. Marini, Payan, Miller, Rodriguez, and Preston (2008) surveyed 290 employers and employees about sit/stand option jobs. There was an over 90% agreement that jobs as cashier, hotel security guard, telemarketer, hotel desk clerk, and kiosk clerk jobs could be performed alternating sitting with standing/walking. Survey participants also agreed that job quality and production quotas were not negatively affected.

Alternatively, desks that permit one to sit or stand while working have a long history of use by Thomas Jefferson, Winston Churchill, and Ernest Hemingway. Google, AT&T, and the Social Security Administration are just a few employers who are using this type of office furniture. Giron (2012) reported that using a standing desk strengthens muscles in the legs, improves balance and alertness, and counters obesity caused by long sitting. No mention was made of employees who used standing desks as having a disabil-

ity, and accordingly, reasonable accommodation was not an issue. Persons with affected disabilities who are having difficulty sitting or standing and would benefit from sit/stand option work should inquire of the employer if sitting/standing desks are provided and, if not, request reasonable accommodation.

Permissive absenteeism offers another prospective or needed modification. Individuals with disabilities may be tardy or absent from work because of pain, anxiety attacks, periodic depression, medical treatments or surgery. There are many factors that have a bearing on whether or not an employer would permit intermittent absences. Employees who have had a long and productive work history or have valuable skills may receive more favorable acceptance for absences when contrasted to newly hired or unskilled workers. Professional, skilled, or semi-skilled workers are more likely to have benefits such as vacation, sick, or personal leave credits that can be accessed when they are ill. As a reference for expected absenteeism: Kroll, Carpenter, and Wyman (2008) reported the average unplanned absences a year was 5.3 days for supervisory employees, 4.9 days for salaried employees, 5.6 days for hourly non-union employees and 6.7 days for hourly union employees. Additionally, Stipe (2010) in a presentation at the annual International Association of Rehabilitation Professionals conference summarized data from interviews, surveys, government reports, and human resource manuals. He opined that most employers would tolerate 6-8 days of absences per year or approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of a day per month.

Furthermore, Marini, Palacios, Castillo, and Miller (2012) conducted telephone surveys with 1,071 employers in 46 states and concluded that 2-3 days of absences per month was acceptable for the following jobs: school janitor, telemarketer, school cafeteria attendant, food sorter, security guard, waitress, bus boy, stock clerk, retail sales clerk, maid, rental car driver, hotel janitor, and cashier. Training time for jobs ranged from less than 30 days up to 90 days. Jobs could be performed sitting or standing/walking. The authors cautioned against generalizing that the same conclusions can be reached for similar jobs in other localities or with other employers.

It may be suggested that entry-level employment may offer job opportunities. Persons with a high school education (or less), little or no work experience, and no job training are frequently relegated to unskilled work. Factors discussed below may further increase difficulty in seeking and obtaining employment. If a physical or mental disability limits sitting, standing, walking, lifting, carrying, concentrating, or remembering, the worker may be unable to work full-time, unless accommodations can be arranged to permit continued employment.

English language proficiency may offer a hindrance toward employability for these individuals. Inability

or limited ability to speak, read, or write English may also seriously affect obtaining or retaining even entry-level employment. However, it may be proposed that trends are changing. Pew Research (2004) reported 60% of bilingual Hispanic workers preferred to speak English at work. Only one in ten preferred Spanish. There was also a strong preference for bilingual workers to read job manuals and work instructions in English.

Changing demographics of the workforce similarly interplay with evaluation of job placement options. Careerbuilder (2007) estimated 40 million Hispanics live in the United States, and Vithana (2008) reported bilingual professional employees were needed by State and Federal government agencies such as the Social Security Administration. Kochar (2014) concluded that while the number of new Hispanic arrivals has declined, the number of employed immigrants has increased to 49.7% in construction, eating/drinking/lodging establishments, wholesale and retail occupations, and business services.

In summation, it is proposed that each year thousands of individual choose to work rather than receive Social Security Disability benefits. They endure pain, limited ability to sit, stand, walk, have difficulty concentrating, experience depression and anxiety attacks, but continue to work. Why? Olney, Compton, Tucker, Flores, and Zuniga (2014) interviewed Social Security disability recipients who returned to work and discovered the most frequently cited reasons were they had the support of family members and service providers, are motivated by a strong work ethic, and they desired to be self-sufficient. Alternatively, some persons need a job that would permit the option to sit or stand. Affected employees should inquire about available adjustable desks that enable a person to sit or stand while working and, if unavailable, request reasonable accommodation.

Again, admittedly, physical, psychological, and linguistic factors remain vital barriers and challenges to employment. Exacerbation of physical or mental symptoms may interfere with a person's work schedule causing distress and interruption of work or absences. Practices vary by employers, localities, industry, and job classifications. Surveys, however, have revealed employers, on average, permit approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of a day a month for work absences. More generous absences may be realized by union workers who are protected by collective bargaining agreements. Furthermore, workers who perform entry-level or unskilled work with less than a high school education and inability to read, write, or speak English face a difficult task of finding and retaining employment. Difficulties are compounded if the person has a physical or mental disability that affects the ability to sit, stand, walk, lift, carry, remember or concentrate. Recent trends, however, offer hope that sig-

nificant changes are occurring. Although the immigrant population is large, assimilated immigrants are beginning to prefer to speak and read job manuals in English, rather than Spanish. Immigrants are also seeking jobs in retail and wholesale occupations and business services, and less in the fast foods industry where English proficiency may not be a job requisite.

This opinion suggests that job placement may be considered an applicable long-term life decision for persons receiving Social Security benefits. However, admittedly, many barriers exist for persons choosing to aggressively pursue employment. Vocational counselors, alongside persons that receive Social Security benefits, but critically examine both potential barriers, alongside prospective benefits of pursuing employment following receipt of applicable benefits.

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