DISABILITIES AND THE WORKPLACE: EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES PERCEPTIONS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 Prohibits discrimination against qualified job applicants and employees with disabilities. This article reports on a study of the perceptions of college students with disabilities of employment opportunities and concerns about the workplace as they prepare for employment with their college education credentials. The study found that they perceive less opportunities and more discrimination than others. Optimism about the effectiveness of the ADA to combat discrimination was found to be insufficient. Also, acceptance by supervisors was found to be less than by co-workers and individualized performance evaluation criteria was preferred. Furthermore, self-doubt was found along with time management and worries about health as personal concerns. Implications and challenges are integrated in the discussions.

INTRODUCTION

Many college students anticipate completion of their degree programs and entrance into the workforce. Students with disabilities, however, may feel some anxiety preceding their desire to graduate and joining the workforce which they may perceive to be potentially impersonal and insensitive to their needs. Research indicate that various forms of disabilities have different characteristics that interfere with successful vocational adjustments (Braithwaite, Labrecque 1994; Dunn 1994; McNeil, Franklin, Mars 1991).

People with disabilities have been the subject of legislation (Asch, Mudrick 1995) in three areas: rehabilitation and education, income support, and civil rights. The rehabilitation and education regulations have established academic adjustment opportunities for students with disabilities to ensure appropriate access to higher education and mandated reasonable accommodation for them to compete with their peers. Many colleges and universities have expanded their accommodation requirements (Scott 1994) to include extended testing time, alternative testing procedures such as oral testing, taped response, taped classroom lectures, extended assignment deadline, and use of electronic devices. Some professors provide individual and small study groups, copies of lecture notes, study guides, and tutorial assistance (Scott 1994).

With the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), people with disabilities are protected against discrimination in public areas and the workplace. The increasing number of college educated persons with disabilities poses a new challenge for employers and businesses to individualize employment decisions, and may require employers to involve workers with disabilities in making accommodation decisions that involve them (Gray 1997; Henderson 1994; Kopels 1995; Slack 1995). Disability research has concentrated on the developmental needs of children and adolescents and can benefit from a life span focus.

The available studies on disabilities and the workplace have concentrated on the actions and perceptions of businesses and employers on such issues as safety, insurance, liability, productivity, attendance, and accommodations (Henderson 1994; Simons, Power 1996). Although little literature exists on employers' actions and attitudes toward those with disabilities in the workplace, there is a severe lack of literature directly pertinent to the investigation of the perceptions, opinions, and concerns of people with disabilities in the workplace. Their perceptions are sorely needed and may facilitate the development of more individualized and sensitive program services that address the changing workplace needs.

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the perceptions that college students with disabilities have regarding their workplace entrance opportunities and their specific concerns related to organizational, interpersonal, and personal issues. The major areas addressed by the questionnaire were:

1. Perceptions of job opportunities compared to others.
2. Perceptions of employers' willingness to hire graduates with disabilities.
3. Perceptions of co-workers' sensitivity to their disabilities.
4. Perceptions of supervisors' understanding of their disabilities.
5. Perceptions of individualized productivity evaluation.
6. Perceptions of ADA in addressing workplace discrimination.

DISABILITIES AND THE WORKPLACE

Employer obligations under ADA requires that employers make reasonable accommodation for employees with disabilities. In December 1994, the President's Committee's Job Accommodation Network (JAN) reported that 68 percent of job accommodations cost less than $500, and further that employers report that for every dollar spent on accommodation, the company received 28 cents in benefits. Smolowe (1995) reported on one survey of corporate executives, about four-fifths of whom had altered their office space, indicated that it cost only about $223 per person with a disability to do so. Despite the fact that overall accessibility accommodation costs appear to be relatively meager, only 8 percent of people with disabilities are employed full-time, a mere 7 percent are employed part-time, which is about the same proportion it was in 1990 before ADA passed (Henderson 1994; Smolowe 1995). While people with disabilities encounter more difficulties in obtaining jobs, lack of opportunities for career advancement remains another source of frustration. Miller and Catt (1989) noted that upward mobility that has taken place in the workplace for workers with disabilities has been mostly in the federal government.

The employment rate of people with disabilities by large corporations has increased slightly over the past ten years. However, during that same period, the percent of people with disabilities hired by small businesses has decreased from 54 to 48 percent (Smolowe 1995). Employers commonly cite their fear of legal implications in case they need to terminate the employment of those with disabilities who do not work out. Fears that those with disabilities might prove to be more accident prone or that they might further exasperate existing disabilities also have hindered their employment. More of employers' reluctance to hire workers with disabilities emanate basically from spurious assumptions and misconceptions. Common misconceptions relate to safety, insurance, and productivity including acceptance and attendance in the workplace (Freedman, Keller 1981).

Studies that refute the safety misconceptions include a 1981 survey conducted by the DuPont company which showed that 96 percent of their employees with disabilities rated average or above average compared with 92 percent of those who did not have disabilities

on safety records. One study of International Telephone and Telegraph Company (ITT) of their Corinth, Mississippi plant, where 125 persons with disabilities were part of a 2,000 member workforce, showed an all-time safety record of 3,700,000 job hours worked without lost time that was injury related. It also showed that no worker with a disability had suffered more than a minor on-the-job injury since starting with the company (Henderson 1994; President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped 1982).

The misconception that the requirements of insurance companies discourage employers from hiring workers with disabilities is common especially among small businesses. The assumptions are that they will be penalized through high premiums and worker's compensation rates if they hire persons with disabilities. Contrary to these assumptions, insurance premiums are based on a company's overall safety records. An employer is not obligated under ADA to provide insurance benefits, but if the employer chooses to offer such benefits, an employee with a disability is entitled to the same quality of coverage as is provided to all other employees. The President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped (1982) reported on a study of 29 companies conducted by the United States Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers which revealed that 90 percent of the respondents reported no change in insurance costs as a result of hiring persons with disabilities. It was also indicated that insurance companies do not tell employers whom to hire, nor are employers obligated to obtain approval for workers' compensation insurance before hiring workers with disabilities (Henderson 1994). Thus, employers should not refuse to hire applicants because of a feared or actual increase in insurance costs.

A common productivity misconception is that workers with disabilities are not capable of performing their jobs and represent a burden to other employees who must "take up the slack". Henderson (1994) reported on the DuPont study which showed that 92 percent of their workers with disabilities were rated average or above average on productivity measures, compared with 91 percent for their workers who did not have disabilities. Similarly, ITT found that individuals with disabilities were more productive than their co-workers. At a Texas company, for example, two employees with mental retardation who insert

springs into window locks produced 60 percent more output than their co-workers without disabilities. In another example, Continental Bank of Chicago proudly boasts of a blind worker who accurately types up to 96 words per minute (Miller, Catt 1989). A fundamental principle of the ADA is that an individual with a disability must be qualified to do the job. Only the capabilities of the individual at the time of the employment decision must be evaluated. Speculation that the applicant may become incapable in the future to perform the job's essential functions is prejudicial (Bishop, Jones 1993).

Another misconception about individuals with disabilities in the workplace is the issue of acceptance. The assumption is that employees who do not have disabilities will not accept individuals with disabilities and will resent any special treatment to them such as parking spaces, wheelchair ramps, elevators etc. While the DuPont survey (Henderson 1994) did not find that special accommodations resulted in much resentment of workers with disabilities, it is essential to note that acceptance by co-workers is critical for workers with disabilities. There are still many people who are unable to see beyond the physical disability to the individual. They have the sentiment that those with disabilities are not capable of making decisions about their lives. Such fears can be avoided by employer initiated panel discussion of the disability, the needed accommodations, and many other strengths of the individual despite the disability (Vash 1982; Weaver 1991). However, it is essential to recognize that the use of a panel discussion approach could be legally problematic without the disabled worker's explicit written permission, since employers have been sued for informing co-workers who do not have a need to know. This is because disability status is considered confidential medical information under the ADA.

Attendance records of employees represent a significant criteria in performance evaluations. Misconceptions about work attendance of workers with disabilities assumes that they are absent from their jobs more frequently than others without disabilities. Again, the ITT Study (Henderson 1994) found that 85 percent of the workers with disabilities were average or above average in attendance. A reasonable accommodation action of employers is essential in helping workers with disabilities. Such actions may include scheduling consistent work shifts, allowing an employee who

fatigues easily due to side effects of medication the opportunity to take more frequent breaks, and allowing more flexible scheduling. Employers' willingness to adapt (Gray 1997) to the changing nature of work by replacing adversarial labor relations with a cooperative approach that recognizes the clash between workers' status as employees and their needs as individuals will strengthen a supportive work environment for people with disabilities.

The role of employers in minimizing work disincentives and increasing self-determination opportunities for people with disabilities not only contributes to the success of the ADA initiatives but helps society overall. It is estimated that people with disabilities who do not work receive federal disability assistance that amount to almost 60 billion a year (Shapiro 1993). The overall cost of unemployed people with disabilities rises to $170 billion a year when the costs of medical care and rehabilitation are considered with loss of productivity. Disability income (DI) beneficiaries establish their eligibility, in part, by withdrawing from the labor force because they lose all benefits once they have earned an excess of approximately $500 per month for a nine-month period. Thus, people with disabilities are discouraged from working to the greatest extent they can, unless they are sure they can earn an amount greater than their disability income benefit (Asch, Mudrick 1995).

Overall, many people with disabilities are capable of making productive contributions to employers, their families, society, and earning their livelihood (Vander Beek, Gray 1995). Available data indicate that individuals with disabilities have performance records comparable to others without disabilities (Freedman, Keller 1981). They have fewer accidents and their insurance rates do not affect the worker's compensation rates. Workers with disabilities also have good attendance records in comparison with able-bodied colleagues (Miller, Catt 1989).

METHODOLOGY

The subjects in this exploratory study were college students known to have some kind of disability and enrolled at a major university during the Fall Semester of 1996. Approximately 450 students with disabilities out of about 24,000 students were enrolled at the time of the study. As a first step in the data collection, the list was reviewed and only those students residing at the university's

Table 1: Respondents Categorized Organizational, Interpersonal, and Personal Concerns

Organizational Question	Response Categories	Frequency
Concerns about workplace culture,	Clear non-discrimination policy	42
practice, and accommodation asked,	Sensitivity to differences in performance evaluation	27
"what are your primary concerns about	Education on disability and diversity issues	27
workplace culture as one with disabilities?"	Flexible work schedule	12
	Physical-structural accessibility	8
Interpersonal Question		
What are your concerns about workplace	Disrespectful treatment	28
relationships with co-workers and	Informal network exclusion	18
supervisors?	Disapproval	18
	Patronizing	15
	Offensive jokes	12
	Perceived unintelligent	8
Personal Concern Question		
Concerns about self attributes and needs	Self-doubt	36
asked, "what are your concerns about	Managing time	23
your disability that may affect your	Worry about health	16
workplace success?"	Asking for help	4

Note: Number of responses may exceed sample size (N=48) because of opportunity to provide multiple responses

dormitories were selected for convenience. This resulted in a group of 178 students.

Because the study sought to obtain responses about subjects' perceptions toward their workplace entrance, the author limited the investigation to those identified as juniors and seniors in their undergraduate education. A sample of 82 junior and senior students with disabilities living at one of the university's dormitories was obtained. Five volunteer students with disabilities coordinated the distribution and collection of a self-administered questionnaire.

The questionnaire was designed to obtain responses to a series of scaled and open-ended questions. For each scaled question, respondents were asked to give their opinion using a Likert-type Scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree, Strongly Disagree). The open-ended questions were structured to allow the respondent to elaborate in greater depth and detail on specific concerns on three levels: organizational, interpersonal, and personal. These responses were reviewed by the researcher and subsequently organized into major categories.

Fifty-nine students (72%) voluntarily completed usable study questionnaire with the instruction that they respond anonymously. Seventy-three percent of the respondents were female, and the average age of all respondents was 25.5 years. Forty-four percent were

seniors, and 56 percent were juniors. The questionnaire was pretested on a small number of key informants including the five volunteers with disabilities. Modifications were made using their feedback. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

RESULTS

Perceptions of college students with disabilities regarding the workplace as they work toward graduation were considered across five items. Respondents reported on whether they perceive college students with disabilities to have the same opportunity of getting a job as those without disabilities. Fifty-one percent of the respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed that graduates with disabilities have the same chance as those without disabilities. Thirty-seven percent strongly agreed or agreed, and 12 percent were undecided.

Findings reveal that opinions were almost evenly divided on the item that measured whether employers will hire the right college graduate without regard to disabilities. Forty-two percent of the respondents felt that employers will consider persons with disabilities in their decision in hiring the right college educated person, and 17 percent were undecided.

Regarding the respondents' perceptions of potential co-workers' attitudes to disabilities, a majority felt that their potential co-workers will

be accepting of their disabilities. For example, fully 58 percent agreed or strongly agreed. Thirty-nine percent were of the opinion that potential co-workers will not be accepting, while only 3 percent were undecided.

Similarly, respondents were asked to indicate in their opinion whether potential supervisors will be understanding of people with disabilities. Fifty-eight percent indicated that supervisors will not be understanding, 32 percent felt that they will, and 12 percent were undecided. Regarding perceptions on individualized performance evaluation, findings reveal that the majority of the respondents (61%) believed that workplace productivity should be measured on individual abilities, rather than compared to that of others without disabilities. However, 31 percent strongly disagreed or disagreed that performance measurement should be individualized, and 8 percnet were undecided.

Opinions were evenly split on the final scaled question that related to the significance of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) in addressing employers' discriminatory practices against people with disabilities. Respondents were asked to respond to whether the ADA will reduce discrimination of people with disabilities in the workplace. Forty-one percent felt that it will reduce discrimination, another 41 percent had the opinion that ADA will not reduce discrimination. Eighteen percent of the respondents were undecided.

Responses to the open-ended questions were solicited from the respondents regarding their specific concerns about the workplace in organizational, interpersonal, and personal levels. Eleven students (18.6%) did not respond to any of the open-ended questions. Respondents' categorized concerns to the open-ended questions are reported in Table 1.

On the organizational level, respondents provided a wide range of responses. This question asked, "what are your primary concerns about workplace culture as one with disabilities?" The largest single group of concerns were related to clear non-discriminatory policy (e.g. no discrimination in hiring, insurance, training, and promotions). Two equally prevalent concerns were related to sensitivity to differences in individual performance and the need for educating workers and supervisors on the issues of disabilities and diversity. Other frequently cited concerns included the need for flexible work schedules and adequate structural and facility accessibility to

accommodate the needs of employees with physical disabilities.

Responses on the interpersonal level solicited the respondents' specific concerns about work relationships with co-workers and supervisors. They were asked, "what are your concerns about workplace relationships with co-workers and supervisors". While a majority of responses focused on concern about disrespectful treatment (e.g. respect, not treating disabilities like a disease, etc.), a large number of responses identified exclusion from informal networks and disapproval by co-workers and supervisors as important concerns. Other findings on the interpersonal level reveal that respondents are concerned about being patronized (helping when I don't need it, being superficially nice). Also, offensive jokes and being perceived as less intelligent were prominent among respondents concerns.

The final open-ended question was related to concerns that respondents had about themselves. They were asked, "What are your concerns about your disability that may affect your workplace success?". Respondents identified a number of specific concerns which they perceived. Principal among these were a set of concerns related to their self-doubt. A majority of the responses highlighted self-doubt concerns (e.g. fear of taking risks, afraid of mistakes, feeling inadequate, concern about what others think of me.)

In another large category of responses, respondents expressed concerns related to time management and problems of juggling the workplace demands with those of their disabilities. Also, a number of respondents cited that they constantly worry about their health. A small group of concerns revolved around not feeling comfortable about asking others for help. They felt that others will perceive them as a source of burden and inconvenience if they ask for assistance.

DISCUSSION

Disability issues in the workplace is timely, especially with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 which became fully implemented in 1994. Because it protects approximately 50 million people (McNeil 1993), organizations that are covered by ADA are prohibited from discriminating otherwise qualified disabled Americans in selection, retirement, and termination policies and practices. Further, it stipulates that individuals with disabilities cannot be denied

access to various job-related opportunities such as professional development incentives, participation in training programs, and workshops or career development.

The findings of this study clearly indicate that the majority of college students with disabilities did not believe that they have as much chance of being selected for employment as others without disabilities. This finding should be of interest to employers, especially human resources professionals and occupational social workers in their effort to develop a plan to help their organizations comply with ADA. Organizations can include statements that encourage all to apply for positions including those with disabilities in their job announcements.

In this study, it was also found that respondents almost divided evenly on issues about whether employers will select the right person for the job regardless of disabilities. Although most of the respondents felt that their chances of being selected for a job is less than that of others without disabilities, 42 percent believed that employers will select the right person regardless of disabilities. On the other hand, another 41 percent felt that disabilities can play a significant role in employers' selection of the right person for a job. Again, this finding has implications for employers who need to convince all those with disabilities that their disabilities are secondary to their qualifications for the right jobs.

The findings on the respondents' perceptions of their potential co-workers' attitudes about disabilities were interesting. The preponderance of respondents believed that co-workers will be accepting of their disabilities. This is interesting because employers tend to cite concerns about co-workers not accepting people with disabilities as reasons not to employ them (Henderson 1994). Actually, this research found that respondents were more concerned about a lack of acceptance from managers or supervisors than they were from co-workers. This finding has implications for organizations to design and deliver training for both employees and managers or supervisors on valuing employees with disabilities and particularly on helping those without disabilities understand how such workers can contribute to the organization and how to interact with them at work.

The research question related to individualized performance evaluations was supported by a significant majority as anticipated.

That is, workplace accommodation should include productivity measurement systems that are based on individual output, rather than compared to that of others. In an effort to make reasonable accommodation for workers with disabilities, employers may have to treat them differently by rearranging duties, providing special help, or modifying work tasks (Rothwell 1991; Smith 1997). Most job analysis of employee skills, experience, needs, and interests are useful in enhancing a match between the individual and the work to be performed. It is important to note that evaluations of individual output regardless of the job performance standard is not required by the ADA and could result in lowering standards, something employers fear. Nevertheless, as with every human resource activity, performance evaluation is a systematic process designed to assess the extent to which employees are performing jobs effectively. Equal employment opportunity (EEO) regulations and court action have required employers to look closely at their evaluation systems to prevent discrimination.

A striking finding of this study came from the evenly split perceptions about the significance of the ADA in addressing employers discriminatory practices against people with disabilities. While 41 percent felt that the ADA will reduce discriminations, another 41 percent believed that it does not make a significant difference. Thus, some distrust is suggested. This perception may be stemming from the historical knowledge that the United States' antidiscrimination laws have yet to effectively address everyday discriminatory practices. For example, they may be aware that African Americans are still being discriminated against in employment and housing even though such practices became illegal since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Most of the findings in the scaled responses were corroborated by findings on the respondents' categorized open-ended responses that were related to their organizational and interpersonal level concerns. For example, concerns about discrimination, acceptance by co-workers, lack of acceptance by supervisors, and performance evaluations were found on both measures. However, findings on the personal level suggests important roles for human resources professionals or employee assistance practitioners in organizing and providing social support and counseling

services to this group of employees. A more accepting work environment can help to reduce some self-doubt of workers with disabilities. Findings related to time management problems, worry about health, and reluctance in asking for help, are concerns that could be addressed through counseling services.

This study has some limitations. First, it is limited to a sample of students with disabilities from a single southeastern state university, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Second, some critical domains such as differences in gender and categories of disabilities were not analyzed. For example, respondents with learning disabilities may perceive the workplace issues differently from those with physical disabilities. Third, variations in cultural factors such as ethnicity was not addressed in this study. Therefore, this study is viewed as one that may help to begin to address workplace issues of college educated and professional workers with disabilities. This study's findings may stimulate employers and those responsible for the enforcement of the ADA to seek the opinions of those with disabilities in their decision making process and future research.

The findings from this study delineate challenges for workplace administrators. The challenge is to design an accommodations process that begins by examining the organization itself. Critical areas of evaluation include physical facilities, physical examinations that are non-discriminatory, and job descriptions that indicate how much physical or mental exertion that is required in order to do the jobs competently. It is also essential that non-job related questions about disabilities be eliminated from application forms, interviews, and other pre-employment inquiries in the selection processes. Furthermore, providing training that is necessary for workers to keep their jobs, advancement opportunities, and special equipment training for all employees and especially those with disabilities make good business sense.

Although it has been suggested that employers need to do more to assist individuals with disabilities in securing employment, it is also essential that individuals with disabilities themselves recognize their role in putting employers at ease about their disability. The indicated self-doubt regarding workplace success and lack of optimism about employment opportunities found in this study may have some validity given the declining federal government employment of individuals with disabilities and all others. However, employees with disabilities can smooth the way for others with disabilities by participating in identifying appropriate accommodations and eliminating misconceptions on the job.

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