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Identification of the Characteristics of Work Environments and
Employers Open to Hiring and Accommodating People with
Disabilities

Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 46 (3) 130-137.

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This study was supported by a grant from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR), Grant number H133G000028

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the characteristics of employers that are open to hiring and supporting people with disabilities, so that rehabilitation professionals can better target their placement and educational activities. Using a grounded theory qualitative approach, focus groups and interviews were conducted with employers, employed persons with disabilities, and experienced rehabilitation placement professionals. The results suggest thirteen specific characteristics that are organized into three major categories that are found among employers who are open to hiring and accommodating persons with disabilities. The three major categories were: work cultural issues; job match; and employer experience and support.

Identification of the Characteristics of Work Environments and Employers Open to Hiring and Accommodating People with Disabilities

It has been over a decade since the ADA was signed into law yet the unemployment rate for people with significant disabilities has remained virtually unchanged (<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/disable/emperndis.pdf>). Public policy makers have recognized the persistent problem of unemployment among people with significant disabilities and responded by strengthening the employment outcome focus of the Rehabilitation Act, and initiating new programs such as the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act (TWWIIA, PL 106-170)

While these initiatives are important, it is clear that they alone won't solve the employment challenges of many people with disabilities. To effectively meet the employment goals desired by many consumers, rehabilitation providers also need to increase the effectiveness of placement services. One way to accomplish this is to increase our understanding of employers. Many employers do hire and effectively accommodate and include people with disabilities. Identification of the specific characteristics of those employers who are open to, and successful in hiring and accommodating people with disabilities can help us focus our placement services, and improve the targeting of our consulting, education, and advocacy activities.

Prior researchers have recognized the importance of understanding employers and how they perceive disability issues (Millington, Asner, Linkowski, & Der-Stepanian, 1996). Research has been conducted on employer attitudes toward people with various disabilities (Gilbride, Stensrud, Ehlers, Evans, & Peterson 2000), employer's perceptions of the ADA (Hernandez, Keys, and Balcazar, 2000), how to develop relationships with employers (Fry, 1997), and

the types of consulting services that rehabilitation professionals might provide to employers (Gilbride & Stensrud 1992, Gilbride & Stensrud, 1999; Jenkins & Strauser, 1999).

Stone and Colella (1996) developed a comprehensive model of factors that they believed affected the treatment of people with disabilities in organizations. They identified three clusters of variables including attributes of the people with disabilities, environmental factors (public policy issues), and organizational characteristics. The organizational variables that they hypothesized to have the most effect on people with disabilities included organizational norms and values, human resource policies, and the nature of the reward systems.

A number of other researchers concur with Stone and Colella, and have attempted to identify the specific characteristics of the workplace that improve an organization's capacity to effectively hire and include people with disabilities (Akabas, 1994; Butterworth, Hagner, Helm, & Whelley, 2000; Kirsh, 2000a). Akabas (1994) asserted that placement professionals need to identify and reach out to employers that celebrate diversity, and provide an individualized and supportive workplace. Butterworth, Whitney-Thomas and Shaw (1997) found that supported employment consumers had higher success rates in organizations that had a "culture of inclusiveness." In a qualitative study of 8 young adults with developmental disabilities, Butterworth, Hagner, Helm, and Whelley, (2000) identified four organizational characteristics that were related to successful integration of the consumers they studied. They found that successful employers allowed opportunities for multiple context relationships between employees, provided specific opportunities for social interactions, used a personal and team-building management style, and had an interdependent job design. Similarly, Kirsh (2000b) found that consumers with psychiatric disabilities were more

successful in workplaces whose norms included acceptance of diversity and an atmosphere of respect and caring.

This initial research on workplace culture suggests that employers do vary in their openness to hiring and including people with disabilities, and that there are specific organizational characteristics that enhance this inclusiveness. The present study was designed to extend this research. In this study, focus groups and interviews were conducted with successfully employed people with disabilities, employers that have successfully hired and included employees with disabilities, and successful placement providers. This facilitated the identification of specific workplace factors that characterize employers open to inclusion of PWD's.

Method

A grounded theory qualitative design (Straus & Corbin, 1998) was chosen for this study. While some research has been conducted on employer openness, that research is in a formative stage and lacks specificity and broad empirical validation. Grounded theory is an effective method to develop a theory from the bottom up. That is, rather than beginning with a theory about employer openness and testing it, this strategy allows the theory to emerge from the data. In grounded theory, qualitative data are carefully obtained and through a systematic procedure of data analysis and coding, categories and concepts are developed and then integrated in larger components. These larger components then become the conceptual building blocks of hypotheses and theory, which can then be explicitly tested. A major advantage of qualitative research is the emphasis on data that identify the meaning people give to events in context (Hagner & Helm, 1994). A central component of employer openness to hiring persons with disabilities is the perception of consumers about the inclusiveness of the

worksite. The importance of consumers' experiences of acceptance and inclusion make grounded theory appropriate to address this research area at its current stage of development.

Procedures

Focus groups and interviews were conducted with three groups: successfully employed people with disabilities, employers that have successfully hired and integrated PWD's into their workforces, and placement providers that have worked closely with employers and have successfully placed many people with disabilities. Only successful participants were included in this study since our purpose was identification of employer characteristics that enhanced hiring and inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Two groups of successfully employed consumers were recruited for this study (n=6 and n=10). One group was conducted in a large city and the other in a midsize regional city. These two locations were chosen because they represented very different labor markets and consumer populations. Local rehabilitation providers and the state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency in each area nominated consumers. The consumer groups consisted of people with a wide range of disabilities including mobility limitations, cognitive disabilities, psychiatric disabilities, substance abuse and AIDS. The consumer groups included 11 women and six men, of which nine were African-American, and one was Hispanic. The average age of the consumers was 47.4, four were married, three were divorced, five had never been married, and four provided no information on their marital status. Consumers were paid \$100 plus expenses and lunch to participate. The focus groups lasted approximately four hours with a lunch break in the middle and were tape recorded and transcribed. The first consumer group met a second time toward the end of the study to review

findings and serve as a member check of the emerging theory. Consumers were asked to describe their employment experiences and discuss employer behaviors, policies and procedures, and other characteristics of the workplace that increased or decreased their feelings of acceptance, and their ability to be a successful employee.

Five focus groups, and nine individual interviews were conducted with employers. Employers included human resource directors from hospitals, manufacturing, and service industries, owners of small businesses, and mid-level supervisors of retail stores. The number of participants in each group varied from six to ten. Employers were identified by local rehabilitation providers as organizations that had hired consumers, and were viewed in the community as open to hiring people with disabilities. Initial employer groups were asked to discuss their experiences with employees with disabilities. As potential issues were identified from the consumers and placement providers, employers were asked more specific questions around those emerging topics. This process of feeding initial results back into the data collection process is viewed as essential to theory building from the grounded theory perspective (Straus & Corbin, 1998).

A focus group was also conducted with providers of placement services (n=5) along with individual interviews of placement providers (n=3). The focus group consisted of agencies that provided services to members of the second consumer group. Consumers indicated which service providers they believed had the strongest relationships with employers, and which agencies were the most helpful to them in transitioning to work. The placement providers identified by the consumers were invited to participate in the focus group and agreed to participate. Placement providers were asked how they identified which employers to contact for potential employment opportunities and their perceptions of the characteristics of employers open to hiring people with disabilities.

Coding and Data Analysis

Independent open coding of the initial transcripts was conducted by each of the three primary investigators (Straus & Corbin, 1998). After each focus group, investigators identified statements that they viewed as related to employer openness. Statements were collected and patterns and themes identified. Those themes were then compared to the literature and refined into categories. As indicated in the grounded theory methodology, further questions were developed related to those categories that were then asked of the next focus group. The employer focus groups were conducted both before and after the second consumer group and the service provider group.

Differences in coding of statements between the three primary researchers were discussed and negotiated as a group. During the final coding, a fourth independent researcher was asked to review the categories, and items were discussed until consensus was reached. Categories were continually refined and reexamined after each focus group. The resulting model consisted of three major categories, and thirteen specific characteristics of open employers.

Credibility of Findings

In qualitative research issues of reliability and validity are often discussed in terms of the credibility of the findings (Bogdin and Bickland, 1998; Hagner & Helm, 1994; Straus & Corbin, 1998). The credibility of findings in a qualitative study is based upon the quality of data obtained (often called thick description) and other specific techniques designed to limit potential bias and enhance the usefulness and generalizability of results. To enhance the credibility of this study a number of techniques were utilized. First, as indicated above, careful attention was paid to transcript coding and analysis, with an extensive audit trail and field notes from the three primary researchers. Thick description was ensured by examination and coding of over 600 transcript pages. Second, triangulation of

data was accomplished by obtaining information from multiple sources with different perspectives (consumers, employers, and service providers). Third, all the transcripts were reexamined after categories were developed to identify potential discrepant data and adjust the model to address those inconsistencies. Fourth, a participant check was conducted toward the conclusion of the data collection phase of the study. The participant check was conducted by reconvening the initial consumer group and presenting them with the emerging categories and model. This group reviewed the categories and model, and provided feedback that resulted in a number of the categories being extended and refined. At the conclusion of the participant check, the consumer focus group members confirmed that the revised model reflected their experience of workplaces that were open to them as people with significant disabilities.

Results

As indicated above, the extensive data collection and analysis process resulted in identification of 13 specific employer characteristics organized into three major categories. The three major categories are: Work Cultural Issues; Job Match; and Employer Experience and Support. Each of these categories will be discussed, along with the specific employer characteristics within each category. Direct quotations from all three data sources (people with disabilities, employers, and providers) will be provided to illustrate the employer characteristics. A complete list of categories and employer characteristics can be found in Table 1.

Work Cultural Issues

This was the largest category and included values and norms concerning diversity, work performance, organizational practices, and policies. The central issue for consumers was feeling included and respected. Consumers indicated

that a good employer was one who included them with all employees and listened to their concerns and needs. The importance of feeling integrated into the organization was best expressed by one consumer, who used some version of the word "include" five times in one statement.

They include us in everything that they do. I mean we are included. We were having a Christmas party a couple of weeks ago and they are including us in it. Everything they do we are included. We have staff meetings for like company meetings every month because how our production was the past month how much scrap was there for the whole place, what new contracts were in, what old contracts were going out.

They include us in everything.

Employers also indicated that diversity, and inclusion of people who are different has become increasingly important to their organization's success. Reflecting this issue, one employer stated: "Diversity is important to us as a company. Our customer base is getting more diverse. Our employees are getting more diverse. If we can't handle differences and handle them really well, it will cost us money."

A second cultural value expressed by both consumers and employers, was a focus on job performance, rather than disability. One consumer stated: "I don't think they see the disabilities. They treat us like we're--like you want to be treated, like a regular human being and that's the way they treat us there. You know they don't see disabilities. They see our performance. As long as we perform to the best of our abilities, that's all they ask."

Employers also indicated that they focus exclusively on job performance. One employer stated: "I hire for attitude and train for skills. After that, the cost of accommodations is nothing. I want employees who will stay and do good work."

A number of other cultural issues were identified by participants that were related to the manner in which employers managed, supervised and accommodated employees with disabilities. A key consideration was the flexibility and sensitivity of the employer to the employee's specific situation. Often employers didn't single out people with disabilities for special treatment, but rather understood, as one employer stated, "Everybody needs some kind of accommodation sometime." While another employer stated that, "We have the approach that, hey, if we can do anything to make your life easier at home or work, we try to work with the employee to do it."

Employers also recognized that it was important that values and norms around inclusion and flexibility come from senior management. One employer stated: "But I think it starts at the top, you have to hold people accountable and our managers have objectives that their bonuses depend upon in terms of working with diversity."

Consumers also indicated how important it was for employers to be flexible and accommodating. One consumer stated, "My disability is obvious, you can see it, but I get somewhat treated different, not in a bad way. They accommodate. Like we just moved from one area to another, so they make sure everything was accessible for me like the bathroom, the area."

Medical benefits were also frequently discussed by both consumers and employers. Participants recognized that people with disabilities may have unique medical needs that aren't effectively covered by traditional plans. One consumer stated: "The employer is hiring PWD's so they need to look at that [benefits options] and it was looked at and it was changed." An employer said "We've got 5 health plans, and 3 vision plans and so on but to go beyond this to accommodate a disability we would look at that on a case by case basis. "

There was a great deal of agreement between consumers, employers and providers on the type of work culture that is welcoming and supportive to people with disabilities. Seven specific employer characteristics were identified in this category, which can be found on Table 1.

Job Match

The second major category was work design. All three groups discussed the importance of focusing on the specific match between the consumer and the job. The actual ability of the applicant to perform the essential functions of the job was emphasized, while disability issues were de-emphasized.

One consumer stated; "I was having trouble because I had to fit it [a particular part] a certain way into the gauge, and I couldn't do it. They said "okay, we'll put somebody else on this," and they put me on a job I knew how to do." Another consumer said: "They're focusing on what it is you can do and trying to encourage you to look at yourself, as an employee, and not as a person with a special situation."

Employers were also concerned about focusing on the ability of the person to be a good employee. One employer said: "I can pick out the people that are nervous versus an attitude—you ask them why they want the job, and if they can explain that to you, that means a lot to me, that means the person is going to show up."

A placement provider emphasized that they focus on job skills when working with employers. The provider stated: "You must make sure the person with a disability can do the job, I tell them I am here to help with your employment needs, I won't send you someone who can't do the job." Another provider indicated the key was focusing on just the essential functions of the job. She said

that, "A closed employer stands by the job description to the letter, an open employer is more flexible and will try and make it work."

Many of the providers had consumers who developed their job skills by participating in internships. While not a widely used technique in rehabilitation, it was very successful for many of these consumers and placement providers. One provider stated:

I mean, an internship, it's a no cost collaboration between [the agency] and the employer, so they basically get to see without any risk what this person is like, so it just--it's really a very casual way of working with employers... I would say a very small percentage of students [they call consumers students] don't get placed right from internships.

All of the participants consistently emphasized the importance of a good match between the consumer and the specific job. Consumers wanted employers to recognize, and allow them to use their skills and talents, while employers wanted good reliable employees. The four specific employer characteristics from this category are listed on Table 1:

Employer Experience and Support

The key components of the third category were the extent to which an employer was skilled at managing "differences," and the level of support they felt they had to include and accommodate workers with disabilities. Employers who were comfortable and had experience with an ethnically diverse workforce found it easier to accommodate a person with a disability. For these employers, disability was just another form of diversity. As one employer stated: "So you are so used to that [accommodating existing employees] that then hiring a person with a disability is not really an issue, and it gives you insight into how you can be creative, to make the choice work." Another employer said, "I think we can kind of

stretch ourselves when we're making an accommodation, and we have done that, we haven't had anybody ask for anything unreasonable yet."

A consumer also recognized that at his organization disability was just another type of diversity. He said: "It is the same thing with the ethnic part of it, and in the plant that I'm in there are a lot of people who are from different countries...you know everybody helps each other out. Being disabled out there where I am it doesn't really make any difference."

The second factor was the availability of human resources support. Having the necessary support, either from the disability community, or an in-house human resource department was viewed as essential. One employer stated: "I think what I could use the most is a point of contact, someone that I know I can pick up the phone and call and ask questions...about reasonable accommodations...the ADA, especially that, what it is we're expected to do, what's reasonable." When responding to that type of employer need a vocational rehabilitation provider indicated that she had placed 7 consumers with one employer. She said "I became their HR staff, I did the paperwork and the interviewing, I did the hiring for them sight unseen."

Developing strong effective relationships between community rehabilitation programs (CRPs) and employers was identified by both groups as a key support strategy. The need for support, and the willingness to rely on a CRP for that support was underscored by an employer who said: "So perhaps that could go back to the education of us and supervision about disability in general, and you know, going beyond the obvious [disability issue] and you know, help us to understand and not, say, be afraid." A provider indicated that their commitment to assisting employers and maintaining a strong relationship increased employer openness to hiring people with disabilities. She stated: "There are mutual benefits [between the agency and employers] and we try to make sure they see,

[we want to] help them with their general employee who might have problems...we get a lot of positive feedback on that. "

The two specific employer characteristics from this category are list on Table 1:

Discussion

The results of this study support and extend prior research concerning the characteristics of employers that are open to hiring and supporting workers with disabilities. The three categories identified in this study, work culture, job match, and employer experience and support, are consistent with the factors discussed in the theoretical literature. Further, all of the consumers during the member check agreed that the employer characteristics identified in this study were on target and as one consumer concluded, "these are good things!"

The importance of work culture values concerning diversity, egalitarianism and flexibility found in the work of Stone and Colella, (1996), Akabas (1994) and Butterworth, Whitney-Thomas, and Shaw (1997) was strongly supported by the results of this study which indicate that organizations that authentically embrace those values, and have strong senior management support, create a culture in which people with disabilities can successfully work and succeed. Employer values and culture vary. In this study seven specific characteristics were identified that can be used to differentiate employers that may be more open to hiring and accommodating people with disabilities.

The second category, job match, has always been a key component of quality vocational rehabilitation (Gilbride, Stensrud, and Johnson, 1994; Spirito-Dalgan & Gilbride, in press). The current study underscores the importance of this match for both the consumer and employer. These results are consistent with the findings of Colela, Denisi, and Varma (1997) who found more negative

bias directed at a worker with a disability in a poor fit situation. Successful placement professionals understand the importance of job match and work closely with consumers and employers to ensure that the position is an appropriate fit, before a placement is made.

The results of this study concerning employer experience and support also confirm and extend the current literature. Employers with successful diversity experience find inclusion and accommodation of people with disabilities much easier. These results suggest that employment outcomes for people with disabilities can be enhanced if the rehabilitation community plays an active role in providing support for employers with less experience and limited internal personnel resources. Employers are likely to utilize members of the disability community to help them with personnel issues if those services are provided consistently and focused on job performance.

From the perspective of consumers, three issues seemed to continually emerge: inclusion and respect, being listened to by their employer, and a good job match that utilizes their capabilities. While these factors are not surprising, they do suggest that along with a thoughtful analysis of the match between the consumer and the job, rehabilitation professionals need to attend much more to the culture of the specific employer. The employment success of the consumers in this study was significantly affected by these environmental factors. These results suggest that employment outcomes can be improved if consideration is given to the extent of these factors in the employer's environment prior to placement.

The results of this study suggest that even employers who are open to hiring and accommodating workers with disabilities are very concerned about maintaining explicit and rigorous hiring guidelines. Their first objective is to hire the person who most effectively demonstrates that they can perform the essential

functions of the job, with or without accommodations. Their second objective is to hire people with the soft skills (i.e. positive attitude) to be a reliable worker. In order to hire a person with a disability, employers consistently emphasized that applicants had to meet these criteria before they would be considered for a position. If the applicant was referred by an agency, employers wanted assurance that the worker could do job. If the applicant posed a challenge to their existing system, by needing accommodations with which the employer was unfamiliar, or needing occasional rehabilitation counseling interventions, employers wanted on-going support in understanding these needs. Employers without strong human resource departments would look toward the disability community for personnel support. However, they wanted that support to be job related, effective, and timely.

Limitations of Study

The limitations of this study are those common to most qualitative research which include the small sample sizes, and the limited representativeness of the sample, both of which reduce generalizability. As indicated in the methodology section a number of procedures were employed to mitigate the inherent limitations of a qualitative design. Nonetheless, these results must be understood as preliminary, and need to be further validated by other qualitative and quantitative research.

Implications for Rehabilitation Counselors

There are a number of implications of these results for rehabilitation counselors and other placement providers. First, placement should always be done in a thoughtful manner that matches employee ability with the essential functions of the job. The results of this study underscore the importance of rehabilitation and placement professionals having a comprehensive

understanding the essential functions of positions in their local labor markets, and then using that knowledge to find appropriate fits for their consumers. Labor market knowledge and accurate consumer assessment have long been considered essential functions within rehabilitation counseling. The result of this study highlight the importance of these skills in assisting consumers to find meaningful and successful employment.

Second, rehabilitation professionals should go beyond traditional labor market research that emphasizes job openings and salary, and also evaluate the organizational culture of the target employer. Rehabilitation professionals can use the characteristics of open employers found in this study to help direct their analysis of employer openness to identify those most willing and capable of hiring people with disabilities.

For example, rehabilitation providers can ask (or determine) employers some of the following key questions:

- How much diversity does the employer have in their workforce?
- Is the organization's management style personal and flexible?
- Does the organization provide ongoing training for front line supervisors and see that as a critical factor in managing employees?
- Does the employer have experience working with people with disabilities?
- Does the employer have a source of support? And, if not, can my agency provide that support?

Rehabilitation professional can use the answer from these types of questions to focus placement efforts on those employers most likely to provide quality employment opportunities.

Third, the rehabilitation community can use the characteristics outlined in this study to provide a direction and focus for employer education and consulting. In large part, the characteristics that make an employer open to a person with a

disability, are factors that would benefit all employees, particularly in the our increasingly diverse society. Not all employers (even very progressive ones) will embody all of these characteristics. Rehabilitation counselors can use these factors to help employer's conduct a self-assessment from which they can identify areas in need of improvement. Rehabilitation professionals can also be involved in advocacy and educational initiatives that challenge other employers to authentically evaluate and change their organizational culture to enhance their openness.

Finally, the results of this study suggest that many employers require, and would welcome, thoughtful support in meeting their personnel needs. These results support prior suggestions in the literature that rehabilitation counselors should “horizontally expand” their role to include services to support employers (Gilbride & Stensrud, 1999; Jenkins & Stauser, 1999). Most of the employers in this study had received ongoing support and assistance from rehabilitation professionals. They were consistent in their appreciation for that support and the role that it played in their ability to successful hire and accommodate people with disabilities. These results suggest that more opportunities for people with disabilities could be generated if rehabilitation professionals expanded their support to more employers. While many rehabilitation agencies support the concept of providing services directly to employer (Gilbride, 2000) few have committed the necessary organizational resources. Providing services directly to employers requires significant conceptual and systemic change. These results challenge rehabilitation professionals to consider those changes, and find ways to reach out and support employers.

In summary, these results suggest that employment outcomes for people with disabilities can be enhanced if rehabilitation providers pay more attention to the specific characteristics of the organization in which they want to place their

consumer. Specifically, this study provides preliminary empirical data on some of the characteristics of work environments that are related to increased employer openness to hiring and accommodating employees with disabilities. There are a number of issues suggested by this study that require additional research. First, future research needs to confirm, revise, and expand these employer characteristics in order to deepen our understanding of the types of work environments that are conducive to success for workers with disabilities. Second, we need to develop a simple and valid method to measure these factors. In order to be helpful to rehabilitation counselors, placement professional, consumers, and others interested in employment of people with disabilities, we need to find an easy, reliable method to access the type of employer information suggested by this study. Third we need to determine if providing services and support directly to employers does increase the number and quality of placements. If rehabilitation agencies redirect resources toward employer support, we need to be sure that those resources resulted in increased quality placements.

In summary, successful employment of people with disabilities is complex and challenging, but of vital significance. We need to continue to increase our understanding of employers and work environments, so that we can reduce the barriers to employment that many people with disabilities confront.

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Table 1

Key Characteristics of Employers who are Open to People with Disabilities

Work Cultural Issues

1. Employers include people with disabilities with all workers, and treat them equally.
2. Employers welcome diversity, they are egalitarian and inclusive.
3. Employers' management style is more personal and flexible.
4. Employers focus on a worker's performance not their disability.
5. Senior management expect and reward diversity.
6. Employers are comfortable providing accommodations to all their employees.
7. The organization provides "cafeteria style" benefits.

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Work Design Issues

1. The employer focuses on the consumer's capabilities and effectively matches the worker with the job requirements.
2. The employer obtains input from people with disabilities on their ability to perform job duties, and includes people with disabilities in all accommodation discussions.
3. The employer focus on essential, not marginal functions.
4. The employer offers internships, and they often lead to jobs.

Employer Experience and Support Issues

1. The employer has the ability to supervise a diverse workforce.
2. The employer views the CRP (or other rehabilitation agency) as a partner, and as an on-going employment support resource.