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Development and Validation of the Employer Openness Survey

Dennis Gilbride
Syracuse University

David Vandergoot
Center for Essential Management Services

Kristie Golden
South Oaks Hospital

Robert Stenrud
Drake University

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Abstract

This study describes the four-phase process by which the Employer Openness Survey (EOS) was developed and validated. The EOS is an 18 item instrument designed to measure the openness of employers to hiring, accommodating, and promoting workers with disabilities. During the first phase potential questions were generated and pilot tested with employers. Scoring criteria and construct validity were evaluated in the second phase. In the third phase the EOS was field-tested with employers, scoring criteria was finalized, and inter-rater reliability established. In the fourth phase the EOS was presented to placement professionals who evaluated the clarity and usefulness of the instrument for practitioners in the field. Results of this study provide initial support for the EOS, and confirmation of its usefulness for rehabilitation counselors providing placement services.

Development and Validation of the Employer Openness Survey

Prior research has indicated that employers vary considerably in their openness to hiring and accommodating people with disabilities (Akabas, 1994; Stone and Colella, 1996). Employer attitudes and culture, experience with disability, institutional support, and senior management commitment, have all been identified as factors in employer openness (Butterworth, Hagner, Helm, & Whelley, 2000; Gilbride, Stensrud, Vandergoot, & Golden, 2003; Kirsh, 2000a). Accurately understanding and measuring an employer's openness to hiring a person with a disability is important because it has the potential to enhance the effectiveness of placement services. There are two major challenges in assessing employer openness. First, is finding a way to obtain organizational information simply and accurately, without provoking employer concern over litigation and EEOC issues. Second, is to identify genuine interest in hiring persons with disabilities that goes beyond the desire to appear to be in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Both business and rehabilitation researchers have explored organizational variables related to employer openness. Stone and Colella (1996) hypothesized that organizational norms and values, human resource policies, and the nature of the reward systems were key factors in employers' openness to hiring and accommodating employees with disabilities. Akabas (1994) asserted that open employers were those who celebrate diversity, and provide an individualized (in contrast to rigidly standardized) and supportive workplace. Kirsh (2000b) found that workplaces whose norms included acceptance of diversity and an atmosphere of respect and caring

enhanced the success of consumers with psychiatric disabilities. Similarly, Butterworth, Whitney-Thomas, and Shaw (1997) found that consumers were more successful in organizations that had a "culture of inclusiveness."

In a qualitative study of eight young adults with developmental disabilities, Butterworth et al. (2000) identified four organizational characteristics related to successful integration of these consumers: opportunities for multiple context relationships between employees, specific opportunities for social interactions, a personal and team-building management style, and interdependent job design.

In a more extensive study of employer characteristics related to openness, Gilbride, et al. (2003) conducted focus groups with successfully employed consumers, employers with strong track records of hiring and accommodating workers with disabilities, and successful placement professionals. Using a grounded theory methodology they identified 13 specific characteristics of open employers organized into three categories (employer culture, work design, employer experience and support).

The first category identified by Gilbride et al., employer culture, included characteristics exemplified by factors such as, "Employers include people with disabilities with all workers, and treat them equally," "Employers welcome diversity, they are egalitarian and inclusive," "Employers' management style is more personal and flexible," and "Senior management expect and reward diversity." These characteristics are quite consistent with the literature reviewed above.

The second category was work design issues. This category was characterized by factors such as "The employer focuses on the consumer's capabilities and effectively

matches the work with the job requirements," and "The employer obtains input from employees' with disabilities on their ability to perform job duties, and includes people with disabilities in all accommodation discussions." This set of variables is consistent with best practices in placement, and underscores the importance of job match for successful employment (Gilbride & Stensrud, 2003; Spirito-Dalgin & Gilbride, 2003).

The third category was employer experience and support. Two characteristics were identified in this category: "The employer has the ability to supervise a diverse workforce," and "The employer views the rehabilitation provider as a partner, and as an on-going employer support resource." Gilbride et al. concluded that open employers either have the internal expertise to hire and accommodate employees with disabilities, or have effective and reliable relationships with rehabilitation agencies that provide them the help and support they may need.

The purpose of the present study was to develop and test an instrument, the Employer Openness Survey (EOS), that was designed to operationalize the three major factors identified in the Gilbride et al. (2003) study. We hypothesized that a simple, non-threatening employer openness instrument could be used by rehabilitation professionals and consumers to identify the most promising employers to contact for placement and employer development. Further, such an instrument could be used as a consulting tool to help employers identify areas in which they could increase their openness to hiring and effectively accommodating persons with disabilities. Finally, we wanted the instrument to be easy to implement, to require no special skills, and be sensitive to time limits of both employers and rehabilitation professionals.

Method

The EOS was developed and tested in four phases in order to establish its reliability and validity (Antonak & Livneh, 1988; Bellini & Rumrill, 1999). During the first phase potential questions were generated and pilot tested with employers in order to establish content validity and evaluate item wording, clarity and appropriateness. Scoring criteria and construct validity, were evaluated in the second phase. In the third phase the EOS was field-tested with employers, scoring criteria was finalized, and inter-rater reliability established. In the fourth phase the EOS was presented to placement professionals who evaluated the clarity and usefulness of the instrument for practitioners in the field, and the experience of using the instrument was examined. In the next section we will outline each of these four phases.

Phase One: Pilot study

In order to establish content validity, a number of potential questions were developed to measure each of the three components of employer openness described above. Each question was reviewed by the research team for relevance to the established attributes of openness, and being non-threatening. An initial list of 28 mostly open-ended questions was developed. We chose to use open-ended questions as they allowed the employer to provide more specific information on how they approached personnel development issues. Forced choice answers would have allowed us to provide more quantitative reliability and validity data, but we felt that open-end questions increased the usefulness of the instrument for placement professionals. After development of the pilot items, employers were chosen who were known to have successfully hired persons with disabilities based on recommendations from local

rehabilitation providers. Piloting our questions with employers allowed us to determine if the questions were clear, understandable, and non-offensive (Crocker & Algina, 1986)

Phase one was conducted in three steps. At the end of each step feedback from the employers was evaluated and the instrument was modified. A total of 23 employers were interviewed during the pilot phase, including eight in step one, seven during step two, and eight in step three.

A member of the research team conducted the pilot interviews in person at the employer's business. After completing the EOS interview, employers were also asked eight debriefing questions to allow them the opportunity to provide feedback on the instrument. The debriefing questionnaire focused on employers' general feelings about the interview, if any questions were perceived as offensive, and suggestions for new questions, modification of item language and their overall perception of the interview process. Employers offered suggestions about how to specifically word questions for clarification, and all but one employer evaluated the EOS interview process positively. With the use of the employer feedback debriefing form, interview questions were revised, added and removed. The research group, prior to initiating the next step of the pilot study, reviewed all changes.

The three pilot study steps and use of the debriefing questionnaire assisted in the final wording and ordering of the questions. Of note, employers indicated that two questions were perceived as particularly positive and set a good tone for the interview: "What are your company's key strengths?" and "What are you most proud of at your place of employment?" These two items were placed, respectively, at the beginning

and end of the interview, as they seemed to facilitate development of a positive relationship between the placement provider and employer.

The final instrument consisted of 18 questions (see appendix). Two questions, “What jobs do you currently have openings for or that you will have in the near future?” and, “What benefits do you offer?” (Items 5 & 13) are not included in the scoring of openness but were retained as they provide general information that is of value to placement providers. The order of items on the instrument was determined from employer feedback and a decision to place disability focused questions (e.g., “How do you handle it when an employee returns to work after an illness or accident?” (Item 16) toward the end of the interview.

Examples of questions designed to measure work culture include: “Can supervisors flexibly assign job tasks based on an employee's strengths and weaknesses?” (Item 10) and, “What was the single most effective action your company took to promote diversity in the workplace?” (Item 17) An example of a work design question is: “What personal attributes or characteristics does your company look for in new hires?” (Item 6) An example of a question concerning employer experience and support is: “If a new hire or current employee asks for an accommodation who would you go to for technical assistance?” (Item 15)

Phase Two: Establishing Construct Validity

The purpose of phase two was to determine if the EOS measured employer openness as defined by Gilbride et al. (2003), and to establish scoring criteria. To determine scoring criteria key statements for each of the 18 items obtained from employers during the pilot phase of the study were abstracted and placed in a

spreadsheet. Each item had from three to eight unique statements that seemed to represent a different underlying concept or employer activity related to employer openness. The research group ranked these statements in order from least open to most open for each item based upon the Gilbride et al. model. Initially, it was decided to have three scale points for each item with one being closed, two being neutral, and three being open. (This was revised to a 5 point scale during phase three to allow more flexibility in scoring.) Then, for each item, a statement was chosen to represent the scale values of one to three.

The next step was to test the convergent validity of the instrument by evaluating whether the concept of employer openness could be recognized and distinguished from the concept of closedness. Three composite sample instruments were created from the set of employer responses elicited during the pilot study. One sample EOS consisted of responses judged to be illustrative of closed employers, the second to illustrate neutral employers, and a third for open employers.

Thirty-four rehabilitation professionals attending a disability awareness conference then reviewed these three sample instruments. These placement professionals were provided information on the Gilbride et al. (2003) model of employer openness, along with a description of the three categories and 13 specific characteristics identified in that study. Conference participants then rated the three sample EOS forms on the closedness-openness continuum, using the three point scale described above with 1= closed, 2= neutral, and 3= open. The average ratings of responses to all items of the closed EOS interview were 1.46, the neutral EOS interview was 2.01, and the open EOS interview was 2.82. These averages reflect well the

expected values for closed, neutral, and open responses and were strong evidence that rehabilitation professionals could identify the extent of openness of an employer based on the results of the EOS. An analysis of variance was also conducted on these results confirming that the difference in the ratings on the 3 samples interviews were statistically significant ($F= 144.89, p<.001$)

. [I do wish there was something we could do with this. Any ideas Dave?]

Phase Three: Field test of EOS

The purpose of the third phase was to field-test the instrument and determine the final scoring protocol. We asked placement providers to nominate employers for inclusion into this phase of the project. Placement providers in two states (one in the Northeast, and the other in the Midwest) provided the names of employers they had worked with. Employer contact information was obtained, and research associates approached employers in an attempt to complete the EOS.

Eighty-three employer interviews were conducted and scored. Scoring was based upon criteria developed during the earlier phases of the research, and upon the consensus of the researchers. A specific scoring protocol was developed that operationally defined each possible employer response and its corresponding score. For example, item number 12, “How do you communicate with, and get feedback from, your employees?” A proactive approach with evidence of reaching out to get input is scored as a 5; input possible but with no real active outreach, a passive approach is scored 3; no formal or systematic approach is scored as a 1. (Scoring criteria is available in the Appendix.) Two rehabilitation professionals were trained in scoring the surveys and the correlation between their ratings of the interview was obtained to

determine inter-rater reliability. The inter-rater reliability was .89 ($p < .001$). The potential range of scores was from 16 to 80, our sample range was from 39 to 73.

Phase four: Evaluation of the Usefulness of the EOS

To determine if the EOS would be of value to rehabilitation professionals, presentations were made before two groups of placement providers attending professional conferences. The first was a group of rehabilitation professional attending a regional National Rehabilitation Association conference ($n = 39$), the second was a group of practitioners attending a conference sponsored by the Association of Vocational Rehabilitation in Alcohol and Substance Abuse ($n = 28$ for a total of 67 providers). The Gilbride et al. (2003) model of employer openness, along with the instrument, scoring criteria and validation procedures were presented to group participants. At the conclusion of the presentation participants were asked to complete a one page feedback form that asked seven questions utilizing a Likert-style scale from 1 to 5 (1=strongly disagree, and 5= strongly agree) concerning the instrument. Results can be found in Table 1. Participants agreed that the instrument measured employer openness as defined by Gilbride et al. ($M = 4.4$, $SD = .85$), that it would be useful in developing relationships with employers ($M = 4.4$, $SD = .80$), and that they would consider using it in their placement work ($M = 4.6$, $SD = .98$). The only item rated lower than 4, was "Consumers could use this instrument" with a mean score of 3.9, ($SD = .96$).

Following the conclusion of data collection a focus group was convened with the research associates who conducted the EOS interviews. Four associates were involved,

all of who were certified rehabilitation counselors (CRC's), with Master's degrees and employed as rehabilitation counselors with case management and placement responsibilities. Research associates were asked (1) How well did the process work in connecting with employers to complete the EOS; and (2) How useful is the EOS process and resulting information for placement?

The research associates reported that on average it took about three calls to connect with the designated contact person. Once contact was made the rate of actually completing the EOS was 54%. The research associates reported that it was often difficult getting to the contact person due to screening of calls by the contact's associates and the prevalence of voice mail. Many contacts did not return calls. A number of contacts reported that they were initially reticent about discussing hiring procedures and policies with an unknown person. Research associates felt that employers may have been more responsive if the EOS process was conducted in the context of placement rather than as part of a research study.

The research associates agreed that once a contact completed the EOS the information was useful for employer development and placement purposes. Several key topics were explored through the EOS, including revealing the needs of employers that rehabilitation professionals could address, identifying the attributes of applicants sought by employers, employers preferred recruiting resources, and learning about the employer's prior experience with rehabilitation service providers.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to develop a useful and valid instrument to measure employer openness as defined by Gilbride et al. (2003). The results provide

preliminary evidence for the content and construct validity of the EOS. The strong positive results found during phase four (provider review) indicates that the instrument is perceived as meaningful and useful to rehabilitation professionals engaged in placement activities.

It must be noted that the EOS is a new instrument and further analysis and research is warranted. The EOS is based on a specific model of employer openness, which, while promising, and grounded in past business and rehabilitation literature, is clearly not definitive. The instrument also uses open-ended questions that make it difficult to perform many traditional psychometric strategies related to reliability and validity. Further, validation of the instrument is needed that would demonstrate increased hiring, accommodation, and advancement of workers with disabilities in company's rated as more open.

While further testing and analysis of the instrument is necessary, the strong consistent results found in this study suggest that the EOS has the potential to help placement professionals identify employers most open to hiring and accommodating employees with disabilities. The results also suggest that employers do not find the EOS questions threatening or inappropriate. In fact, an interesting outcome of this study was the extent to which employers enjoyed and appreciated the discussion that resulted from answering the EOS questions. A very positive unexpected outcome of this study was that a number of placements were made during the pilot phase, and employer/provider relationships were strengthened by the process of engaging employers in discussing the EOS questions.

Implications for Practice and Research

There are a number of ways in which rehabilitation counselors and other placement providers can use the EOS to increase the employment of people with disabilities. The first use of the instrument is as an employer screening device. The EOS can be used to quickly identify the level of openness of a potential employer thus increasing the effectiveness of placement and employer development activities. Given the large caseloads of many rehabilitation professionals, using the EOS to help focus services on the most promising (open) employers may save valuable time and resources. The EOS may also have the potential to be used by consumers to help them understand the types of questions they can ask of employers that are useful, but do not result in employer defensiveness.

A second use of the EOS is as a consulting and educational tool. To the extent that a provider or agency has the resources, the EOS can be used to help employers evaluate their actual (rather than publicized) level of openness. Consulting and educational services can then be directed to assist employers in honestly evaluating and changing organizational practices and procedures that may be limiting employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Consulting services potentially may be focused differently based on which of the three factors seems to limit an employer's openness. For example, an employer with a limited support system may benefit from direct personnel services from the provider, while an employer with a closed culture may benefit from assistance in changing policies, or instituting more effective communication procedures.

A third use of the EOS is as an employer development tool. Rehabilitation counselors and other professionals can use the questions on the EOS as a way to begin

or deepen a relationship with an employer. The very strong positive response of employers to the questions on the EOS suggests that employers are willing to engage in conversations with providers if they feel that the rehabilitation professional has an authentic and thoughtful interest in them. Placement providers can thus use the EOS as a method to approach an employer and establish a meaningful relationship (Fry, 1997).

These promising initial results, along with the concerns noted above, suggest that further research on the psychometric properties and uses of the EOS is warranted. A number of significant questions remain concerning the EOS, and employer openness in general. For example, are there a few particular questions (or employer characteristics) that are most important? Can the score on the EOS predict the likelihood of a consumer receiving a job offer? Is the score on the EOS an accurate measure of the employer's level of openness, or is it more a reflection of the specific individual answering the questions? Are there meaningful cut-off scores that rehabilitation counselors can rely on to focus their placement efforts? Can the EOS be used with relatively closed employers to help them change their culture or procedures? Can consumers use the EOS to facilitate their self-directed job search? Is the model of employer openness that the EOS measures a valuable and useful concept?

In summary, this initial research suggests that the EOS is a valid and useful instrument that may have a number of practice applications for rehabilitation counselors. While further research is necessary, rehabilitation counselors and other placement professionals may find this instrument of immediate benefit in their work.

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Table 1

Rehabilitation Providers Feedback on the Employer Openness Survey (N= 67)

Item	Mean*	Standard Deviation
1. The instrument addressed employer openness to hiring and accommodating people with disabilities in a manner that made sense to me	4.4	.85
2. I understand how to use the scoring key	4.2	.90
3. The instrument seems easy to use and understand	4.3	.97
5. The instrument could help me better understand employers	4.3	.85
5. The instrument could help me develop partnerships with employers	4.2	.80
6. Consumers could use the instrument	3.9	.96
7. I will consider using all or part of the instrument in my placement work	4.6	.98

*Five level Likert-style scale: 1= Strongly disagree, 3= Neutral, 5= Strongly agree

Appendix

Employer Openness Survey

Open responses score as 5
Neutral responses score as 3
Closed responses score as 1

If the scoring guidelines provided clearly do not fit the answer given by the employer, you may choose to use a rating of 2 for those answers that fall between 1 and 3, or a rating of 4 for those answers that fall between a 3 and a 5.

Examples of each type of response are given for each item. Raters need to judge how closely the actual response matches one of the examples provided and score the response accordingly.

If it is still not clear what rating to give, a general rule to follow is to give the response the highest rating possible. This approach will tend to score employers as open as possible and encourage further development and relationship building. Subsequent follow-up with the employer will clarify the extent of the employer's openness and readiness to hire.

Do not let any prior response color any subsequent judgment you make. Each item should be rated independently of all other items.

Items 5 and 13 are not scored as they are relevant only for collecting placement information.

1. What are your company's key strengths?

Open: focus is on employees, their positive attributes, or their opportunities as employees

Neutral: focus is on customers

Closed: focus is on production, services, technology, processes, etc., whatever the organization produces

2. What are the three top concerns of your company's Chief Executive Officer?

Open: focus is on employees, their well-being (note: concern for lack of staff is not to be interpreted as a concern for employees. This reflects more of a concern for production)

Neutral: focus is on customers

Closed: focus on production, provision of services, pricing, and revenue

3. **What recruiting resources do you use to find good candidates?**

Open: use of three or more types of resources that include some that are external to company, e.g., government agencies including at least one that focuses on persons with disabilities, web sites and recruiting at schools. Mention of external resources that do not include persons with disabilities, but other organizations that advocate for protected groups score as 4.

Neutral: few types, most of which are primarily local resources, such as newspapers and job fairs

Closed: use of internal recruiting (employee referrals), word-of-mouth, personal networks, or only one way of recruiting

a. **What experiences have you had with government recruiting resources such as the Department of Labor and VESID (the state vocational rehabilitation agency)?**

(Note: Raters may use information from Item #3 to help score this sub-item)

Open: works with these agencies to hire or has tried

Neutral: passive, mainly aware of agency services but hasn't been proactive

Closed: Not aware, no experience, no interest

4. **How has using automated electronic applications, such as resume scanning, using fax machines, email and the Internet, changed the make up of your applicant pool, if at all?**

Open: recognition that more persons with disabilities or from diverse backgrounds and culture are being attracted, and aware of implications of new technologies, or at least thinking about how new technologies have impacted on the make up of the applicant pool

Neutral: no impact although used, not really thought about impact on the applicant pool

Closed: not used, sticks with tried and true

5. **What jobs do you currently have openings for or that you will have in the near future?**

Not scored – a placement information item

6. What personal attributes or characteristics does your company look for in new hires?

Open: An open employer will indicate a value for people for who they are rather than for what they can do and make reference to attributes or characteristics (rather than job-related skills) such as need for team player, readiness to learn (implies willingness to teach), employees described as valued resource, refers to having employees with a range/mix of attributes, not one type

Neutral: A Neutral employer will indicate desire for a combination of skills as well as reference to desirable personal attributes.

Closed: A closed employer references only required skills, looking for one specific type of applicant, or concerned with the personal appearance of employees. Even the reference for having employees with good interpersonal skills is closed when it is viewed as a skill required for certain jobs, such as sales clerks or receptionists.

7. What criteria or measures, such as interviews and reference checks, do you use to determine if an applicant is a good fit for the job?

Open: An open employer will use a variety of approaches to get to know an applicant and use multiple contacts, both subjective and objective to accomplish this. There will be a balance of strategies, for example at least two objective and two subjective approaches. Interviews and reference checks are subjective, while work histories and tests are objective. Novel and creative/thoughtful approaches, such as taking a candidate on a tour, are signs of willingness to provide the person with an opportunity to make him/herself known.

Neutral: Although both objective and subjective approaches are used, there is only one example of one of the types. There is not a balance or enough variety of objective or subjective approaches.

Closed: Rigid and complete reliance one or the other kind of evidence such as only using drug tests, computer tests, screening tests or only using interviews and references, without the mix of objective and subjective input.

8. If you had to choose, would you select someone who you knew to be a quick learner or someone who you knew to be very dependable? Why?

(Note that this question requires an either/or answer. Therefore, there is no possible neutral choice. If the employer refers to both being desirable, this indicates he/she is being very selective in that both quick learning and dependability are requirements. Thus, an employer indicating both would be a closed employer due to this restrictiveness.)

Open: reference to trust, dependability, reliability; characteristics anyone could have not dependent on prior experience, education, etc.

Neutral: none, this item must be rated open or closed

Closed: Emphasis on ability to learn or indicating both are important (unable to choose one over the other)

9. **Do you provide internships and/or apprenticeships?**

Note that this question requires an answer regarding what the company does at present, or might have done in the recent past. Indicating a willingness to provide these, without having done so would only merit a neutral rating.

Open: Yes, offers these or has done so in recent past (within last two years)

Neutral: Select this rating only if the company indicates willingness to do this even though they haven't done so to this point.

Closed: No or blank

10. **Can supervisors flexibly assign job tasks based on an employee's strengths and weaknesses?**

Open: Yes

Neutral: No, but with a positive qualification as to why it is not possible, such as the jobs are too routine, or union issues, etc.

Closed: No

11. **Does your company have special recognition programs or activities for individual employees, teams, departments or other groups?**

(Note: This item refers to doing good things for employees like providing holiday parties, discounts, bonuses, etc. It does not pertain to employee benefits or anything that all employees get simply as a result of being employed.)

Open: Listing of more than two that are related to personal or professional achievements, development and growth

Score of four: a listing of two

Neutral: Listing of one

Closed: None

12. **How do you communicate with, and get feedback from, your employees?**

Open: includes getting or giving information – requires four or more approaches

Score of four: Three approaches

Neutral: Two approaches or face-to-face meetings

Closed: No formal or systematic approach

13. What benefits do you offer?

This item is not scored

14. What kind of social activities does your company have and who participates?

(Note: multiple events occurring during the year that are similar count as one activity)

Open: Three or more activities

Neutral: One or two

Closed: None

15. If a new hire or current employee asks for an accommodation who would you go to for technical assistance?

Open: Potentially could seek assistance from multiple sources, primarily external to the company, that could be local or from corporate headquarters

Neutral: Tries something but only with internal resources, or one source

Closed: No assistance sought or no acknowledgement this has ever been needed or shows a concern for litigation or legal issues

16. How do you handle it when an employee returns to work after an illness or injury?

Open: Mention of some kind of accommodation with examples provided, or reference to a process to ensure smooth re-entry, such as in-service training

Neutral: Need of doctor's note only

Closed: No formal approach or doesn't know

17. **What was the single most effective action your company took to promote diversity in the workplace?**

Open: A proactive approach or strategy; the company took deliberate action

Neutral: Passive approach; it just happened; company not opposed to it but did not seek it out, emphasizes meeting legal or Equal Opportunity requirements

Closed: No action, or flat statement that they don't discriminate

18. **What are you most proud of at your place of employment?**

Open: Reference to giving back to the community; going beyond the company

Neutral: Statements related to employees and/or customers

Closed: References to product(s), services, productivity
