

Employment for All: Disability's Place in the Workforce

Mary Claire Schibelka

December 15, 2013

As a special educator, it is one's goal to ensure that students are as successful after high school as possible. This means that teachers are responsible for making sure their students have appropriate social, functional, and daily living skills by the time they graduate, as well as a plan for what each will do once they are out of high school. One of the main concerns of special education teachers is whether or not students with disabilities will become employed after they graduate. Unfortunately, people with disabilities have the lowest employment rate out of every minority group in the United States (Lavin, Owens, Neimiec, 2009). According to the 2012 Bureau of Labor Statistics Labor Force Characteristics Summary (2012), only 17.8% of people with a disability were employed last year, in contrast to the 63.9% of people without a disability. Of that 17.8%, most employees commonly work only part time, due to difficulty with finding a full time job. People with disabilities are also more likely to work in production, transportation, and materials moving, rather than management or professional occupations. The question is, why? Are companies simply discriminating against these individuals? Are people with disabilities unable to find jobs due to a lack of resources? Or are they simply just not trying hard enough to get hired?

Determining why the employment of individuals with disabilities is so low is often difficult to pinpoint. There are many variables that affect the low level of employment of individuals with disabilities. For example, 46 percent of people with disabilities are over the age of 65, and very few people over the age of 65 are employed, even if they do not have a disability (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). In order to determine whether the cause of the low employment rate of people with disabilities is attributed to age, attitudes of employers, or any other cause, each potential cause must be closely examined.

Business Incentives

Several retail businesses have been commended or recognized for making efforts to hire people with disabilities, including Office Max (PR Newswire, 2013) and Wal-Mart (Lenois, 2012). Also, technology companies, such as Microsoft (CSR Wire, 2000), and federal government agencies like NASA, the Department of Justice, and the Railroad Retirement Board are also known for hiring these individuals (WhatDisability, 2009). Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, *all* businesses are required to allow the employment of and provision of accommodations for “qualified” individuals with disabilities (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990.). The problem is that if a business does not want to hire employees with disabilities, it might say that there were simply applicants who were better-qualified. Fortunately, several incentive-based initiatives are being offered to encourage businesses to employ individuals with disabilities.

Many states are beginning to establish Employment First initiatives to prevent discrimination against individuals with disabilities in the workforce. Employment First initiatives are regulations implemented by individual states that prioritize integrated, community-based employment. Employment First Initiatives aim to raise expectation, so that people with disabilities are held to the same standards of employment as any other working-age adult, rather than expected to be placed in segregated or less important positions. In these states, a portion of funding is required to go to these efforts by providing more advocacy, public education on employment of people with disabilities, customized job-related technologies, and training for individuals with disabilities. Employment First Initiatives are evaluated based on measurable progress made in the community. States that adopt Employment First Initiatives must create some sort of tangible evidence, whether it be a report, a CD, or a website in order to prove that

they have made progress in employing individuals with disabilities. By requiring these states to produce evidence of their progress, states are held accountable for ensuring that sufficient efforts towards employing individuals with disabilities are made (Lavin, Owens, Neimiec, 2009).

In addition to Employment First Initiatives, there are also a number of benefits businesses can receive as incentives to hire more people with disabilities. For example, the Small Business Tax Credit gives up to a \$5,000 tax credit to businesses that made \$1 million or less over the course of a year or employ 30 or more individuals with disabilities (United States Department of Labor, n.d.). Because of monetary incentives, a business that would not normally hire an individual with a disability may be more inclined to do so simply because of the tax credit.

Several private agencies also honor specific businesses for hiring people with disabilities. JJ's List is a website that lists businesses with a good reputation for promoting disability awareness. The site contains a directory of businesses with good disability practices, including accessibility features and employees with disabilities. JJ's List provides a "Seal of Approval" to businesses that are exemplary in promoting disability awareness. It also allows companies to sign up for training in disability awareness (JJ's List, 2013). This is an incentive for businesses to hire more individuals with disabilities for the simple reason that it is good marketing. In a 2002 study, over 87% of Americans reported that they would prefer to give their business to a disability-aware company, as opposed to one that was not (Siperstein, Romano, Mohler & Parker, 2001). Therefore, it is a business's best interest, in terms of competition with other businesses, to comply with the demands of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Vocational Services

Federal law dictates that students who have Individualized Education Plans must receive transition planning services, starting at the age of 16. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, “transition services means a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that is designed to be within a results-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation” (IDEA, 2004). Vocational coordinators are often hired in schools or school districts to teach job-related skills and obtain jobs for students with disabilities. Teachers and parents are encouraged to collaborate with vocational coordinators to ensure that new job skills are practiced and maintained. The ultimate goal of this system is to help students with disabilities to gain competitive employment (Occupational Information Network, 1995). In theory, the system works very well. However, not all districts have a vocational coordinator, and depending on the size of a coordinator's case load, it can become difficult to meet the needs of all students fully. For these reasons, it is possible for students to exit high school without any vocational skills, training, or experience, and thus, they are often unprepared for the workforce.

Another concern for students with disabilities entering the world of employment is the application process. In cases where a student is working with a vocational coordinator, many times the coordinator finds a job placement for the individual. However, this is not always the case. Often, persons with disabilities are left with no assistance finding a job. This leaves them on their own to enter potential workplaces, ask for applications, fill out applications, and

interview. Naturally, this can be a major setback for some individuals. According to the Cornell University Employment and Disability Institute (2011), people with disabilities who are able to complete applications often do not receive interviews at all. Applications of people with disabilities are often screened immediately, due to gaps in employment, little experience, or short periods of previous employment. Fortunately, there are resources that offer supports to assist individuals with disabilities with getting into the workforce.

Incentives for Individuals with Disabilities

The National Council on Independent Living (NCIL) is a non-profit organization that supports the equal participation of people with disabilities in the community. NCIL represents a number of other agencies that support the community involvement of people with disabilities, such as Centers for Independent Living and Statewide Independent Living Councils. These organizations provide services such as peer support, information referral, individual and systems advocacy, and independent living skills training, all of which aim to assist individuals with disabilities in living independent lives, where they do not have to rely on other people to make decisions for them. Part of living independently includes the ability to be employed just as a person without a disability would be. In fact, Centers for Independent Living operate under the belief that people with disabilities are the experts on their own needs so they are staffed and completely governed by individuals with disabilities (NCIL, 2013).

The Regional Access and Mobilization Project (RAMP) is an example of a local, non-profit Center for Independent Living agency dedicated to increasing the independence of individuals with disabilities. If a person with a disability is receiving Social Security income, he

or she is eligible to receive employment, community, and individual services. Also, RAMP itself hires people with disabilities to help seek out community-based jobs for other individuals (RAMP, n.d.).

The foundation for RAMP's Employment Network Services is the Ticket to Work Program. The Ticket to Work Program is a work incentive program for people with disabilities created by Social Security. The program allows its beneficiaries to keep their cash benefits and medical coverage while employment networks help them transition into work. Therefore, if an individual with a disability gets a job, the Ticket to Work Program ensures that he or she will not immediately lose his or her disability income and healthcare benefits. Also, once the individual has stopped receiving benefits, after maintaining a steady job, the benefits may be reinstated if the individual were to lose his or her job. The program also offers vocational rehabilitation, training services, and job referrals without cost (Social Security, 2013).

In addition to the Ticket to Work Program, Social Security also offers Earned Income Exclusion and Student Earned Income Exclusion as work incentives for people with disabilities. These exclusions are similar to the Ticket to Work Program because they allow working people with disabilities to continue receiving a portion of their Social Security Income. Under Earned Income Exclusion, the first \$65 that a person with a disability earns from working is not counted as part of his or her gross earnings. After that, only half of the amount earned is counted, causing Social Security Income to be reduced by only \$1 for every \$2 earned. Student Earned Income Exclusion applies to students under the age of 22 and excludes up to \$1,730 of gross earning in a month when figuring countable income. These exclusions allow people with disabilities to continue receiving a portion of their Social Security Income, along with the wages they are earning at their jobs. Also, Social Security may exclude from earned income any out-of-

pocket expenses that a person with a disability pays for items that he or she needs for work. This includes attendant care services, car modifications, transportation costs, and any special equipment (Social Security, 2013).

Self-Determination

Utilizing agencies, services, and specialists in the vocational field makes it very possible for individuals with disabilities to learn work-related skills and find/maintain employment in appropriate jobs. However, these services are of no use if they are not taken advantage of by the individuals who are eligible to receive services. Students must be given information about these agencies, and they must be self-determined enough to actually use the services or see to it that someone else makes arrangements for them to receive the services. Self-determination is “a concept reflecting the belief that all individuals have the right to direct their own lives” (Bremer, Kachgal, Schoeller, 2003). People with disabilities who are self-determined and believe that they have the ability to control their own destinies are more likely to be employed and hold jobs than their counterparts who are not as self-determined (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003). Therefore, even if students are properly trained in how to get jobs and perform job skills, they need to take the initiative to actively seek employment.

Attitudes of Employers

In 2002, Unger conducted a literature review regarding employers’ attitudes on hiring people with disabilities. She found that although the Americans with Disabilities Act forbids employer discrimination against applicants with disabilities (Americans with Disabilities Act,

1990), some employers are often still apprehensive about hiring individuals with disabilities due to concerns in their abilities to perform tasks, compared to the abilities of people without disabilities. In the past, many employers reported feeling far more comfortable hiring an individual with a physical disability than an individual with an intellectual or emotional disability because of the concern that employees with disabilities would not be able to get along with other coworkers and cooperate as part of a team (Fuqua, Rathburn, & Gade, 1984). Now, one of the main reasons for the apprehensiveness of employers to hire people with disabilities is because they think the individuals will require a greater amount of training (Olson, Cioffi, Yovanoff, & Mank, 2000).

In contrast to the negative attitudes of these employers, many employers who have previously hired people with disabilities report having very positive experiences working with them. For example, various employers who have hired people with disabilities and worked with them on a weekly, or even daily, basis, have generally been very pleased with their work performance (Blanck, 1998; Du Pont, 1993), safety, and attendance (Blanck; Du Pont; Shafer et al., 1987).

Conclusion

There does not seem to be one single cause for the lack in employment of people with disabilities. A lack of self-determination, vocational training, and disability-awareness in the business world all seem to be contributing factors. Fortunately, although many employers still have negative attitudes in regards to hiring workers with disabilities, hiring people with disabilities is becoming a more widespread practice, shown to be beneficial not only for the

employers, but also the employees. Now that there are more businesses willing to hire individuals with disabilities, self-determination is crucial to the success of these individuals because it is what motivates them to go out and search for jobs. It is up to teachers to encourage self-determination of people with disabilities and lead them to appropriate services to assist in their employment. In addition to including instruction on self-determination, it is very important for special educators to offer more work experiences into the curriculum so that students are more prepared to enter the workforce following graduation. Some of these examples might involve arranging part-time jobs with the help of a job coach and offering more vocational training in work environments.

Clearly, the consistent employment of individuals with disabilities is not yet where it should be. However, significant improvements have been made in recent years. These could perhaps be attributed to some of the incentives such as Employment First Initiatives, tax credits, and recognition of disability-aware businesses. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013), disability employment has gone up 5.4 percent for people with disabilities who are of working age between 2012 and 2013, while the percentage for people without disabilities stayed the same. Also, the percentage of people with disabilities who are either working or actively looking for work increased by up to 2 percent, and decreased for people without disabilities. This goes to show that improvements are being made exclusively in the area of disability, and these changes are not simply attributed to an increase in the employment of the entire population. With the combination of continuing disability awareness in the community, hiring effective and well-qualified teachers and vocational coordinators, and offering incentives for businesses to become disability-aware, individuals with disabilities will continue to gain recognition in the

world of employment, until one day, they are seen as equal competitors to people without disabilities in the world of work.

References

- About NCIL. (n.d.). National Council on Independent Living. Retrieved December 14, 2013, from <http://www.ncil.org/about/>
- Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-336, § 1, 102 Stat. 328 (1990).
- Blanck, P. D. (1998). *The Americans with Disabilities Act and the emerging workforce: Employment of people with mental retardation*. Washington, DC: American Association of Mental Retardation.
- Bremer, C., Kachgal, M., & Schoeller, K. (2003). Self-determination: supporting successful transition. *Improving Secondary Education and Transition Services Through Research*, 2(1), 1.
- Bruyère, S., Erickson, W., Malzer, V., & Schrader, S. v. (2011). *Emerging employment issues for people with disabilities*. Ithaca: Cornell University ILR School Employment and Disability Institute.
- Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor (2012). *Persons with a disability: labor force characteristics -2012* [Press Release]. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/disabl.nr0.htm>

CSR Press Release. (2000, July 19). RSS. Retrieved December 9, 2013, from

http://www.csrwire.com/press_releases/25088-Microsoft-Recruits-Hires-and-Accommodates-People-with-Disabilities

Disability awareness training for businesses and organizations. (2013). JJ's List. Retrieved

December 11, 2013, from http://www.jjslist.com/pages/business_trai

Disability News, Resources, and Inspirations. (2012, December 18). Best places for people with

disabilities to work in the federal government. Retrieved December 9, 2013, from

<http://www.whatdisability.com/employment3/530-best-places-for-people-with-disabilities-to-work-in-the-federal-government>

Du Pont de Nemours and Company. (1993). Equal to the Task II: 1990 Du Pont Survey of

Employment of People with Disabilities. Wilmington, DE: Du Pont de Nemours and Company.

Fuqua, D. R., Rathburn, M., & Gade, E. M. (1984). A comparison of employer attitudes toward

the worker problems of eight types of disabilities. *Vocational Evaluation and Work Adjustment Bulletin*, 15(1), 40-43.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 300.43 (2004)

Lavin, D., Neimiec, B., & Owens, L. A. (2009). Establishing a national Employment First

agenda. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 31, 133-144.

Lenois, C. (2012, January 4). Sam's Club makes people with disabilities part of the culture.

American Training. Retrieved December 11, 2013, from

<http://www.americantraininginc.com/people-with-disabilities-and-sams-club/>

Newsire. (2013, April 23). OfficeMax receives national award for leadership in hiring people with disabilities. PR Newswire. Retrieved November 1, 2013, from <http://www.ssa.gov/ssi/text-work-ussi.htm><http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/officemax-receives-national-award-for-leadership-in-hiring-people-with-disabilities-204259911.html>

Olson, D., Cioffi, M. A., Yovanoff, P., & Mank, D. (2000). Employers' perceptions of employees with mental retardation. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Palmer, S., & Wehmeyer, M. (2003). Adult outcomes for students with cognitive disabilities three-years after high school: the impact of self-determination. *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities*, 38(2), 131-144.

Siperstein, G. N., Romano, N., Mohler, A., & Parker, R. (2006). A national survey of consumer attitudes towards companies that hire people with disabilities. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 24(1), 3-9.

Shafer, M. S., Hill, J., Seyfarth, J., & Wehman, P. (1987). Competitive employment and workers with mental retardation: Analysis of employers' perceptions and experiences. *American Journal of Mental Retardation*, 92(3), 304-311.

Social Security Administration. (2013). *Your ticket to work*. (05-10061) [Pamphlet].

Social Security. (n.d.). Understanding Supplemental Security Income (SSI)-- SSI Work Incentives. Retrieved December 11, 2013, from <http://www.ssa.gov/ssi/text-work-ussi.htm>