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A Model of Successful Work Experience for Employees Who Are Visually Impaired: The Results of a Study

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Abstract: This study explored the factors that contribute to a successful work experience for employees who are visually impaired from the perspective of employers. The employers who were interviewed emphasized the dual responsibility that employees have to empower their own success and that employers have to enable the employees' success. In addition, an integrative model of successful employment was developed from the interviews with the employers.

The rate of unemployment among people with visual impairments (that is, those who are blind or have low vision) is unacceptably high. Whereas 82% of working-age people have jobs or own businesses (Dixon, Kruse, & Van Horn, 2003, p. 7), "only 31 percent of blind and 44 percent of visually impaired individuals between the ages of 21 and 64 are employed" (Wolffe & Candela, 2002, p. 59). Although the age, educational level, and health status of people who are visually impaired has an impact on their employment rate (Kirchner, Schmeidler, & Todorov, 1999), corporate culture plays a crucial role in successful employment.

Historically, employers believed that workers who are visually

impaired "did not fit in with [the] corporate structure, other workers did not know how to relate to workers with disabilities, and workers with disabilities could not compete with sighted workers" (Crudden, McBroom, Skinner, & Moore, 1998, p. 10). In addition, Goffman (1963, p. 19) described physical disabilities, such as blindness, as a stigma, noting that individuals with disabilities and others feel uneasy in social situations and that it becomes the job of people with disabilities to make others feel comfortable so they can interact socially and at work.

Even those who are trained to work with people with disabilities sometimes experience distress. For example, sighted interns at Arkansas Enterprises for the Blind with no prior experience in working with people with visual impairments experienced a pattern of reactions that included

> depression, frustration, trauma, fear, withdrawal, melancholy, sadness, fright, amazement, nervousness, helplessness, uneasiness, dizziness, sorrow, revulsion, pity, annoyance, guilt, shyness, self-consciousness, resentment, [and] loss. (Ward, 1973, pp.1-2)

The interns felt relieved when they talked to others about their feelings and "realized that they were not alone in their responses" (Ward, 1973, p. 4). Ward's study found that preparing persons for feelings they may experience and providing opportunities to discuss these feelings helped them to cope. How, then, can this knowledge be translated into a workable solution for success in the workplace?

Exploring models of diversity that frame attitudes toward such groups as people with disabilities can steer professionals toward best practices that allow the meaningful accommodation of workers with disabilities. Plaut (2002, p. 368) identified "four models of diversity that currently … permeate both popular discourse and social science thinking." Sameness, common identity creation, value-added, and mutual accommodation models are shared practices that show how people relate to one another and frame society's attitudes toward different groups. The sameness model minimizes differences among people and leads

to efforts to assimilate. The common-identity model encourages the creation of an overarching identity that minimizes differences, but it can increase bias when it tries to replace a subgroup identity, such as disability. The value-added model recognizes that different approaches add value but risks placing individuals in pigeonholes. The mutual-accommodation model says that differences should be accommodated regardless of whether they add value and that institutions must "accept, adjust to, and incorporate group differences" (Plaut, 2002, p. 384).

The purpose of the research reported here was to identify factors that contribute to a successful work experience. Instead of focusing on negative barriers and on overcoming barriers, the study examined successfully employed persons with visual impairments. In other words, it sought to answer the following questions: Why are these employees successful? What is it about their skills that enables them to succeed in their work environment? What factors contribute to their success? What approaches have they taken that have enabled them to navigate the cultural, social, and attitudinal problems that often arise? Identifying factors that contribute to a successful work experience could empower employees who are visually impaired to be more successful in the work environment and could educate employers about what they can do to enable these employees to be successful (Golub, 2005).

Service providers have a great deal of information about employees, but there is much less information about employers' perceptions of the factors that contribute to the success of employees. Since information from employers is sparse, this study examined such factors from the perspective of employers.

Method

The participants (employers of people with visual impairments) were recruited through the American Foundation for the Blind's Career Connect mentorship program, which pairs job seekers who

are visually impaired with successfully employed people with visual impairments who work in fields of interest to the job seekers. The mentors gave letters to their employers asking if they would participate. All the participants provided written consent in accordance with procedures that were approved by Northeastern University's Institutional Review Board.

The following five research questions were addressed in the study:

1. What types of corporate culture and organizational structure empower people who are visually impaired to succeed?

2. What specific social skills are used by people who are visually impaired who are successfully employed?

3. How do successful workers with visual impairments make others feel comfortable?

4. What factors contribute to work success?

5. What specific steps do corporations take to enable their employees with visual impairments to succeed?

These questions were designed to explore the best practices of employers of individuals who are visually impaired, to build a model of success from the employer's perspective, to identify which factors employers believe affect their workplace culture, and to assist service providers to steer employees toward organizations that are more likely to enable their success (Golub, 2005).

The 22 employers from 11 states were interviewed by telephone and audiotaped from April 22, 2004, to June 18, 2004, and an independent consultant transcribed the tapes. The transcripts were read several times to identify emerging themes and the meaning of the themes for the employers who were interviewed. Responses were categorized into themes and coded on the basis of how many employers raised the theme, how frequently the theme was mentioned, and the importance that the employers

placed on the concept. This article explains the model that was developed after the responses were analyzed.

PARTICIPANTS

Of the 22 employers, 32% were from for-profit companies and 68% were from nonprofit organizations or governmental agencies with 9 to 500,000 employees. Of these employers, 36.5% worked at private companies, 18% worked at governmental agencies not related to services for people who are blind, 36.5% worked at agencies that provided social services for people who are blind, and 9% worked at other social services agencies. Seventy-three percent of the employees were professionals, and the employees' salaries ranged from $14,000 to $87,500 per year.

An integrative model of successful employment was developed from the interviews with the employers that shows the dual responsibility of the employer and the employee. One side of the model includes seven steps that the employer can take that will enable the employee to be successful. The other side shows seven steps that the employees can take to empower their own success. As you read the steps in the model, try to imagine that the employer and the employee are each taking steps on opposite sides of a staircase and that they meet at a common landing (see Figure 1).

Model for employers

This section describes the seven steps that the employer needs to take to enable an employee with visual impairment to be successful.

STEP 1: CORE VALUES FLOW FROM THE TOP DOWN

The most fundamental step that employers should take is to recognize that the intrinsic values of an organization have an important impact on their employees' success. When core values are promulgated from the top of the organization and are

implemented through the entire chain of command, they stand a better chance of having an impact. An employer can implement core values by viewing diversity as a strength, rather than an accommodation; clarifying values in the mission statement and personnel policies of their organization; sharing the values of the organization with new employees; implementing a program to increase awareness of diversity; educating employees so as to dispel myths about people with visual impairments; and encouraging a collegial atmosphere in which everyone respects each other's abilities.

For example, one employer explained what is done in their organization to ensure that the intrinsic core values flow from the top down:

> One of the core values of the corporation is integrity and trust and respect, so it flows from the top down…. They reinforce it in a lot of different ways. They have a lot of diversity training on various topics; it's a variety of diversity, not just color of skin,…. and that includes people who are visually impaired.

> It has to be an ethic of the company that inclusiveness is important, diversity is important …. and that they see that as a strength, rather than an accommodation…. And that value is important up the line to the managers. It isn't just important to me; it's important to my manager, [and] it's important to her manager who is the CEO of the corporation, so that value is intrinsic to who we are and how we do our work.

STEP 2: FILL THE TOOLBOX

If employers are going to hold their employees accountable for doing the work, they must provide the physical tools that the employees need to perform their jobs well, such as screen readers, software, and braille printers. They can fill the toolboxes by asking employees what equipment they need to do their job well and by making sure that new or upgraded equipment is accessible to and compatible with the needs of all employees. One employer explained:

> The most important thing I have learned is to make sure that each employee has the tools they need to do their job. That's my responsibility. If I am going to hold them accountable to do the work, I

have to be held accountable to provide them with the tools needed to perform well.

STEP 3: ACCESSIBILITY AND ACCOMMODATIONS

It is important to provide accessibility and accommodation in all aspects of work. All equipment and facilities should be accessible to all employees, and all employees must receive the same information that is shared with other employees (especially when using nonelectronic communication that may not be accessible to everyone). The employers said that they reviewed their companies' procedures to identify which ones needed to be adapted to ensure access for all employees, and, when planning outside speakers or events, they asked ahead of time if the materials or information presented in the meeting would be accessible to everyone. They recognized the importance of accommodations as part of what employers need to provide to run a successful organization. As one employer noted, asking employees what they need works:

> It's … real[ly] important to sit down … and say, "What it is that you need?" and tell them that if they have an accommodation that they need, they have to feel free to request it because I can't read minds.

STEP 4: ATTITUDE COUNTS

Employers should strive to make the employee's disability as "transparent" as possible by encouraging others to focus on the individual employee rather than on his or her disability. Employers need to provide assistance when needed, but they should not take the lead when offering help. They also need to encourage employees with visual impairment to show others how adaptive equipment works and to use the employee with visual impairment as a resource for testing the usability of equipment and locations of meetings. Two employers explained the importance of transparency and attitude this way:

> Make it as transparent as possible. He doesn't have difficulty doing the majority of the items that other people do. Once in a while, you have to make some allowances for presentations and so forth, but try to make it a nonissue.

> She doesn't want to be treated differently. She really doesn't want help with things unless she's asking for it. She doesn't want to be treated like she has a disability.

STEP 5: WORDS SPEAK AS LOUDLY AS ACTIONS

The employers understood that their employees who are visually impaired can benefit greatly by having their fellow workers and employers provide some verbal cues that give them enough information about their surroundings without "overdoing it." Such verbal cues included telling employees with visual impairments when you enter the room; informing them of the subtleties of a conversation and the participants' body language; and making them aware of other types of social interaction, such as who walks by and waves. The employers often asked their employees with visual impairments if they would like to teach them and others how to be a sighted guide. These employers then knew how to model the behavior they expected other employees to use. Some talked with newly hired employees about how to relate to a person who is visually impaired and showed the video *What Do You Do When You See A Blind Person* (American Foundation for the Blind, 2000).

The employers talked about specific things they do on a daily basis. In the words of one employer:

> In general, over the years, what [people who are blind] have taught me is … to act my same self as I do with everybody else, the only exception being that I know there are certain things I can do that will make the relationship smoother. When I am entering a room, I say that I am there in some way--making some noise, so they know I've gotten there or just saying their name. And whenever there is another person in the room, I always make sure it doesn't turn out to be just the sighted people involved in the conversation. I try to make sure [the employees who are visually impaired] are aware of any subtleties that are going on. If we all start laughing for some reason or something happened that we saw, I'll tell the person what it was. I try to make sure the person remains included in the activity. I try to be aware of … information I am getting purely visually that affects our conversation. So … if I suddenly become distracted by something I saw that the person wouldn't have seen, … I would say something like "Oh, that was so and so who just walked by" if someone waves at me. I try to be more aware of those little things that

lubricate the social interaction.

Another employer also talked about how the organization trains new employees to interact:

> When we hire a new employee who is not visually impaired, … we talk … about how you relate with a [person who is blind]. We have a movie we can show them, but we also talk to them about the emotional response to working with a disabled person that any human being is going to have. Basically, at least we give the new employee permission to have those emotional responses and can explain that everybody goes through that. Sometimes a certain situation or a certain person will bring up feelings of sadness or discomfort or some other emotional feelings. So managers have the responsibility … to bring up those connections and talk about them openly.

STEP 6: EXPECT THE SAME PERFORMANCE

The sixth step is to expect the same performance from all employees after accessibility accommodations have been made, because then acceptance by others is more likely. The employers said the key is to remain flexible in the way work is performed, as in the following two comments:

> The approach I take is basically to "level the playing field" for whatever the person's disability is. Then I treat her like everyone else--same performance level and everything…. As long as she has the tools to do her job, then … I expect the same thing as from everyone else. So she has the reader, she has the computer program that reads the stuff to her, and she has the braille keyboard. If anything malfunctions, then that's my responsibility--to make sure that these tools are back in place for her to do her job effectively.

> They may not do the work in the same way that somebody else does, but their net output should be the same like you would have expected if you hired a sighted or not disabled person. They have to do the job.

STEP 7: MUTUAL ACCOMMODATION

The last step is to recognize that differences among individuals are substantial and must be accommodated regardless of whether they add value. It is legitimate for people to have different perspectives. Employers need to make meaningful changes in company policies and institutional practices to implement a mutual accommodation model so that each employee feels safe,

valued, and respected. The goal is to acknowledge, respect, and value differences.

Model for employees

This section describes the steps that employees who are visually impaired must take to empower their own success, from the perspective of employers.

STEP 1: YOUR COMFORT IS CONTAGIOUS

Employers stated that when an individual with disabilities is comfortable with his or her visual impairment and asks for what he or she needs, it helps the individual and their employer to succeed. Employers suggested that workers who are visually impaired help others get past the discomfort they may feel about visual impairment by demonstrating that disability is not the most important thing about visually impaired people. One employer described an employee who is visually impaired who made others feel comfortable:

> She has been real[ly] open about showing people her equipment and how she does her work. I think a lot of it has to do with how open she is about stating what her needs are…. She is assertive without being annoying. She knows what she needs; it's just a fact, and she's real[ly] comfortable asking for things.

STEP 2: BLINDNESS COMPETENCIES

The employers said that blindness competencies are the key to success. Employees with visual impairment should be up-to-date in their orientation and mobility, braille, and assistive technology skills; maintain a variety of strategies to cope in case a system fails (if a Braille 'n Speak dies, have a backup); and establish systems by which information can be accessed quickly. During interviews, candidates should demonstrate their competence and have specific ideas for how to manage the details of the work and transportation.

STEP 3: BE AN AMBASSADOR FOR BLINDNESS

The overall opinion was, like it or not, employees with visual impairments need to be ambassadors for blindness. Employers felt that the awkwardness of a coworker is not a reflection of the individual, but pointed out that the person who is visually impaired has more responsibility for ameliorating awkwardness in a relationship with a colleague than anyone else. Employers suggested that employees with visual impairments work actively at putting others at ease by engaging them in conversation; maintaining a broad variety of hobbies and interests, so they have lots of things to talk to others about; using humor to diffuse the discomfort of others (for example, the employee could say, "Let's go to lunch--I'll drive"); making people feel comfortable when they ask questions about blindness, adaptive equipment, or how work is completed; and asking employers and coworkers if they want to learn how to be a sighted guide. One employer explained:

> Whether you like it or not, you have to spend your life using up a lot of energy to be a diplomat and an ambassador for blindness. Even though it's exhausting and you get sick of it, if you want to be successful, … you have to go through that.

Making others feel comfortable when they ask questions is important, one employer said:

> Just being friendly and answering questions, and I think just her ability to be honest with people. If they ask her questions, she doesn't make them feel silly for asking them. She maintains good eye contact even though she can't do the eye-contact thing.

STEP 4: POSITIVE ATTITUDES

Employers suggested that employees with visual impairments be as positive and competent as possible, work hard, avoid using their blindness as a crutch or excuse, and view challenges as new opportunities. If the employee who is visually impaired has a sense of entitlement or an underlying sense of anger, his or her coworkers will stay away. If he or she faces an obstacle, he or she should push forward without being a victim. Two employers described the importance of maintaining a positive attitude:

> He doesn't have a chip on his shoulder about being blind. He's a realistic person, and he's just a regular guy.

> If somebody has an attitude, no matter what type of limitation it is in life--that it's a burden and everybody needs to do things to serve them because they can't do things--I don't think you are going to have somebody be successful. If you have an attitude that you are there to do the same job as everybody else and you don't want to be treated differently, then … people are going to interact with you, and you'll be integrated well.

STEP 5: WORK ETIQUETTE

Employers encouraged good work etiquette by suggesting that employees with visual impairments approach fellow workers after confirming that they are not in the middle of a task and that it is a good time to talk, leave a chair free for someone else to sit, and listen for cues when interacting with others at work.

STEP 6: INSIST ON BEING HELD TO THE SAME STANDARD

Once workers with visual impairments have the necessary accommodations, employers suggested that they insist on being held to the same expectations as their coworkers in terms of work performance, and on taking full responsibility for their duties. Two employers explained how an employee who is visually impaired could insist on being held to the same performance standard:

> Not expecting to be treated differently from anybody else is really what governs the way other people treat them. There's a difference between asking for help and accommodation. I am really talking about the day-to-day, minute-to-minute interactions with people and how they do things.

> Speaking as a blind person myself and speaking as someone who has gone through raising children and the normal kind of living, dealing with coworkers, working full time, and just dealing with life--buying houses and even cars--I think the big thing is the responsibility for making sure that you do your part. As a blind person, you can't expect other people to automatically adjust to you. You kind of have to be out there and understand and kind of show people how. It's a matter of education. And if you are not willing to do that yourself, then … other people are not going to know how to relate to you unless you help them

out. The things you have to do are try and get them past the blindness and realize that it is not the most important thing about you. The most important thing about you is your humanness, and the blindness is just a secondary pain in the butt to have to get through.

STEP 7: MUTUAL ACCOMMODATION

Finally, people who are visually impaired need to help their employers move toward a model of mutual accommodation--a situation in which the employer, employee, and other staff members are comfortable talking about different ways to accomplish tasks and discussing different perspectives--by acknowledging their own differences while respecting and valuing differences in others.

Discussion

Four conditions must be met to succeed in the mutual accommodation paradigm (Plaut, 2002). First, social and cultural constructions can change and need to be malleable. Institutional policies should have the norm of expecting differences and making it acceptable to notice differences. This norm was evident when employers spoke openly with their employees about differences, allowed them to express their feelings, and educated them about the myths and stereotypes of visual impairment. Second, individuals construct and help define the world around them as much as it constructs them. An example of this aspect of mutual accommodation was when the employers explained that each individual employee needs to be an ambassador for blindness. Third, all individuals must learn to navigate different worlds and understand that one way is not always the right way or the only way. This aspect of mutual accommodation was seen when the employers talked about accepting that there is more than one way to accomplish a task. Fourth, it is important to change and accommodate differences. The employers recognized that there were times when they had to change their method of achieving a goal to accommodate differences. Mutual accommodation does not just allow differences to exist; it actually permits people to talk about differences and encourages

individuals to tack back and forth between individual and group-based perspectives.

Because the participants were all volunteers, the sample was small, the participants all employed an individual with a visual impairment, and employers were the only subject category who were interviewed, some degree of bias is to be expected. However, it should be noted that the sample population was diverse, including 11 states, 15 companies or organizations, and 15 types of jobs. Although the qualitative approach that was used is a strength, since it yields extremely specific and useful information, it also has inherent weaknesses in the generalizability of the findings. In any case, it is hoped that the rich data provided by the interviewees will serve in some way to help employers and employees work together to decrease the employment problems faced by people who are blind or have low vision. Moreover, it is hoped that these findings will stimulate further study in this important area of research.

Successful workers with visual impairments were willing to take the seven steps needed to empower their own success. Their employers were also willing to take the seven steps necessary to enable their employees' success. The employees and the employers each climbed six steps and met at a common landing--the seventh step--to implement the mutual accommodation model. This study identified the dual responsibility of both employers and employees and showed that the mutual accommodation model is a best practice that can improve the employment success of workers with visual impairments.

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