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Understanding Employers' Hiring Intentions in Relation to Qualified Workers with Disabilities: Preliminary Findings

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Abstract *Introduction* As part of the planning process for a larger survey study to examine factors affecting employers' intention to hire and hiring of people with disabilities, a series of three semi-structured focus groups were held with key hiring decision makers, such as Human Resources directors, Chief Operating Officers (COOs), or Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of small, medium, and large Seattle area companies. *Aim* The chief goals of the focus groups were to elicit and refine the participants' beliefs, normative influences, and perceived control relative to hiring workers with disabilities. *Method* Narrative data obtained from the focus group discussion were examined using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to identify themes expressed by the focus group participants within the context of company size. *Results* Themes did vary by company size, but a prevailing concern across all companies related to questions about the efficiency/effectiveness of contact with vocational rehabilitation agencies. For both small- and mid-sized companies, there was a belief that people with disabilities could not do the work or were somehow less qualified. For large companies, convincing departmental and team managers that outreaching workers with disabilities would be a worthwhile hiring practice remained a challenge. *Conclusion* The themes derived from this study can be used to help occupational rehabilitation professionals develop educational and marketing interventions to improve employers' attitudes toward hiring and retaining individuals with disabilities.

Keywords Employers · Hiring intention · Disability · Attitudes

Studies of employer attitudes toward hiring workers with disabilities suffer from an uneven definition of attitude [1] and insufficient concern with the hiring decision itself [2]. Unger's [3] review of the literature points to inconsistency in results and raises concerns about low return rates on surveys, the potential for socially desirable responses—especially in relation to interactive voice (phone) surveys, and lack of agreement on salient variables for research. In terms of major research findings, Copeland [2] summarizes the current status quite well in noting that employers appear conflicted regarding the employability of individuals with disabilities. Although potential employers tend to express generally positive attitudes towards those with disabilities, when pressed more specifically about hiring individuals with disabilities (particularly certain subgroups, such as persons with mental health issues), employers often express reluctance to recommend hiring [1, 2, 4].

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The present study uses a focus group sequence in order to better understand employer beliefs, perceived norms, and perceptions of control in relation to hiring outreach efforts toward qualified workers with disabilities. A larger focus group sequence was used by the US Department of Labor (2005) involving 26 groups and 233 executives and human resources managers at multiple sites around the country. There were a number of issues addressed in these focus groups, including staffing, use of external recruiters, and reactions to materials and messages regarding the Employer Assistance Referral Network, a website for hiring individuals with disabilities.

A segment of focus group activity, however, related directly to perceptions about workers with disabilities in each of the first 20 focus groups. Overall, there was minimal experience in working with or actually hiring people with disabilities. A common concern was that people with disabilities could not perform work across both physical (e.g., shipyard labor) and desk occupations. Other concerns related to fear of legal problems, employee and co-worker safety, attendance, and negative work attitudes. Cost of accommodations for people with physical disabilities was also a salient concern. Of note in this focus group study was that findings were not analyzed by company size.

The most recent study of employer perspectives on the employment of people with disabilities was completed by Domzal et al. [5] under contract from the Office of Disability and Employment Policy (ODEP), US Department of Labor. This involved a large interactive telephone survey using representative weighted sampling with 3,797 respondents, with a 51.4% response rate, representing 2,469,000 companies. In addition to 12 sectors of industry, findings were analyzed by company size: small companies (5–14 employees), medium-sized companies (15–249), and large companies (250+). Findings of interest in relation to hiring people with disabilities included the following:

- Only 19.1% reported employing people with disabilities.
- 53.1% of large companies reported employing people with disabilities, decidedly the highest percentage.
- Healthcare costs, workers' compensation, and fears related to litigation were cited as more challenging by companies designated small- and medium-sized versus large companies.
- 72% of all companies cited the nature of their work as too challenging for people with disabilities.
- Attitudes of co-workers or supervisors were the least frequently cited challenges.
- Companies that *do not* recruit employees with disabilities cited that persuasive information was needed regarding performance productivity of workers with disabilities and how hiring people with disabilities can benefit a company's "bottom line."
- Larger companies were more likely to be persuaded to hire by means of information supported by statistics or research.

The Pacific Northwest Disability and Business Technical Assistance Center (DBTAC), as well as the national network of ten DBTACs, is committed to developing employer training or marketing modules in order to increase the probability that potential employers will consider applicants with disabilities. These efforts have thus far emphasized generic training of employers and Human Resources (HR) representatives in order to increase their understanding of disability, employer incentives, resources to assist them in identifying and retaining qualified candidates with disabilities, etc. Although this generic training is seen as valuable by both providers and participants, there is no evidence that participation in this training by employers increases their readiness to hire individuals with disabilities. Similarly, large-scale media marketing efforts [6] have been ineffective in influencing the actual hiring of employees with disabilities. To be able to develop effective educational and marketing strategies, it is necessary to gain a better understanding of the factors that determine the decisions by potential employers to hire people with disabilities. Once this information is available, vocational rehabilitationists can proceed to develop educational interventions that are both effective and efficient by being audience-relevant and packaged and presented within the relatively short time span usually available (e.g., a 25- to 30-min Rotary Club meeting, a time slot at an HR unit meeting, etc.).

The approach advocated in this paper is based on Ajzen's [7, 8] theory of planned behavior (TPB), an empirically based conceptual framework that has been found useful for identifying the determinants of many different kinds of behavior (see Armitage and Conner for a review) [8]. According to the TPB, the immediate antecedent of a behavior is the intention to perform the behavior under consideration. Intention, in turn, is determined by three components: attitude toward the behavior (the degree of positive or negative evaluation of the behavior), subjective norm (the perceived social pressure to perform the behavior), and perceived behavioral control (the perceived ability to carry out the behavior). Although not widely applied in rehabilitation research, there has been some recent use of the model in the prediction of physical activity for individuals with chronic disabilities including those with chronic kidney disease [9], cardiovascular disease [10], spinal cord injury [11], and arterial disease [12]. TPB is an integral part of Rolf Schwartzer's Health Action Process Approach (HAPA) Model of Health Promotion which has received increasing research attention in recent years.

The current study, of which the effort described is the first step, is concerned with the intentions of potential

employers to reach out to workers with disabilities as part of their hiring recruitment. According to the TPB, the intention to engage in this behavior should increase to the extent that attitudes toward the behavior are favorable, important others are perceived to be supportive of it, and perceived control over its performance is high. Attitudes, in turn, are assumed to be based on beliefs about the likely consequences of the behavior, termed *behavioral beliefs*. When potential employers believe that hiring people with disabilities produces mainly positive outcomes, their attitudes toward this behavior will be favorable; but if they believe that hiring people with disabilities has mainly negative consequences, their attitudes will be unfavorable. Similarly, subjective norms (perceived social pressure to hire persons with disabilities) are based on *normative beliefs*, i.e., beliefs that particular referents (e.g., one's supervisor, co-workers, upper-level managers, etc.) do or do not support hiring persons with disabilities. Finally, the overall level of perceived behavioral control depends on *control beliefs* which have to do with the perceived availability of resources, facilities, and other factors required to hire and retain persons with disabilities. The present study was designed to explore these behavioral, normative, and control beliefs among potential employers of persons with disabilities in order to complete the development of a survey instrument to collect data from a larger sample.

Procedure

An "employment disability" outreach survey was administered to the Business Advisory Council (HR representatives) for the University of Washington Project With Industry, a job placement program for people with disabilities and a small Seattle area Rotary Club. Participants were asked to list the advantages and disadvantages of reaching out to persons with disabilities, to list the individuals or groups who would approve or disapprove of reaching out to persons with disabilities, and to list the factors that would make it easier or more difficult to reach out to persons with disabilities. As examples of item responses, an HR representative might indicate that hiring qualified workers with disabilities is good for business due to tax incentives (behavioral belief), perceive that department managers are negative with regard to hiring outreach (normative belief), and that vocational rehabilitation agencies frequently provide updated applicant profile lists (control belief).

The charge, then, for Hebert Research, the university partner in this research effort, was to take the initial items generated and have them rated and discussed as to frequency of concern across a series of three semi-structured focus groups utilizing hiring managers and decision makers from small, mid-sized, and large companies in the Puget Sound area in the month of October 2007. The chief goals of the focus groups were to further refine and qualitatively explore insights regarding participants' behavioral beliefs, people perceived as influencing them, and their perception of the control they had in hiring activities of this type.

Three focus groups were developed representing key decision makers such as HR directors and Chief Operating Officers (COOs) or Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of three predetermined levels of company size—small, medium, and large. All focus group members were randomly selected and incentivized for their involvement. These groupings are described below:

- Small company (30–100 employees)—There were six participants in this group, all but two owning their companies. Industries represented were a catering service, a sign manufacturing company, a restaurant, a veterinary clinic, a plumbing company, and a construction company. All respondents were high school graduates, with one having a college degree.
- Mid-sized company (101–500 employees)—This group had eight participants and represented general retail, aerospace, internet marketing, retail/development, insurance, the hospitality industry, construction, and engineering consulting. All in this group were HR professionals. Educationally, one had a high school degree with the remaining being college graduates, of whom three had further master's degrees.
- Large company (500+ employees)—There were six participants in this group representing grocery retail, technical colleges, hospitality, healthcare, and education. All were human resource professionals and had college educations.

The responses from focus group participants were recorded as statements following the presentation of each initial item as secured from the outreach survey. Because there was a natural categorization of the data, formal coding was not performed. Fraser (Author 1) conducted the first review and developed the themes based upon the participant statements, and assigned statements to themes. Johnson (Author 2) independently completed the same process and validated the themes. Disagreements would have been resolved by consensus, although this was not necessary.

Findings

The chief findings relative to the themes within the focus groups will be presented specifically by company size as above and referenced as to the relevant component of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB): behavioral beliefs,

normative beliefs, or control beliefs. These findings are as follows:

Small Company Focus Groups

Most participants in this group had prior contact with individuals having disabilities. They had either worked with or hired people with disabilities ($n = 3$) or had family members/friends with some type of disability. Four of the six participants presently did not have an employee with a disability within the company (to their knowledge).

Theme 1—*Commitment/loyalty by qualified workers with disabilities (a behavioral belief).* One consistent theme that emerged early was related to the positive experience that participants employing people with disabilities stated that they had. For example, they observed, "He was very loyal and worked in kitchen support for me over 11 years," and, "You know they'd show up and not call to say 'I don't feel too well today.' "This commitment to the company appeared to be very much appreciated.

Theme 2—*Lack of contact by vocational rehabilitation agencies (a control belief).* All members of this focus group indicated a lack of awareness about vocational rehabilitation agencies and only one had ever been contacted by a vocational rehabilitation agency. One representative actually had wanted to respond to advertisements encouraging the hiring of people with disabilities, but there was no salient contact information provided. The general group response in this area was, "...vocational rehabilitation agencies really need to be more accessible."

Theme 3—*Effectiveness in contacting state vocational agency (a control belief).* Participants also suggested that rehabilitation agencies need to provide a one-stop resource for employers to reach qualified workers with disabilities, either a specific agency or a website. All participants also agreed that employers need a comprehensive list of "job ready and qualified" applicants with disabilities sorted by desired industry sector. These employers reported they have limited time for recruitment and that any new outreach effort must be effective and efficient.

Theme 4—*The fear of losing revenue (a behavioral belief).* Fiscal concerns were a significant topic for the small company representatives. There was a frequent perception that profit margins would be affected, "If an individual is going to slow the process and not contribute, I'll be losing money." Contributing to fiscal concern was the belief by participants that additional training time would be required on two levels: training the supervisor to work effectively with the employee with a disability and additional time training the worker.

Theme 5—*Fears of litigation (a behavioral belief).* The small employer group expressed a significant concern about being sued, particularly in relation to wrongful termination, by a worker with a disability. They did not perceive that they had or could afford legal counsel for defense or to mitigate adverse publicity.

Theme 6—*Structural/physical constraints (control and behavioral beliefs).* There were a number of comments among participants in this group relating to physical and structural barriers at their worksite and their perceived lack of resources in order to modify these barriers and better accommodate workers (control). Some participants also indicated a stereotypal perception that people with disabilities do not have the strength or physical capacity to perform the work (behavioral). Examples of these presented comments were: "We're housed in an older structure with no men's or women's bathrooms being accessible, ledges on doors, etc.," or the job itself being "too physical," or having too many "physical demands."

Theme 7—*Incentives/financial assistance for employing workers with disabilities (a behavioral belief).* There was a consensus among members of this group that financial incentives would be extremely helpful in encouraging them to develop positions for people with disabilities. Tax benefits and other more direct incentives were seen to be of significant value. It was also suggested that a "contracting agency" for people with disabilities would be helpful inasmuch as a smaller company might not have to deal with some of the extra benefits issues such as health insurance, or perhaps receive some wage subsidy through the contacting agency for hiring people with disabilities. The participants were concerned that it was important that their HR responsibilities not increase when they hire people with disabilities.

Theme 8—*Altruistic/empathetic concern regarding hiring workers with disabilities (a behavioral belief).* It was interesting that several of the participants expressed a real interest in having a qualified person with disabilities in the workplace. It may be that, as a smaller company, there is more direct contact with an employee having a disability with comments such as, "It's a joy to see them grow," or, "...it is particularly enjoyable to help them pull through," or, "...to assist in strengthening their weakness..." While these statements may seem patriarchal or patronizing, they do reflect some of the positive feelings among company representatives who enjoyed contact with workers with disabilities.

Mid-Sized Company Focus Groups

Six of eight of the participants in this group indicated that their companies have hired individuals with disabilities and five of them also indicated that they had direct experience in exposure to a qualified worker with a disability within their setting. There were a number of continuing themes that were similar to the smaller companies, including lack

of contact by vocational rehabilitation agencies, concerns about the efficiency/effectiveness of contact, and financial incentives for hiring. For both small- and mid-sized companies, there was a belief that people with disabilities could not do the work or were somehow less qualified. There were, however, a number of very different additional themes as reviewed below:

Theme 1—*Concerns about mid-level and team managers (a normative belief).* As opposed to the smaller companies, company representatives in this group perceived their line managers as presenting more direct barriers to hiring. These managers were portrayed as not wanting to accommodate, perceiving additional training time being needed, or some lack of productivity on the part of workers with disabilities. These HR representatives seemed somewhat intimidated by line level management. This is of interest because, simultaneously, they did not necessarily perceive upper management as being opposed to the employment of qualified individuals with disabilities.

Theme 2—*Lack of co-worker receptivity/uncomfortableness (a normative belief).* There was a consistent perception that co-workers might be resentful of special benefits being extended to qualified workers with disabilities such as flex time, shift modifications, etc. One quote was, "We face a problem through the union. Employees with disabilities need acceptance by people and these people are not always willing to be that accepting."

Theme 3—*Lack of qualifications (a behavioral belief).* About half the participants had the perception that individuals referred from vocational rehabilitation agencies were less qualified or had a poorer employment history than other job candidates—basically, vocational rehabilitation agencies being seen as representing individuals who are unable to find work on their own. This perception is of interest because these companies as a group had almost no contact with vocational rehabilitation agencies.

The participants from medium sized employers did not express the concerns brought up by the small company group about litigation, reduced productivity costs and the lack of physical accessibility. Neither did they cite the positive benefits derived from personal connectedness to employees with disabilities.

Large Company Focus Groups

This group was well exposed to qualified workers with disabilities. All but one participant had worked with an employee who had a disability. Some of the themes, particularly from the mid-sized companies, were very similar for the larger company HR representatives. Awareness of vocational rehabilitation agencies was generally high with these larger companies. As with the mid-sized companies, however, convincing departmental and team managers that outreaching workers with disabilities would be a worthwhile hiring practice remained a challenge (a normative belief). There were a number of comments related to line managers not embracing diversity, requiring too much attitudinal adjustment, and believing that costs will be excessive. However, the larger company representatives did not really mention co-worker issues.

Theme 1—*Efficiency/effectiveness of contact with vocational rehabilitation agency (a control belief).* The discussion among these company representatives went well beyond having a single point of contact or listing of qualified workers available to industry, but the lack of an existence of a uniform marketing approach to them as larger companies. There were numerous comments made in this regard such as, "...showing what the VR agency can do for me—if anyone can show me how my life can be easier, I'd be interested in that," or, "...they need to look into their marketing...," and, "...bring knowledge to us—educate us; all of this lowers the barriers." There was consensus agreement that vocational rehabilitation agencies should have marketing teams of sales representatives/engineers to educate these companies and conduct outreach. This appears to be the type of contact to which they're accustomed in the world of larger business—they are used to dealing with well-polished marketing and sales teams.

It is of interest that, at the larger company level, there were no concerns about litigation or liability, loss of revenue or discussed need, in fact, for financial incentives.

Discussion

Although only a formative step in a larger research project, the focus group findings presented here are of definite interest because they provide initial and unique perspectives on developing effective interventions. At the focus group level, within the context of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), most of the concerns related to behavioral beliefs; others, however, related to normative beliefs regarding co-worker and manager negativity (mid-sized companies), manager negativity alone (large companies), and control beliefs about the effectiveness and efficiency of contact with vocational rehabilitation. The smaller companies had the widest range of concerns, including several beliefs specific to risk aversion in regard to hiring employees with disabilities: fears of potential litigation, loss of revenue, and difficulties in eliminating, or affording modifications to physical barriers in the workplace. Many of these concerns could obviously be countered by education to include tax credit, deduction information related to worksite accommodations made by the companies, or the low cost of accommodations [13]. Financial risk and

aversion (legal liability, healthcare costs, etc.) were also a significant issue among the smaller and mid-sized companies (actually relatively small, <250) in the ODEP-contracted study by Domzal et al. [5]. Smaller companies, with less than $1,000,000 in revenue may benefit from both a federal tax credit of $5,000 of the first $10,250 spent and an additional $15,000 as a deduction (http://www.ada.gov/taxback.htm) for accommodations.

The basic lack of visibility to these companies of community-based or state vocational rehabilitation agencies along with the lack of single points of contact were major concerns. It follows that with no contact with vocational rehabilitation personnel, employers would lack awareness of the Work Opportunity tax credits and other ADA-related tax incentives, State VR agency support for On-the-Job Training (OJT), and other financial incentives available to support them in hiring qualified employees with disabilities. It was of special interest that smaller company representatives had a special appreciation of workers with disabilities' work commitment and a "feel good" type of connection toward them despite the number of concerns that were voiced. This might be a function of their more direct contact with these employees. They might also be more responsive to the individual being evaluated than would a larger company's hiring personnel, particularly inasmuch as a small company owner (the majority of those in this group) is often directly involved in the hire. In accord with the TPB, most of these small company issues were behavioral beliefs.

The mid-sized companies appeared less risk-averse than the small companies, but were still interested in financial incentives. They also referenced the lack of contact by vocational rehabilitation agencies and the lack of a single source referral point for qualified individuals with disabilities (control beliefs). Again, if there is no contact with vocational rehabilitation agencies, the financial incentives to hiring in which they have interest may remain unknown. It was in the mid-sized companies that the concern about lack of receptivity by mid-level or line management, and even co-worker resistance, became prominent. It is at this level of company size that these normative beliefs or influences began to appear. Education targeted to HR representatives about the comparable productivity, fewer scheduled absences, longer job retention, and other positive performance points from the recent De Paul study [14] relating to workers with disabilities needs to be clearly provided to HR representatives in order that they might counter these concerns with co-workers and management. This type of information is also crucial to countering the beliefs that these company representatives had about people with disabilities being less qualified or being physically less capable of performing their work. This was true for both small-and mid-sized companies—congruent with beliefs of almost three-quarters of the employers interviewed in the study by Domzal et al. [5]. There is also a message of professional responsibility here relative to qualifications of a referral. Vocational rehabilitation counselors need to send carefully selected clients with appropriate skills to an employer or none at all. These HR representatives could also benefit from an understanding of the financial incentives for hiring qualified workers with disabilities.

From the viewpoint of the larger companies, there were no risk-related issues, nor any stated interest in financial incentives. Resistance from department or line managers was perceived as an issue, as it also was by the mid-sized companies—normative influences were again in evidence, but on the manager versus co-worker level. Again, HR representatives need positive work performance information about employees with disabilities in order to counter these at least perceived concerns.

Larger companies desire to meet with a vocational rehabilitation agency's marketing unit or representatives. They seem to expect a high-caliber educational or marketing presentation in order that they might consider this hiring option in more detail (a volitional control belief). This appears somewhat related to the Domzal et al. [5] findings that larger companies were more likely to be persuaded by statistical or research-based information. Unfortunately, given the current state of service delivery within vocational rehabilitation, this is either not going to occur or will occur with very limited frequency. Of all the concerns profiled across all the focus groups, the lack of vocational rehabilitation's professional visibility as a hiring resource was the most troubling. This underscores the need for more of a high caliber "demand side" placement marketing effort—encouraging the need for hiring individuals with disabilities within the business community [15]. This is becoming more crucial given the challenges of the current recessionary environment. One-stop centers, as established under the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, brought together rehabilitation providers under one point of contact, but the focus has been more on providing career development services to the client versus optimal marketing and servicing of the employment community with qualified employees with disabilities. Domzal et al. [5] indicate that only about one percent of companies surveyed used the Employer Assistance and Recruiting Network (EARN) service as developed by ODEP to assist employers in locating qualified workers with disabilities.

In review of this preliminary data across groups, the most salient finding of this study is an apparent need to carefully tailor educational or marketing approaches with respect to hiring people with disabilities based upon company size. Employers from small, medium, and large companies had different training needs and "access" points with regard to vocational rehabilitation engagement.

Because at all levels, people making recruiting and hiring decisions have limited time for educational/marketing presentations, it is critical that DBTAC's, vocational rehabilitation agencies, and others provide customized training that is time efficient, and packs the "best punch."

There are obviously a number of limitations to this study such as small sample groups, educational level variance between the small employer group (less college) versus the college educated mid- and large-size company representatives, and the exploratory nature of this initial work. It would be expected that these findings would be at variance with a larger survey such as the work by Domzal et al. [5] but this was generally not the case despite differing cut-offs for company size. There was, however, a lack of findings relative to co-worker or manager negativity in the Domzal et al. [5] study irrespective of company size, but this could be a function of "social desirability" in response as contact involved a "one-to-one" interactive telephone survey. Findings from the present qualitative study were used to inform final item selection for a revised survey of employer attitudes using the TPB model that is currently being administered to a larger employer and HR professional sample in the Pacific Northwest.

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