

VCU-RRTC on Employment of People with Physical Disabilities

Research Study #2 -- Research Brief #2

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SUCCESSFUL EMPLOYMENT AND QUALITY WORK LIFE AFTER SEVERE DISABILITY: COMPARISON OF PREDICTIVE MODELS WITH MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS AND SPINAL CORD INJURY

Important Employment Outcomes Reported by Individuals with Multiple Sclerosis

Introduction

Multiple sclerosis (MS) affects approximately 2.3 million people worldwide, with most individuals being diagnosed between the ages of 20 and 40 during what are usually the most active employment years. Employment is of great importance to adult life and produces tangible (income, fringe benefits) and intangible (intrinsic benefits, purpose in life) benefits. However, MS can present significant barriers to maintaining employment. Research has found that, as the illness progresses, there is a sharp decline in employment. One study found that only 20-30% of people with MS were employed 15 years after diagnosis, and less than 50% in the US are currently employed.

The majority of research on employment of people with disabilities focuses on employment rate, health, and employment, or employer perceptions. Although obtaining and maintaining work is an important employment outcome, other quality indicators of employment must be considered. Current literature is devoid of studies examining subjective aspects of the employment experiences and quality employment outcomes throughout the work life cycle of people with MS. This RRTC study sought to identify important predictors and outcomes of employment of greatest importance as defined by individuals with MS. Our objectives included the following:

1. Identify at least two sets of factors/predictors related to quality employment.
2. Identify three common themes of quality employment throughout the work life cycle after MS diagnosis.
3. Describe how qualitative and quantitative studies may work together to clarify employment outcomes.

What is the source of information?

To allow for new insights on quality outcomes of employment, a qualitative approach was used. We conducted three focus groups in three different geographic locations (Ohio, Georgia, South Carolina), in an effort to get a cross sectional representation and to assess if regional differences were linked to quality outcomes of employment. We recruited participants from a variety of different sources, including community support groups and clinics. Participants included 74 individuals who had a physical disability from MS, were over 18 years old, were less than 65 years old at the time of diagnosis, and had been employed at some point after their diagnosis. Groups were heterogeneous. A semi-structured interview format queried participants about factors impacting employment.

What are the general themes individuals with MS found to be important outcomes of employment?

Participants identified three important themes within employment outcomes, which included compensation, helping others, and personal well-being. Compensation includes things such as income and benefits, or tangible aspects of employment. In contrast, helping others and promoting personal well-being are more intangible benefits of employment.



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¹The National Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Society, accessed August 11, 2015, <http://www.nationalmssociety.org/What-is-MS/Who-Gets-MS>.

²Fraser, R., Clemmons, D., & Bennett, F. (2002). Multiple sclerosis: psychosocial and vocational interventions. New York: Demos.

³Rumrill, P.D., Hennessy, M., & Nissen, S. (2008). Employment issues and multiple sclerosis (2 ed.). New York, NY: Demos Medical Publishing, Inc.

