

Chapter 1

Employers' Attitudes Towards People with Disabilities in the Workforce: Myths or Realities?

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A review of literature on employers' attitudes toward workers with disabilities was completed. Factors that may impact employers' attitudes toward people with disabilities in the workforce are provided as well as a description of the methodologies used in the investigations. Although decades of employer attitudinal research have generally produced inconsistent findings due to variations in research design, results indicate that employers who have previous experience with workers with disabilities have favorable perceptions of these individuals in the workforce and a willingness to hire them.

Major legislative and philosophical forces during the past 30 years have attempted to enhance the participation of working-age Americans with disabilities in the competitive labor market. The public policy initiatives related to employers and work disability began in 1970 with the passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA). The OSHA was followed by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, state workers' compensation enactments of the 1980s and 1990s, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998, and the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act (TWWIIA) of 1999 (Hunt, 1999).

The forces that have both paralleled and provided the impetus for passage of much of the legislation include the following: (1) significant changes in thinking regarding the vocational rehabilitation and employment potential of Americans with disabilities; (2) the evolving role of employers in addressing disability in the workplace; and (3) the civil rights movement. For persons with significant

disabilities, who might have once been viewed as unemployable, these societal trends have fostered a shift from a medical model emphasizing a clinic or center-based approach of "fixing" or "curing" people with disabilities to the present emphasis on capabilities, choice, and workplace supports in maximizing the work potential of people with disabilities. Recently, other factors have also contributed to a positive outlook regarding the employment potential of Americans with disabilities desiring to work. These factors include favorable economic conditions and a strong demand for labor.

Yet, despite increased laws designed to address employment discrimination and provide for workplace accommodations for qualified workers with disabilities, the employment rate of individuals with disabilities has increased very little since the late 1980s. A series of studies conducted by the National Organization on Disability (NOD), in collaboration with Louis Harris and Associates (1998), reported an actual increase in the unemployment rate from 66% in 1986 findings to 71% in 1998. The unemployment rate of people with disabilities is especially disheartening because the studies found that an overwhelming majority (72%) of unemployed persons with disabilities indicated that they preferred to work (1998). Also, representatives from business and industry identified recruitment and selection of qualified workers as their top concern for the new millennium (Bureau of National Affairs [BNA], 2000; Miller, 2000). In a time marked by a critical demand for labor and significant economic expansion and prosperity, it is discouraging that members of our nation's largest minority, people with disabilities, are not participating in the labor force to the same extent as their peers without disabilities.

Employers play a critical role in addressing the high unemployment rate experienced by persons with disabilities. A number of researchers have identified employer attitudes toward people with disabilities as an important factor in the staggering unemployment rate of persons with disabilities (Blanck, 1998; King, 1993; Smith, 1992). Although employers' attitudes toward individuals with disabilities have been studied extensively, the research has produced inconsistent findings. Factors identified as positive attributes by some employers (e.g., attendance, safety, productivity) have been cited as concerns by employers in other studies (Nietupski, Hamre-Nietupski, VanderHart, & Fishback, 1996). Because of inconsistency in methodology, it is difficult to compare and derive conclusions based on the results of previous research. A plausible explanation for these mixed results is that employers were not categorized by characteristics that might influence their perceptions of people with disabilities in the workforce. Investigations have identified a variety of business, respondent, and applicant-worker characteristics that may impact employer perceptions of people with disabilities in the workforce (see Table 1 below).

The purpose of this article is to review the empirical literature related to employers' perceptions of people with disabilities in the workforce and to identify characteristics that might impact employer perceptions.

METHOD

Data Collection Process

The literature reviewed was drawn primarily from the fields of vocational rehabilitation, psychology, mental retardation and other developmental disabilities, and mental illness. Research on employers' attitudes toward persons with disabilities spans almost half a century, commencing with studies investigating their attitudes toward workers with cardiac limitations (Lee, Rusk, White, & Williams, 1957; Olshansky, Friedland, Clark, & Sprague, 1955; Reeder & Donahue, 1958) and former mental health patients (Olshansky, Grob, & Malamud, 1958). For the purpose of this study, the literature reviewed was published from 1982 to 2000.

Table 1: Factors Investigated in Employer Attitudinal Research

Employer, Respondent or Worker Characteristics	Relevant Research
Disability of Employee or Applicant	Blanck, 1998; Diska & Rogers, 1996; Fuqua, Rathbun, & Gade, 1984; Gibson & Groeneweg, 1986; Gruenhagen, 1982; Gade & Toutges, 1983; Johnson, Greenwood & Schriener, 1988; Marcouiller, Smith & Bordieri, 1987; McFarlin, Song, & Sonntag, 1991; Nietupski, Hamre-Nietupski, VanderHart & Fishback, 1996; Phillips, 1975; Shafer, Hill, Seyfarth, & Wehman, 1987; Shafer, Kregel, Banks, & Hill, 1988; Thakker, 1997
Previous Experience with Workers with Disabilities	Diksa & Rogers, 1996; Gade & Toutges, 1983; Gibson & Groeneweg, 1986; Gruenhagen, 1982; Levy, Jessop, Rimmerman, Francis, & Levy, 1993; Levy, Jessop, Rimmerman, & Levy, 1992; Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994; McFarlin et al., 1991; Phillips, 1975
Size of Employer	Ehrhart, 1994; Gade & Toutges, 1993; Greenwood & Johnson, 1987; Levy et al., 1992; Levy et al., 1993; Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994; Nietupski et al., 1996
Sector of Business or Industry	Diska & Rogers, 1996; Ehrhart, 1994; Gade & Toutges, 1993; Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994; Nietupski et al., 1996; Thakker, 1997

The process for identifying research on employers' attitudes about workers with disabilities began with a search of electronic databases (i.e., ERIC, Dissertations Online, PsychLit). Keywords included employer attitudes, workers with disabilities, mental retardation, mental illness, handicapped, business and disability, developmental disabilities, vocational rehabilitation, supported employment, and employment. To be included in the review, the study had to involve data gathered from community-based employers or organizations regarding their perceptions of persons with disabilities in the workforce or their actual experiences with workers with disabilities. A total of 24 studies were reviewed. The first section of the literature review addresses factors or characteristics that may impact employer attitudes toward persons with disabilities in the workforce. It is followed by a review of the methodological differences in the research and a summary of key findings.

RESULTS

Disability of Employee or Applicant

Several studies have explored employer attitudes toward individuals with disabilities in the workforce according to the type or severity of the disability (e.g., Fuqua et al., 1984; Johnson et al., 1988; McFarlin et al., 1991; Thakker, 1997). The results indicate that employers expressed greater concerns over employing persons with mental or emotional disabilities than employing persons with physical disabilities. For example, Fuqua et al. (1984) examined eight disability areas using a mail survey sent to randomly selected urban employers. The disability areas included blindness, cerebral palsy, paraplegia, emotional problems, epilepsy, amputation, deafness, and mental disabilities. Employers expressed the greatest concern toward employing individuals with mental disabilities and blindness and were least concerned about hiring individuals with epilepsy.

Findings from a survey of Fortune 500 companies concur with the results reported by Fuqua and colleagues (1984). Over 90% of the respondents responded affirmatively to hiring individuals with physical disabilities or hearing impairments, 39% responded affirmatively to hiring individuals with severe physical disabilities, and 20% responded affirmatively to hiring applicants with severe

mental disabilities (McFarlin et al., 1991). Similarly, employers from a variety of businesses and industries located in Arkansas and Oklahoma believed that workers with mental disabilities and emotional disabilities were of greater concern than workers with physical or communication disabilities (Johnson et al., 1988).

Although McFarlin and colleagues (1991) found that attitudes toward workers with disabilities tended to be more positive with respect to turnover, absenteeism, and work performance, their results contrast with other reported findings (e.g., Fuqua et al., 1984; Johnson et al., 1988). For example, over two-thirds of the executives in the study conducted by McFarlin et al., (1990) agreed with statements indicating that workers with disabilities perform as well and have lower turnover rates than their counterparts without disabilities, whereas findings from other studies revealed employers' concerns with the productivity or performance of workers with disabilities (e.g., Fuqua et al., 1984; Johnson et al., 1988).

Findings regarding the social skills of workers with disabilities and their ability to interact or get along with coworkers were also inconsistent in studies investigating different disability types. In some instances, employers expressed little concern with coworker acceptance or the ability of workers with disabilities to interact with coworkers (Fuqua et al., 1984; McFarlin et al., 1991). In contrast, employers did express concerns regarding the social skills of workers with mental, emotional, or communication disabilities and their ability to function as part of a team (Johnson et al., 1988). Employers were least concerned with the ability of persons with physical disabilities to socialize with coworkers and work as part of a team.

In more recent studies, employers have not only expressed more favorable attitudes toward employing persons with severe disabilities in the workplace but also viewed workers with severe disabilities as dependable, productive workers who can interact socially and foster positive attitudes on the part of their coworkers (Levy et al., 1993). Almost three-fourths (74.4%) of the employers believed that the productivity rates of workers with severe disabilities can be as high as those of workers who are not disabled. The perceptions of employers reported by Levy and colleagues (1993) contradict the findings of prior employer attitudinal research (e.g., Fuqua et al., 1984; Johnson et al., 1988). However, it is unclear how much the idea of social desirability influences employer responses.

Although all three studies were conducted prior to the implementation of ADA employment regulations, the response rate reported by Levy and colleagues (1993) was extremely low (6.2%) despite a larger sample size ($n = 418$) than that of Fuqua et al., McFarlin et al., (1991) and Johnson et al., (1988).

Specific Disability Population

Employer attitudes toward a specific disability population have also been studied extensively. For example, prior to the effective date for employer compliance with the Title I employment regulations of the ADA, Minskoff, Sautter, Hoffmann, and Hawks (1987) surveyed employers across nine different industries regarding their attitudes towards individuals with learning disabilities. One-third of the respondents indicated that they would not knowingly hire an applicant with a learning disability. Employers were less positive in their attitudes toward hiring persons with learning disabilities and affording them special consideration than toward hiring the disabled population in general. Yet, almost three-fourths of the employers (72%) were willing to give individuals with learning disabilities special considerations that they would not afford to coworkers without disabilities.

Employers willingness to make accommodations for workers with disabilities is also illustrated by employers who have hired persons with mental retardation. Employers in several studies have indicated that workers with mental retardation may require extra time and effort to be integrated into the workforce (Nietupski et al., 1996; Shafer et al., 1987). Results of a recent study indicated that 79% of the employers perceived the amount of training and supervision for workers with mental retardation to be greater than for nondisabled coworkers (Olson, Cioffi, Yovanoff, & Mank, 2000). Yet, employers in that same study reported that employing persons with mental retardation brings other benefits to their business such as enhancing their organization's public image and promoting diversity in the workplace.

Employers may be willing to allow less-than desired performance by employees with mental retardation in exchange for reliable attendance and low turnover (Blanck, 1998; Shafer et al., 1987; Shafer et al., 1988) or dedication to work (Johnson et al., 1988; Nietupski et al., 1996). Thus, employers may be willing to devote more time to training and supervision or to sacrifice productivity

in exchange for a reliable, dedicated employee or for other benefits such as increased workforce diversity and demonstration of corporate social responsibility.

The reporting by businesses representatives of actual experiences with employing workers with mental retardation has also assisted in dispelling other long-standing myths and misconceptions about employing persons with disabilities. For instance, employing persons with mental retardation does not result in an increase in health insurance rates or workers' compensation claims (Blanck, 1998; Olson et al., 2000; Shafer et al., 1987) or pose a safety risk in the workplace (Blanck, 1998; Olson et al., 2000). Employers with experience in supervising persons with disabilities also indicated they were pleased with the individuals' work quality (Nietupski et al., 1996) or work performance (Marcouiller et al., 1987).

Previous Experience with Individuals with Disabilities

Employers who have had previous experiences with individuals with specific disabilities, such as deafness (Phillips, 1975), mental retardation (Gibson & Groeneweg, 1986; Gruenhagen, 1982), epilepsy (Gade & Toutges, 1983), and psychiatric disability (Diksa & Rogers, 1996), also reported more favorable attitudes toward hiring applicants with the same disability. For example, in a study of employers' attitudes toward hiring individuals who are deaf, the results indicated that employers with previous experience employing individuals who are deaf have more positive attitudes toward hiring such a person again (Phillips, 1975). However, employers with limited or no experience hiring persons who are deaf expressed concern over worker safety (Phillips). Gruenhagen (1982) reported comparable findings in a study of fast-food restaurant managers regarding their previous experience with individuals with mental disabilities, their attitudes toward hiring them, and their opinions about their place in society.

In another study, drawing from a sample of Fortune 500 companies, McFarlin et al. (1991) found that the more exposure respondents had with employees with disabilities in their own workforce, the more positive their attitudes. Two studies that focused on employers' attitudes and preferences for hiring individuals with severe disabilities reported similar findings (e.g., Levy et al., 1992; Levy et al., 1993). Employers who had previous positive experiences with individuals or workers with severe

disabilities, reported more favorable attitudes toward individuals with severe disabilities in the workplace. The results were similar despite differences in the samples. One sample was composed of predominantly smaller employers located in a limited geographic area (e.g., Levy et al., 1993), and the other was a national sample composed of Fortune 500 companies with a majority of the businesses employing more than one thousand employees (e.g., Levy et al., 1992).

Data for the previous studies were collected from employers prior to the implementation of the employment regulations of the ADA. The results of a similar study conducted after the full implementation of the employment provisions of the ADA reported conflicting findings in this area. In conducting face-to-face interviews with 170 randomly selected employers located in a large metropolitan area, researchers failed to identify a relationship between employers' previous experience with hiring individuals with disabilities and attitudes toward individuals with disabilities in the workforce (Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994). Regardless of previous experience with persons with disabilities, the employers reported favorable attitudes toward individuals with disabilities in the workforce.

Size of Employer

Many studies suggest that there is an increased likelihood of larger employers being more willing to include people with disabilities in their workforce because of the variety of jobs available, and greater personnel and economic resources (Blanck, 1998; Collignon, 1986; Kemp, 1991). Yet, findings in the area of employer size and perceptions of persons with disabilities have been fairly inconsistent. The results of research conducted prior to the implementation of the ADA indicate that larger employers typically hold more favorable attitudes toward individuals with disabilities in the workforce (e.g., Gade & Toutges, 1983; Greenwood & Johnson, 1987; Levy et al., 1992; Levy et al., 1993).

Research conducted after the implementation of the ADA failed to identify a relationship between employer size and attitudes toward individuals with disabilities in the workforce (Ehrhart, 1994; Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994). For example, in a national study of employers' attitudes toward persons with disabilities across size and industry, no relationship was established between size of employer and attitudes toward workers with disabilities (Ehrhart). Regardless of the size of business, employers reported

favorable attitudes toward persons with disabilities in the workforce. Research utilizing the same instrumentation as the measures used in Ehrhart's study also found no relationship between employer size and attitudes toward persons with disabilities (Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994).

Sector of Business or Industry

Similar inconsistencies have been found in investigations of the relationship between the type of industry and employer attitudes toward persons with disabilities in the workforce. Findings from studies conducted prior to and after the implementation of the ADA's employment regulations failed to confirm a relationship between type of industry and employer attitudes toward hiring persons with disabilities (Ehrhart, 1994; Gade & Toutges, 1983; Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994).

Yet, more recent studies have produced mixed findings. For example, employers representing eight types of industries differed on their perceptions of workers with psychiatric disabilities (Diksa & Rogers, 1996). Social services professionals differed from those in the transportation, utilities, and communication industries on scores on the symptomatology subscale (i.e., symptomatic and behavioral manifestations of the psychiatric disorder and the effects of medication), administrative concerns, and work performance. For instance, employers in the social service industry expressed lower levels of concern than employers representing other industries with such characteristics as an employee lacking enthusiasm, exhibiting bizarre behaviors, and having a poor memory. Yet, Nietupski et al. (1996) and Thakker (1997) were unable to identify a significant relationship between type of industry and attitudes toward workers with disabilities.

A series of investigations of the experiences with workers with disabilities of one employer in the chemical manufacturing industry reported favorable results regarding the contributions of these employees. In 1958, DuPont conducted its first in a series of investigations to assess the job performance of workers with disabilities in comparison with those without disabilities. Findings from the initial investigation indicated that DuPont supervisors generally rated their workers with disabilities as good as nondisabled employees on measures of attendance. In many areas, such as safety, motivation, and job performance, supervisors reported workers with disabilities performed better than those without disabilities.

The results of the DuPont study also demonstrated that hiring people with disabilities did not contribute to an increase in compensation costs or lost-time injuries and that most employees with disabilities did not require any special arrangements. If modifications were necessary, they generally involved minor adaptations. Supervisors participating in subsequent studies conducted in 1973, 1981, and 1990 have continued to depict DuPont's employees with disabilities as safe, productive, and dependable workers. Interestingly, the DuPont study has not been conducted since the ADA employment regulations have been in effect.

Although numerous studies have investigated different organizational or worker variables that affect employer perceptions of persons with disabilities, the results have generally been inconsistent. Employers have expressed concerns about workers with disabilities in many areas, including productivity, absenteeism, turnover, interpersonal situations on the job, and fears about costs, including accommodations and increases in insurance rates. These concerns are potentially unfounded in that many respondents are surveyed about their perceptions of persons with disabilities and may not have had direct experience working with or supervising employees with disabilities.

In contrast to myths and stereotypes, employer ratings have indicated that workers with disabilities have average or above-average performance (Blanck, 1998; Du Pont, 1993), safety records (Blanck; DuPont; Shafer et al., 1987), and attendance. (Blanck; DuPont; Shafer et al., 1987). Respondents in these studies were supervisors of an employee with a disability and more than likely interacted with workers with disabilities on a daily or weekly basis. These respondents assessed overall worker performance based on personal experience. Lastly, findings have consistently demonstrated that employers who have previous experience with workers with disabilities are more willing to hire persons with disabilities (Diksa & Rogers, 1996; Gade & Toutges, 1983; Gibson & Groeneweg, 1986; Gruenhagen, 1982; Levy et al., 1992; Marcouiller et al., 1987; McFarlin et al., 1991).

Methodology

The perceptions of the business community toward persons with disabilities in the workforce have been investigated through a variety of research methodologies.

Researchers have studied employers' perceptions of persons with disabilities predominantly by surveying employer representatives who have the responsibility of hiring or supervising (e.g., Diksa & Rogers, 1996; Ehrhart, 1994; Johnson et al., 1988; Levy et al., 1993; Marcouiller et al., 1987). Samples have also consisted of employers drawn from local (e.g., Gruenhagen, 1982; Kregel & Unger, 1993; Phillips, 1975; Thakker, 1997) regional and national geographical areas (e.g., Blanck, 1998; Levy et al., 1993; Petty & Fussell, 1997) (e.g., Ehrhart, 1994; Levy et al., 1992; McFarlin et al., 1991). Methods for collecting data have included mail surveys (e.g., Fuqua et al., 1984; Gade & Toutges, 1983), where findings often revealed low return rates in comparison to research utilizing telephone (e.g., Diksa & Rogers, 1996), or face-to-face interviews (e.g., Johnson et al., 1988; Kregel & Unger, 1993), which often reported higher participation rates.

These variations in research design have produced inconsistent findings in that factors identified as benefits in one study may be expressed as concerns by employers in other studies, making it difficult to compare results and derive conclusions across studies. Yet, the results have identified several perceived employer benefits and concerns in hiring people with disabilities (see Table 2 on the following page). The benefits and concerns expressed by employers of workers with disabilities may have implications for public policy makers, employment service providers, and individuals with disabilities in addressing the labor force participation of this population. The following section reviews methodologies used to investigate employer perceptions of persons with disabilities in the workforce and summarizes key findings and implications of employer attitudinal research.

Type of Research

Researchers primarily utilized quantitative research designs to investigate employer perceptions of persons with disabilities in the workforce (e.g., Ehrhart, 1994; Levy et al., 1992; Nietupski et al., 1996; Shafer et al., 1987). Of the 24 studies reviewed, only Pitt-Catsoupes and Butterworth (1995) reported findings resulting from qualitative data collection strategies. Using separate focus groups of supervisors of workers with disabilities, coworkers, and human resource personnel, they identified factors that facilitated or inhibited the employment of individuals with disabilities.

Table 2: Employer Perceived Benefits and Concern Towards Employing People with Disabilities

Benefits & Concerns	Relevant Research
Work Performance / Quality	Blanck, 1998; Diksa & Rogers, 1996; DuPont, 1993; Gade & Toutges, 1983; Gibson & Groeneweg, 1986; Johnson et al., 1988; Kregel & Unger, 1993; Marcouiller et al., 1987; McFarlin et al., 1991; Neitupski et al., 1996; Petty & Fussell, 1997; Phillips, 1975; Pitt-Catsoupes & Butterworth, 1995; Shafer et al., 1987; Shafer et al., 1988
Productivity	Blanck, 1998; Fuqua et al., 1984; Gade & Toutges, 1983; Johnson et al., 1988; Kregel & Unger, 1993; Levy et al., 1993; Levy et al., 1992; Marcouiller et al., 1987; Petty & Fussell, 1997; Shafer et al., 1987
Safety	Blanck, 1998; DuPont, 1993; Fuqua et al., 1984; Gade & Toutges, 1983; Johnson et al., 1988; Nietupski et al., 1996; Olson et al., 2000; Phillips, 1975; Shafer et al., 1987
Dependability / Dedication	Blanck, 1998; Fuqua et al., 1984; Levy et al., 1993; Nietupski et al., 1996
Attendance or Punctuality	Blanck, 1998; DuPont, 1993; Gade & Toutges, 1983; Johnson et al., 1988; Kregel & Unger, 1993; Marcouiller et al., 1987; McFarlin et al., 1991; Nietupski et al., 1996; Shafer et al., 1987; Shafer et al., 1988
Community Image / Corporate Social Responsibility	Nietupski et al., 1996; Olson et al., 2000; Pitt-Catsoupes & Butterworth, 1995; Shafer et al., 1987
Turnover / Retention	Blanck, 1998; Johnson et al., 1988; McFarlin et al., 1991; Shafer et al., 1987; Shafer et al., 1988
Appearance	Gruenhagen, 1982; Marcouiller et al., 1987; Shafer et al., 1987; Shafer et al., 1988
Coworker Acceptance / Ability to Interact as Part of a Team / Social Skills	Blanck, 1998; Ehrhart, 1994; Fuqua et al., 1984; Gade & Toutges, 1983; Johnson et al., 1988; Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994; Levy et al., 1993; Marcouiller et al., 1987; McFarlin et al., 1991; Petty & Fussell, 1997; Phillips, 1975
Lack of Necessary Job Skills / Experience	Gruenhagen, 1982; Nietupski et al., 1996; Petty & Fussell, 1998; Pitt-Catsoupes & Butterworth, 1995
Financial Incentives	Blanck, 1998; Shafer et al., 1987
Costs (workers compensation, accommodations)	Blanck, 1998; Fuqua et al., 1984; McFarlin et al., 1991; Olson et al., 2000
Extra Training and/or Supervision	Johnson et al., 1988; Kregel & Unger, 1993; Marcouiller et al., 1987; Neitupski et al., 1996; Olson et al., 2000; Petty & Fussell, 1997; Pitt-Catsoupes & Butterworth, 1995; Shafer et al., 1987

Existing findings derived from quantitative research on employers' attitudes toward persons with disabilities were most often drawn from descriptive or correlational research. Several of the reviewed studies investigated employers' perceptions across various combinations of factors (Blanck, 1998; McFarlin et al., 1991; Shafer et al., 1987; Thakker, 1997). These variables can generally be categorized in three areas: organizational, respondent, and worker characteristics. Commonly analyzed organizational characteristics include such factors as type of industry, size of workforce, and geographic location of business. Respondent characteristics are attributes of the organizational representative being surveyed or interviewed, such as job title, previous experience or contact with people with disabilities, length of time with the organization, level of educational attainment, and gender. Worker characteristics focus on factors associated with a person with a disability, such as type and severity of disability, gender, and job title.

Although all of the studies provide descriptive statistics, only a limited number completed analyses using inferential statistical procedures. In some instances, this shortcoming can be attributed to data collected from a limited number of employers, rendering a number of statistical procedures inappropriate. Additionally, there is very little commonality across studies in terms of the type of variables that are investigated. Eleven studies have investigated a specific disability (e.g., Blanck, 1998; Diksa & Rodgers, 1996; Gade & Toutges, 1983; Gibson & Groeneweg, 1986; Gruenhagen, 1982; Marcouiller et al., 1987; Minskoff et al., 1987; Olson et al., 2000; Phillips, 1975; Shafer et al., 1987; Shafer et al., 1988). Others have studied a number of different disabilities (e.g., Fuqua et al., 1984; Johnson et al., 1988) or referred to persons with disabilities in general (McFarlin et al., 1991; Levy et al., 1993; Ehrhart, 1994).

Outcomes from research analyzing the relationship between the same variables have also produced conflicting results across studies. For instance, a number of studies reported mixed findings in examining the relationship between employer size and attitudes toward people with disabilities (Ehrhart; Gade & Toutges; Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994; Levy et al., 1993; Nietupski et al., 1996).

Inconsistent findings can also be attributed to variations in the size of the areas from which samples were

drawn, as well as in procedures used to gather data. In the vast majority of the studies, mail surveys were the predominant method utilized in gathering data. A limitation with the use of mail surveys is the low response rates generally reported in employer research using this data collection technique. In many instances, the findings from the reviewed research indicated that mail surveys conducted with businesses and organizations in limited geographical areas (e.g., Shafer et al., 1987; Thakker, 1997) reported much higher return rates than research utilizing mail surveys with national samples of employers (e.g., Ehrhart, 1994; Olson et al., 2000). The response rates for findings from regional samples of employers ranged from 6.2% (Levy et al., 1993) to 61% (Thakker), and the response rates for national samples of employers ranged from 6% (Olson et al) to 38% (McFarlin et al). Furthermore, very few studies that utilized mail surveys have reported any characteristics of nonrespondent data.

Overall, researchers utilizing telephone surveys experienced greater success in gathering data, as they frequently reported much higher participation rates in comparison to those for mail surveys. The findings also indicated that the most effective method in achieving a high participation rate was to collect data from employers through face-to-face interviews. For example, results reported by a limited number of researchers demonstrated high employer participation rates when data were collected through face-to-face structured interviews (e.g., Johnson et al., 1988; Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994; Kregel & Unger, 1993). However, conducting in-person interviews with a large number of employers across diverse geographical areas may be very labor intensive and not economically feasible.

One of the critical shortcomings with the existing research on employers' perceptions toward workers with disabilities is that the majority of the studies surveyed employer representatives who may have been responsible for hiring or supervising but who did not necessarily have actual, firsthand experience in working with employees with disabilities (e.g., Diksa & Rogers, 1996; Levy et al., 1993; McFarlin et al., 1991; Olson et al., 2000). Of the 24 studies reviewed, only 7 involved samples composed predominantly of supervisors or managers with direct experience with a worker with a disability (e.g., Blanck, 1998; Dupont, 1993; Kregel & Unger, 1993; Petty & Fussell, 1997; Pitt-Catsouphes & Butterworth, 1995; Shafer et al., 1987; Shafer et al., 1988). Results from studies that surveyed

direct-line managers or supervisors indicated that they were generally satisfied with the work performance of employees with disabilities (Blanck; Dupont; Pitt-Catsouphes & Butterworth; Shafer et al., 1987). Furthermore, employer representatives who had previous experience in supervising or managing workers with disabilities expressed fewer concerns about hiring applicants with disabilities and reported more favorable perceptions of workers with disabilities.

Summary of Findings

Despite the identified limitations in the methodology used by previous researchers, several key points can be highlighted from the results of research on employers' perceptions of people with disabilities in the workplace. These findings include the following:

- The type and severity of disability may impact the extent to which persons with disabilities are included in the workforce. For instance, employers expressed more concern with hiring individuals with mental or emotional disabilities as compared to individuals with physical disabilities. This finding may have direct implications on the willingness of applicants or workers with "hidden" disabilities to disclose them or request accommodations. All of the findings resulting from research investigating employers' attitudes across different types of disabilities were based on responses from employer representatives who have had little direct experience supervising or managing workers with disabilities (eg., Diksa & Rogers, 1996; Fuqua et al., 1984; Johnson et al., 1987; Thakker, 1997).
- To some extent, employers appear willing to sacrifice work performance or work quality in exchange for a reliable, dependable employee. However, it is unclear the extent to which other factors, such as economic and labor market conditions or coworker perceptions, might influence an employer's willingness to support or sustain a worker with a disability who may be perceived as less productive.
- Employers report several concerns surrounding the work potential of employees with disabilities that may be derived from existing myths and misconceptions and not from their direct experiences with workers with disabilities. These myths and misconceptions may frequently result in an applicant or employee with a disability not being recognized as a "qualified employee with a disability" under the provisions of the ADA.

- Increasingly, there appears to be a renewed emphasis on employers' recognizing the significance of employing workers with disabilities in an effort to enhance their image in the community (e.g., Olson et al., 2000; Nietupski et al., 1996), strengthen their commitment to corporate social responsibility, (e.g., Pitt-Catsouphes & Butterworth, 1995), or increase the diversity of their workforce so that it reflects that of the general population.
- Relative to other employers, those who have previous experience with workers with disabilities report more favorable perceptions of persons with disabilities in the workforce and a willingness to hire individuals with disabilities.
- An overwhelming majority of studies of employers' attitudes toward workers with disabilities have been completed with managers who have the capacity to hire or supervise. Very few studies were conducted with front-line supervisors or employer representatives who had actual experience supervising or evaluating the work performance of employees with disabilities. Senior management and human resource professionals play a pivotal role in developing and implementing business policies and practices directed toward integrating people with disabilities into the workforce. Yet, first-line supervisors may be called upon to assess worker performance and address potential support needs of workers with disabilities. Additionally, supervisors' desire and ability to integrate and support people with disabilities is influenced by the extent to which (1) organizational responses and practices match formal policies; (2) visible activities or business strategies reflect a commitment to include individuals with disabilities in the workforce; and (3) senior management embraces values and strategies that include a commitment to including and retaining individuals with disabilities in the workforce (Balsler, 1999; Thakker, 1997). Future research efforts need to be directed at both corporate or senior management and direct-line supervisors.

Conclusion

Employers have identified both benefits and concerns regarding the employment potential of people with disabilities. Prior experience with workers with disabilities tends to produce more favorable perceptions and a willingness to hire persons with disabilities. However, although a majority of employer representatives may agree with the idea of hiring people with disabilities,

this agreement may not transfer to a willingness of employers to consider individuals with disabilities as job applicants for their own company (Gibson & Groeneweg, 1986). Also, many business executives believe that more should be done in their company and into others to integrate people with disabilities into the workforce (McFarlin et al., 1991).

Perhaps there has not previously been a time in history in which prosperous economic conditions, emerging technology, and progressive disability-related legislation

coexisted to generate a more promising employment outlook for persons with disabilities. Employers are increasingly faced with managing a diverse workforce, and many have strengthened their efforts in the area of corporate social responsibility. The employment experiences of persons with disabilities during this time may provide an indication of the extent to which employer attitudes present significant barriers or opportunities for the employment of millions of Americans with disabilities desiring to participate in our nation's labor force.

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