

# Chapter 1

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

### *Chapter Overview*

A review of literature on employer's 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.

### 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 people with disabilities are included in the workforce. For instance, employers expressed greater concern about hiring individuals with mental or emotional disabilities than individuals with physical disabilities. This finding may have direct implications on the willingness of applicants or workers with "hidden" disabilities to disclose them and/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 with 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 derive 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 (Olson et al., 2000; Nietupski et al., 1996), strengthen their commitment to corporate social responsibility, (Pitt-Catsouphes & Butterworth, 1995), or increase the diversity of their workforce to reflect that of the general population.
- Relative to other employers, those who have previous experience with workers with disabilities report more favorable perceptions of individuals with disabilities in the workforce and a willingness to hire them.
- An overwhelming majority of studies of employers' attitudes toward workers with disabilities have been with managers who had the capacity to hire or supervise. Very few studies were conducted with frontline 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. 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 people with disabilities in the workforce; and (3) senior management embraces values and strategies that include a commitment to including and retaining people with disabilities in the workforce (Balser, 1999; Thakker, 1997). Future research efforts need to be directed at both corporate or senior management and direct-line supervisors.

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## 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 them. 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 people with disabilities as job applicants for their own company (Gibson & Groeneweg, 1986). Also, many business executives believe that more should be done in their and other companies 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 most promising employment outlook for people 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 people with disabilities during this time may provide an indication of the extent to which employer attitudes present significant barriers to the employment of millions of Americans with disabilities desiring to participate in our nation's labor force.



## Chapter 1: Chapter Questions

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1. According to the studies mentioned, employers expressed greater concerns over employing persons with \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_ disabilities than individuals with \_\_\_\_\_ disabilities.
  - a. physical or mental; emotional
  - b. physical or emotional; mental
  - c. mental or emotional; physical
  
2. Research indicates that employers appear willing to sacrifice \_\_\_\_\_ in exchange for a reliable dependable employee.
  - a. work performance
  - b. work attendance
  - c. work quality
  - d. both a and c
  
3. True or False: Employers who have previous experience with workers with disabilities report less favorable perceptions of people with disabilities in the workforce and are more apprehensive about hiring people with disabilities.
  
4. Employers report that by hiring individuals with disabilities it:
  - a. enhances their image in the community.
  - b. strengthens their commitment to corporate social responsibility.
  - c. increases the diversity of their workforce.
  - d. all of the above.
  
5. The DuPont study indicated that workers with disabilities have average or above average:
  - a. performance.
  - b. safety records.
  - c. attendance.
  - d. all of the above.

6. One study that was reviewed showed that almost \_\_\_\_\_ of employers surveyed believed that the productivity rates of workers with severe disabilities can be as high as those of workers who are not disabled.
- one fourth
  - one third
  - one half
  - three fourths
7. Studies reviewed showed that employers were less positive in their ability to hire individuals with \_\_\_\_\_ disabilities and affording them special consideration than toward hiring the disabled population in general.
- emotional
  - learning
  - physical
  - sensory
8. True or False: When looking at studies representing different industries, employers in the social service industry expressed higher levels of concern with such characteristics as an employee's lacking enthusiasm, exhibiting bizarre behaviors, and having poor memory than employers representing other industries.
9. The DuPont study demonstrated that hiring individuals with disabilities:
- did not contribute to an increase in compensation costs or lost-time injuries.
  - did contribute to an increase in compensation costs or lost-time injuries.
  - required numerous and expensive accommodations to be made to the workplace.
  - increased turnover absenteeism.
10. Studies show that employers have unfounded concerns regarding hiring individuals with disabilities in what areas?
- Productivity, absenteeism, and turnover.
  - Productivity and interpersonal situations on the job.
  - Costs of accommodations and increases in insurance rates.
  - Productivity, absenteeism, turnover, interpersonal relationships on the job, costs of accommodations, and increases in insurance rates.



## Chapter 1: Chapter Answers

1. According to the studies mentioned, employers expressed greater concerns over employing persons with mental or emotional disabilities than individuals with physical disabilities.
2. Research indicates that employers appear willing to sacrifice work performance and work quality in exchange for a reliable dependable employee.
3. **FALSE** -- The correct statement is: Employers who have previous experience with workers with disabilities report **MORE** favorable perceptions of people with disabilities in the workforce and are **LESS** apprehensive about hiring people with disabilities.
4. Employers report that by hiring individuals with disabilities it enhances their image in the community; strengthens their commitment to corporate social responsibility; and increases the diversity of their workforce.
5. The DuPont study indicated that workers with disabilities have average or above average performance, safety records, and attendance.
6. One study that was reviewed showed that almost three-fourths of employers surveyed believed that the productivity rates of workers with severe disabilities can be as high as those of workers who are not disabled.
7. Studies reviewed showed that employers were less positive in their ability to hire individuals with learning disabilities and affording them special consideration than toward hiring the disabled population in general.

8. **FALSE** -- The correct statement is: When looking at studies representing different industries, employers in the social service industry expressed **LOWER** levels of concern with such characteristics as an employee's lacking enthusiasm, exhibiting bizarre behaviors, and having poor memory than employers representing other industries.
9. The DuPont study demonstrated that hiring individuals with disabilities **did not contribute to an increase in compensation costs or lost-time injuries.**
10. Studies show that employers have unfounded concerns regarding hiring individuals with disabilities in the areas of **productivity, absenteeism, turnover, interpersonal relationships on the job, costs of accommodations, and increases in insurance rates.**

# Employers' Attitudes Toward People with Disabilities

- Employers appear to be willing to sacrifice work performance or work quality in exchange for a reliable and dependable employee.

# Employers' Attitudes Toward People with Disabilities

Employers report concerns  
surrounding the work potential  
of employees with disabilities  
that derive from myths.....

**NOT**

from direct experience  
with employees with  
disabilities.



# Employers' Attitudes Toward People with Disabilities

## ■ Reasons for renewed emphasis among employers for hiring people with disabilities include:

- Enhanced community image;
- Strengthened corporate social responsibility; and
- Increased diversity to reflect general population

# **Employers' Attitudes Toward People with Disabilities**

Relative to other employers.....

**Employers who have  
previous experience with  
workers with disabilities  
report more favorable  
perceptions of people  
with disabilities in the  
workforce and a  
willingness to  
hire.**