

# Chapter 3

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## **How Do Front-Line Supervisors in Business Perceive the Performance of Workers with Disabilities?**

### *Chapter Overview*

Front-line supervisors often have responsibility for assessing employee work performance and addressing productivity issues. Yet, much of the findings regarding employers' perceptions of individuals with disabilities in the workforce are derived from workplace personnel which have little or no experience with actual employees with disabilities. In this study, 255 supervisors of employees with known disabilities were surveyed about their experiences with individuals with disabilities in their work units. Findings indicated that supervisors were quite satisfied with the work performance of employees with disabilities and that their performance was similar to that of their nondisabled coworkers. However, supervisors' perceptions of employees' work performance differed based on the perceived functional limitations of the employees and the supervisors' personal experiences with disability.

### Summary of Findings

In this study, the 255 supervisors of employees with disabilities were quite satisfied with the work performance of employees with disabilities. The investigation also identified relationships between specific supervisor characteristics, employee characteristics and work performance.

- Employers' attitudes toward people with disabilities in the workforce have been extensively studied (Kregel & Unger, 1993). The results indicate that the expressed attitudes of employers toward applicants or workers with disabilities are often contradictory (see e.g., Fuqua, Rathburn, & Gade), that employers rate the work performance of employees with disabilities quite favorably, while other studies have found just the opposite; employees with disabilities are sometimes rated poorly in comparison to other employees. Despite an abundance of research, there is uncertainty surrounding employers' perceptions of the ability of applicants or workers with disabilities to contribute to organizational productivity and profitability.
- Supervisors are satisfied with the overall work performance and productivity of employees with disabilities. They describe workers with disabilities as conscientious, consistent, dependable, and prompt employees. Workers with disabilities perform as well as, or better than, their nondisabled coworkers. Additionally, supervisors' perceptions of the work performance of employees with disabilities were not affected by the length of time they were responsible for supervising employees with disabilities.

- Businesses continue to remain concerned about the productivity of workers with disabilities, not surprising since the 1990s was clearly the decade of enhanced business productivity. There is increasing pressure for businesses to get the most work output per unit of employee. Why should this be any different for employees with disabilities? This concern could be viewed positively in the sense that businesses are growing increasingly “color blind” to the type of disability, race, or color of a given person if that person can be productive and get the job done in an effective and efficient manner. Businesses are under pressure to maximize their profits; this often translates into either reducing expenses or getting the most out of each worker in a 40 to 50 hour week. Qualified individuals with disabilities, matched to appropriate jobs, may have very attractive long-term relationships with their employers. However, the burden remains on the individual with a disability, the supporting agency, and to a certain extent the business to capitalize on this opportunity.
- Despite employers’ satisfaction with the work performance of workers with disabilities, employees with different functional limitations were rated less favorably on work performance measures. Supervisors were less satisfied with the work performance of employees with disabilities who they perceived as needing assistance with specific job-related tasks, such as managing one’s work day, making job-related decisions, and performing the essential functions of the job. In contrast, employees with disabilities with functional limitations in the areas of mobility or communication received more satisfactory work performance ratings.
- Supervisors with no personal experience relating to disability were more satisfied with the work performance of employees with disabilities than supervisors who reported personal experiences relating to disability. The perceptions of supervisors with no personal experiences relating to disability may reflect a tendency to respond to politically sensitive items in a socially desirable manner. In contrast, supervisors who have a history of experiences with people with disabilities were rigorous in their assessment of the work performance of employees with disabilities and may have higher expectations based on their personal experiences.
- Surprisingly, many supervisors were not involved in the hiring of employees with disabilities, as many employees were already working in their current positions prior to the supervisors’ arrival in the department or unit. It is reasonable to assume that employees with disabilities in this study may have relatively stable work histories with their specific departments or work units. The majority of supervisors (73%) report supervising employees with disabilities within their organizations for at least one year, with almost one-third (30%) of the supervisors reporting that they supervised employees with disabilities for at least three years but less than 10 years. Additionally, supervisors indicated that employees with disabilities appear to be committed and reliable employees. Thus, the employees with disabilities in this study may have experienced less frequent job changes due to promotion, reassignment, transfer, or termination as compared to other workplace personnel.

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## Conclusion

Findings from this research indicate that employees with disabilities are viewed as capable and productive employees whose work performance contributes to organizational productivity and profitability. The favorable work performance assessments from supervisors with direct experience in managing workers with disabilities should assist in addressing the various myths and misconceptions pertaining to the work capabilities of people with disabilities. However, the findings also raise additional questions about the capacity of organizations and workplace personnel to address potential performance issues of employees who may have more challenging support needs.



## Chapter 3: Chapter Questions

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1. Prior studies about employers' attitudes toward persons with disabilities in the workplace indicate that:
  - a. employers' attitudes are often contradictory.
  - b. employers support government assistance for persons with disabilities and feel they should not have to work.
  - c. employers think most individuals with disabilities are best suited for self-employment options.
  - d. all of the above.
  
2. Which of the following statement(s) indicate areas where supervisors were satisfied with the work performance of the worker with a disability?
  - a. Supervisors were satisfied with the workers' timeliness of arrival and departure.
  - b. Supervisors were satisfied with the workers' attendance.
  - c. Supervisors were satisfied with the workers' consistency in task performance.
  - d. all of the above.
  
3. Which of the following statement(s) best describes the supervisors performance rating of the employee with a disability as compared to coworkers' performance?
  - a. Supervisors indicated that work performance of employees with disabilities was the same as or better than coworkers on almost all of the measures of work performance.
  - b. In the area of work speed, supervisors indicated that workers with disabilities performed about the same as coworkers.
  - c. none of the above.
  - d. both a and b.
  
4. Which of the following statements reflects the respondent's view about supervising employees with disabilities?
  - a. More than one third indicated that more supervision was provided to employees with disabilities.
  - b. More than one half indicated that more supervision was provided to employees with disabilities.
  - c. Less than one fourth indicated that more supervision was provided to employees with disabilities.
  - d. none of the above
  
5. True or False: Supervisors who did not perceive employees with disabilities as needing assistance in managing their work day, making decisions on the job and performing the essential functions of the job, rated their work performance higher than supervisors who perceived employees with disabilities as needing assistance in these functional areas (i.e., caring for basic needs, communicating, moving from place to place).

6. Which of the following is a key finding from this analysis?
- a. Supervisors are satisfied with the overall work performance and productivity of employees with disabilities.
  - b. There is some evidence that supervisors have reservations about the ability of employees with disabilities to complete job duties and responsibilities in a timely manner.
  - c. all of the above.
  - d. none of the above.
7. The purpose of this investigation was to:
- a. provide a description of the work performance of employees with known disabilities from the perspective of their supervisors.
  - b. determine the characteristics that employers look for when hiring new employees.
  - c. determine how experience with disability affects an employer's view of supervising an employee with a disability.
  - d. all of the above.
8. Various misconceptions or conflicting information regarding the work performance of individuals with disabilities are often based on:
- a. first-hand experience.
  - b. beliefs about the capabilities of persons with disabilities, not first-hand experience.
  - c. what is portrayed by the media regarding the abilities of individuals with disabilities.
  - d. all of the above.
9. True or False: The findings of this study should assist in addressing the widespread myths and misconceptions pertaining to the work potential of employees with disabilities.



## Chapter 3: Chapter Answers

1. Prior studies about employers' attitudes toward people with disabilities in the workplace indicate that employers' attitudes are often contradictory.
2. All of the following statements indicate areas where supervisors were satisfied with the work performance of the worker with a disability.
  - ♦ Supervisors were satisfied with the workers' timeliness of arrival and departure.
  - ♦ Supervisors were satisfied with the workers' attendance.
  - ♦ Supervisors were satisfied with the workers' consistency in task performance.
3. The following statements best describe the supervisors' performance rating of the employee with a disability as compared to coworkers' performance.
  - ♦ Supervisors indicated that work performance of employees with disabilities was the same as or better than coworkers on almost all of the measures of work performance.
  - ♦ In the area of work speed, supervisors indicated that workers with disabilities performed about the same as coworkers.
4. The following statement reflects the respondent's view about supervising employees with disabilities.
  - ♦ More than one third indicated that more supervision was provided to employees with disabilities.

5. **TRUE** – Supervisors who did not perceive employees with disabilities as needing assistance in managing their work day, making decisions on the job and performing the essential functions of the job, rated their work performance higher than supervisors who perceived employees with disabilities as needing assistance in these functional areas (i.e., caring for basic needs, communicating, moving from place to place).
6. The following statements are key finding from this analysis.
  - ♦ **Supervisors are satisfied with the overall work performance and productivity of employees with disabilities.**
  - ♦ **There is some evidence that supervisors have reservations about the ability of employees with disabilities to complete job duties and responsibilities in a timely manner.**
7. The purpose of this investigation was to **provide a description of the work performance of employees with known disabilities from the perspective of their supervisors.**
8. Various misconceptions or conflicting information regarding the work performance of individuals with disabilities are often based on **beliefs about the capabilities of persons with disabilities, not first-hand experience.**
9. **TRUE** -- The findings of this study should assist in addressing the widespread myths and misconceptions pertaining to the work potential of employees with disabilities.

# **Supervisors' Evaluation of Workers with Disabilities**

**Supervisors view workers with  
disabilities as:**

- Capable,
- Productive,
- Conscientious,
- Dependable, and
- Prompt

**EMPLOYEES!!!**

# **Supervisors' Evaluation of Workers with Disabilities**

**OVERALL ASSESSMENT of  
worker performance is very  
favorable, yet.....**

**there is evidence that  
some employers remain  
concerned about the  
ability of employees  
with disabilities to  
complete job  
duties in a  
timely manner.**



# **Supervisors' Evaluation of Workers with Disabilities**

**Personal experience of  
supervisors dramatically  
influence their perceptions of  
employees with disabilities.**

- Those supervisors with a history of experiences with workers with a disability were more rigorous in their assessment and may have higher expectations for them based upon personal experience.

# **Supervisors' Evaluation of Workers with Disabilities**

**Front-line managers report that the person having the most direct and immediate supervisory contact with the worker is a KEY determinant of successful long-term performance and retention of all employees.**