Employment Barriers for Individuals with Disabilities
Transitioning from Postsecondary Education to the Workplace

Issue:

According to data released by the Commerce Department’s Census Bureau on March 16, 2001, approximately 1 in every 5 Americans has some type of disability. With 20% of the population disabled, these numbers have an impact on the United States both economically and socially (United States Census Bureau, 2001). Economically, the individuals with disabilities find themselves working at non-professional jobs that pay less, are associated with less prestige, and have little room for advancement. Less than one half of one percent of employed persons with disabilities are pharmacists, lawyers, judges, physicians, dentists, health workers, firefighters, or fire prevention workers (Stoddard, Jans, Ripple, & Kraus, 1998). Furthermore, 33% of individuals with disabilities live in a household with an annual income of less than $15,000, a number more than twice as high as individuals without disabilities (New Freedom Initiative, 2001; Burkhauser and Daly, 1994).

While these figures may seem startling, it is even more distressing if you look at the entire picture of individuals with disabilities. Much of the current literature on individuals with disabilities and employment focuses on individuals with disabilities who are employed. However, of the population of individuals with disabilities that are of adult working age, 70% are unemployed. Despite policy changes and more developed supports, the rate of unemployment for individuals with disabilities has hovered at around 70% for the past 12 years (New Freedom Initiative, 2001).

Recently, President George W. Bush passed the New Freedom Initiative to tear “down the remaining barriers to equality that face Americans with Disabilities today” (New Freedom Initiative, 2001). The mechanism to increase equality for individuals with disabilities includes increasing access to assistive technologies, expanding educational opportunities, and promoting access to the social realms of the workplace and community. Promoting access to social realms for individuals with disabilities is a difficult task. The New Freedom Initiative proposes such solutions as telecommuting, innovative transportation, and promoting home ownership. Increasing accommodations
via assistive technologies for individuals with disabilities will only aid a portion of population with disabilities. Two-thirds of employed individuals with disabilities work without accommodations or were unaware of specific accommodations that would benefit them (The Urban Institute, 2001). Therefore, increasing access to accommodations for individuals who do not need them, or do not know how to use them may have little impact on decreasing the number of unemployed. Expanding educational opportunities for individuals with disabilities also seems like a good mechanism to reduce unemployment for individuals with disabilities. However, even with a postsecondary education, only 50% of individuals with disabilities are employed (Swenson & Richards, 1999).

While these strategies do promote equality for individuals with disabilities they are limited in their scope to reduce unemployment for individuals with disabilities because they try to target a problem that has yet to be adequately defined. Descriptions of work behavior from the past were based on roles, tasks, and activities of people without disabilities. These descriptors have been presented in standardized reference works, such as the Dictionary of Occupational Titles, and defined the structure and content of occupations (United States Department of Labor, 1991). People with disabilities may or may not accomplish or perform work in similar ways to those descriptions, and this study may be able to shed some light on divergences.

“What is work? No definition is satisfactory because work relates to all human activities, and one would have to exhaust all such activities to exhaust the provinces of work. Modern terminology uses the word occupation to identify work activities. It is a functional term describing what people do to ‘earn a living,’ emphasizing that it is work which sustains life (Applebaum, 1992, p. 36).” Work has progressed through history with changing responsibilities. Employees with disabilities seem to be caught in the secondary phase of work which is characterized by an industrial period, while people without disabilities have progressed to the tertiary phase of postindustrial, computer-based careers (Applebaum, 1992).

Many advocates, agencies, and policies suggest that access to education will increase the employment of individuals with disabilities. However, among those individuals with disabilities who have completed postsecondary education, only 50% are employed (Swenson & Richards, 1999). These statistics are similar to, if not lower than the rates of employment for individuals with disabilities that have graduated from high school. For example, studies looking at high school graduates that were three years from graduation found that between 55-65% of individuals were competitively employed (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996).

In order to successfully guide people with disabilities into a productive and successful career path, postsecondary support services need to be in place to encourage career exploration and adaptation. For example, identifying successful role models, encouraging students to volunteer, arranging for internships or “shadowing experiences”, encouraging students to work during the summer, and conducting student tours of
industry and business can promote students interest in their occupational future and give them the confidence they need to enter the work force (Maddy-Berstein, 1997). Although the Individuals with Disabilities and Education Act (IDEA) promotes academic and career development and school-to-work transition for secondary youth, it is important to recognize the differences between a job and a career. A bachelor’s degree is a prerequisite to many career opportunities. Yet, students with disabilities are often unsuccessful in postsecondary education. Employment rates for people with disabilities are closely linked to their level of education (Stodden & Dowrick, 2000), but they have a lower rate of postsecondary enrollment relative to the general population (Office of Special Education Programs, 1992). The differences between the populations with and without disabilities persist into the employment arena (Benz, Doren, & Yovanoff, 1998; National Center on Secondary Education and Transition for Youth with Disabilities, 2000). Therefore, students with disabilities at a college level planning to pursue a career are a minority population that is often overlooked. With all of this uncertainty, it is important to explore the mechanism(s) that is/are making it difficult for individuals with disabilities to find, procure and/or advance in the job market. Individuals defined employment issues of importance for people with disabilities in a pilot study, including opportunity and disability related barriers, and poor satisfaction with transition supports. It is the goals of this study to explore those issues from the viewpoint of individuals with disabilities. By focusing on the viewpoint of individuals with disabilities, the proposed study will also help to elucidate methods of improvement for preparatory, transition, and employment supports for individuals with disabilities.

Furthermore, the meaning people attribute to their work is to be sought. Applebaum (1992) compares work to “the spine which structures the way people live, how they make contact with material and social reality, and how they achieve status and self-esteem” (p. 5). These complex relationships have been skillfully and artistically captured by writers, such as Studs Terkel (1974) in his classic book, “Working”. Ethnography too has often captured the lives of people in a community in such ways that a great deal of light is shed on work and attitudes towards work (Lareau and Shultz, 1996). Some ethnographic accounts specifically focused on workplace settings giving detailed accounts of the microsystem setting of work (Baba, 1991; Darrah, 1996). There have been many rich program descriptions dealing with efforts to enable people to get work and meaningful jobs (Bernick, 1987; Bullock, 1985). It is the goal of this study to explore “work” in a holistic manner, looking at the importance of support transition from postsecondary education to the workplace, life in the work place for employees with disabilities, and the role of employers in this process.

**Research Questions**

1. In what ways can preparatory support services, transition support services, and workplace support services be improved to
increase success in securing employment? (In response to the agenda set forth by the New Freedom Initiative, some initial fieldwork will be done to assess the importance of proficiency in computer and Internet usage to securing employment for individuals with disabilities.)

2. What disability-related reasons make securing employment difficult?

3. What role does education level play in one’s ability to successfully secure employment?

**Methods**

Previous research has utilized large samples of individuals with disabilities and employers, sacrificing depth of information for breadth. This study is interested in going beyond breadth, and focusing on depth through the use of qualitative research. Current literature lists possible barriers to employment from the most common to the least common. However, these lists only provide a surface picture of difficulties for employment seeking individuals with disabilities, and do not indicate the reason(s) that individuals with disabilities are unemployed. It is the goal of this study to go beyond the superficial surface of the problem and look at the essence of the unemployment issue.

Qualitative research is concerned with the essence, nature or ambience of things, while quantitative research is concerned with amount (Berg, 1998). Using qualitative research methods is especially beneficial in this study because it will give depth to the issues defined by individuals with disabilities in the pilot study. Qualitative research methods will also be utilized to preserve the “real life context in which events occur” (Isaacs and Michael, 1995, p. 219), specifically the employment arena for individuals with disabilities.

Therefore, 20 individuals with disabilities will be interviewed, 10 individuals with high school education and 10 individuals with postsecondary education, to ascertain their views about unemployment and/or employment experiences for individuals with disabilities and to get a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of unemployment which “embodies an interpretive characteristic of description” (Schwandt, 1997, p. 161).

The group of interviewees with disabilities will be used as “experts” in the arena of employment for individuals with disabilities. They are considered experts because of their ability to provide insight about unemployment and/or employment experiences through “detailed stories and personal accounts” (Morgan and Scannell, 1998, p.73). The individuals without postsecondary education will be utilized as the control group, and will provide the study with a powerful comparison group. Furthermore, interviewing individuals that are employed and unemployed will provide information on helpful strategies to secure employment, as well as contemporary barriers to securing employment. Interviewing was chosen as the qualitative method that would be most effective for this study because it allows the researcher to explore the
contents of the mind and ascertain the reasons behind unemployment, rather than ask the individuals to rate prefabricated “barriers” to employment from most important to least important (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). It also provides a strong methodology that permits the investigator to explore the essence of the employment issues defined in the pilot study by individuals with disabilities.

Timeline/Benchmarks

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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<tr>
<td>October 1, 2001</td>
<td>• Final draft of pilot study proposal</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Draft of pilot survey</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 1, 2001</td>
<td>• Final draft of pilot survey</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Begin collecting pilot data</td>
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<td>December 1, 2001</td>
<td>• Preliminary data analysis of pilot data</td>
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<td>• Synthesis of preliminary pilot data into results</td>
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<td>January 1, 2002</td>
<td>• RRTC research findings brief completed for pilot study</td>
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<td>• Follow-up research study proposal draft completed</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 1, 2002</td>
<td>• Data collection for follow-up research study begins</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 1, 2002</td>
<td>• Preliminary data analysis of follow-up research study</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Preliminary summary results presented and distributed at PacRim</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 1, 2002</td>
<td>• Follow-up study data collection complete</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 1, 2002</td>
<td>• Follow-up data analysis and synthesis</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 1, 2003</td>
<td>• Follow-research study findings brief completed</td>
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Products and Impact

The project will result in at least the following products:

- Published article(s) targeted at disabled student services officers at individuals with disabilities, postsecondary institutions of higher education, postsecondary administrators, postsecondary student services personnel, transition service providers, and/or employers.
- Research and findings brief(s).
- At least one conference presentation.

Completion of this research project will increase the understanding of the barriers that individuals with disabilities
face as they transition from postsecondary institutions to the workplace. It will also help to identify the areas of transition support that need to be improved to ease their transition, as well as lead to improved transition services at postsecondary institutions and the workplace. Information gathered from this study will also help to clarify the role of technology for individuals with disabilities in the employment arena. The results of this study will ultimately result in more successful career outcomes for people with disabilities.

References


