



Disability Employment Literature Review Summary

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Low employment levels for people with disabilities have drawn concern from policy makers, service providers, and people with disabilities themselves for many years. While statistics vary depending on type of disability, education, age and other factors, the overall employment rate has hovered around 30 percent for over a decade. Scholars differ on the causes for low employment levels. This literature review is a first step in a project designed to identify factors that lead to successful careers for people with disabilities. It focuses on two questions:

What do we know about employment levels and experiences of people with disabilities?

What factors influence employment outcomes for people with disabilities?

In order to address these questions, academic and policy literature from the last 10 years on employment was reviewed. While the literature review provided a comprehensive summary of employment levels for people with different kinds of disabilities and other characteristics and the programs that serve them, few studies specifically addressed factors that lead to successful employment. The existing studies highlighted the need for in-depth qualitative research and studies that looked at employment over time to address these questions. The literature fell into three categories:

- 1. Overviews of employment outcomes and related issues:** This section focused primarily on government statistics available through the Current Population Survey (CPS), Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), and American Community Survey (ACS), ongoing surveys from the U.S. Census Bureau in conjunction with the Bureau of Labor Statistics, as well as the vocational rehabilitation system national database and several national health surveys. Taken together, these studies demonstrate consistent low employment levels for people with disabilities and a decline in employment since the 1990s. They also suggest that people with more education and disabilities that impact less on daily functioning have a better chance of finding jobs. The data on types of employment shows people with disabilities in a range of jobs, but over-represented in service, cleaning and office support jobs. Earnings are significantly lower for people with disabilities than the general population. Factors influencing outcomes include a positive relationship with a counselor, job placement services and support that reflects individual choices.
- 2. Studies of programs and legislation designed to improve employment for people with disabilities:** These studies focus on several key environmental factors influencing employment for people with disabilities: legislation, government funded programs, and employer responses to people with disabilities. They suggest that much more work needs to be done to understand the workplace environment and motivate employers to hire people with disabilities. While consistent evaluations of government initiatives exist, these studies uniformly show people with disabilities employed at low wages in a limited range of jobs. Programs to encourage employment do make a difference, but they need more coordination with stronger efforts to yield better employment outcomes.

- 3. Studies focusing specifically on strategies to improve employment outcomes:** About half of these articles focus on environmental factors while the remaining studies identify personal attributes among people with disabilities that lead to successful employment. This group of studies suggests that environmental factors like workplace understanding of disability and willingness to accommodate people with disabilities remain important, regardless of personal attributes. That said, self-efficacy – understanding personal strengths and weaknesses, interpreting disability in a positive manner, confidence in skills and abilities, and an ongoing ability to plan, organize, develop strategies and work toward goals – does appear an important factor in employment success. These studies also highlight the importance of job placement in employment outcomes. They also show that availability of benefits such as health insurance and input from health providers influence willingness to seek employment.

Identifying Factors that Lead to Successful Employment for People with Disabilities

These studies consistently noted that people receiving SSDI are less likely to be employed, with varying explanations for this finding. Another uniform observation across this research is that many employers do not understand the ADA and that day to day compliance with the ADA is uneven. Several themes run through these studies that impact on employment outcomes:

- **Employment levels vary significantly depending on type of disability.** Overall, this research suggests that different strategies may be most effective depending on the type of disability.
- **Education and age influence employment.** People with more education are more likely to be employed, particularly in full time jobs. Younger people are more likely to seek employment, while people disabled when they are older more often stop working entirely.
- **Employment for people with disabilities tends to cluster in management, professional and technical, service sector, and sales and office occupations.** Within these categories, people with disabilities are over-represented in cleaning, food service and office support functions.
- **Research on business is limited, but suggests that a number of workplace factors influence employment outcomes.** Studies of all aspects of employment for people with disabilities report that a positive workplace culture, supportive supervisors, and lack of resistance from co-workers are important factors for successful careers. Looking more carefully at strategies to improve employers' role in supporting employees with disabilities would be important in part of a general effort to improve employment.
- **Disclosing disability is difficult and may influence hiring and retention trends.**
- **Job placement is an essential component of employment development strategies.**
- **Self-efficacy plays an important role in successful careers.** Exploring the role of self-efficacy for people with a wide range of disabilities and understanding how it is developed could enhance employment outcomes.