A Second Look at Factors Associated with Employer Hiring Behavior

Regarding People who are Blind or Have Low Vision

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Abstract

Introduction: Although negative employer attitudes and reasons that employers do not hire people with disabilities have both been investigated, little research has focused on why employers do hire people with disabilities. The purpose of this study was to investigate factors associated with employer hiring behavior regarding people with visual impairments, including the opportunity to hire (i.e., application receipt).

Method: Participants were a national sample of 388 hiring managers who completed an online survey that assessed their hiring experiences concerning people with visual impairments. Two logistic regression models were analyzed, one that included nine independent variables thought to be associated with hiring (Model 1), and one that included these nine variables plus application receipt (Model 2).

Results: Variables that were significantly associated with hiring behavior in Model 1 were prior communication with vocational rehabilitation (VR), employer attitudes, company size, company policy, and personal relationship with someone with a visual impairment. Significant variables in Model 2 were received application, employer attitudes, and personal relationship.

Discussion: As expected, application receipt was the most important predictor of hiring behavior, with odds of hiring increasing by more than 40 with receipt of an application. Despite this exceptionally strong relationship, employer attitudes and having a personal relationship remained significant predictors, indicating the robustness of attitudes as a determinant of why employers hire and the importance of personal connections to hiring behavior.

Implications for practice: Employers cannot hire unless given the opportunity, and the first step to being hired is typically submitting an application. VR professionals should both encourage
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consumers to submit applications, providing support in this process as needed, and communicate with employers to encourage their consideration of these applications.
A Second Look at Factors Associated with Employer Hiring Behavior

Regarding People who are Blind or Have Low Vision

For people with visual impairments (that is, those who are blind or have low vision), employment levels have historically been low compared to those without disabilities. A recent study calculated employment and unemployment rates for people who were visually impaired with data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2017 American Community Survey (McDonnall & Sui, 2019). People with visual impairments had an employment rate of 44.2%, as compared to 77.2% for people without disabilities, while unemployment rates for people with visual impairment were at 10%, compared to 4.8% for people without disabilities.

One frequently identified employment barrier is negative employer attitudes about people with disabilities (e.g., Burke et al., 2013; Hernadez, Keys, & Balcazar, 2000; Ju, Roberts, & Zhang, 2013), including those with visual impairments (Cruden, Williams, McBroom, & Moore, 2002; Kirchner, Johnson, & Harkins, 1997). Negative employer attitudes toward visually impaired employees have been discussed in the literature for over four decades, with negative attitudes of employers and the general public regarding the work capabilities of this population documented (Fuqua, Rathburn, & Gade, 1984; O’Day, 1999; Salomone & Paige, 1984; Williams, 1972). Earlier studies using large surveys of people with visual impairments found that negative employer attitudes were often considered the most challenging barrier to employment (Cruden & McBroom, 1999; Kirchner et al., 1997). Since then, negative employer attitudes have been identified as an employment barrier in studies involving job seekers with visual impairments (Coffey, Coufopoulos, & Kinghorn, 2014; Antonelli, Steverson, & O’Mally, 2018), reported by vocational rehabilitation (VR) personnel (McDonnall, Zhou, & Crudden, 2013), and even acknowledged by employers themselves (Crudden et al., 2002).
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One reason for the persistence of negative employer attitudes specifically toward visually impaired employees may be the nature of the disability and the different methods it requires for accessing environmental information; many employers may not know or be able to imagine how a person with a visual impairment could perform essential job functions without using vision. This lack of knowledge may be one factor in employers having less favorable views of employees with visual impairment than most other disabilities (Chen et al., 2016; Gilbride, Stensrud, Ehlers, Evans, & Peterson, 2000; Inglis, 2006).

Employers’ Reasons for Hiring People with Disabilities

Although much research has been conducted on negative employer attitudes and why employers do not hire people with disabilities (e.g., Kaye, Jans, & Jones, 2011; Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt, & Brooks, 2001; Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt, & Kulkarni, 2008; Peck & Kirkbride, 2001), there has been less research into why employers do decide to hire people with disabilities. Studies examining employer-reported reasons for hiring have indicated that top management interest, a strong commitment to diversity in general, strong relationships with non-profit organizations (such as VR), and individual factors such as work performance were important (Boni-Saenz, Heinemann, Crown, & Emanuel, 2006; Graffam, Shinkfield, Smith, & Polzin, 2002). One longitudinal study that evaluated the impact of intention to hire on the actual hiring behavior of human resource managers found that policy factors (having formal company policies about hiring people with disabilities and providing diversity training), rather than expressed intention, were significant predictors of future hiring (Araten-Bergman, 2016). Another study investigated factors associated with expressed commitment to hire people with disabilities (rather than actual hiring) and found that company size, personal relationship with someone with a disability, disability legislation and job accommodation knowledge, and inclusion of disability as
part of diversity efforts were significant predictors (Chan et al., 2010). Another study identified characteristics of employers open to hiring people with disabilities, including company culture that welcomes diversity and providing accommodations, focus on employees’ match to required job skills and not disability, and employer view of the rehabilitation provider as a partner (Gilbride, Stensrud, Vandergroot, & Golden, 2003). Gewurtz, Langan, and Shand (2016) conducted a scoping review of the literature on hiring people with disabilities and identified themes that were reported or presumed to impact hiring decisions. These themes included companies having hiring policies or requirements, having a successful history of hiring people with disabilities, and being provided information and support (including through relationships with VR agencies).

**Factors Associated with Hiring People with Visual Impairments**

Research regarding why employers hire people with visual impairments is also very limited, with only a few studies touching on this issue and one focusing on it. Similar to the themes identified for people with disabilities, studies have indicated the importance of employer education and support (from VR or internal sources), focus on the employee’s job skills and assets, and supportive hiring policies to overcome negative employer attitudes and encourage hiring of people with visual impairments (Cruden & Fireison, 1997; Cruden et al., 2002). Additional factors thought to positively influence hiring of people with visual impairment are employers having communication with VR (McDonnall, 2016), and understanding how people who are visually impaired function on the job (Cruden et al., 2002; McDonnall, Zhou, & Cruden, 2013). One study investigated factors that influenced hiring decisions for nine employers who had hired employees with visual impairments (Wolffe & Candela, 2002). Among these were candidates who were proactive in demonstrating how they could perform a job,
addressing employer concerns about access and productivity, and the importance of having guidance from people who were knowledgeable about accommodations and access technology.

One recent study (McDonnall, 2018) examined factors associated with employer hiring of people with visual impairments using logistic regression modeling, and identified only two significant factors: employer attitudes and communication with VR. The purpose of the current study was to repeat the previous study regarding factors associated with hiring behavior using a new national sample of employers, while refining one of the measures utilized and adding variables thought to further explain differences in hiring behavior. We incorporated two new variables not available in the previous study: company policy about hiring people with disabilities, based on its importance in previous research (Araten-Bergman, 2016; Gewurtz et al., 2016) and whether the employer had ever received an application from someone who is visually impaired, which indicates opportunity to hire. We examined the following research questions:

1. What variables are associated with employer hiring of people with visual impairments?
2. When the opportunity to hire a person with a visual impairment is considered, what variables are associated with employer hiring of people with visual impairments?

Method

Sample

Participants were identified using a market research company, Research Now, that provides targeted research services to businesses. Research Now offers a business-to-business research panel which allows companies to access a pool of business professionals to serve as research participants. For this study, they distributed our survey to a targeted audience defined as managers or high-level professional staff (such as president, vice president, or CEO) who were
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U.S. citizens. Research Now sent the email invitation to 25,843 potential participants, of which 1,786 opened the email link describing the study. A total of 1,064 entered the survey, resulting in an initial response rate of 59.6%. After entry, 668 participants qualified for the study and 464 of those completed the full survey, for a completion rate of 69.5%. After removing responses that were considered too fast (less than five minutes to complete the entire survey), 388 valid responses were retained. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board for human subjects research of the authors’ university.

Procedure

Research Now emailed targeted research panel members, advising that they may qualify to participate in the study. Interested participants followed a link from the email to the Research Now website where they were given study instructions and a link to enter the study’s online survey. A qualifying question at the beginning of the survey asked participants to indicate if they were involved with hiring decisions at their company. Participants who were not involved with hiring did not qualify for the study and exited the survey. An additional question about halfway through the survey required participants to provide a specific response to demonstrate that they were reading the questions. Participants who responded incorrectly to this question were disqualified and exited the survey. Survey completion time from the point of entering the survey averaged approximately nine minutes.

Participant Characteristics

Participants were from 47 states, fairly well distributed across the country: Midwest (24.2%), Northeast (22.3%), Southeast (20.7%), West (20.5%), and Southwest (12.2%). Company size was also well represented, with 23.2% of participants from companies with 1 to 49 employees; 28.1% with 50 to 499 employees; 29.6% with 500 to 2,499 employees, and 19.1%
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with 2,500 or more. Participants reported their positions as manager/supervisor (53.6%),
director/chief executive (24.5%), owner (13.1%), human resources personnel (3.9%), or other
(4.9%). Men made up 59.8% of the sample, and most participants were between the ages of 45 to
64 (65.7%) and had at least a 4-year college degree (79.9%).

Independent Variables

The majority of the variables in the previous model were included in the current models,
although the measure changed for one variable and two variables were added. The received
application variable was based on the question “Have you ever received a job application from
someone who is blind or significantly visually impaired?” and was coded 1 for a yes response
and 0 for a no response. It was conceptualized as the opportunity to hire a person with a visual
impairment, and was included only in the second model. The other new variable was company
policy, which was based on the question “Does your company have a written policy about
employment of people with disabilities?” and was coded 1 for a yes response and 0 for a no
response.

Two employer characteristic variables were retained: gender (female as the reference
category) and company size. Company size was dichotomized into large companies (1,000+
employees; coded 1) and small/medium companies (1-999 employees; coded 0). Having a
personal relationship was a dichotomous variable based on participants’ responses to the
question “Have you ever had a personal relationship with anyone who is blind or significantly
visually impaired, such as a friend, family member, or neighbor?” with yes responses coded 1
and no responses coded 0.

The Employer Attitudes Toward Blind Employees Scale (EABES) was used to measure
employer attitudes. The EABES is an 11-item scale that consists of statements to which
employers provide their level of agreement on a 7-point scale. It includes two subscales: challenges and productivity. Scores can range from 0 to 66, with higher scores associated with more positive attitudes. The measure has been used in previous studies and has sufficient evidence for reliability and validity (McDonnall, 2014, 2017). In the present study, participant scores ranged from 3 to 66. Chronbach’s alpha was .92 for the productivity subscale, .75 for the challenges subscale, and .88 for the overall scale.

To assess knowledge participants were asked if they knew of any way a legally blind employee could perform specific work tasks (accessing printed materials, accessing a computer to use internet or email, using typical office equipment, handling a cashier position, utilizing standard industrial equipment). If a participant responded yes, he/she was asked to explain how a legally blind person could perform the task. This “how” response was rated for accuracy by four independent raters based on a coding scheme developed during previous studies (McDonnall, O’Mally, & Crudden, 2014; McDonnall & Crudden, 2018). Raters discussed any score disagreements until a consensus was reached. Scores could range from 0 to 5; actual scores ranged from 0 to 4. Belief in knowledge indicates that the participant thought he/she knew how a person could perform a task (answered yes to the initial question), but did not give an accurate “how” response. Scores could range from 0 to 5, and actual scores covered the entire range. Note that scores on these two scales combined could range from 0 to 5, because a score of one could be assigned to either knowledge or belief in knowledge, but not to both.

Prior communication with VR about people with visual impairments was determined based on responses to three questions. In the previous study, we evaluated only whether the employer had communicated with VR, but did not know the temporal order of that communication in relation to hiring. In this study, we included a question about the temporal
order, and used that information to identify only those employers who had spoken to VR about people with visual impairments before hiring someone, or who spoke to VR but didn’t hire someone. The three questions used to create this variable were: “Have you ever communicated with your state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency about employment of people with disabilities?”, “Has this included talking about people who are blind or significantly visually impaired?”, and “Did you hire the person who is blind or significantly visually impaired before you communicated with VR or after?” If the participant (a) answered yes to the first two questions and (b) hired someone and selected a response that indicated contact with VR before hiring or did not hire anyone (therefore didn’t answer the third question), this variable was coded 1. If the participant provided (a) a no response to either of the first two questions or (b) a yes response to the first two questions and the person had hired someone but communicated with VR after hiring, this variables was coded 0. Ten employers had communicated with VR before hiring, 10 employers had communicated with VR after hiring, and 10 employers had communicated with VR but did not hire. In the previous study, all 30 employers would have been coded 1 for this variable; in the present study, only those 20 people who communicated with VR before hiring and those who communicated but didn’t hire were coded 1. This distinction is important because it allows us to determine the relationship between prior VR contact and hiring. Those who reported communicating with VR about people with visual impairments were asked to pick the statement that best describes their relationship; participants who indicated they had “an ongoing relationship with someone from the agency” were given a score of 1 for the relationship with VR variable and others were give a score of 0.

**Dependent Variable**

*Hiring behavior* was determined by participants’ answers to this question: “Have you
ever hired someone for your business who is blind or significantly visually impaired?” A yes response was coded 1 and a no response was coded 0.

Statistical Analyses

Descriptive statistics were utilized to describe the sample and all of the variables in the models, and the Pearson product-moment correlation was used to assess the univariate relationship between continuous and dichotomous variables. Logistic regression was utilized to determine the multivariate relationship between our independent and dependent variables. Model 1 addressed the first research question and Model 2 addressed the second research question. SAS 9.4 was used for all statistical analyses.

Results

Means and standard deviations for all variables included in the regression models, and correlations between these variables, are provided in Table 1. All of the variables with the exception of gender had a significant univariate relationship with having hired. Of particular note is that 15.2% \(n=59\) of employers in our sample had hired someone with a visual impairment, 5.2% \(n=20\) had prior communication with VR about people with a visual impairment, and 13.9% \(n=54\) reported receiving an application from someone with a visual impairment.

Statistical results of both logistic regression models (Model 1 without the received application variable and Model 2 including this variable) are provided in Table 2. In Model 1, significant variables were (a) prior communication with VR, (b) employer attitudes, (c) company size, (d) company policy, and (e) personal relationship with someone with a visual impairment. In addition, the interaction between company size and company policy was significant, indicating that the effect of company policy is dependent on company size. For large companies, having a company policy was not associated with hiring, but for small/medium companies,
having a company policy significantly increased the odds of hiring \((OR=4.00; 95\% \text{ CI}=(1.23, 12.99)\). Significant variables in Model 2 were (a) received application, (b) employer attitudes, and (c) personal relationship. The company size and company policy interaction was not significant and was therefore removed from this model.

**Discussion**

This study sheds additional light on factors that are associated with employers’ hiring behavior regarding individuals with visual impairments. It expands on a previous study of the same topic, repeating the statistical analyses with a new sample while modifying and adding relevant variables that allow for a more thorough investigation. Additional questions available in this follow-up study provide insight into the temporal relationship between one of the important predictors in Model 1, communication with VR, and hiring behavior. The temporal relationship of VR contact to hiring is relevant because only communication *prior* to hiring indicates that this contact may influence employer hiring behavior.

Prior communication with VR was a strong predictor of hiring behavior, with those who had communicated with VR being 4.3 times more likely to hire. With this refined variable, the relationship was considerably weaker than in the previous study. However, hiring behavior was not as closely linked to communication with VR in this sample, with only 33.9% of those who had hired someone having communicated with VR about employment of people with visual impairments. Although 66.7% who had communicated with VR about employment of people with visual impairments did hire someone, only half of those who communicated with VR and hired someone spoke to VR *before* hiring the visually impaired person. When the original communication with VR variable (from the previous study) was utilized in the model, the odds of hiring increased to 11, which is less than half of the odds from the previous study \((OR=24.1)\).
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Together, these results reveal two important findings: (a) in this second employer sample, the relationship between hiring and communication with VR was not as strong in general as the relationship found in the first study, and (b) having prior communication with VR is an important indicator of whether a person with a visual impairment will be hired. As in the previous study, having an ongoing relationship with VR was not a significant predictor, but that may be associated with the fact that less than 1% \((n=3)\) of the employers reported such a relationship.

Company size and company policy, as well as their interaction, were significant variables in Model 1. Employers from large companies were more likely to hire, and employers from companies with policies were more likely to hire. The interaction between the variables indicates that company policy was much more important for employers from small/medium companies, perhaps because most large companies (87.9%) had a policy. Previous research related to the relationship between company size and hiring of people with disabilities has been mixed (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2001), and this is the first study to the authors’ knowledge to document a relationship between company size and hiring of people with visual impairments. Research associated with reasons for hiring people with disabilities has indicated a company policy or culture open to hiring is important (Araten-Bergman, 2016; Boni-Saenz et al., 2006; Crudden et al., 2002; Gewurtz et al., 2016), and these findings support this previous research.

When considering the opportunity to hire a person with a visual impairment, which we defined as having received an application, prior communication with VR, company size, and company policy were not important factors. As expected, receipt of an application was the most important predictor of having hired in Model 2, with odds of hiring increasing by more than 40 times if an application was received. Despite the obvious and very close relationship between having received an application and hiring for our sample, two additional significant variables
from the first model were also significant when controlling for application receipt: employer attitudes and having a personal relationship with someone with a visual impairment.

Employer attitudes have long been considered a barrier to employment for people with visual impairments, but little empirical evidence has existed for this relationship. These results, along with our previous study’s results, provide strong support for that supposition. For employer attitudes to remain a significant variable in the model after receipt of an application is considered demonstrates the robustness of this finding. Interestingly, 54 employers reported receiving an application, and a large majority of these employers – 77.8% – hired the person with a visual impairment. Based on the statistical results, we know that the small proportion who did not hire the applicant held more negative attitudes.

It is also relevant that 96.4% of the 329 employers who have not hired someone with a visual impairment reported that they never received an application. Some of these employers may have received an application and not been aware of it because the person did not disclose on the application and the person was not interviewed, but it is interesting that such a large proportion of the sample who have not hired did not have the opportunity via an application. When considering employment for people with disabilities in general, receipt of an application may not be as rare as the population is much larger compared to people with visual impairments (12.8% versus 2.4%; Kraus, Lauer, Coleman & Houtenville, 2018). However, given the small size of the visually impaired population and the low percentage of the population who are in the labor force (McDonnell & Sui, 2019), most employers may never receive an application from someone who is visually impaired, making the opportunity to hire particularly important.

Just under half of the sample had a personal relationship with someone with a visual impairment, but approximately three-quarters of the employers who hired someone had a
personal relationship. This variable also proved to be a robust predictor of hiring behavior in our logistic regression models, as it retained its significance in Model 2. Its significance may explain the odd finding that more employers have hired someone than have received an application – 59 employers have hired someone, but 17 of them report that they did not receive an application. This suggests that some employers have hired people with visual impairments because of a personal relationship, which is often the case in hiring in general. It is also possible that having a personal relationship with someone with a visual impairment may make an employer more likely to consider hiring another individual with a visual impairment.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is that it relies on self-report data that was all obtained at the same time. Given that this is cross-sectional rather than longitudinal data, we can generally only refer to the relationships between hiring behavior and our independent variables as associations. The one exception to this is the prior communication with VR variable, for which we were able to determine that any communication with VR occurred before, not after, hiring. Also, although we were diligent in our efforts to remove data that was questionable, we can not be certain that all responses provided were accurate. For example, some employers may have hesitated to acknowledge receipt of an application from someone who is visually impaired if they did not hire the person, and some may not have read questions carefully. Finally, although we have a national sample of employers, it is not a nationally representative sample. We know that this sample is different on variables related to likelihood of hiring and communication with VR compared to our previous study sample, and the ability to generalize these results broadly is unknown.

Implications for Professionals
Employers must be given the opportunity to hire a person with a visual impairment for that to happen, and, in most cases, that means the person must put in a formal application with the employer. This indicates that VR professionals can serve as a resource to employers to help them identify qualified applicants. Our data show that only a small percentage of employers have received an application, and that the majority of those who are aware of receiving an application have hired. These results provide support for the importance of VR professionals continuing, and expanding where possible, their efforts to work with employers. Communication with VR does matter to employer hiring behavior, but actually receiving an application from a person with a visual impairment eclipses this effect. Still, employers who have communicated with VR are more likely to have received an application, thus providing the opportunity to hire.

Current unemployment rates for people with visual impairments are more than twice the rates of people without disabilities (McDonnall & Sui, 2019), indicating many people searching for employment have not been able to find it. It is likely that job search efforts will take longer for this population, and support from a VR professional in preparing for the job search, and identifying effective job search methods and potential job leads can be vital. VR professionals can encourage individuals with visual impairments to continue their job search efforts, even in the face of rejection. Helping consumers understand the hard work that is often required of a job search is important. Although it may seem obvious, the importance of putting in applications with employers should be emphasized to consumers, and any support that is necessary, for example, for inaccessible application formats should be provided.

Although people with visual impairments may face more rejection in the application process than people without disabilities, VR professionals can help pave the way for these applicants by having contact with the employer before an application is submitted or during the
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hiring process. This contact should include educating employers to help improve their attitudes about the employability of this population. These findings also suggest that VR professionals may want to target large companies or companies that have formal policies in place about employing people with disabilities for their contacts.

One challenge faced by VR professionals who work with people who are visually impaired is the small number of consumers who are available to apply for positions at any given time. Even if employers are open to the idea of considering a visually impaired applicant, they might not be able to find someone who is qualified for the position at the time they need to hire. However, the more employers that are aware of VR as a resource for qualified applicants, the more likely a connection between the two can be made when needed.
References


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**FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH HIRING BEHAVIOR**

Table 1

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Model Variables*

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* p < .05, ** p < .01
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<td>0.92</td>
<td>7.57**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Company policy</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>5.34*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Co. size x Co. policy</td>
<td>-1.96</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>3.87*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal relationship</td>
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<td>0.36</td>
<td>6.24*</td>
<td>2.47</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employer attitudes</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>18.97**</td>
<td>1.08</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>1.21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belief in knowledge</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>1.19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prior communication with VR</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>6.42*</td>
<td>4.30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship with VR</td>
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<td>1.36</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>1.44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Received application</td>
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<tr>
<td>Model Wald $\chi^2$</td>
<td>55.33**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nagelkerke $R^2$</td>
<td>.36</td>
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Note. Model 1 and Model 2 each have 10 DF. N=388.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$