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Employment after Vision Loss:
Results of a Collective Case Study

by

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Abstract:

A collective case study approach was used to examine factors influencing job retention of persons with vision loss after employment. Ten participants provided information regarding how job modifications, job restructuring, training/retraining, organized labor, transportation, motivation, and their employers and coworkers impacted their job retention. Computer technology was a major positive influence for most participants. Print access and technology were a source of stress for most participants.

Employment after Vision Loss: Results of a Collective Case Study

Persons who successfully retain competitive employment after vision loss are a minority population and are presumed to have overcome a multitude of employment barriers. This study investigated, through a collective case study approach, ten persons who are severely visually impaired who retained employment in the competitive labor market and their significant other, employer, and rehabilitation counselor. The focus of the inquiry was the impact of organized labor, job modification, job restructuring, and training/retraining on job retention. Through this approach, readers gain insight into the issues faced by consumers attempting to retain their employment after vision loss.

Previous Research

Consumers with visual impairments identify employer attitudes, transportation and mobility issues, print access, adaptive equipment and accommodations, and lack of job opportunities as major barriers to employment (Crudden, McBroom, Skinner, & Moore, 1998; Malakpa, 1994; Rumrill, Schuyler, & Longden, 1997; Salome & Paige, 1984). Some of these barriers can be addressed through service provision (i.e. mobility issues or adaptive equipment) while others, such as employer attitudes, require a more complex approach. Competitively employed persons with visual impairments credit their vocational success in the face of dismal employment statistics to personal motivation, support from family and significant others, education and training, credentials, previous job experience, and personal characteristics, including a strong work ethic (Crudden, et al., 1998).

In a study of persons with visual impairments who retained employment after vision loss, Herndon (1995) found that participants returning to the same job were likely to be under 35 years of age, college educated before utilizing vocational rehabilitation services, and to have the least severe visual conditions with residual vision. Participants who returned to work in different jobs were also likely to be under 35 years of age but more likely to receive college education through vocational rehabilitation services, and likely to have sustained their vision loss before 1 year of age.

Rehabilitation counselors reported that physical modifications to job sites were the most frequently provided vocational rehabilitation services to facilitate job retention, followed by training/retraining and job restructuring through use of changes in job duties, flexible deadlines, and/or exchanges among workers regarding tasks (Sikka & Stephens, 1997). Rehabilitation counselors also identified communication with employers and technology as key issues to successful job retention.

Methodology

Research Strategy

A qualitative data collection process was utilized to facilitate an in-depth understanding of the rehabilitation process for persons who retain their employment after vision loss. This approach allows the reader to gain insight into the rehabilitation process, specifically, the job retention process, from the consumer's perspective. The collective case study methodology allows greater understanding of the phenomena, in this case job retention, to facilitate theorizing for a larger collection of cases. The research questions focused on the impact of organized labor, job modifications, job restructuring, and training/retraining on job retention. However, it was hoped and expected that participants would provide information about additional factors impacting their job retention.

Ten cases were investigated. In each case, the consumer was interviewed first. Then, with the consumer's permission, telephone interviews were conducted with the significant other, employer, and rehabilitation counselor. This methodology allowed the researcher to compare and contrast the perspectives of various parties within the rehabilitation process.

A brief survey was used to further compare perspectives of the parties within cases on key issues in the rehabilitation process. This instrument provided a summary, of sorts, of the similarities and differences between each consumer and the others closely associated with the rehabilitation process. The survey was used within cases only and aggregate data for the surveys is not regarded as valid given the sample size and the nature of the inquiry.

Sample

Rehabilitation counselors, with the consumers' permission, provided the names and contact information for clients who successfully retained employment after vision loss. A pool of 41 possible participants was generated. Ten participants were randomly selected from the pool of 41.

Procedure

Participants were contacted by mail with letters explaining the project, the survey, and consent forms for their own participation and permission to contact their rehabilitation counselor, employer, and significant other. After obtaining the participants permission, each was asked to verbally contact the rehabilitation counselor, employer, and significant other and obtain their verbal consent to participate. Consent forms and surveys were then sent to each of the other parties.

Two to three telephone interviews were conducted with each participant. Each interview was audio taped for note taking purposes. Interviews were loosely structured, but focused on issues pertinent to job retention, including job modification, job restructuring, training/retraining, and the possible impact of organized labor. Interviews typically lasted 45 minutes to just over

one hour. At least one telephone interview was conducted with the consumer before contacting other parties. Contact with other parties was also by telephone, and interviews were typically shorter.

Analysis

The researcher analyzed transcriptions of the audio tapes. A collection of case studies was developed to obtain insight into the job retention process. After each case study was developed, a draft was submitted to the consumer for review. Each consumer verified the accuracy of the information and assessed the level of personal disclosure. After participant review, minor modifications were made to increase accuracy and anonymity.

Content analysis was used to identify similarities and differences among the cases. This manuscript contains a summary of this content analysis. To read the actual case studies and survey results, readers are directed to Employment retention after vision loss: Intensive case studies (Crudden & Fireison, 1997).

Subjects

The study included 7 men and 3 women. All lived in urban areas with 9 in large cities. Eight of 10 were married and lived with a spouse. The remaining two were never married and live alone. Two have secondary disabilities (hearing impairment secondary to brain surgery for a tumor and diabetes). Half of the participants were totally blind and the others were legally blind.

Three participants were high school graduates with one enrolled in a community college; four had undergraduate degrees, with one a CPA and another an architect. One subject had a graduate degree in social work, another in vocational rehabilitation, and the final, a Ph.D. in psychology. Three participants were employed by state agencies and one by a federal agency. One participant was self-employed. The remainder were employed in the private, for-profit sector. Occupations of the participants included: (a) mail clerk, (b) supervisor, (c) customer service representative, (d) computer coder, (e) vocational rehabilitation counselor, (f) architect, (g) pastor and sales representative, (h) psychologist, (i) clerical assistant, and (j) employment analyst.

Results

Descriptions of Participants

During the course of the telephone interviews, subjects described themselves and the personal characteristics they believe influenced their ability to retain employment. Participants used the following descriptors regarding themselves: outgoing, persistent, laid back, and having a positive attitude. Comments about working included reference to a work ethic or the desire to “not only be busy, but to contribute, to work or to make a difference.”

While not specifically asked about their adjustment to vision loss, four participants described their reaction to losing vision. One reported having a positive adjustment and three reported difficulty, stating they were angry, frightened, or hid their vision loss from others. Comments included statements such as, "...in terms of the emotional aspect, it is never as bad as you think it is going to be." Another participant stated, "I can almost whisper in the back of my mind, 'Boy, you are lucky that you are blind.' That sounds crazy...".

Support of family and/or friends was instrumental in their successful efforts to retain employment. Parents and spouses were frequently mentioned as being crucial to adjustment and job retention. Couples therapy was helpful to one participant.

Rehabilitation counselors described consumers as intelligent, having a strong work ethic, being single-minded, and having tenacity or being persistent. Rehabilitation counselors believed the consumers were motivated, had family support, and had strong character. These descriptors somewhat correspond with those of employers, who described the participants as professional, motivated, having supportive families, and having good work habits. Significant others similarly described the participants as having a good work ethic, being determined and persistent, intelligent, driven to succeed, and perfectionistic.

Job Restructuring and Job Modifications

Job restructuring strategies were more individualized than job accommodation strategies. Use of other staff to assist with written communication was the most typical strategy. Participants also benefitted from on-the-job assistance from rehabilitation professionals, such as job coaches. A small number of participants relied on family members for assistance with organizing or performing clerical tasks. Regularly scheduled meetings with the employer was another strategy helpful in job retention.

Only two participants retained the same job with the same employer after their vision loss. Job restructuring strategies used by consumers included becoming self-employed, reducing their workload, or eliminating some job duties. Consumers reported difficulty being able to perform work at the same speed as sighted employees, and a helpful job restructuring strategy included a longer training period to learn new tasks.

Time off to pursue personal adjustment and mobility training was helpful to employees. Modified schedules in response to transportation difficulties was another helpful strategy. Other helpful strategies included: higher security access on computer networks, lowered qualifications for hiring, introduction to security staff, providing cab fare rather than mileage allowances, and allowing the consumer to fly to meetings rather than drive.

Each of the 10 consumers used job modification strategies with 9 of 10 using a computer with assistive technology. Other job modifications strategies included closed-circuit televisions,

headsets, a cassette recorder, and aids and appliances, such as monoculars or magnifiers. Job modifications that did not involve technology were typically physical changes to the work site and included larger work areas, different furniture, accommodations designed to reduce glare, painted stairs, or moving items in the workplace to facilitate mobility.

Training/Retraining and Organized Labor

Six of the 10 participants received training regarding use of computers, access technology, and mobility. Six of the 10 employers provided some type of training on the job for participants. Participants also found Braille instruction and personal adjustment training beneficial.

No participants believed organized labor impacted their ability to retain employment.

Motivation

When discussing their motivation to retain employment, six participants attributed their drive to their family background or upbringing. Half of the participants specifically remarked on their “work ethic”. Having a “need” or a “drive” to work or stay busy was a frequent statement of employees in the study. Finances were a motivating factor for more than half of the participants.

The need to be independent and spirituality were also motivating forces. At least three of the participants mentioned strong religious faith and its critical role in both adjusting to vision loss and pursuing job retention. One participant stated, “There is something beyond the moment. Something beyond the present difficulty. Something beyond the opinions of the one person I am dealing with at the moment. An eternal perspective so that whatever is going on at the moment is less important than what is going on in the rest of the world.”

Employers and Coworkers

The majority of participants experienced some negative feedback from coworkers in the form of criticism, reluctance to provide assistance, and negative comments or jokes. Those with dog guides experienced negative comments from coworkers concerning allergies or dog hair in the workplace. One participant observed, “I’ve had the experience of being admired and being really disliked for the exact same reason, because I had to do things differently and I was being allowed, even though I was working very hard, to learn the skills that were required.”

Participants also expressed a feeling of being scrutinized on the job or of being compared to more experienced and sighted coworkers. Others stated that coworkers were sometimes hesitant about saying the wrong thing. Humor was suggested as a means of promoting positive relationships among coworkers.

In contrast, the majority of subjects described their employer as being supportive, cooperative, or positive. Some employers facilitated communication or relationships between the employee with a vision loss and coworkers.

Rehabilitation counselors did not typically comment about coworker relations. Of those who did, half said the relationships were difficult and half that they were positive. Half of the employers made positive comments about employee-coworker interactions and only one volunteered awareness of friction between the participant and other workers. Three of the 10 significant others discussed problems with coworkers as a major issue in the participant's effort to retain employment.

Transportation

Of the 10 participants, half use a white cane, two use dog guides, and the remaining three do not use mobility aids, though two of those rely on family members for mobility assistance. One participant commented, "I realized I had been expending an incredible amount of energy walking slowly and walking carefully, pretending that I didn't have visual problems. I would be embarrassed if I knocked something over. When I started using the cane, not only was I able to relax when I walked because I didn't have to worry about walking into a tree or falling down a flight of stairs, I identified myself as a visually impaired person. People understood that when I knocked something that I wasn't just klutzy or I was not drinking. It was a 'coming out of the closet' kind of thing."

Half the participants use public transportation to travel to and from work, one uses paratransit, one walked, and the remainder ride with a family member or coworker. Three participants chose their home based on its location to the job site or public transportation. Only two employers expressed awareness that their employee was having difficulty with transportation issues.

Limitations

The sample for this study was randomly selected. However, the sample pool consisted of persons identified as successful in job retention by rehabilitation counselors. Thus, the sample pool is not random and is not representative of the general population of persons who are visually impaired or who retained employment. The high educational level of the participants makes this sample particularly distinctive from the general population of persons with visual impairments.

Because the sample size is small and the data qualitative, generalizations cannot be based on the results. Qualitative data is typically exploratory and generates information for potential empirical study. The information provided gives useful information in theorizing regarding the impact of a variety of factors on job retention among persons with visual impairments.

Discussion

A prevalent theme throughout the case studies is the impact of computer technology on

job retention. While computer technology is generally regarded as having a profound positive impact on their lives, participants experienced stress associated with it. For example, participants were anxious when delays in procuring equipment occurred, when they were asked to perform job tasks without ample time to learn how to use their equipment efficiently, or when the equipment provided was incompatible with the employer's system.

Consumer evaluations in assistive technology and provision of training at the earliest possible point in the rehabilitation process appears indicated. Such training may be helpful in reducing the stress consumers experience when attempting to learn adaptive techniques to blindness and new technological skills while continuing to be productive employees. Evaluations to identify and obtain appropriate equipment in a timely manner appears integral to employee success. Rehabilitation providers must make every effort to identify, obtain, and install appropriate equipment at the earliest possible time to facilitate consumer success.

Even with assistive technology, access to print continued to be a stressor for participants. Participants receiving assistance accessing print from coworkers sensed negative feelings from coworkers and believed they were regarded as less competent. Productivity suffered when participants took time to personally transfer print materials to an adaptive format. Participants using closed-circuit televisions also expressed concern about the speed with which they could access printed documents. The impact of these stressors and possible solutions warrants further investigation.

It is suggested that rehabilitation providers engage in dialogue with the employer and the consumer to identify potential areas of concern regarding expected productivity standards and relationships with coworkers. Making productivity expectations clear may reduce employee anxiety. Employers alerted to possible problems with coworkers may institute procedures to correct these issues. Rehabilitation providers can be of assistance in sensitizing employers and coworkers to disability issues.

Participants resolved their transportation arrangements without major involvement from the rehabilitation counselor. All participants lived in or around urban areas, which impacted the availability of public transportation. Some chose their employment or residence based on transportation access. Further research regarding the impact of transportation issues on job retention, particularly for those in rural areas, would also be worthwhile.

Most participants expressed positive feelings about their employer and the efforts made by the employer to facilitate job retention. Additional research with employers to examine their motivations and characteristics would be beneficial.

While no two participants described themselves, or were described by others, in exactly

the same way, a general picture of the participants does emerge. Participants are generally regarded as intelligent, hard-working, and with a desire to be independent. Participants attributed these characteristics to family support and/or upbringing. Additional research to identify the values and characteristics of persons who retain their jobs is indicated, along with the identification of support systems that would be effective for persons without family support.

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