
An Overview of a Strengths-based Approach to Employment for Individuals with Disabilities

Employment is a fundamental aspect of adulthood that permits individuals to be autonomous and financially independent. Having a job allows us to create social contacts, to feel part of something that is greater than ourselves, and to have a sense of purpose (Evans & Repper, 2000). It is therefore a critical aspect of social inclusion (Evans & Repper, 2000). For people with disabilities, however, the prospect of finding or keeping a job may be particularly difficult. Since having a disability already results in experiences of social exclusion, lack of employment only exacerbates this problem.

Individuals with disabilities who are employed full time report higher levels of life satisfaction than those who do not have full time jobs (Moore, Konrad, Yang, Ng, & Doherty, 2011). However, achieving steady employment continues to be a struggle for these individuals. In Canada, this critical problem was made very evident by the 2012 Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD). Approximately 13.7% of Canadians over the age of 15 reported in this survey that they had a disability, whether learning, developmental, physical or psychological (Bizier, Marshall, & Fawcett, 2014) and it was revealed that people with disabilities were twice more likely to be unemployed when compared to those without disabilities (Turcotte, 2014).

Furthermore, individuals with disabilities who were employed earned significantly less than workers without disabilities (Turcotte, 2014). This result was consistent regardless of educational attainment: even individuals with disabilities with university degrees earned significantly less than individuals without disabilities with the same level of education (Turcotte, 2014).

People with disabilities report numerous barriers that impede their employment

Barriers include being dismissed from a job due to one's disability, employer discrimination, and negative labelling (Shier, Graham, & Jones, 2009). Other barriers identified by young adults with disabilities include lack of adequate job training, loss of financial supports once employed, and lack of accessible transportation to one's workplace (Lindsay, 2011). It is necessary to begin breaking down these barriers so that all individuals, whether experiencing a disability or not, has an equal chance of getting a job.

My approach as a course lecturer

As a course lecturer for pre-service teachers, I have had the opportunity to teach theories and strategies that aim to promote the successful inclusion of individuals with (and without) disabilities. One of the first discussions we have in these courses concerns the implications of medical and social models of disability. While the medical model suggests that disability is due to a deficit within the individual, the social model argues that disability is a function of societal barriers (Hughes, 2010). A person who uses a wheelchair is only 'disabled' when they encounter a non-accessible building, or a sidewalk without a sloping curve. This model emphasizes that it is the responsibility of society to ensure that buildings, schools, workplaces and other environments do not impede on any individual's ability to function, whether or not they have an impairment (Hughes, 2010). Disability is viewed as a difference, not as a deficit.

Despite advances made by the gradual acceptance of the social model of disability in educational fields, I feel that disability research, and discussions of disability in general, almost always contain a negative underlying tone. In research there has been a focus on developing strategies and resources that **prevent** disability from inhibiting a person's success, discussions of ways of how one can **overcome** and live fully **despite** their particular difficulties, and, in the case of employment, a focus on how a disability **does not mean an individual is not employable**. Disability is still viewed in a less than positive light, which is made all the more evident by the fact that all disabilities are consistently defined and diagnosed based on their undesired symptoms.

What is lacking in disability discourse is the idea that 'the negative' does not have to be the determining factor of disability. A disability, while disruptive, sometimes excruciatingly painful, and certainly life-altering, can also foster strengths that may not have otherwise emerged within an individual. Focusing on the symptoms does provide a guide for supports and resources that someone with a disability may need, which is essential for the maintenance of quality of life. However, this focus does not provide the full picture of an individual's potential (Buntix, 2013).

I have had various experiences that have contributed to my understanding of disability. I have interned as a learning strategist for university students with learning difficulties, worked as a program facilitator for young adults with developmental disabilities, and volunteered as a community integration aide with seniors with mental illness. Throughout all of these experiences, my understanding and appreciation for disability has grown. While everyone I worked with endured various setbacks due to their differences, it was clear that each had abundant qualities to share with their communities. These qualities were not developed in spite of disability, they were developed in tandem with disability. These qualities were just as significant to their personhood as those qualities that deemed them 'disabled'.

Identifying and promoting the benefits

Research offers clear evidence for the benefits of hiring employees with disabilities. A large study conducted by De Paul University found that individuals with disabilities had less scheduled absences and equivalent performance ratings than employees without disabilities (De Paul University, 2007). In addition, company administrators reported that employees with disabilities are very reliable and that the cost of any accommodations needed were negligible (De Paul University, 2007). Moreover, individuals with autism and intellectual disabilities are shown to demonstrate lower turnover rates and better work safety behaviours than individuals without disabilities (Ready Willing & Able, n.d.). While more research is necessary to expand on these findings, there is certainly evidence that individuals with disabilities are unmistakably very valuable members of the workforce.

The strengths-based approach to disability

The adoption of a strengths-based approach to disability (Wehmeyer, 2015) that focuses on the skills and abilities that people with disabilities have to offer would foster much more access to employment. This approach emphasizes the skills that individuals with disabilities contribute to work environments and the rest of their communities. Rather than developing hiring initiatives in order for companies and employers to appear sympathetic towards employees with disabilities, there should be a understanding of how the strengths of individuals with varying disabilities would benefit their employers. Of equal importance, this strengths-based approach would facilitate the development of self-esteem and self-determination among people with disabilities (Wehmeyer, 2015).

It is necessary to add that a strengths-based perspective of employment of individuals with disabilities does not negate the fact that accommodations might be necessary in order to reduce workplace barriers (Buntix, 2013). However, the focus when hiring any individual, whether diagnosed with a disability or not, should always be what talents they can offer.

It is my belief that perspectives of disability will continue to evolve. The movement towards a more positive and strengths-based approach to the concept of disability will enable further access to social inclusion, including access to employment. Progress has been made, but improvements are needed so that all individuals have access to jobs in which they can be autonomous, financially independent, and included.

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