

Introduction to the Special Issue

The State of the Science Conference

Katherine J. Inge* and Paul Wehman

Virginia Commonwealth University, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (VCU-RRTC) on Employment of People with Physical Disabilities, Richmond, VA, USA

The most recent statistics from the Bureau of Labor Statistics for 2016 reveal that 17.9% of people with disabilities had employment, while 65.3% of individuals without a disability were employed. The unemployment rate in 2016 for individuals with disabilities was 10.5%, compared to 4.6% for those without a disability (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). However, employment rates for individuals with physical disabilities tend to be lower than those of other people with disabilities.

As an example, the unemployment rate of individuals with multiple sclerosis (MS) in the United States has been reported to be between 55% and 70% (Rumrill et al., 2015), resulting in a disproportionately high level of unemployment among a group of individuals who are qualified and experienced workers. People with multiple sclerosis (MS) face unique barriers to employment, since MS is associated with a wide range of physical, cognitive, and emotional symptoms that appear episodically and unpredictably (Roessler & Rumrill, 2003; Rumrill et al., 2013). In addition, a number of researchers have reported that individuals with cerebral palsy (CP) continue to experience significantly lower rates in getting and keeping employment in comparison to individuals without disabilities (Huang et al., 2013; Magill-Evans, Galambos, Darrah, & Nickerson, 2008). As a final example, the National Spinal Cord Injury Statistic Center reported information on 28,450 individuals with SCI in the National Spinal Cord Injury Database. More than half of these individuals (57.1%) were employed at the time of the injury. One year post injury, only 11.7% were employed; by 20 years post

injury, 35.2% were employed (National Spinal Cord Injury Statistic Center, 2012).

In 2013, the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR) funded a National Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Employment of People with Physical Disabilities at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU-RRTC). The goal of the Center is to conduct research, training, and knowledge dissemination activities that will impact the employment rates of this underemployed and unemployed group of citizens. As part of the work of this important Center, a State of the Science Conference on the Employment of People with Physical Disabilities was held in Richmond, Virginia on September 26 and 27, 2017. The conference was designed to discuss issues and implications from the new knowledge gained from our disability employment research activities. Along with presentations by prominent speakers, expert panels took place, which provided lively discussions around empowering individuals with physical disabilities to access quality employment, independence, and integration into society. The important findings from the research were presented to the participants, and the papers included in this special issue report on these findings.

It is clear from this State of the Science Conference that more intervention development and expansion of intervention testing will be fundamental to help persons with physical disabilities gain and maintain employment. We believe that the papers presented next are a good representation of this RRTC research, and more importantly, provide a deep foundation for future research. Future research must focus on ways to change employment behaviors of persons with disabilities and their employers. The findings from our current work need to guide the design of experimental

*Address for correspondence: Katherine J. Inge, Ph.D., O.T.R., Virginia Commonwealth University, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (VCU-RRTC) on Employment of People with Physical Disabilities, 1314 W. Main St., PO Box 842011, Richmond, VA 23284, USA. E-mail: kinge@vcu.edu.

studies to identify independent variables that affect employment outcomes. This research is vital to assist this group of individuals who have been underutilized in the workforce.

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