

Guest Editorial

Work and Disability

I am pleased to present the special issue on work and disability in *WORK: A Journal of Prevention, Assessment & Rehabilitation*. The purpose of this special issue is to address the employment status of individuals with disabilities nearly 25 years after the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law. The ADA offered great promise for the equal treatment of individuals with disabilities in public places, particularly in the workplace, and was one of the most significant pieces of legislation promoting civil rights of individuals with disabilities [1].

The ADA was originally signed into law in 1990 [2], and was further clarified by the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 [3]. The purpose of the ADA was to create a law protecting the civil rights of individuals with disabilities, thereby increasing access of individuals with disabilities to public spaces, community resources and employment opportunities [4]. Thanks to the ADA, many physical structures are now accessible, and societal attitudes toward individuals with disabilities have improved.

Despite these improvements, individuals with disabilities continue to struggle to ensure that their civil rights are protected, particularly in the realm of competitive employment. Recent data from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics provides that the employment rate of individuals with disabilities was 17.8 percent in 2012, as compared to a 63.9 percent employment rate of individuals without disabilities [5]. Such statistics are disheartening given the efforts that have been made over the past 25 years to level the playing field in order to provide equal opportunity for all. Simply passing laws to promote equal opportunities in employment for individuals with disabilities is not enough. Society as a whole must undertake the responsibility of ensuring that rights of individuals with disabilities are protected and supported.

The following articles provide a broad scope of perspectives addressing challenges that individuals with

disabilities face in obtaining competitive employment, and offer potential solutions to such challenges. This issue begins with two first-person narratives of individuals with disabilities who discuss their own struggles and successes seeking and obtaining employment. Girma, a graduate of Harvard Law School and a Skadden Fellow at Disability Rights Advocates, tells the story of her first experience job hunting during a summer in Alaska. Schwartz, Associate Professor of Law and Director of the Disability Rights Clinic at Syracuse University College of Law, discusses the ways in which self-advocacy, technology and institutional support have supported his successful legal and academic careers. These personal narratives paint a vivid image of the resilience and hard work that is often required to achieve such successes. Both authors note that adaptive technology has largely assisted in their success; however, Oswal explains that while adaptive technology can be helpful in accessing online resources, some technologies, such as digital libraries, can be both a boon and bane of blind faculty and students.

Several authors describe barriers that individuals with disabilities face in the workplace, such as racism, physical barriers and employers themselves. Lukyanova, Balcazar, Suarez-Balcazar and Oberoi utilize data from vocational rehabilitation to examine the extent to which African Americans with mental illness face additional challenges securing a job, as compared to Caucasians with mental illness. Saigal and Narayan identify physical barriers preventing individuals with disabilities from gaining access to the formal sector in Delhi, India. Gray and his colleagues, Gottlieb, Hollingsworth, Miller and Morgan, present three articles addressing challenges faced by people with mobility impairments and limitations. Sabatello uses a case study of a woman who sustained a TBI at the age of sixteen to illustrate the challenges that individuals with “invisible disabilities” face in procuring employment, obtaining accommodations and gaining acceptance in the workplace.

Social participation and significant others' involvement play an important role in employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. Araten-Bergman, Tal and Stein present findings from an Israeli study that explores the interdependence of employment, social capital, and community participation for employed and non-employed working age individuals with disabilities. McCluskey, Brooks, King and Burton demonstrate that significant others often reinforce unhelpful illness perceptions and serve as wider psychosocial obstacles to recovery from persistent low back pain and continued work participation.

Transition to employment from the educational setting is one of the most important areas in which policies and programs can drastically influence employment outcomes for young people with disabilities. Bellman, Burgstahler and Ladner describe outcomes from participation in work-based learning opportunities and share suggestions for others who wish to increase the participation of students with disabilities in work-based learning to improve their academic achievement and career prospects. Gragoudas discusses the importance of promoting self-determination skills among students with disabilities in secondary school to assist with their transition planning and teach self-advocacy skills for future employment. Nochajski and Schweitzer describe a model demonstration project that identifies best practices to facilitate successful school to work transition for students with emotional/behavioral disorders. Kalef, Barrera and Heymann describe Telenor Open Mind, a job training program at Norway's largest telecommunications company with financial support from Norway's Labor and Welfare Organization (NAV), which acts as a springboard for individuals with disabilities into the workplace.

Finally, several authors describe the supports offered and challenges faced by governmental programs and advocacy groups, which were designed to support individuals with disabilities in obtaining competitive employment. Hallden reviews the workers' compensation system in the United States and identifies the false assumptions that create barriers to effective and timely

resolution of claims. Brown and Johnson describe the current state of vocational rehabilitation services for individuals aging with secondary disabilities, and discuss the impact of aging and secondary conditions on employment status. Benshoff, Barrera and Heymann offer a potential solution to improving disability rights in India by examining strategies of the National Centre for the Employment of Disabled People, an organization dedicated to advocating for the rights of individuals with disabilities in India.

We are proud to provide a broad scope of challenges and solutions presented by a diverse group of authors from a wide array of disciplines. We hope that this special issue inspires others to pursue scholarship, promote policymaking and increase dialogue about potential solutions to challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in gaining competitive employment. We welcome your feedback and partnership in these endeavors.

Sincerely,

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References

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