

# Employment For Students With Disabilities: A Systematic Review

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## Abstract

Finding employment opportunities for individuals with special needs continues to be a challenge. In this systematic review, the researcher presents a comprehensive overview of supportive work environments that can increase the rate of employment for people with special needs. This study aims to answer the following research question: What are the solutions proposed and recommended by previous studies to counter the decline in employment among individuals with disabilities? In total, 12 studies met the inclusion criteria. The results highlight the importance of communicating and working with individuals with special needs, as well as preparing and training them to overcome the unemployment rate. Strategies include establishing a curriculum for social skills based on work, implementing the project SEARCH model, providing job accommodations, and offering job accommodations.

**Keywords ;** Employment, Individuals With Disabilities, Work Environments.

## Introduction

The research projects altogether point to the fact that the encouraging working environment for individuals with special needs is the key when they are making the initial transition to competitive employment and when they are working (Cordell, 2023; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011). One of the major efforts has been the exploration of different programs such as employer-based ones like of Project SEARCH, supported employment and vocational rehabilitation services, all of which have demonstrated their effectiveness in the facilitation and improvement of employment outcomes (Wehman et al., 2017; Schall et al., 2015; Wehman et al., 2013). Disabilities, in the framework of this research, mean inabilities or impairments that might disable a person from having good physical, cognitive, sensory and emotional functioning. The individual may then find it

difficult to involve in various daily tasks, including working. Another commonly used definition of a disability is available in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, which states that a disability is a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity [Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990, 42 U.S.C. § 12102(2)]. The word employment is used to describe the situation when a person is on a job and gets into paid work. In this case, the worker will do the tasks or services that he or she is assigned to do by the employer or organization, and in return, the person will receive compensation which may be in the form of wages or salary or other forms (Barwaśny, 2023).

## Work Environment for Individuals with Disabilities

Challenges surrounding the employment of individuals with disabilities are multifaceted, demanding a comprehensive approach for effective solutions. Primarily, the strategy relies on the relationship that is built between employers and workers with disabilities, as mentioned by the United States Department of Labor in the year 2020. The supportive working environment is the main pillar that needs to be kept in mind in order to create a successful workplace for people with disabilities, comprising the whole set of aspects that jointly determine a positive and welcoming work environment (Luecking, 2009).

The initial principle of this environment is to take into account the functions of diversity and inclusion, and this is emphasized by Bruyère, and Erickson (2007). Working towards a diverse workforce is not just about a company acknowledging the inherent value of people with different backgrounds, abilities, and perspectives, but also [the organization] taking steps to ensure that there is a sense of belonging and integration for all employees, including those with disabilities. In a working environment that is enriched with diversity and inclusion, people with disabilities are not seen as abnormalities but rather as fully-fledged parts of the team. This approach, which ensures the creation of a respectful environment where each employee is valued for their own talents and accomplishments, is the envisioned one. Moreover, it implies the free exchange of views and mutual understanding among the team members that in turn erases myths and misunderstanding concerning disabilities. Notably, work environment which is supportive is not just about acceptance, it also focuses on the employee's needs in different levels. It encompasses

making reasonable adjustments to the workplaces or duties to ensure a workplace that enables people with disabilities to do their jobs well. Such accommodations could include provision of physical condition of the work space, flexible working hours, use of technologies that assist and even modifications to the work role.

The communication and disclosure of vital information is the main link to creating a healthy environment for workers with disabilities. One of the key means of meeting the specific needs of employees with disabilities is through developing trusting and enabling communication with the employers, which is indicated by the study by Kaye et al. (2011). When staff members are able to share their situations and discuss what they are required, it makes way to the required adjustments and accommodations. These accommodations can encompass a range of adjustments, including workplace modifications and flexible schedules (Hendricks, 2010). The employers who manifest this type of communication practice create a climate that people can speak honestly about the difficulties that they encounter because of their handicap, ultimately leading to a more inclusive and accommodating workplace. It creates a common platform that helps fill the knowledge gap and thus allows the employers to be well-versed with the employee needs and provide the necessary assistance and facilitation for a good and productive time at work.

Investing in disability awareness and inclusion training is a proactive step that employers can take to foster an inclusive workplace culture. Hernandez et al. (2017) bring to light the critical role of such training programs in creating a climate where

employees, irrespective of their differently abilities, are appreciated and supported. When a whole workforce is aware of the hurdles and tribulations faced by their coworkers with disabilities, they are able to better offer help and assistance when required. This, in turn, will diminish that sense of loneliness which some disabled team members may experience. Therefore it will enhance teamwork and unity in the workplace. Honoring and paying tribute to workers with disabilities to an inclusive and various workforce is also a very significant factor. John Blanck and his co-authors (2017), emphasized the role of ensuring career growth for disabled people. By employers recognizing and appreciating the abilities and efforts of employees with disabilities, not only the individual benefits but the company's culture of diversity and equal opportunities for professional advancement of numerous talents is strengthened. Besides employees with disabilities this appreciation and support encourage them to do their best and also to convey to all the staff that the company is really serious about the diversification.

The article written by Hernandez and his group (2017) revealed how the challenging relationship between the organization and the employees have a critical effect on the overall workplace, especially those with disabilities. This social stress shows up in many ways, different discrimination and low job satisfaction being the most common effects. In such workplaces, the background of difficult working relationships, discrimination against persons with disabilities, either overtly or subtly, is likely to be the bacteria that cause the disease. This discrimination may be manifested in the form of unequal treatment,

insult or discrimination, and it is a violation of the rights and protections that the people with disabilities supposed to have. On top of that, a strain on relationships will likely sustain prejudices and overgeneralizations about the capacity of employees with disabilities, which will negatively affect their success in the workplace. The research carried out by Kaye et al in 2011 emphasizes the role of these negative attitudes as well as the lack of knowledge in these matters. Such types of thoughts can make supervisors or managers hesitate to give reasonable accommodations or make changes to the tasks in order to let employees with disabilities fulfill their responsibilities properly. These attitudes deter people with disabilities, thereby aggravating the problems they face, leaving them without chances for career growth or promotion. not only it promotes a community that is exclusive but also it results in the loss of chances for employers who do not understand the special skills and talents that disabled people can bring to the workplace. One of the steps that companies can take to tackle these challenges is to place a great emphasis on the training of disability awareness and inclusion for all the employees so that they can have empathy and understanding on the issue. Open and communication and considerate adjustment are two crucial components to build up more cordial and supportive employer-employee relationships. Through the dismantling of the prejudicial attitudes and fostering an environment of inclusion, organizations can make the barriers that hinders diversity and equality in the workplace disappear.

### **Strategies to Enhance Employment Opportunities**

In order to improve the job opportunity, recommendation include the practice of the

virtual reality (VR) job interview tools. Virtual reality job interview tool provides an innovative and attractive way to find employment, especially for people with disabilities. Such instruments give an accessible and safe environment to candidates where they can train and sharpen their interview skills by overcoming the issues like anxiety and shyness that usually hinder candidates during traditional interviews. In the case of people with disabilities who may confront additional stress factors, such as communication difficulties or sensory sensitivities, related to their conditions in an interview. With the aid of VR simulation, the candidates can navigate the interview and get instantaneous feedback. Such a tool can optimistically improve their interview skills that consequently make them more employable (Smith et al., 2020).

Clear communication is crucial for creating an inclusive and supportive work environment for individuals with disabilities. It ensures everyone understands their roles and responsibilities within the organization, benefiting all employees. Employers should provide detailed job descriptions, outlining specific tasks, responsibilities, and expectations. This transparency reduces uncertainty and anxiety, enabling individuals to perform their duties with greater confidence. Additionally, employers should ensure employees are aware of workplace policies, procedures, and accommodations, which can lead to increased job satisfaction and productivity (Lund, & Cmar, 2020; Solomon, 2020).

Acknowledging the specific needs of people with special needs and implementing job-based social skills curricula is the critical components that help to build a workplace

culture that is inclusive and supportive. The employer needs to have an elaborate knowledge of the individualized needs of the persons with disabilities to be able to create a workplace that caters for them. This consists of the perception of sensory sensitivities, the peculiarities of communication styles, and the possible accommodations that could enable the best performance at work (Goldfarb et al., 2019). Such curricula can cover essential topics such as emotion regulation, problem-solving, conversation skills, interview skills, and understanding hidden social rules. By providing targeted training, employers equip individuals with the skills necessary for effective communication, teamwork, and overall success in the workplace (Gorenstein et al., 2020).

Overall, taking the time to know individuals with disabilities' specific requirements and hereby slowly implementing job-based social skills curricula are necessary consequences for building a space of inclusivity and progress for all employees. Following the models of Project SEARCH and appropriate work accommodation is vital in this endeavour for improving employability among disabled people. Through the engagement of prospective employees and the implementation of the necessary tools, such as VR job interview software, employers can ensure a bond that will favor those with disabilities and makes them feel part of their firm. This systematic research review was conducted to answer the following question: What do the earlier studies provide as a guidance and recommendation to solve the problem of employment alteration among individuals with disabilities?

## **Method**

## Data Collection

In order to identify all relevant research studies, we performed a thorough and systematic literature search, adhering to the criteria established by Cooper (2017). For this systematic research, six online databases were searched to ensure comprehensive coverage of the literature: EBSCO, Web of Science, Sage Journals, ProQuest, JSTOR, and PsycINFO.

In the search process to identify relevant studies involving individual with special needs, the first search line incorporated specific key terms (disab\* OR Special need\* OR exceptional\* OR learning disab\* OR “develop\* disorder\*” OR “autism spectrum disorder” OR Autistic OR ADHD OR ADD OR “attention deficit hyperactivity disorder” OR “behavior disord\*” OR “down syndrome” OR “physical disab\*” OR “visual impair\*” OR “hearing impair\*” OR deaf OR blind OR “speech language disorder\*”) associated with this particular population. Additionally, to locate studies encompassing employment across various types of texts, the second search line included terms relevant to employment (“disab\* employment” OR “inclusive employment” OR “support\* employment” OR vocation\* rehabil\*” OR postsecond\* OR job accommodation\*” OR “workforce diversity” OR “equal employment opportunity” OR “work program\*” OR “employment service\*” “workplace accessibility” OR “transition”). Excluding specific populations from consideration, the third search line included terms related to populations not relevant to the current study (NOT elementary OR middle OR preschool OR early child\* OR gift\* OR talent\*)

This systematic review included studies that met the following criteria: (a) the search was limited to peer-reviewed journals and empirical studies from 2017 to 2023, (b) studies included participants with disabilities whose age 16 years old and older, and (c) Studies included interventions and/or recommendations for employment for individuals with disabilities. The excluded criteria included: (a) studies participants were not individual with disabilities, (b) studies focused particular time or period such as during the wars or COVID-19, (c) Studies participants younger than 16 years old, (d) studies included policies related to a specific country, and (e) studies discussed the transition but only employment.

The initial search yielded a total of 65,600 articles. After eliminating duplicates, 49,700 unique studies remained. These studies were then categorized as "yes," "maybe," or "no" based on their titles and abstracts, resulting in (207) articles for full-text review. The full texts of all articles categorized as "yes" and "maybe" (95) were obtained and reviewed. Ultimately, out of the this articles, 11 met the inclusion criteria. To identify additional relevant studies, a hand search was conducted for articles published between 2017 and 2023. Journals such as "Remedial and Special Education," "Education and Treatment of Children," and "Reading Improvement" were included due to their high article frequency from the initial computer search. Through this manual search, one more article was located, bringing the total number of included studies to 12. The search and categorization process adhered to the PRISMA guidelines as outlined by Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, and Altman (2009).

## Data Analysis

The coding procedure was conducted in adherence to established general guidelines, aiming to maintain uniformity and transparency throughout the process. The coding sheet encompassed various aspects, including study design, demographic details, sample size, overarching conclusions, and suggested recommendations.

## Result

### Participants

The studies included in this analysis comprised a total of 338 individuals with various disabilities. The majority of participants were identified as having Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in six studies. Two studies focused on individuals with intellectual disabilities, while one study was conducted on individuals with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and another study focused on individuals with visual impairment. Two studies included participants with a range of disabilities, such as ASD, intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, behavior disorders, or learning disorders. The age of the participants varied, with seven studies including individuals aged between 16 and 29, four studies including individuals up to the age of 71, and one study only specifying the main age range of participants. The studies were conducted in diverse settings, with seven taking place in the United States (Baker-Ericzén et al., 2018; Flower et al., 2019; Gorenstein et al., 2020; Grenawalt et al., 2021; Jetha et al., 2019; Peterson et al., 2017; Whittenburg et al., 2020) and one each in New Zealand, Ethiopia, Spain, England, and Canada (Bross et al., 2021; Genova et al., 2021; Newlove-Delgado et al., 2018; Wehman et al., 2017; Yeshanew et al., 2022).

### Research Designs

The research designs employed in these studies varied. Six studies utilized qualitative research designs involving interviews (Bross et al., 2021; Flower et al., 2019; Genova et al., 2021; Grenawalt et al., 2021; Wehman et al., 2017; Yeshanew et al., 2022). Two of these studies focused on individuals with ASD, highlighting the work environment, dealing with social interactions, and adapting to new project requirements. Additionally, they discussed difficulties in job-related tasks such as applications, resumes, and interviews, as well as the misalignment between personal interests and job tasks. Communication about job roles, the work environment, and the organization was underscored as vital for addressing these challenges. Two studies conducted interviews with individuals with intellectual disabilities, exploring workplace challenges and employer attitudes and stereotypes. One study interviewed individuals with visual impairment, while another interviewed individual with ADHD.

Conversely, six studies utilized quantitative research designs, all centered on suggestions and recommendations to enhance the employment rates of individuals with disabilities (Baker-Ericzén et al., 2018; Gorenstein et al., 2020; Jetha et al., 2019; Newlove-Delgado et al., 2018; Peterson et al., 2017; Whittenburg et al., 2020). Four of these studies focused on individuals with ASD, while the other two involved individuals with ASD, intellectual disabilities, and physical disabilities.

### Work Environment

Four studies discussed the pre-employment work environment (Baker-Ericzén et al.,

2018; Flower et al., 2019; Wehman et al., 2017; Yeshanew et al., 2022). These encompass various aspects. Job interviews, job applications, and crafting resumes were frequently cited as notable hurdles. There often existed a disparity between an individual's interests and the tasks associated with the job. The timing and manner of disclosing one's mental health condition significantly shaped their work experiences. The work environment, spanning its ambiance and conditions, wielded a substantial impact on the success of employees dealing with mental illness. Workplace culture, support mechanisms, and accommodations played pivotal roles in determining their ability to thrive in open employment. Furthermore, the emotional toll of transitioning from familiar services to the uncertainties of adult services was significant. A lack of preparation compounded these challenges. Many participants faced difficulties in having their needs met within the adult system, contributing to feelings of anxiety and abandonment.

Four studies delved into post-employment work environment (Bross et al., 2021; Genova et al., 2021; Grenawalt et al., 2021; Newlove-Delgado et al., 2018). Three of these studies discussed employers' attitudes and stereotypes toward individuals with disabilities. One study highlighted the challenges of focusing on tasks, managing social interactions, and adapting to varying project requirements.

### **Suggested Strategies**

Five studies explored various interventions to enhance the employment prospects of individuals with disabilities. Two studies

investigated the impact of the SEARCH model (Jetha et al., 2019; Whittenburg et al., 2020), while one study focused on the SUCCESS model (Peterson et al., 2017). Additionally, one study assessed the impact of a virtual reality job interview tool (Baker-Ericzén et al., 2018), and another emphasized the importance of a curriculum for job-based social skills, covering topics such as emotion regulation, problem-solving, conversation skills, interview skills, and understanding hidden social rules (Gorenstein et al., 2020). Two studies stressed the significance of clear communication regarding job roles, the work environment, and the organization. They also underscored the need for management teams to gain a deep understanding of the needs of individuals with disabilities (Bross et al., 2021; Newlove-Delgado et al., 2018).

### **Discussion**

This study's findings offer valuable insights into the work environment and strategies for enhancing the employment prospects of individuals with disabilities. These insights encompass various aspects of the employment journey, from pre-employment to post-employment support.

### **Supportive Work Environment**

A key component of a successful relationship between employers and employees with disabilities is the creation of a supportive work environment. Employers who are open to diversity and inclusion, including hiring individuals with disabilities, often foster a workplace culture that values and respects all employees (Meeks et al., 2016). This support extends to providing reasonable accommodations to ensure that employees with disabilities can perform their job tasks effectively.

A positive employer-employee relationship also has career advancement opportunities. Employers who acknowledge and appreciate the qualities and accomplishments of employees with disabilities, those organizations can be said to be true to their pledge of equal opportunities for career advancement. This not only benefits the individual but brings a touch of diversity and inclusion into the company as well (Stevenson & Fowler, 2016). While the opposite of this, the relationship between employers and disabled workers that is stressed or unsupportive can cause the feeling of disabled workers being discriminated, isolated, and dissatisfied with their jobs. Discrimination or the failure to understand the capacities of persons with disabilities may, in turn, create serious obstacles as far as the working life is concerned. Consequently, creating such a positive outlook in the relationships between employers and employees with disabilities is a must-do in order to ensure equal employment opportunities and diversify a workforce.

Decent communication between employers and employees is a key factor. A staff member with disability may have to make their employers aware of the condition to apply for the accommodations required. The employers who motivate their employees to talk openly and honestly about their issues create a space where workers feel free to discuss their barriers and challenges while dealing with their disability. Also, companies that accept such disclosures and respond with empathy and flexibility are organizations that are more likely to hold their skilled workers (Chaparro et al., 2020). An effective communication about their job roles, how it is like to work in the organization and organizational expectations are highlighted

as the most important aspects of employment. The particular form of communication that people with disabilities experience can be greatly improved by providing them with an explicitly detailed form of communication (Cordell, 2023). Such tasks are also fundamental, in which the job descriptions are provided, explaining the workplace expectations, and giving them a role in the organization.

### **Strategies for Enhancing Employability Among Individuals with Disabilities**

One noteworthy strategy is the utilization of a virtual reality job interview tool. This tool can provide individuals with disabilities with a simulated and controlled environment to practice job interviews (Genova et al., 2021). Such technology can help alleviate anxiety and enhance interview skills, ultimately improving their employability.

The implementation of a curriculum for job-based social skills is a promising strategy. This curriculum can cover a range of essential topics, such as emotion regulation, problem-solving, conversation skills, interview skills, and understanding hidden social rules (Gorenstein et al., 2020). Such training can empower individuals with special needs to navigate the social complexities of the workplace more effectively.

The Project SEARCH model considered one of the beneficial practices for individuals with disabilities (Schall et al., 2015; Wehman et al., 2013; Whittenburg et al., 2020). This model emphasizes the primary role that practical experience in a real working environment play in making an individual more employable. It is oriented on



joint actions by the stakeholders (such as business personnel, educational staff and community rehabilitation service providers). This manner of working together ensures that the employment journey becomes attentively done and customized to meet each person's needs. The employers who also training their employees about disability awareness and inclusion are likely to have more employees who are inclusive in the workplace. Employees appreciate the obstacles that their colleagues with disabilities have to overcome when everybody in the team is aware of the issues. And they will be more willing to help and support their teammates. It can do so by eroding the sense of loneliness that people with some kinds of disability may have (Mujika et al., 2016).

In summary, this study investigated the dimensions of job creation of individual with disabilities. It emphasizes the importance of targeted interventions, effective communication, adaptation of programs, and involvement of all interested groups for enabling the workplace being welcoming and friendly. The approaches are therefore the route that such people get improved employment opportunities and enhance their general welfare. And these strategies are consistent with the notion of equal treatment and assurance of diversity in the workforce.

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