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## **THE INTEGRATION OF DISABLED PEOPLE INTO THE OPEN LABOUR MARKET: A SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*It has been established that people with disabilities are in most cases excluded from society and major activities in society such as social recreation and employment in the open labour market. Only 1% of people with disabilities in South Africa are working in the open labour market. Only some of the 99% who do not work receive a small grant from the state, which is their only form of income (White Paper on Integrated National Disability Strategy 1997:2-3). It is an objective of the South African government to achieve equity in the open labour market. As little research has formally been done regarding the attitudes, perceptions and needs of employers regarding the integrating of people with disabilities into the labour market, the subject of this study is relatively new. The researchers have therefore conducted an exploratory research study to explore employment possibilities for people with disabilities, the attitudes, perceptions and needs of employers as well as barriers that prevent the employment of disabled people. On the basis of this information the researchers have described guidelines for a training programme for employers to integrate people with disabilities into the open labour market.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Legislation on disability and discrimination practices regarding disability around the world has been changed as a result of pressure from the disability community and its advocates (Davis in Hales, 1996:128-129).

People with disabilities have always been stigmatised and excluded from society and especially the labour market. Disabled people were removed from their homes and communities to isolated establishments and the service provision was less than adequate and mostly planned by non-disabled people (McFarlane in Hales, 1996:6). According to the White Paper on an Integrated National Disability Strategy (1997:2-3), the majority of disabled people in South Africa do not receive any grants. Those who do receive grants, do not receive any other income, while 99% of disabled people are excluded from the open labour market. It has only currently become an objective of the South African government to develop new ways to integrate the disabled person into society and the open labour market. The purpose of the Employment Equity Act, 1998 (Act No. 55 of 1998) is to achieve equity in the workplace by:

- Promoting equal opportunity and fair treatment in employment through the elimination of unfair discrimination;
- Implementing affirmative action measures to redress the disadvantages in employment experienced by designated groups, in order to ensure their equitable representation in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce.

This means that employers must not discriminate against any person, in this case the person with disabilities, and should employ and reasonably accommodate the needs of people with disabilities. This creates a dilemma for many employers, because of the stigma and misconceptions about

disability and the lack of knowledge and skills to accommodate disabled people into the workplace.

The needs of the disabled person as well as the needs of an employer during this reconstruction and integration are equally important. A research study was therefore conducted with the aim of analysing the current South African open labour market situation regarding the employment of disabled people as well as identifying the attitudes, perceptions and needs of employers regarding the employment of disabled people, as well as the barriers that prevent the employment of disabled people; the intention was to develop guidelines for a training programme for employers to enable them to integrate disabled people into the open labour market.

This article will therefore focus on a review of the above-mentioned study by giving a summary of the literature study, which includes disability as a social phenomenon, the employer and the open labour market, and strategies to integrate disabled people into the open labour market. The research methods will also be outlined. This article will conclude by providing the most important quantitative and qualitative results of the study and recommending guidelines for a training programme for employers to enable them to integrate disabled people into the open labour market.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Disability as a social phenomenon**

In order to understand disability as a social phenomenon UPIAS (Oliver, 1990:110) proposes the following relevant definitions:

- *Impairment* means lacking a part of or all of a limb or having a defective limb, organism or mechanism of the body;
- *Disability* means the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by contemporary social organisation, which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments, and thus excludes them from the mainstream of social activities.

Miller and Sammons (1999:26) define impairment as "...a missing, damaged, deficient, or weakened body part or function" and disability as "the inability to perform one or more major life activities because of an impairment". According to Miller and Sammons (1999:26-27), major life activities include:

- Caring for oneself in hygiene and homemaking;
- Having full range of movement while standing, lifting, walking and so forth;
- Having intact senses;
- Communicating with others;
- Learning and working;
- Using mental processes such as thinking, concentrating and problem-solving;
- Interacting with others and developing and maintaining relationships.

The Employment Equity Act (Act No. 55 of 1998) defines people with disabilities as "...people who have a long-term or recurring physical or mental impairment, which substantially limits their prospects of entry into, or advancement in, employment".

In this study disability refers to a physical or mental condition that limits the person's abilities to function socially and physically and has the effect of him/her being excluded from activities in society and from society as a whole.

According to the Central Statistical Service (CSS) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (The White Paper on an Integrated National Disability Strategy, 1997:1), 5,2% of the world population in 1990 was experiencing moderate to severe disability. This ranged from 7,7% in so-called developed countries to 4,5% in less developed areas. In 1995 the CSS reported a disability prevalence of 5% in South Africa. According to Statistics South Africa (South Africa Census, 1996) a total of 2 657 714 people in South Africa are disabled. Visual impairment is the type of disability with the highest prevalence (42%) in South Africa; people with physical impairments include 21% of the disabled population and hearing impairment, 14%. Six percent (6%) of the disabled population have more than one disability, while 7% of the disabled population in South Africa have a mental impairment. Ten percent (10%) of disabled people are unspecified. The researchers have categorised and narrowed the types of disabilities down to the following types of disability for the purpose of this study: visual impairment, hearing impairment, intellectual impairment and physical/mobility impairment.

Disabled people who live in a so-called "normal society" have obstacles to overcome. People who do not have disabilities tend to view disabled people in a certain manner that inhibits the disabled person from functioning independently. Major problems identified by disabled people included social problems, financial and employment problems, physical and mobility problems (Suarez de Balcazar, Bradford & Fawcett in Nagler, 1990:3-12). Stigmatisation also has an effect on disabled people and in the way they view themselves. It is further described as pervasive and endemic for disabled people, because it restricts opportunities and separates the stigmatised group from resources (Dudley, 1997:9). Stigma problems can be defined as the stigma that is associated with a person's disability and includes myths, stereotypes and prejudice. It causes oppression and exclusion from society and facilitates dependency (Dudley, 1997:10-11).

The employer and the open labour market were also important concepts in this study, because it is important to understand who the employer is and what the open labour market entails to understand the integration process and barriers that prevent the integration of disabled people into the open labour market.

### **The employer and the open labour market**

For the purpose of this study, employer and manager were used as synonyms in describing the tasks of the people who are in a leading position in a company/organisation/business. The reason for this is the fact that managers sometimes manage companies and have the responsibility to appoint employees. For all practical purposes they act as the employer in these companies.

An *employer* is defined as a "person who gives work to people and pays them" (De Jager-Haum Active English Dictionary, 1986), as "a person that employs people (Oxford Concise English Dictionary, 1999) and as "a person or business firm that employs workmen, servants etc. for wages" (Webster Comprehensive Dictionary, 1998). *Managers* are "individuals who have been appointed in leading positions and have committed themselves to the task of leadership in the execution of specific tasks. In fulfilling their tasks as managers their attention is particularly directed at subordinates as they attempt to find ways of motivating them in the best interest of the business" (Van Rensburg, 1997:69).

An employer is therefore a person who employs other people to fulfil certain tasks in an organisation/business. A manager is the person who has been appointed in a leading position and

whose attention is solely focused on the employee and the efficient and effective execution of different tasks and functions in order to meet the objectives of the company.

The *open labour market* represents people in the environment who can be hired to work for the organisation. Every organisation needs a supply of trained, qualified personnel. Unions, employee associations and the availability of certain classes of employees can influence that organisation's labour market (Draft, 1995:107). Barker (1999:2) defines the *labour market* as "an imaginary workplace where labour is bought and sold". The *open labour market* can therefore be defined as the environment that consists of people that can be hired for labour by a business or organisation.

Against this background in the context of the integration of disabled people into the open labour market the following attitudes of employers toward persons with disabilities in the open labour market have been identified, according to Gilbride (2000) and Unger (2002):

- Employers who have hired a disabled person before are receptive to continuing to hire disabled persons (Gilbride, 2000:17);
- The type and severity of the disability may affect the extent to which persons with disabilities are included. Employers believed that it is easier to employ persons with physical disabilities, heart impairment, cancer, or living with HIV than employing persons with an intellectual impairment. Employers had average to extreme reservations with placement of persons with intellectual impairment (Gilbride, 2000:17; Unger, 2002:2);
- To some extent employers appeared to be willing to sacrifice work performance or work quality in exchange for a dependable employee (Unger, 2002:2);
- The employer's perception might be a result of a generally negative attitude toward people with disabilities or a lack of experience and not be based on direct experience with disabled employees. However, employers who employed disabled people are more receptive to the idea of hiring disabled people (Gilbride, 2000:17; Unger, 2002:2);
- Increasingly there appeared to be an renewed emphasis on employers' recognition of the employment of disabled people in an effort to enhance their image in the community, strengthen their commitment to corporate social responsibility or increase the diversity of their workforce to reflect that of the general population (Unger, 2002:2).

There is a very high prevalence of unemployment in South Africa. According to Fifa (2002:39), 45% of the labour force is unemployed and 99% of disabled people are unemployed (White Paper on an Integrated Disability Strategy, 1997:2-3). Strategies to integrate previously disadvantaged groups into the labour market have been initiated, but the low rate of economic growth and the population growth are barriers to these strategies. Strategies to integrate disabled people into the labour market have been proposed and will be outlined in the following section.

### **Strategies to integrate disabled people into the open labour market**

Society has established very narrow definitions of *independence* and views any person who receives help from somebody else as "dependent". Disabled people specifically need more help when tending to specific needs and this leads to society believing that disabled people are not able to make their own decisions (Morris, 1993:22-23). According to the system theory model (DeNitto & McNeece, 1997), the social model (Olkin, 1999) and the ecological systems model (McMahon, 1996), it is impossible to function in a vacuum and all people are interdependent on other people and systems for survival. *Independence* is therefore redefined as the ability to make one's own decisions and choices in life. To enhance independence and the making of decisions and choices

regarding employment, strategies have been developed to integrate disabled people into the South African open labour market. These strategies include:

- The Employment Equity Act, 1998 (Act No. 55 of 1998);
- Affirmative action strategies regarding the employment of disabled people;
- Reasonable accommodation methods for people with disabilities (Kearney, 1994:11);
- Alternative strategies incorporated in the Code of Good Practice of the Employment Equity Act, 1998 (Act No. 55 of 1998) that include:
  - Confidentiality and disclosure of disability;
  - Employee benefits
  - Employment Equity planning;
- The Skills Development Strategy for Economic and Employment Growth in South Africa (1997).

In addition to the above-mentioned strategies The Proposal for the Introduction of an Employment Support Programme for People with Disabilities (2001) of the South African Department of Labour has also introduced the following strategies to promote the integration of disabled people into the open labour market:

- *Bursary scheme for persons with disabilities.* This scheme is a measure to facilitate employment of persons with disabilities and with the potential to further their education at a tertiary institution;
- *Wage subsidy scheme.* The aim of this scheme is to place persons who find it difficult to obtain employment due to their disability and would probably require a longer training period in suitable positions in the labour market;
- *Subsidies for placement officials at councils for people with disabilities.* This is an employment services placement function, which has been outsourced in part to various organisations. It is a subsidy to cover wages of placement officers employed by national councils and associations for people with disabilities.

It became clear to the researchers that the South African government and community have proposed many strategies to integrate disabled people into the open labour market. There is an uncertainty, however, regarding the needs and perceptions of employers regarding the integration process. The following section will therefore focus on the researchers' empirical study regarding the current needs and attitudes of employers, the employment possibilities for disabled people and the barriers that prevent the employment of disabled people.

## **RESEARCH STUDY**

### **Research questions**

Research questions for the study included the following:

- What are the employment possibilities for the different types of disabled people in the open labour market?

- What are the perceptions, attitudes and needs of employers regarding the integration of disabled people into the open labour market?
- What are the barriers that prevent the integration of disabled people into the open labour market?
- What are the possible elements that should be included in a training programme for employers?

### **Research methodology**

In order to address the research questions the researchers conducted an exploratory study (Rubin & Babbie, 2001) with the aim of identifying guidelines for a training programme for employers to integrate disabled people into the labour market. Creswell's dominant-less-dominant model of a combination of quantitative and qualitative research was utilised (Creswell in De Vos *et al.*, 2002:366). The dominant approach was quantitative research, because a structured interview schedule was used to collect the quantitative data. The less dominant qualitative data about the respondents' perceptions, attitudes and needs regarding the employment of disabled people in the workplace were collected through a small number of open-ended questions as part of the structured interview schedule as well as the researcher's observation during the interviews.

For the purpose of this study the population was all the companies in the Pretoria area whose employees are appointed according to the regulations of the Employment Equity Act, 1998 (Act No. 55 of 1998). This included businesses and companies who had 50 or more employees, large companies with large and small franchises, and smaller companies with less than 50 employees.

The researchers utilised the purposive sampling method (Strydom & Venter, 2002:207) to recruit 30 respondents. The criteria for the selection of respondents were that they had to be personnel managers or human resource representatives of companies and be in the position to employ employees in a company. Thirty (30) respondents from 30 different companies took part in this study. There were the same number of male (50%) and female (50%) respondents and the respondents were mostly from the age-group 26-30 years (36%). Mostly White respondents (80%) took part in this study and the prevalent language was Afrikaans (63,33%), though respondents said that English was the language most commonly spoken in companies. The majority of the respondents were from the middle management level (46,67%) and different types of managers took part in the study. The respondents consisted of sales, personnel, administration, shop, branch and general managers, human resource representatives/managers and an owner of a business. The companies ranged from small retail businesses to large retail businesses with franchises with many employees and franchises with few employees. A wide range of companies was selected and included companies that sell food (16%), clothes (13%), stationery (10%), furniture (7%), house/hardware (13%) and car parts and accessories (10%). Other companies included entertainment (7%) (a coffee shop and a movie theatre), financial institutions (10%), garden services and nurseries (7%), and large companies providing telecommunication and postal services (7%). The sizes of these companies also varied from 4 employees to 39 000 employees. Some companies had small franchises with 4 employees, while others had franchises of 300 employees. Each company had a unique composition and management structure, but a singular purpose of being as financially lucrative as possible.

As mentioned above, a structured interview schedule with the inclusion of a few open-ended questions was utilised as data collection method. In structured interviewing with a schedule the interviewer asks all the respondents the same series of questions with a limited set of response categories, except where open-ended questions are used. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994:649), a structured interview is standardised and straightforward, but the open questions

leave room for some flexibility. The responses were recorded according to a coding scheme that had been established by the researchers with the assistance of the Department of Statistics from the University of Pretoria.

The researcher developed the structured interview schedule, utilising all the information gathered in the literature study. A pilot study was conducted with three (3) respondents who were not part of the main study. The interview schedule consisted of four sections:

- The biographical information of the respondent;
- Information regarding the company;
- Disability and reasonable accommodation;
- The integration of disabled people into the labour market.

After the data were gathered from the structured interview with the 30 respondents, the researchers coded all the schedules and the Department of Statistics from the University of Pretoria assimilated the raw quantitative data and processed it into understandable frequencies. During the interviews the researcher also made observations regarding the respondents and the company, and after each interview the researcher recorded her impressions of these observations on the structured interview schedule. These include the overall impressions of the feelings, perceptions and attitudes of the respondent and the company. An overview of the results regarding the quantitative and qualitative data to integrate disabled people into the open labour market will be provided in the following section.

## Research findings

A summary of the most important research findings will be presented in two parts namely: (1) quantitative results and (2) qualitative results.

### Quantitative results

- Fifty percent (50%) of the respondents stated that disabled people should receive equal consideration in the labour market, 3,33% (1 respondent) stated that disabled people should not receive equal consideration, while 46,66% answered that disabled people should receive equal consideration, but they experience fear and uncertainty regarding this matter.
- According to the respondents, there were no disabled people employed in 63% of the companies that took part in this study. Only 37% of the companies had disabled people employed in their organisations and they were mostly employed as full-time employers.
- Job possibilities for the four types of disabilities in the 30 selected companies were as follows:
  - Four respondents (13,33%) stated that job possibilities for **visually impaired people** were “good”, while five respondents (16,67%) stated that this would be “reasonable”. The majority of 21 respondents (70%), however, declared that the employment of visually impaired people was “poor”.
  - Four respondents (13,33%) stated that the possibility for the employment of **hearing-impaired people** was “good” and ten respondents (33,33%) responded that employment possibilities were “poor”. Sixteen (16) respondents (53,33%) stated that employment possibilities for hearing-impaired individuals were “reasonable”.

- The majority of 16 respondents (53,33%) stated that employment possibilities for **intellectually impaired people** were “reasonable”, while 12 respondents (33,33%) stated that this was “poor” and 2 respondents (6,67%) declared that it was “good”.
- Six respondents (20%) stated that the employment possibilities for **physically impaired individuals** were “good”, while 12 respondents (40%) stated this was “reasonable” and 40% “poor”.
- Based on the above results, job placement for physically impaired individuals will be “good” (40%). Compared to the other types of disabilities (visually impaired: “good” – 12%; hearing-impaired: “good” – 30% and intellectually impaired: “good” – 3%), it seems as if companies are more willing to employ physically impaired individuals, while the employment possibilities of visually impaired people were poorer than the other types of disabilities. Physically impaired people thus had a better change of being employed, while the chances of employment for hearing and intellectually impaired people were reasonable.
- In terms of the integration of disabled people into the labour market, the researchers investigated the feelings and attitudes towards disabled people that might be prevalent in the companies. Respondents did not have strong feelings regarding the examples of feelings and attitudes that the researchers included, namely mistrust, disbelief, fear, stress, relief, worry, excitement, ambivalence, uncertainty, frustration and anger. Twenty percent (20%) responded to “Very much” to frustration, which was the highest response to this option. Ambivalence received the highest reaction (63,33%) to the option “To some extent”, while mistrust received the highest reaction (70%) in the “None” category.
- In response to the question “ What is the overall policy regarding the employment of disabled people in your company?” 46,67% of respondents did know the company’s policy regarding the employment of disabled people, while 50% did not know anything about a policy regarding employing disabled people. One respondent (3,33%) told the researcher that all policies are implemented by the head office.
- Types of barriers regarding the disabled person that prevent the employment of disabled people were also identified. The barriers that mostly affect the employment of disabled people (60%) were physical and mobility factors. Barriers that are “Sometimes barriers” include inability to cope with workload (53,33%), dependence of a disabled person (56,67%) and the special needs of the disabled person (70%). Differences between a disabled employee and other employees received the highest reaction to “Not a barrier” (53,33%).
- According to the types of barriers regarding the employer/co-worker that prevent the employment of disabled people, 36,67% of the respondents thought that ignorance was “Definitely a barrier” while 36,67% thought that ignorance was “Sometimes a barrier”. 56,67% respondents thought that general knowledge of disability was “Sometimes a barrier”, while stigma (50%), cultural barriers (50%), fear of disabled people (56,67%) and negative attitudes toward disability (46,67%) were predominantly seen as “Not barriers”.
- Concerning the respondents’ knowledge about the Skills Development Act, 18 (60%) of the respondents did have knowledge of the Act, while 12 (40%) did not know anything about the Act.
- The researchers also asked a follow-up open question about what strategies provided for in the Regulations of the Skills Development Act are in place to facilitate and support their



organisations. Strategies that were in place were mostly in large companies and included the following:

- learner ships;
- training facilities at head office;
- employment equity forum;
- skills programmes;
- workplace skills plan;
- skills development departments; and
- training academies.

### Qualitative results

During the research study, the researchers collected quantitative data by using a structured interview schedule, but also qualitative information based on observation during the structured interviews with the respondents. By using field notes the researchers recorded their impressions of each company after the interview; the following were the most important impressions:

- Some companies were really geared up for disabled employment and have specialised training facilities to expedite the process of integration. These were mostly large companies with many work sectors, buildings and job opportunities;
- Employment of disabled people in smaller companies is dependent on the employer/manager's knowledge and previous experience of disabled people;
- The respondents were positive regarding the reasonable accommodation of disabled individuals, but the manner and methods of doing so were dependent on the size and financial position of the company;
- Accessibility was quite a problem, in most cases, and most shops were not equipped to accommodate, for instance, employees in wheelchairs;
- Work pressure and the focus on productivity hindered the job placement of disabled people;
- The researchers had the impression that in general the companies did not have strong feelings regarding the integration of disabled people into the open labour market, because they have not as yet had to deal seriously with the issue. There was a sense of apathy and neutrality.
- Managers have many roles to fill and deal with a great amount of work pressure. To hire a disabled person is hard work and the training of a disabled person will take extra time. Managers are not trained to hire and train disabled people in their own company/shop and may not have the time and knowledge to deal with this.
- There are training facilities available at most head offices and some branches of the company, but the training does not specialise in preparing managers to deal with a disabled person.
- There was no training programme to prepare the employer/manager/co-worker to accommodate disabled people into the open labour market.

- There may be policies and plans on the table regarding the integration of disabled people into the labour market, but these policies are not communicated to managers in companies/shops. Some managers were not even aware of the fact that they should employ disabled people.
- The nature of the barriers that prevent disabled people from being integrated into the labour market depend on the type and degree of disability.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- According to both the literature and the empirical study, lack of knowledge regarding disability creates barriers in the integration of disabled people into the labour market and this should be addressed in a training programme for employers.
- According to the literature and the empirical study, there is a fair amount of apathy and lack of interest regarding the integration of disabled people into the open labour market and this should be addressed in sensitisation and training programmes.
- Policies regarding the employment of disabled people should be communicated to all managers at all management levels and they should be adequately trained to understand and implement these policies.
- Companies should be assisted in the process of hiring disabled people and there should be continuous training and support when a disabled person is employed in their organisation.
- Training of the disabled person, manager/employer as well as co-workers should take place before and after a disabled person is employed and a mediator/facilitator/job-coach should remain involved during this whole process.
- It has been established that there is a definite need for a training programme for employers to assist them to integrate disabled people into the open labour market. Based on the research findings, the following guidelines/themes for such a training programme can be recommended:
  - Knowledge of disability that includes the different types of disability;
  - Handling of conflict situations between disabled workers and non-disabled workers;
  - Facilitation of managers/supervisors/co-workers in dealing with a disabled person;
  - Strengths and limitations of disabled workers;
  - Legislation and strategies regarding the employment of disabled workers;
  - Reasonable accommodation methods that include technology and accessibility when employing a disabled worker;
  - Termination of employment of a disabled employer;
  - Benefits for disabled workers;
  - Concepts that include the empowerment of disabled workers, independence, normalisation and habilitation;
  - Social responsibilities of companies;
  - Advantages of employment of disabled people;
  - Creating awareness of the potential and abilities of disabled people.

## CONCLUSION

Social workers have an important role to play in the process of the integration of disabled people into society and into the open labour market as they have the necessary skills to facilitate the process for the disabled person as well as the employer. During this study guidelines for a training programme for employers were drawn up and the social worker is the ideal person to facilitate the incorporation of these guidelines and resulting training programme to be implemented by the manager. This study has thus emphasised the fact that social workers have the skills and expertise to be involved as training consultants, job coaches, facilitators and specialised consultants regarding the training of disabled people and employers in the open labour market.

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