

**PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS IN EMPLOYMENT AND JOB RETENTION OF  
THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED IN THE UNITED STATES:  
A FUTURE CONCERN OF SPECIAL EDUCATION**

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*Special education and rehabilitation services for the blind embody many benefits. Ultimately, however, such services ought to lead to employment because, like any persons, the blind and visually impaired derive many benefits from employment. Yet, access to jobs for people with severe vision problems is impeded by many factors. It is therefore necessary to empower such persons to gain and retain jobs. One means to this end is through the use of assistive technology.*

The multi-faceted process of providing special education and rehabilitation services for children and individuals who are blind or visually impaired embodies myriad tangible and intangible benefits. Ultimately, however, it is important—sometimes actively impelling—that, beyond the consumption benefits of education, this provision leads to employment of persons who are blind or visually impaired.

Employment possibilities are stressed for the blind from an early age because, for persons with, and those without disabilities, the acquisition and retention of gainful employment has multiple benefits. Inter alia, it leads to economic freedom which, in turn, heightens one's standard of living, increases socio-economic contribution and enhances a person's sense of self worth. These possibilities are especially crucial to persons with disabilities who face limited employment opportunities mainly because of a zillion societal setbacks and interpersonal complications. More than many disability categories, these setbacks and complications are exacerbated for the blind and visually impaired. This article therefore emphasizes that, in the process of educating children who are blind or visually impaired, a consistent focus ought to be placed on problems and impediments to acquisition and retention of gainful employment for such children when they reach the age of employability. Toward that end, the article covers possibilities and opportunities for employing the blind and visually impaired, and the need to empower such persons for gainful employment.

*Employment of the Blind*

During its deliberation in 1990 prior to the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), The Congress of the United States indicated that there were 43 million Americans with one or more physical or mental disabilities (The Center for an Accessible Society, 2006). Using recent census data, this estimate was revised to 53 million and even that estimate is shaky given the fact that census personnel relied on self-reporting of the existence of disabilities (The Center for an Accessible Society). Whatever the correct figure, the truth remains that a substantial proportion of this population consists of people who are blind or visually impaired. For example, three years after the passage of ADA, McNeil (1993) found that the United States had approximately four million working-age adults who were said to have a vision loss that was not correctable. Among persons who were of working age but either totally blind or severely visually impaired, seventy-four percent were unemployed. Likewise, Career Connect (2004) of the American foundation for the blind reports that while 82% of working age people are employed or run their own businesses, only 31% of people who are blind and 44% of those who are visually impaired (between 21 and 64 years) are employed. On the other hand, Olkin (1999) maintains that unemployment and income levels among persons with disabilities differ along ethnic/racial lines. To illustrate, persons with disabilities account for only 13.4% of the workforce but among these persons, Caucasians have the highest incomes. Caucasians with disabilities earn more than Hispanics with disabilities. In turn, Hispanics earn more than their African-American counterparts with disabilities (Olkin, 1999). In fact, African-Americans with disabilities have

the largest number of people who earn less than five thousand dollars a year (Olkin). Noted however is the fact that, regardless of income differentials among people with disabilities, numerous factors obviate their access to gainful employment.

#### *Impediments to Employment*

In 1973, Congress passed the Vocational Rehabilitation Act (Section 504 of PL93-112) which prohibited discrimination solely on the basis of disability in areas such as employment, accessibility, and higher education. In 1990, this law was revised and updated as p1101-336, Americans With Disabilities Act, ADA. Like Its predecessor, the ADA prohibits discrimination based solely on disability. Specifically, the act prohibits denial of access to jobs, goods, and services because of disability. Title I prohibits employers from discriminating against qualified persons applying for employment (Hinton, 2003). Once hired, the Act *protects qualified individuals with disabilities from discrimination in the workplace. This protection applies to all decisions that affect the conditions and privileges of the individual throughout his or her employment* (Bolte, Goodman, Hollwitz, 1995, p149).

The preceding notwithstanding, there is high unemployment and under-employment among persons with disabilities (Olkin, 1999) and especially among persons who are blind or visually impaired (McNeil, 1993; Career Connect, 2004; JWOD, 2006; BLIND, Incorporated, 2006). This phenomenon is attributable to a variety of impeding factors, including a myriad of myths and misconceptions about disabilities in general and blindness in particular. Proceedings from a conference aimed at enhancing the employability of people who are blind or visually impaired (Proceedings, 2001) and findings from other sources (Rosensweig, 2003; Katyal, 2002) show that this problem is a world-wide challenge.

In the United States, Leonard, D' Allura, and Simpson (1997) find that children who are blind or visually impaired often do not acquire elementary level skills—interpersonal skills, positive work attitude, dependability, etc.—that contribute to job acquisition and retention. In addition, more than other students without disabilities or those with other disabilities, youths who are blind or visually impaired experience different problems in their transition from school to work. Eventually, this difficulty negatively affects their employability. In like manner, employability is affected, like any other group, when the blind and visually impaired drop out of school or fail to acquire adequate education (Olkin, 1999).

When people with severe visual impairments do not drop out of school or training and eventually obtain jobs, it is imperative that they perform their jobs effectively as a means of retaining their employments and justifying their incomes. To this end, the blind and visually impaired, like any other group in the age of technology, need technological devices and equipment suitably adapted to their situation. Unfortunately, specialized services that provide assistive equipment and devices (including computers with screen readers, screen magnification features, and/or braille outputs) are woefully and consistently under-funded (Kirchner, Johnson, & Harkins, 1998). This is a major impediment to job acquisition and retention because these devices are helpful in enabling the blind and visually impaired to perform their jobs effectively and efficiently. For example, about forty percent of people with severe visual impairments use computers to perform their jobs (Kirchner et al, 1997). Thus, without access to adaptive computers, such persons will be unable to retain their jobs.

The blind and visually impaired also encounter difficulty in obtaining jobs because of employers' fears, doubts and uneasiness in hiring people who are so classified (Malakpa, 1994). Employers not only fear a possibility of a heightened risk (for insurance purposes), but also entertain doubts regarding the job performance of the blind and visually impaired. There is additional uneasiness and concern as to whether the presence of such persons will have negative impact on the business or institution (Malakpa). This misconception is countered by the finding of Hanye (1998) who demonstrates that, given a real work experience, people who are blind or visually impaired can obtain and retain employment and perform effectively on the job.

In addition to the above, job retention for people with severe vision impairment is affected generally by job related complications such as transportation, safety in the work place, and acceptance by coworkers and patrons (Malakpa, 1994). Initially, coworkers and patrons may be hesitant, even reluctant, to work with a person who is blind or visually impaired. However, as both parties become acquainted, the focus usually changes from the disability to personality. Likewise, while initially safety may be a concern, as the person with a vision problem becomes familiar with the work place, he/she can navigate effectively to conquer the environment. Transportation, however, is always a major problem especially

in cities without efficient public transportation systems. In some cities, special transportation services are provided for persons with disabilities at minimal cost. Unfortunately, most of these services are not very efficient.

Alongside the foregoing, a variety of independent and subjective variables are vital to job acquisition and retention for people with severe visual problems. Independent variables include the type, degree and onset of the impairment, and the individual's organizational membership (Hinton, 2003). Subjective factors include the individual's perception of, and reaction to, the visual impairment as well as the level of the person's diffidence versus the extent of self-confidence, self esteem and positive self-referred behaviors.

Superimposed upon the complications of independent and subjective variables are the negative impacts of the social environment. Put differently, people with severe vision loss are not likely to seek remunerative employment when members of their families (and any significant others) are over-protective. Likewise, seeds of fears, doubt, and discouragement deepen diffidence and delay the day when the person actively seeks employment. The social consequences of the disability have similar discouraging effects; that is, setbacks, deprivations, degradations, exclusions, and the like, experienced because of the disability heighten diffidence, destroy self-esteem, and thereby make the person reluctant to seek a gainful employment.

Similarly, job acquisition for the blind and visually impaired is impeded frequently by a lack of knowledge regarding prospects, possibilities, training options, and procedures for search and application. Thus, to encourage and empower such persons to seek and retain jobs, they must be informed in these areas.

#### *Prospects and Possibilities*

In another work two decades ago (Malakpa, 1986), I found that historically, the blind and visually impaired were isolated from society and, in some instances, actually put to death. Later, like others with severe disabilities, they were institutionalized. In institutions, they performed menial jobs. However, even when some were talented, the general attitude was there talents were to be rewarded with room and board, not funds. During the period of integration, even the talented blind were subjected to very limited roles. In seeking employment, they were limited to sheltered workshops where they performed repetitive tasks. While this was better than joblessness, it still was a form of isolation.

Today, landmark pieces of legislation coupled with the proliferation of adaptive technology have fostered successes for the blind and visually impaired in personal and home life, travels, education, training, and ultimately, job acquisition and retention. With technology, the sky is the limit. People with severe vision problems can use regular computers equipped with screen synthesizers and readers, screen magnification software, and braille translation and output possibilities (Burger, 1996; Hammarlund, 1999; Carey, 2000; RNIB, 2001; Katyal, 2002; Schroeder, Uslan, Taylor, Wilson, & Terry, 2005).

JAWS (Job Access With Sounds) by Freedom Scientific is a leader in the provision of voice synthesizers and screen readers along with other hard-and-software devices for the blind and Visually Impaired. Window Eyes (by G. W. Micro Inc.) has similar devices. Beyond these two, scores of other companies in the United States, Canada, Europe, Japan, China, Korea, and Australia, manufacture and market computer assistive devices to facilitate personal management, education and job performance of people with severe vision impairments.

There are also hundreds of communication devices for the blind and visually impaired. These range from hard-and-software for surfing the web to handheld devices for communicating, organizing schedules and addresses, and storing vital pieces of information for quick retrieval. Additionally, the Duxbury translator converts printed materials to braille to be printed by braille embossers. Furthermore, with scanners (e.g. Kurzweil, Open Book Ruby and Arkinstone), printed materials can be scanned and read out loud by the scanner or stored into a computer.

Because of technology, people with severe vision impairments are now capable of functioning effectively in employment settings where employees have to access digital tele-communication information. Recently, Adaptive Innovations a division of Trango Software Corporation, Toronto,

Canada, developed BrailleStream - LCD software. This provides data from LCD window of business telephones in sound, braille, or magnification. Naturally, according to the developers of this software, the purpose is to empower and create employment possibilities for the blind and visually impaired (Upshawinst, 2004). Furthermore, there are many voice recognition devices that enhance activities of daily living (ADL) and job performance for persons with disabilities, including persons with severe vision problems (Schroeder et al, 2006).

#### *Empowerment*

As children who are blind or visually impaired are educated, the ultimate aim ought to be enabling such children to be independent and productive members of society. A major means to this end is getting them employed. In that regard, the preceding does not exhaust the list of possibilities for the blind and visually impaired; rather, it is a cursory overview of such possibilities. This overview underscores the fact that, in light of constitutional and legislative provisions, and given the proliferation and diversity of assistive devices and equipment, people with severe vision problems have a right to, and can perform effectively, a variety of jobs. Accordingly, the blind and visually impaired must be encouraged and empowered to pursue, acquire, and retain gainful employment.

Efforts aimed at empowering the blind and visually impaired to seek and retain employment must begin by addressing methods and possibilities for education and training that will make them employable. Nothing is more empowering than the acquisition of sound education and marketable skills. In providing such education for the blind, even from an early age, the special education process ought to consider subjective factors that make such persons, at an employable age, reluctant to pursue employment. Put succinctly, there is a need for such persons to eschew diffidence; rather, they must develop a heightened sense of self-confidence and self-esteem.

Empowerment methods and procedures must also focus on the rights of the population under discussion. For example, the pursuit of a livelihood is a right protected by the Privileges and Immunities Clause of Article IV of the U.S. Constitution. This right is given teeth by a variety of legislative enactments, notably PL93-112--The vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973--and PL101-336--Americans With Disabilities Act, ADA of 1990, as amended. Under these and similar pieces of legislation, people who are blind or visually impaired, like others in society, have a right to non-discrimination and full participation (Roessler & Kirk, 1998).

Becker (1998) offers measurable objectives for empowering the blind and Visually impaired in seeking, obtaining and retaining employment. The key objectives are outlined as: (1) compensation and benefits package, (2) proximity to family, friends, and community (3) ethics and respect for human dignity supported by management and owners, (4)self-fulfillment opportunities, (5) physical and emotional safety (6) sense of belonging, and (7) opportunities for personal improvement and upward mobility.

Alongside objective measurements for empowerment, it is generally incontrovertible that the core of empowerment for employment rests on technology. Already, about forty percent of people with severe visual impairments use computers to perform their jobs (Kirchner et al, 1997). To empower the remaining sixty percent of this population, emphasis must be placed on acquisition of relevant technological equipment and devices, and proper training in the use of the same. This possibility will open wide the door to a huge variety of jobs that can be performed effectively by the blind and visually impaired.

Furthermore, empowerment must include an accentuation of the rights of the blind and visually impaired. There must be an emphasis on enforcing existing legislation and, where necessary, enacting relevant pieces of legislation. Furthermore, empowerment must stress public education. Employers and the general public must be educated about the blind and blindness in an effort to dispel myths and misconceptions concerning the population under discussion.

#### *Benefits of employment:*

Gainful employment yields many benefits for persons with or without disabilities. In the face of a disability, these benefits are exaggerated because disability breeds additional needs while conversely, it is the basis for numerous barriers to employment. Hence, a person who is blind or visually impaired derives many personal benefits, both tangible and intangible. Tangible benefits include cash money and materials acquired as a consequence of increased income. Intangible/unquantifiable benefits of

employment refer to the joy, emotional uplift, sense of economic freedom, increased sense of self-worth and self-confidence, high esteem, and improved self-referred behaviors, a person enjoys because of employment.

Employment also breeds socio-economic and socio-political benefits. By being employed, the blind and visually impaired become wage earners who pump money into the economic stream of society. They contribute to social and community programs and, as opposed to being dependent on the socio-political system, they become taxpayers. Put in other terms, a cost-benefit analysis of placing the blind and visually impaired on jobs will show that the benefits of their employment far outweigh the extra cost of their education, training and preparation for employment.

### Conclusion

Employment of people with severe vision impairments is impeded generally by multiple personal and social problems. Nonetheless, there is a need to empower such persons to gain and retain employment. This is because, beyond the fact that, like others in society, they have a constitutional and legal right to the pursuit of a meaningful livelihood, their employment yields multifarious personal and social benefits. Moreover, the possibility of effective and efficient job performance is enhanced by the proliferation of assistive technology. This technological break-through juxtaposes legal rights, fuels personal ambition, and silences employers' excuses. Thus, failure to empower and employ the blind and visually impaired is not only inexcusable but also an indefensible violation of their constitutional and human rights.

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