

## **Employers' attitudes toward persons with disabilities in the workforce: myths or realities?**

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A review of literature on employers' attitudes toward workers with disabilities was completed. Factors that may affect employers' attitudes toward persons with disabilities in the workforce are provided, as well as a description of the methodologies used in the investigations. Although several key themes emerge, decades of employer attitudinal research has generally produced inconsistent findings due to variations in research design.

Major legislative and philosophical forces during the past 30 years have attempted to enhance the participation of working-age Americans with disabilities in the competitive labor market. The public policy initiatives related to employers and/or work disability began in 1970 with the passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA). OSHA was followed by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, state workers' compensation enactments of the 1980s and 1990s, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998, and the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act (TWWIIA) of 1999 (Hunt, 1999).

The forces that have both paralleled and provided the impetus for passage of much of the legislation include the following:

1. significant changes in thinking regarding the vocational rehabilitation and employment potential of Americans with disabilities,
2. the evolving role of employers in addressing disability in the workplace, and
3. the civil rights movement.

For persons with significant disabilities, who might have once been viewed as unemployable, these societal trends have fostered a shift from a medical model emphasizing a clinic or center-based approach of "fixing" or "curing" people with disabilities to the present emphasis on capabilities, choice, and workplace supports in maximizing the work potential of people with disabilities. Recently, other factors have also contributed to a positive outlook regarding the employment potential of Americans with disabilities desiring to work. These factors include favorable economic conditions and a strong demand for labor.

Yet, despite increased laws designed to address employment discrimination and provide for workplace accommodations for qualified workers with disabilities, the employment rate of persons with disabilities has increased very little since the late 1980s. A series of studies conducted by the National Organization on Disability (NOD), in collaboration with Louis Harris and Associates (1998) reported an actual increase in the unemployment rate from 66% in 1986 to 71% in 1998. The

unemployment rate of persons with disabilities is especially disheartening because the studies found that an overwhelming majority (72%) of unemployed persons with disabilities indicated that they preferred to work and because representatives from business and industry identified recruitment and selection of qualified workers as their top concern for the new millennium (Bureau of National Affairs [BNA], 2000). In a time marked by a critical demand for labor and significant economic expansion and prosperity, it is discouraging that members of our nation's largest minority, persons with disabilities, are not participating in the labor force to the same extent as their peers without disabilities.

Employers play a critical role in addressing the high unemployment rate experienced by persons with disabilities. A number of researchers have identified employer attitudes toward persons with disabilities as an important factor in the staggering unemployment rate of persons with disabilities (Blanck, 1998; King, 1993; Smith, 1992). Although employers' attitudes toward individuals with disabilities have been studied extensively, the research has produced inconsistent findings. Some factors identified as positive attributes by some employers (e.g., attendance, safety, productivity) have been cited as concerns by employers in other studies (Nietupski, Hamre-Nietupski, VanderHart, & Fishback, 1996). Because of inconsistency in methodology it is difficult to compare and derive conclusions based on the results of previous research. A plausible explanation for these mixed results is that employers were not categorized by characteristics that might influence their perceptions of persons with disabilities in the workforce. Investigations have identified a variety of business, respondent, and applicant-worker characteristics that may affect employer perceptions of persons with disabilities in the workforce (see Table 1). The purpose of this article is to review the empirical literature related to employers' perceptions of persons with disabilities in the workforce and to identify characteristics that might affect employer perceptions.

## Method

### Data Collection Process

The literature reviewed was drawn primarily from the fields of vocational rehabilitation, psychology, mental retardation and other developmental disabilities, and mental illness. Research on employers' attitudes toward persons with disabilities spans almost half a century, commencing with studies investigating their attitudes toward workers with cardiac limitations (Lee, Rusk, White, & Williams, 1957; Olshansky, Friedland, Clark, & Sprague, 1955; Reeder & Donahue, 1958) and former mental health patients (Olshansky, Grob, & Malamud, 1958). For the purpose of this review, the majority of literature that was analyzed was published from 1982 to 2000.

The process for identifying research on employers' attitudes about workers with disabilities began with a search of electronic databases (i.e., ERIC, Dissertations Online, PsychLit). Keywords included employer attitudes, workers with disabilities, mental retardation, mental illness, handicapped, business and disability, mental illness, developmental disabilities, vocational rehabilitation, supported employment, and employment. To be included in the review, the study had to involve data gathered from community-based employers or organizations regarding their perceptions of persons with disabilities in the workforce or their actual experiences with workers with disabilities. A total of 24 studies were reviewed. The first section of the literature review addresses factors or characteristics that may affect employer attitudes toward persons with

disabilities in the workforce (see Table 1). It is followed by a review of the methodological differences in the reviewed research and a summary of key findings.

## Results

### Disability of Employee or Applicant

Several studies have explored employer attitudes toward individuals with disabilities in the workforce according to the type or severity of the disability (e.g., Fuqua, Rathburn, & Gade, 1984; Johnson, Greenwood, & Schriener, 1988; McFarlin, Song, & Sonntag, 1991; Thakker, 1997). The results indicate that employers expressed greater concerns over employing persons with mental or emotional disabilities than employing persons with physical disabilities. For example, Fuqua et al. examined eight areas of disability in a mail survey sent to randomly selected urban employers. The disability areas included blindness, cerebral palsy, paraplegia, emotional problems, epilepsy, amputation, deafness, and mental disabilities. Employers expressed the greatest concern toward employing individuals with mental disabilities and blindness and were least concerned about hiring individuals with epilepsy.

Findings from a survey of Fortune 500 companies concur with the results reported by Fuqua and colleagues (1984). Over 90% of the respondents responded affirmatively to hiring individuals with physical disabilities or hearing impairments, 39% responded affirmatively to hiring individuals with severe physical disabilities, and 20% responded affirmatively to hiring applicants with severe mental disabilities (McFarlin et al., 1991). Similarly, employers from a variety of businesses and industries located in Arkansas and Oklahoma believed that workers with mental disabilities and emotional disabilities were of greater concern than workers with physical or communication disabilities (Johnson et al., 1988).

**TABLE 1**  
Factors Investigated in Employer Attitudinal Research

Employer, respondent, or worker characteristics	Relevant research
Disability of employee or applicant	Blanck, 1998; Diksa & Rogers, 1996; Fuqua, Rathburn, & Gade, 1984; Gade & Toutges, 1983; Gibson & Groeneweg, 1986; Gruenhagen, 1982; Johnson, Greenwood, & Schriener, 1988; Marcouiller, Smith, & Bordieri, 1987; McFarlin et al., 1991; Nietupski, Hamre-Nietupski, VanderHart, & Fishback, 1996; Phillips, 1975; Shafer, Hill, Seyfarth, & Wehman, 1987; Shafer et al., 1988; Thakker, 1997
Previous experience with workers with disabilities	Diksa & Rogers, 1996; Gade & Toutges, 1983; Gibson & Groeneweg, 1986; Gruenhagen, 1982; Levy et al., 1993; Levy et al., 1992; Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994; McFarlin et al., 1991; Phillips, 1975
Size of employer	Ehrhart, 1994; Gade & Toutges, 1993; Greenwood & Johnson, 1987; Levy et al., 1992; Levy et al., 1993; Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994; Nietupski et al., 1996
Sector of business or industry	Diksa & Rogers, 1996; Ehrhart, 1994; Gade & Toutges, 1993; Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994; Nietupski et al., 1996; Thakker, 1997

Although McFarlin and colleagues (1991) found that attitudes toward workers with disabilities tended to be more positive with respect to turnover, absenteeism, and work performance, their results contrast with other reported findings (e.g., Fuqua et al., 1984; Johnson et al., 1988). For example, over two thirds of the executives in the study conducted by McFarlin et al. agreed with statements indicating that workers with disabilities perform as well as and have lower turnover rates than their counterparts without disabilities, whereas findings from other studies revealed employers' concerns with the productivity or performance of workers with disabilities (e.g., Fuqua et al., 1984; Johnson et al., 1988).

Findings regarding the social skills of workers with disabilities and their ability to interact or get along with coworkers were also inconsistent in studies investigating different disability types. In some instances, employers expressed little concern with coworker acceptance or the ability of workers with disabilities to interact with coworkers (Fuqua et al., 1984; McFarlin et al., 1991). In contrast, employers did express concerns regarding the social skills of workers with mental, emotional, or communication disabilities and the workers' ability to function as part of a team (Johnson et al., 1988). Employers were least concerned with the ability of persons with physical disabilities to socialize with coworkers and work as part of a team.

In more recent studies, employers have not only expressed more favorable attitudes toward employing persons with severe disabilities in the workplace but also viewed workers with severe disabilities as dependable, productive workers who can interact socially and foster positive attitudes on the part of their coworkers (Levy, Jessop, Rimmerman, Francis, & Levy, 1993). Almost three fourths (74%) of the employers believed that the productivity rates of workers with severe disabilities can be as high as those of workers who are not disabled. The perceptions of employers reported by Levy and colleagues (1993) contradict the findings of prior employer attitudinal research (e.g., Fuqua et al., 1984; Johnson et al., 1988). However, it is unclear how much the idea of social desirability influences employer responses. Although all three studies were conducted prior to the implementation of ADA employment regulations, the response rate reported by Levy and colleagues (1993) was extremely low (6%) despite a larger sample size ( $N = 418$ ) than that of Fuqua et al., McFarlin et al. (1991), and Johnson et al.

### Specific Disability Population

Employer attitudes toward a specific disability population have also been studied extensively. For example, prior to the effective date for employer compliance with the Title I regulations of the ADA, Minskoff, Sautter, Hoffmann, and Hawks (1987) surveyed employers across nine different industries regarding their attitudes toward individuals with learning disabilities. One third of the respondents indicated that they would not knowingly hire an applicant with a learning disability. Employers were less positive in their attitudes toward hiring persons with learning disabilities and affording them special consideration than toward hiring the disabled population in general. Yet, almost three fourths of the employers (72%) were willing to give individuals with learning disabilities special considerations that they would not afford to coworkers without disabilities.

Employers' willingness to make special accommodations for workers with disabilities is also illustrated by employers who have hired persons with mental retardation. Employer representatives in several studies have indicated that workers with mental retardation may require extra time and

effort to be integrated into the workforce (Nietupski et al., 1996; Shafer, Hill, Seyfarth, & Wehman, 1987). Results of a recent study indicated that 79% of the employers perceived the amount of training and supervision for workers with mental retardation to be greater than that for nondisabled coworkers (Olson, Cioffi, Yovanoff, & Mank, 2000). Yet, employers in that same study reported that employing persons with mental retardation brings other benefits to their business, such as enhancing their organization's public image and promoting diversity in the workplace.

Employers may also be willing to allow less-than-desired performance by employees with mental retardation in exchange for reliable attendance and low turnover (Blanck, 1998; Shafer et al., 1987; Shafer, Kregel, Banks, & Hill, 1988) or dedication to work (Johnson et al., 1988; Nietupski et al., 1996). Thus, employers may be willing to devote additional time to training and supervision or to sacrifice productivity in exchange for a reliable, dedicated employee or for other unintended benefits, such as increased workforce diversity and promoting positive corporate social responsibility.

The reporting by businesses representatives of actual experiences with employing workers with mental retardation has also assisted in dispelling other longstanding myths and misconceptions about employing persons with disabilities. For instance, employing persons with mental retardation does not result in an increase in health insurance rates or workers' compensation claims (Blanck, 1998; Olson et al., 2000; Shafer et al., 1987) or pose a safety risk in the workplace (Blanck, 1998; Olson et al., 2000). Employers with experience in supervising persons with disabilities also indicated they were pleased with the individuals' work quality (Nietupski et al., 1996) or work performance (Marcouiller, Smith, & Bordieri, 1987).

### Previous Experience with Individuals with Disabilities

Employers' previous experiences with individuals with specific disabilities such as deafness (Phillips, 1975), mental retardation (Gibson & Groeneweg, 1986; Gruenhagen, 1982), epilepsy (Gade & Toutges, 1983), psychiatric disability (Diksa & Rogers, 1996) also reported more favorable attitudes toward hiring applicants with the same disability. For example, in a study of employers' attitudes toward hiring individuals who are deaf, the results indicated that employers with previous experience employing individuals who are deaf have more positive attitudes toward hiring such a person again. However, employers with limited or no experience hiring persons who are deaf expressed concern over worker safety (Phillips, 1975). Gruenhagen reported comparable findings in a study of fast-food restaurant managers regarding their previous experience with individuals with mental disabilities, their attitudes toward hiring them, and their opinions about their place in society.

In another study, drawing from a sample of Fortune 500 companies, McFarlin et al. (1991) found that the more exposure respondents had with employees with disabilities in their own workforce, the more positive their reported attitudes. Two studies that focused on employers' attitudes and preferences for hiring individuals with severe disabilities reported similar findings (i.e., Levy, Jessop, Rimmerman, & Levy, 1992; Levy et al., 1993) in that employers who had previous positive experiences with individuals with severe disabilities, or workers with severe disabilities, reported more favorable attitudes toward individuals with severe disabilities in the workplace. The results were similar despite differences in the samples. One sample was composed of predominantly

smaller employers located in a limited geographic area (Levy et al., 1993), and the other was a national sample composed of Fortune 500 companies with a majority of the businesses employing more than 1,000 employees (Levy et al., 1992).

Data for the previous studies were collected from employers prior to the implementation of the employment regulations of the ADA. The results of a study of employers conducted after the full implementation of the employment provisions of the ADA revealed results that conflicted with previous findings in this area. In conducting rice-to-rice interviews with 170 randomly selected employers located in a large metropolitan area, researchers failed to identify a relationship between employers' previous experience with hiring individuals with disabilities and attitudes toward individuals with disabilities in the workforce (Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994). Regardless of previous experience with persons with disabilities, the employers reported favorable attitudes toward individuals with disabilities in the workforce.

### Size of Employer

Many suggest that there is an increased likelihood of larger employers being more conducive to including persons with disabilities in their workforce because of the variety of jobs available as well as their greater personnel and economic resources (Blanck, 1998; Collignon, 1986; Kemp, 1991). Yet, findings in the area of employer size and perceptions of persons with disabilities have been fairly inconsistent. The results of research conducted prior to the implementation of the ADA indicate that larger employers typically hold more favorable attitudes toward individuals with disabilities in the workforce (e.g., Gade & Toutges, 1983; Greenwood & Johnson, 1987; Levy et al., 1992; Levy et al., 1993).

Research conducted after the implementation of the ADA failed to identify a relationship between employer size and attitudes toward individuals with disabilities in the workforce (Ehrhart, 1994; Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994). For example, in a national study of employers' attitudes toward persons with disabilities across size and industry, no relationship was established between size of employer and attitudes toward workers with disabilities (Ehrhart, 1994). Regardless of the size of business, employers reported favorable attitudes toward persons with disabilities in the workforce. Research utilizing the same instrumentation as the measures used in Ehrhart's study also found no relationship between employer size and attitudes toward persons with disabilities (Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994).

### Sector of Business or Industry

Similar inconsistencies have been found in investigations of the relationship between the type of industry and employer attitudes toward persons with disabilities in the workforce. Findings from studies conducted both prior to and after the implementation of the ADA's employment regulations failed to confirm a relationship between type of industry and employer attitudes toward hiring persons with disabilities (Ehrhart, 1994; Gade & Toutges, 1983; Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994).

Yet, more recent studies have produced mixed findings. For example, employers representing eight types of industries differed on their perceptions of workers with psychiatric disabilities (Diksa &

Rogers, 1996). Social services workers differed from those in the transportation, utilities, and communication industries on scores on the symptomatology subscale (i.e., symptomatic and behavioral manifestations of the psychiatric disorder and the effects of medication), administrative concerns, and work performance. For instance, employers in the social service industry expressed lower levels of concern with such characteristics as an employee's lacking enthusiasm, exhibiting bizarre behaviors, and having a poor memory than employers representing other industries. Yet, Nietupski et al. (1996) and Thakker (1997) were unable to identify a significant relationship between type of industry and attitudes toward workers with disabilities.

Findings from a series of investigations of the experiences of one employer in the chemical manufacturing industry with workers with disabilities reported favorable results regarding their contributions. In 1958, DuPont conducted its first in a series of investigations to assess the job performance of workers with disabilities in comparison with those without disabilities. Findings from the initial investigation indicated that DuPont supervisors generally rated their workers with disabilities as as good as or better than nondisabled employees on measures of safety, attendance, and job performance. In many areas, such as safety, motivation, and job performance, supervisors reported that workers with disabilities performed better than those without disabilities.

The results also demonstrated that hiring persons with disabilities did not contribute to an increase in compensation costs or lost-time injuries and that most employees with disabilities required no special arrangements. Yet, if modifications were necessary, they generally involved minor adaptations. Since the findings from the initial study were revealed, supervisors participating in studies conducted in 1973, 1981, and 1990 have continued to depict DuPont's employees with disabilities as safe, productive, and dependable workers. Interestingly, the DuPont study has not been conducted since the ADA employment regulations have been in effect.

Although numerous studies have investigated different organizational or worker variables that affect employer perceptions of persons with disabilities, the results have generally been inconsistent. Employers have unfounded concerns about workers with disabilities in many areas, including productivity, absenteeism, turnover, and interpersonal situations on the job, and unfounded fears about costs, including accommodations and increases in insurance rates. These concerns are unfounded in that many respondents are surveyed about their perceptions of persons with disabilities and may not have had direct experience working with or supervising employees with disabilities.

In contrast to myths and stereotypes, employer ratings have indicated that workers with disabilities have average or above-average performance (Blanck, 1998; Du Pont, 1993), safety records (Blanck; Du Pont; Shafer et al., 1987), and attendance (Blanck; Du Pont; Shafer et al., 1987). Respondents in these studies were supervisors of an employee with a known disability and more than likely interacted with workers with disabilities on a daily or weekly basis and so were probably in a better position to assess overall worker performance. Lastly, findings have consistently demonstrated that employers who have previous experience with workers with disabilities are more willing to hire persons with disabilities (Diksa & Rogers, 1996; Gade & Toutges, 1983; Gibson & Groeneweg, 1986; Gruenhagen, 1982; Levy et al., 1992; Marcouiller et al., 1987; McFarlin et al., 1991).

## Methodology

The perceptions of the business community toward persons with disabilities in the workforce have been investigated through a variety of research methodologies. Researchers have studied employers' perceptions of persons with disabilities predominantly by surveying employer representatives who have the responsibility of hiring or supervising (e.g., Diksa & Rogers, 1996; Ehrhart, 1994; Johnson et al., 1988; Levy et al., 1993; Marcouiller et al., 1987). Samples have also consisted of employers drawn from local (e.g., Gruenhagen, 1982; Kregel & Unger, 1993; Phillips, 1975; Thakker, 1997) and regional geographical areas (e.g., Blanck, 1998; Levy et al., 1993; Petty & Fussell, 1997) as well as nationally (e.g., Ehrhart; Levy et al., 1992; McFarlin et al., 1991). Methods for collecting data have included mail surveys (e.g., Fuqua et al., 1984; Gade & Toutges, 1983), where findings often revealed low return rates in comparison to research utilizing telephone (e.g., Diksa & Rogers, 1996) or face-to-face interviews (e.g., Johnson et al., 1988; Kregel & Unger, 1993), which often reported higher participation rates.

These variations in research design have produced inconsistent findings in that factors identified as benefits in one study may be expressed as concerns by employers in other studies, making it difficult to compare results and derive conclusions across studies. Yet, the results have identified several perceived employer benefits and concerns in hiring persons with disabilities (see Table 2). The employer-expressed benefits and concerns of employing persons with disabilities may have implications for makers of public policy, employment service providers, and persons with disabilities in addressing the labor force participation of persons with disabilities. The following section reviews prior methodologies used to investigate employer perceptions of persons with disabilities in the workforce and summarizes key findings and implications of employer attitudinal research.

## Type of Research

Researchers have primarily utilized quantitative research designs to investigate employer perceptions of persons with disabilities in the workforce (e.g., Ehrhart, 1994; Levy et al., 1992; Nietupski et al., 1996; Shafer et al., 1987). Of the 24 studies reviewed, only Pitt-Catsoupes and Butterworth (1995) reported findings resulting from qualitative data collection strategies. Using separate focus groups of supervisors of workers with disabilities, coworkers, and human resource professionals, they identified factors that facilitated or inhibited the employment of individuals with disabilities.

Existing findings derived from quantitative research on employers' attitudes toward persons with disabilities most often resulted from descriptive or correlational research. Several of the reviewed studies investigated employers' perceptions across various combinations of factors (Blanck, 1998; McFarlin et al., 1991; Shafer et al., 1987; Thakker, 1997). These variables can generally be categorized in three areas: organizational characteristics, respondent characteristics, and worker characteristics. Commonly analyzed organizational characteristics include such factors as type of industry, size of workforce, and geographic location of business. Respondent characteristics are attributes of the organizational representative being surveyed or interviewed, such as job title, previous experience or contact with persons with disabilities, length of time with the organization, level of educational attainment, and gender. Worker characteristics focus on factors associated with a person with a disability, such as type and severity of disability, gender, and job title.



Although all of the studies provide descriptive statistics, only a limited number completed analyses using inferential statistical procedures. In some instances, this shortcoming can be attributed to data collected from a limited number of employers, rendering a number of statistical procedures inappropriate. Additionally, there is very little commonality across studies in terms of the type of variables that are investigated. Eleven studies have investigated a specific disability (e.g., Blanck, 1998; Diksa & Rodgers, 1996; Gade & Toutges, 1983; Gibson & Groeneweg, 1986; Gruenhagen, 1982; Marcouiller et al., 1987; Minskoff et al., 1987; Olson et al., 2000; Phillips, 1975; Shafer et al., 1987; Shafer, et al., 1988); others have studied a number of different disabilities (e.g., Fuqua et al., 1984; Johnson et al., 1988) or referred to persons with disabilities in general (McFarlin et al., 1991; Levy et al., 1993; Ehrhart, 1994). Outcomes from research in which the relationship between the same variables has been analyzed have also produced conflicting results across studies. For instance, a number of studies reported mixed findings in examining the relationship between employer size and attitudes toward persons with disabilities (Ehrhart; Gade & Toutges; Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994; Levy et al., 1993; Nietupski, et al., 1996).

Inconsistent findings can also be attributed to variations in the areas from which samples were drawn, as well as in procedures used to gather data. In the vast majority of the studies, mail surveys were the predominant method utilized in gathering data. A limitation with the use of mail surveys is the low response rates generally reported in employer research using this data collection technique. In many instances, the findings from the reviewed research indicated that mail surveys conducted with businesses and organizations in limited geographical areas (e.g., Shafer et al., 1987; Thakker, 1997) reported much higher return rates than research utilizing mail surveys with national samples of employers (e.g., Ehrhart, 1994; Olson et al., 2000). The response rates for findings from regional samples of employers ranged from 6.2% (Levy et al., 1993) to 61% (Thakker), and the response rates for national samples of employers ranged from 6% (Olson et al.) to 38% (McFarlin et al., 1991). Furthermore, very few studies that utilized mail surveys reported any characteristics of nonrespondent data.

Overall, researchers utilizing telephone surveys experienced greater success in gathering data, as they frequently reported much higher participation rates in comparison to those for mail surveys. The findings also indicated that the most effective method in achieving a high participation rate was to collect data from employers through face-to-face interviews. For example, results reported by a limited number of researchers demonstrated high employer participation rates when data were collected through face-to-face structured interviews (e.g., Johnson, et al., 1988; Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994; Kregel & Unger, 1993). However, conducting in-person interviews with a large number of employers across diverse geographical areas may be extremely labor intensive and not economically feasible.

One of the critical shortcomings with the existing research on employers' perceptions toward workers with disabilities is that the majority of the studies surveyed employer representatives who were responsible for hiring or supervising but did not necessarily have actual, firsthand experience in working with employees with disabilities (e.g., Diksa & Rogers, 1996; Levy et al., 1993; McFarlin et al., 1991; Olson et al., 2000). Of the 24 studies reviewed, only 7 involved samples composed of predominantly supervisors or managers with direct experience with a worker with a disability (e.g., Blanck, 1998; Du Pont, 1993; Kregel & Unger, 1993; Petty & Fussell, 1997; Pitt-Catsoupes &

Butterworth, 1995; Shafer et al., 1987; Shafer et al., 1988). Results from studies that have surveyed direct-line managers or supervisors indicated that they were generally satisfied with the work performance of employees with disabilities (Blanck; Du Pont; Pitt-Catsoupes & Butterworth; Shafer et al., 1987). Furthermore, employer representatives who had previous experience in supervising or managing workers with disabilities expressed fewer concerns about hiring applicants with disabilities and reported more favorable perceptions of workers with disabilities.

**TABLE 2**  
Employer Perceived Benefits and Concerns in Employing Persons with Disabilities

Benefits and concerns	Relevant research
Work performance/quality	Blanck, 1998; Diksa & Rogers, 1996; Du Pont, 1993; Gade & Toutges, 1983; Gibson & Groeneweg, 1986; Johnson et al., 1988; Kregel & Unger, 1993; Marcouiller et al., 1987; McFarlin et al., 1991; Nietupski et al., 1996; Petty & Fussell, 1997; Phillips, 1975; Pitt-Catsoupes & Butterworth, 1995; Shafer et al., 1987; Shafer et al., 1988
Productivity	Blanck, 1998; Fuqua et al., 1984; Gade & Toutges, 1983; Johnson et al., 1988; Kregel & Unger, 1993; Levy et al., 1993; Levy et al., 1992; Marcouiller et al., 1987; Petty & Fussell, 1997; Shafer et al., 1987
Safety	Blanck, 1998; Du Pont, 1993; Fuqua et al., 1984; Gade & Toutges, 1983; Johnson et al., 1988; Nietupski et al., 1996; Olson et al., 2000; Phillips, 1975; Shafer et al., 1987
Dependability/dedication	Blanck, 1998; Fuqua et al., 1984; Levy et al., 1993; Nietupski et al., 1996
Attendance or punctuality	Blanck, 1998; Du Pont, 1993; Gade & Toutges, 1983; Johnson et al., 1988; Kregel & Unger, 1993; Marcouiller et al., 1987; McFarlin et al., 1991; Nietupski et al., 1996; Shafer et al., 1987; Shafer et al., 1988
Community image/corporate social responsibility	Nietupski et al., 1996; Olson et al., 2000; Pitt-Catsoupes & Butterworth, 1995; Shafer et al., 1987
Turnover and retention	Blanck, 1998; Johnson et al., 1988; McFarlin et al., 1991; Shafer et al., 1987; Shafer et al., 1988
Appearance	Gruenhagen, 1982; Marcouiller et al., 1987; Shafer et al., 1987; Shafer et al., 1988
Coworker acceptance/ability to interact as part of a team/social skills	Blanck, 1998; Ehrhart, 1994; Fuqua et al., 1984; Gade & Toutges, 1983; Johnson et al., 1988; Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994; Levy et al., 1993; Marcouiller et al., 1987; McFarlin et al., 1991; Petty & Fussell, 1997; Phillips, 1975
Lack of necessary job skills/experience	Gruenhagen, 1982; Nietupski et al., 1996; Petty & Fussell, 1998; Pitt-Catsoupes & Butterworth, 1995
Financial incentives	Blanck, 1998; Shafer et al., 1987
Costs (workers' compensation, accommodations)	Blanck, 1998; Fuqua et al., 1984; McFarlin et al., 1991; Olson et al., 2000
Extra training or supervision	Johnson et al., 1988; Kregel & Unger, 1993; Marcouiller et al., 1987; Nietupski et al., 1996; Olson et al., 2000; Petty & Fussell, 1997; Pitt-Catsoupes & Butterworth, 1995; Shafer et al., 1987

## Summary of Findings

Despite the identified limitations in the methodology used by previous researchers, several key points can be highlighted from the results of research on employers' perceptions of persons with disabilities in the workplace. These findings include the following:

\* The type and severity of disability may affect the extent to which persons with disabilities are included in the workforce. For instance, employers expressed greater concern with hiring individuals with mental or emotional disabilities than individuals with physical disabilities. This finding may have direct implications in terms of the willingness of applicants or workers with "hidden" disabilities to disclose them or request accommodations in the workplace. Interestingly, all

of the findings resulting from research investigating employers' attitudes across different types of disabilities were based on responses from employer representatives who may have had little direct experience supervising or managing workers with disabilities (e.g., Diksa & Rogers, 1996; Fuqua et al., 1984; Johnson et al., 1988; Thakker, 1997).

\* To some extent, employers appear willing to sacrifice work performance or work quality in exchange for a dependable employee. However, it is unclear the extent to which other factors, such as economic and labor market conditions or coworker perceptions, might influence an employer's willingness to support or sustain a worker with a disability who may be perceived as less productive.

\* Employers report several concerns surrounding the work potential of employees with disabilities that may derive from existing myths and misconceptions and not from their direct experiences with workers with disabilities. These myths and misconceptions may frequently result in an applicant or employee with a disability's not being recognized as a "qualified employee with a disability" under the provisions of the ADA.

\* Increasingly, there appears to be a renewed emphasis on employers' recognizing the significance of employing workers with disabilities in an effort to enhance their image in the community (e.g., Nietupski et al., 1996; Olson et al., 2000), strengthen their commitment to corporate social responsibility (e.g., Pitt-Catsouphes & Butterworth, 1995), or increase the diversity of their workforce to reflect that of the general population.

\* Relative to other employers, employers who have previous experience with workers with disabilities report more favorable perceptions of persons with disabilities in the workforce and a willingness to hire persons with disabilities.

\* An overwhelming majority of studies of employers' attitudes toward workers with disabilities have been conducted with managers who have the capacity to hire or supervise. Very few studies were conducted with frontline supervisors or employer representatives who had actual experience supervising or evaluating the work performance of employees with disabilities. Senior management and human resource professionals play a pivotal role in developing and implementing business policies and practices directed toward integrating persons with disabilities into the workforce. Yet, first-line supervisors may be called upon to assess worker performance and to address potential support needs of workers with disabilities. Additionally, supervisors' desire and ability to integrate and support persons with disabilities in the workforce is influenced by the extent to which (1) organizational responses and practices match formal policies; (2) visible activities or business strategies reflect a commitment to include persons with disabilities in the workforce; and (3) senior management embraces values and strategies that include a commitment to including and retaining persons with disabilities in the workforce (Blaser, 1999; Thakker, 1997). Future research efforts need to be directed at both corporate or senior management and direct-line supervisors.

## Conclusions

Employers have identified both benefits and concerns regarding the employment potential of

persons with disabilities. Prior experience with workers with disabilities tends to produce more favorable perceptions and a willingness to hire persons with disabilities. However, although a majority of employer representatives may agree with the idea of hiring people with disabilities, this agreement may not transfer to a willingness of employers to consider people with disabilities as job applicants for their own company (Gibson & Groeneweg, 1986). Also, many business executives believe that more should be done in their company and in others to integrate people with disabilities into the workforce (McFarlin et al., 1991).

Perhaps there has not previously been a time in history in which prosperous economic conditions, emerging technology, and progressive disability-related legislation coexisted to generate the most promising employment outlook for persons with disabilities. Employers are increasingly faced with managing a diverse workforce, and many have strengthened their efforts in the area of corporate social responsibility. The employment experiences of persons with disabilities during this time may provide an indication of the extent to which employer attitudes present significant barriers to the employment of millions of Americans with disabilities desiring to participate in our nation's labor force.

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