

## **Possible Factors Influencing Hiring Decisions for Physically Disabled Applicants<sup>1</sup>**

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The present study examined whether awareness of an individual's disability would influence respondents' ratings of job applicants with disabilities (compared with equally qualified applicants without disabilities). It was predicted that respondents would rate individuals with a disability higher when specific information is provided regarding the individual's disability than when little or no additional information is provided. Participants were instructed to read the job applications provided and then rank order them according to their perceived fit for the job description. Implications for real world hiring decisions are discussed along with recommendations that may reduce the potential for prejudice in hiring.

### **Introduction**

In today's supposedly progressive society, individuals with various types of disabilities are still facing discrimination in the workplace (Louvet, 2007). Society typically views an individual with a disability as weak, dependant, and incompetent when compared to an individual without a disability (Bell & Klein, 2001). When evaluating job applicants, it makes sense that employers would look for the most qualified, capable person available. Someone with a disability may not stand a chance if the mindset of the individual doing the evaluation is that disabled applicants are of little value in the workplace.

Individuals that are familiar with or close to anyone with a disability are likely to have a different outlook on the capabilities and competence of their friends with disabilities. Caregivers, loved ones, and acquaintances of individuals with disabilities understand that although there may be certain limitations in daily life, there does not have to be any major restrictions on activity providing the appropriate accommodations are made. Family and friends of individuals with disabilities witness the daily lives of these people and become comfortable with their abilities, limitations, and sometimes unorthodox ways of functioning. Individuals with a disability may accomplish tasks a little differently than those

without disabilities. For example, an individual with limited use of his or her legs may put pants on using a grab bar for stability and stand two or three times before the pants are in their appropriate place. The process of getting dressed may be slower for the individual with a disability compared to an individual without a disability, but the important thing is that the individual with a disability is just as capable of accomplishing everyday tasks as someone without a disability.

Truly understanding the nature of someone's disability is essential to employers because it will aid the employer in dealing with the relevant issues and making the appropriate accommodations. Having a disability does not mean that one is unable to perform any job function as well as an able-bodied individual. No one possesses *all* skills. Whether one lacks skills to perform a job function because of a disability or a lack of experience, this does not mean one cannot be taught.

In typical job positions, an individual with a disability would most likely perform as efficiently and adequately as individuals without a disability. Awareness of limitations and knowledge of accommodations will make having an individual with a disability on the payroll easier for everyone involved. It would be easier because the employee with a disability will be more comfortable knowing that his or her employer is aware of the situation,

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and the employer will feel confident that he or she has taken the appropriate measures to ensure proper accommodation for the individual with a disability. At the same time he or she has trained a productive asset to their team of employees. It is also likely that awareness will also increase the comfort level of co-workers in the place of employment of the individual with a disability. Once co-workers gain an accurate perception of the situation, they have no reason to be curious, talk, laugh, or stare.

Interest in studies examining the issue of discrimination against individuals with disabilities in the workplace has increased since the passing of the Rehabilitation Act in 1973 and more recently, the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 (Gouvier, Sytsma-Jordan, & Mayville, 2003). Following this trend, Bell and Klein (2001) studied the effects of disability, gender, and job level on ratings of job applicants. Bell and Klein's study consisted of three central hypotheses.

Bell and Klein's (2001) first hypothesis was that ratings of job applicant would be contingent upon the mere presence of a disability. If a disability is present, Bell and Klein predicted that ratings would be highest for individuals without a disability compared to the disabilities used in the study. Individuals were rated based on hiring recommendation, competence, starting salary, activity, and potency.

For their second hypothesis, Bell and Klein (2001) expected that gender would affect ratings of individuals with disabilities. Specifically, male applicants with disabilities were expected to receive lower ratings overall compared to females with disabilities. This prediction was based on the general consensus that males are supposed to be stronger, more dominant, and more independent than females whether a disability is present or not.

Bell and Klein's (2001) third hypothesis dealt with the effect disability and job type would have on applicant ratings. Bell and Klein particularly suggested that there would be more of a difference in applicant ratings when the applicant was applying for a supervisory position as opposed to a non-supervisory one. This prediction is also based on a broad generalization that individuals with disabilities are usually incompetent and dependent. This inconsistent belief leads some employers to

view individuals with disabilities as inadequate candidates for supervisory positions.

None of Bell and Klein's (2001) hypotheses were supported. It was found that the respondents actually displayed less bias toward the applicants with disabilities and more toward the female applicants in general. Bell and Klein attributed the discrepancy to the respondents being distracted by the disability information. The respondents were able to deduce that attitudes concerning applicants with disabilities were being measured, so they compensated for negative ratings.

The independent variable of gender was also left out in a research study conducted by Gouvier et al. (2003), but it was replaced by level of contact required for the position. Gouvier et al. also examined certain patterns of discrimination in hiring applicants with disabilities. Gouvier et al. hypothesized that when the three variables disability type, position difficulty, and level of contact are manipulated, a pattern of discrimination would present itself. These researchers predicted that individuals with a disability associated with brain dysfunction would be recommended for low-status positions that do not require a lot of intelligence.

The predictions made by Gouvier et al. (2003) were, for the most part, all supported. Overall, the applicant with a chronic mental illness was not as likely to be hired as the applicant with a physical disability (back injury). The applicant with a chronic mental illness was also least likely out of the four applicants to be hired for any of the positions. The applicant with a physical disability was preferred over the other applicants for the complex position, whereas the applicants with a developmental disability or a head injury were preferred for the easier job. The findings in Gouvier et al.'s research suggest that hiring decisions are influenced by type of disability and complexity of the position for which the applicant is applying. This fact is understandable considering the jobs used in Gouvier et al.'s study were a janitorial position and a phone operator position. An individual using a wheelchair may not be able to effectively fulfill the physical requirements demanded of a janitorial position, and in the same respect an individual with limited mental abilities may not be able to handle the fast pace of a phone operator position.

# Hiring Biases

Louvet (2007) also predicted that applicants with a disability would be poorly rated according to the type of job for which they are applying. Louvet found that there was not a substantial difference between ratings for individuals with disabilities and those without. Louvet argued that this was because respondents attributed applying for a job requiring a lot of public contact with the characteristics of openness and agreeableness, and contrastingly the respondents attributed applying for a position not requiring much public contact with not being open and agreeable. Louvet contended that basically job specifications do not accurately imply personality traits.

Louvet's (2007) second hypothesis dealt with job-roles viewed as stereotypically female or male. As individuals with disabilities are usually seen as weak, dependent, and passive, Louvet predicted that individuals with disabilities would be poorly rated for the male position compared to individuals without disabilities. Louvet's indeed found that individuals with disabilities were rated poorly compared to able-bodied applicants for the male position. Applicants with disabilities were however rated to be fitting for the female position. This finding exemplifies the common belief that females, like individuals with disabilities, tend to be weak, dependent, and passive.

While the studies reviewed address the fact that discrimination does exist in the workplace among individuals with a disability, Louvet's (2007) study dealt with the issue of *why* it exists. Louvet (2007) proposed that the bias for individuals without a disability in the workplace is due to the perceived notion of incompetence among individuals with a disability rather than an overall negative opinion of these people. This led to the prediction that an applicant's approach to disclosing his/her disability may influence the perceptions of incompetence and consequently reduce bias.

The present study was designed to examine how disclosure of an applicant's disability influences respondents' ratings concerning their likeliness of being hired. It was predicted that subjects would rate individuals with a disability higher when applicants portray their disability as an asset compared to those who do not.

An optimistic approach to disclosing one's disability should reduce these negative feelings,

and as a result make individuals with disabilities more likely to be hired and less likely to be discriminated against.

## Method

### Participants

To date, the participants included three male undergraduate students at a small university in southwestern Pennsylvania. Participants were volunteers sampled from students currently enrolled in a general psychology course at the university. It should be noted that participants were offered extra credit as an incentive to participate in the study.

### Design

The present study used a 2×2 within subjects design in which Disability (revealed vs. not-revealed) and Focus of Disclosure (described-as-asset vs. merely described vs. previous job experience) were both manipulated within subjects. The dependent measure was the mean preference ratings of each hypothetical job applicant. This score can range from 1 to 10, where 1 = most preferred and 10 = least preferred.

### Materials

Informational packets were created to be distributed among the participants. The packet contained fifty mock job applications and a job description. The hypothetical applications varied in mundane ways (date of birth, etc.) but primarily differed according to the two major independent variables: Disability (revealed vs. not-revealed) and Focus of Disclosure (described-as-asset vs. merely described vs. previous job experience). Refer to the Appendix section for job description and application form.

### Procedure

After providing their consent to participate, a packet containing a job description and 50 mock applications was given to the participant. Participants were instructed to assume the role of a supervisor assigned to hire a new employee for a data-entry position and review the applications of the potential employees. The task was to identify their top ten choices for hire by returning the ten most preferred applications in order of preference (first choice on top, followed by second choice, etc.). The informational packets were collected upon completion, and the participants were

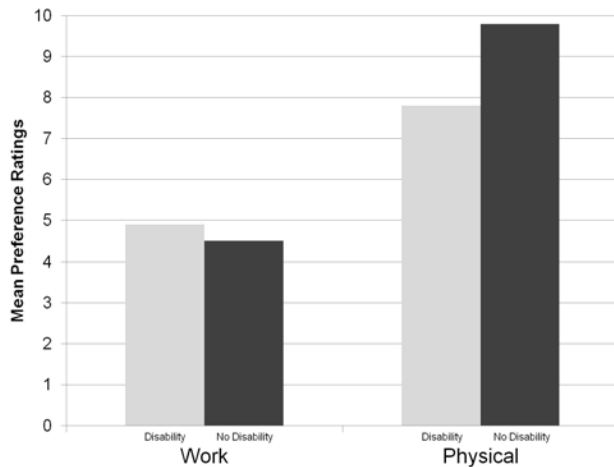
debriefed concerning the actual objectives of the study. The participants were then released.

**Results**

Although only three participants have been tested to date, preliminary analyses were conducted. Specifically, a 2 x 2 within subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed on the mean ranking scores. The results of the analysis revealed a significant main effect of Emphasis,  $F(1, 2) = 19.8$ .  $p < 0.05$ , in which emphasis on work experience resulted in greater preference scores ( $m = 4.7$ ) than emphasis on physical ability ( $m = 9.2$ ).

As shown in Figure 1, the results were also suggestive of a potential interaction between revelation of a physical disability and emphasis on work experience. Assuming that the data patterns continue to persist, this interaction is expected to emerge to significance with additional data.

**Figure 1:** Interaction of Emphasis and Disability.



**Conclusions**

The researcher in the present study predicted that respondents would rate individuals with a disability higher when the applicants portray their

disability as an asset compared to those who do not. These predictions were not fully supported. The present findings show that emphasis on work experience is the most powerful element to influence preference ratings. Despite a limited number of subjects tested the evidence tends to suggest that applicants with a disability gain approximately two rating points by emphasizing their disability in a positive light. Additional data clearly need to be collected to increase confidence in the above statements.

The present study’s findings suggest the following implications for real world application. Applicants should thoroughly inform an employer of their disability and present it as an asset in reference to their ability in the workplace. Louvet (2007) indicated that negative attitudes regarding those with a disability are due to feelings of sympathy and discomfort. An optimistic approach to disclosing one’s disability should reduce this discomfort making individuals with disabilities more likely to be hired and less likely to be discriminated against.

**References**

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