

Perspectives of Consumers with Communication, Vision, and Mobility Impairment on the Use and Procurement of Assistive Technology in the Workplace

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Workplace Accommodations

- While there are many case studies in the literature describing workplace accommodations for specific individuals, there are few large-scale studies about workplace accommodations (Butterfield & Ramseur, 2005)
- The people who have worked with disabilities are an essential source of information about their employment experiences (Freedman, 1996)

Objectives

- Describe strategies for how users with communication, vision, and mobility limitations have become aware of and acquired effective workplace accommodations while working
- Identify effective workplace accommodations

Focus Group Interviews: Methods

- Three separate groups
 - Vision impairment group
 - Communication impairment group
 - Mobility-limited group
- One facilitator and two assistants
- Discussion was digitally recorded and transcribed
- \$50 reimbursement for time and travel was provided
- Data was qualitatively analyzed for thematic content

Primary Questions Addressed

- How did you find out about available tools, equipment and technology; how do you educate yourself about assistive technology available for work?
- How do you request accommodations; how do you approach your employer regarding accommodations?
- What tools, equipment, and technology do you use or have you used in the workplace?

Vision Impairment Group N = 8

- Range of vision impairment from totally blind (NLP) to individuals with low vision
- Every member had employment history
 - 7 currently employed
 - 1 recently laid off

Mobility Impairment Group N = 8

- All focus group members were wheelchair users, 5 power, 3 manual
- Six members had experienced traumatic injuries that resulted in loss of mobility
- Every member had employment history
 - 6 currently employed
 - 1 recently retired
 - 1 recently returned to school

Communication Impairment Group

N=5

- Self-reported communication difficulty
- AAC user
- Internet access, Online text discussion
- Every member had employment history
 - 1 currently employed
 - 1 recently laid off
 - 3 seeking new employment

Learning About Accommodations

- No difference between groups
 - Online searches, magazines
 - Professionals
 - Friends, Community

Learning About Accommodations

“On line **research**, and journals” [communication]

“They have so many groups ... political **networks** [and] different connections you can make depending on your interest.” [motor]

“Talking to your **friends**, they can tell you what is out there. Also, just keeping up with new technology.” [vision]

“All of the above and the internet too and then I am on some different **list-serves**.” [vision]

However,

“One of the biggest problems [is] lack of awareness so if there was a way to have some newsletter that goes out to a wide mailing list that gave insight to the resources that would be good.” [communication]

Requesting and Procuring Accommodations

- Use of Vocational Rehabilitation Services
- ... mixed results

Requesting and Procuring Accommodations

“Voc. Rehab is credited for getting the modified work stations and the modification for my stick to phone” [mobility]

“they did pay for the training I received at the Center for Visually Impaired” [vision]

“voc. rehab helped with my van but not necessarily work” [mobility]

“I don’t like that you have to wait and go through all the red tape.” [vision]

“I did not know what was available.” [vision]

“they said since I was already employed they can’t help me” [mobility]

“They stopped returning my phone call, they won’t ever call me back that was probably about a year ago” [mobility]

Requesting and Procuring Accommodations Cont.

- Employers by and large supportive
- Employee must be direct and candid
- The responsibility of identifying both limitations and accommodations is their own; the individual with a disability must be a strong advocate for themselves

Requesting and Procuring Accommodations Cont.

“I talk to [*employers*] and tell them what I need, even though there may be a backlash.” [vision]

“You have two choices: you can either go for whatever it is you want to do and figure out how to get there, or become a victim of the system.” [vision]

“I followed through and made sure I made my needs clear and watched how people reacted.” [motor]

“Be vocal; you just have to ask, and follow through.” [motor]

“I would be completely candid about what I need and demonstrate how my value to the company exceeds the cost of accommodations.” [communication]

Tools, Equipment, and Technology Used in the Workplace

- Need for specialized computer equipment was common across groups:
 - Use as communication aids (communication)
 - Use to access work related documents (vision)
 - Use of specialized workstation setups and custom input devices (mobility)

Tools, Equipment, and Technology Used in the Workplace (Vision)

- Lower tech strategies
 - Braille
 - high intensity lighting
 - hand-held magnification
 - stickers and tactile markings

Tools, Equipment, and Technology Used in the Workplace (Mobility)

- Access into building / workplace
- Parking features enhanced, or reserved parking created

Tools, Equipment, Technology Used in the Workplace (Communication)

- Phone AT
- Much Left to be Desired
 - E.g., waterproof equipment, a volume adjustment, longer battery life, quicker response time in conversations, privacy, and foreign language translation.
 - “One that would be able to articulate exactly what I want to say”

Conclusions

- Accommodation use varies across groups, but was fairly consistent within groups
 - Even when discussing accommodations for computer equipment
- Learning about the right accommodation was consistent across groups
 - Read current literature; consult experts; interact with community, friends. Unfortunately, need to find resources yourself
- Requesting and procuring accommodations was also fairly consistent across groups
 - Individuals with a disability must be strong advocates for themselves; self reliance is absolutely critical
 - An employee who has a need for accommodation(s) must be direct and candid when dealing with their supervisor / employer
- Voc Rehab Services underutilized, perhaps because they are less involved in procuring accommodations while at work

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