**Service From People With Visual Imperament– Developing a Tool to Measure Employer Attitudes**

**Abstract**

Over the years, persons with disabilities have suffered unjustifiably due to a low employment rate, that results from an unsupportive and negative attitude from employers. This attitude becomes more prevalent during periods of economic stress, as is the case in the Covid-19 pandemic. Prior studies have addressed common concerns of employers within the workplace, such as accommodation costs and integration. However, the dimensions of these concerns extend beyond the workplace, to the external work environment, which includes interactions between customers and suppliers. We are not aware of studies that have investigated or provided a tool to assess the existence of these concerns relating to the external work environment. Moreover, research has not yet explored how these concerns have manifested during the current Covid-19 pandemic. Understanding the dimensions of these concerns and how they manifest is key to developing solutions for this problem. This study is based on 1,036 questionnaires collected using Online Panel Data (OPD), from managers who have hiring authority. We performed Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) followed by Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) for discriminant and convergent validity. Finally, we present an empirical model comprising a stable single factor, and prove predictive validity.

This is the first study to empirically investigate employers’ concerns regarding the interaction between people with disabilities and the external work environment, especially during economically turbulent times such as the current Covid-19 pandemic. This study proposes a model as well as a single factor tool, which is easier to understand and more relevant to a wide range of circumstances.

**Background: The challenge of employing people with visual impairment**

Visual impairment is defined as blindness or impaired vision that results in limitations in daily functions. (Leissner, et al. 2014). One of the central problems for people with disabilities (PwD) is the challenge of integrating into the labor force. There is a small percentage of people with visual impairment in the labor force, and those that are employed tend to have lower wages and fewer opportunities for promotion (Wittich, Watanabe, Scully & Bergevin, 2013).

Throughout history, people with blindness have dealt with high rates of unemployment and underemployment, and despite decades of advancement and the improvement of their status in society, there is still a gap in employment rates between working age people with blindness in the labor force (39%) and people of working age without visual impairment (73%) (Silverman, Bell & Mendez, 2019).

Among PwD, those with visual impairment suffer disproportionately from low rates of employment, relative to other PwD, such as those with learning disabilities (Martz & Xu, 2008). Accordingly, the unemployment rate of people with visual impairment is higher than the unemployment rate of the general working age population (Goertz, Van Lierop, Houkes & Nijhuis, 2010). Workers with visual impairment who have succeeded in finding employment complain of low wages, lack of proper accommodations, inability to receive promotions and career development, and illegal termination (Unger, Rumrill & Hennessey, 2005). Similarly, they deal with discrimination in entrance examinations or interviews, disparagement of their capabilities, or disrespect toward them, their jobs, and being limited to low level positions (Bengisu, Izbirak & Mackieh, 2008). The causes of high rates of unemployment among people with visual impairment are lower rates of education and professional training, disabilities relating to visual impairment, feelings of dissuasion, negative public opinion, lack of accessible public transportation, and discrimination during the hiring process (Jo, Chen, & Kosciulek, 2010).

The negative opinions of employers are considered to be one of the most significant obstacles to employment for people with visual impairment (Coffey, Coufopoulos & Kinghom, 2014). This stems from the need for employers to have more precise and practical information in order to defuse their preconceived notions and worries relating to the employment of PwD (Burke, et al. 2013). Employers prefer to hire people without disabilities, because they believe that PwD cannot efficiently perform the work that is requested of them. There may also be concerns regarding additional costs for health services and compensation, and concern about possible legal processes (Burke, et al. 2013).

Another challenge is workplace accommodation, including use of assistive technologies, to help PwD perform their essential tasks at work. These required accommodations are dependent on each individual person and the extent of their visual impairment (Babu & Heath, 2017). For people with visual impairment, such accommodations can include simple changes in the work environment such as changes in lighting or providing magnifying glasses, or more complex accommodations, such as screen readers and Braille script (Babu & Heath, 2017).

**Previous research on employers’ negative perceptions of employees with visual impairment**

Employers’ negative attitudes regarding employment of people with visual impairment is considered to be one of the main obstacles to their successful employment (Dong, et al. 2017). Employers believe that there are complex challenges in employing a blind person. These challenges are even greater than those faced by people with other disabilities (McDonnall, Zhou & Crudden, 2013). For example, employers believe that employees with visual impairment do not integrate well into society and are less desirable than employees without disabilities. Other employees do not know how to relate to employees with visual impairment, which creates discomfort in social situations at work (Golub, 2006).

Accordingly, Lynch (2013) found that most managers believe that there are only a few jobs at their organization that people with visual impairment could perform successfully. They also believe that it is more expensive to employ a person with visual impairment relative to someone without disabilities. As a result, most managers have a lower preference for hiring, training, and employing individuals with visual impairment relative to employees without disabilities.

Employers’ lack of desire to hire blind employees or employees with visual impairment is due to a variety of fears and concerns. These are mostly the result of misinformation regarding the needs involved in employing people with visual impairment, including workplace accommodations, assistive technologies, and unique challenges of workplace safety for employees with visual impairment (Wolffe & Candela, 2002). McDonnall, O’Mally and Crudden (2014) highlight that the main problem is employers’ limited knowledge or even lack of knowledge regarding people with visual impairment, and how they perform routine work tasks. For example, there may be uncertainty regarding the costs of workplace accommodations, the actual cost of providing accommodations, discomfort, or lack of acquaintance with people with blindness or visual impairment. These are considered to be central challenges in employing people with visual impairment.

Employers recognize their lack of knowledge on the subject; it was found that when they communicate with a professional rehabilitation agency, there is a higher chance of employing a person with visual impairment (McDonnall, 2018).

McDonnall, Cmar, Antonelli & Markoski (2019) found that more than 86% of employers believe that there is a negative correlation between the existence of visual impairments and obtaining work skills and capabilities. However, direct exposure positively influences employers’ opinions towards the talents of people with blindness. Only once employers have experienced positive work performance by blind employees, does their attitude shift.

An additional employer concern that leads to negative attitudes toward hiring people with visual impairment deals with the possible negative reactions and concerns of customers and other employees toward people with visual impairment, relating to their work performance (Papakonstantinou & Papadopoulos, 2020). Employers are concerned that customers will have trouble accepting PwD in the workplace, and that customers will express discomfort and impatience (Bengisu & Balta, 2011).

**Distancing from PwD**

Generally, there is social distance from PwD (Toriello, Leierer, Sheaffer & Cubero, 2007). This distancing exists in the work environment as well (Vornholt, Uitdewilligen & Nijhuis, 2013), and the phenomenon is present with people with visual impairments as well (Unger, Rumrill & Hennessey, 2005). While prior studies of employers’ concerns regarding PwD have addressed internal work processes and integration, the external workplace, including customers and suppliers (Koufteros, et al., 2014) has not been properly investigated.

The social obstacles facing people with visual impairment include impatience and fear from customers (Naraine & Lindsay, 2011), as well as hesitation and rejection (Fekler, Bokek-Cohen & Braw, 2019). As a result, employers are concerned that hiring PwD could negatively affect their customers, and that their customers could respond negatively to employees with disabilities (Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt & Kulkarni, 2008). Employers are concerned that a customer’s negative attitude toward the hiring of employees with disabilities could be a factor influencing their judgement of the quality of service (Rosenbaum, Baniya & Seger-Guttmann, 2017). This is especially the case when disabilities are visible and affect the external appearance of the employee providing the service (Kalargyrou, Barber & Pei-Jou, 2018). In businesses where employees with disabilities communicate with customers, there is “aesthetic anxiety” about these employees. As a result, the business appears less attractive in the eyes of customers (Jasper & Waldhart, 2013). Specifically, PwD tend to receive fewer tasks that require direct contact with customers (Stone & Wright, 2013), because customers feel a sense of discomfort towards PwD. People with visual impairment, in particular, are considered less visually attractive (Kalargyrou, Barber & Pei-Jou, 2018).

**Risk-Taking by Employers**

Employers worry about, and avoid, taking risks, and prefer to minimize situations that might damage their careers and work environments (John, Litov & Yeung, 2008). Risk exposure is a situation where a company could face potential losses (Posthuma, Roehling & Campion, 2011). It is the general obligation of employers to minimize business risks (White & Burr, 2017).

As a result, employers prefer to avoid the risk of hiring employees with disabilities (Annett, 2017). They are concerned that hiring employees with disabilities could place them in a state of financial or legal risk (for example, due to a workplace accident or discrimination) (Kaye, Jans & Jones, 2011). The fear of risks connected to employing individuals with disabilities lessens when there is prior experience (Johnson, Greenwood & Schriner, 1988).

This concern causes employers to prefer hiring a candidate who constitutes less risk even over a highly-skilled candidate. Employers see the hiring of PwD as a risk, a waste of time, and an unnecessary difficulty (Stensrud, 2007).

There are many downsides and complications in hiring PwD. However, people with blindness or visual impairments are those who end up bearing this burden (Malakpa, 2007). Employers believe that hiring people with blindness involves a risk that is too high for their company, and they avoid hiring them (Crudden, McBroom, Skinner & Moore, 1998). Employers are concerned that people with blindness and/or people with visual impairments will not be able to, as a result of their disability, perform the tasks connected to their job (Smith, 2002), or successfully integrate into the workplace (Heera, 2016).

According to Ajzen’s (1985) theory of planned behavior, there is a link between beliefs and behaviors, and the best way to predict behavior is to measure behavioral intention. Intention, in turn, is determined by attitude toward the behavior, subjective norm (the perceived social pressure to perform the behavior), and perceived behavioral control (the perceived ability to carry out the behavior) (Fraser et al., 2010). Therefore, the theory presents a link between managerial attitudes, subjective norms, and intention to hire PwD (Ang, Ramayah & Amin, 2015). As a result, a favorable attitude toward hiring PwD will increase employers’ intention to hire PwD, and vice versa (Ang, Ramayah & Amin, 2015). Therefore, employers’ risk avoidance, which forms the negative attitude towards employing PwD, unfortunately results in low rate of employment of PwD.

On the other hand, upper echelons theory argues that a company’s outcomes can be predicted by their top managers’ characteristics (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007). Indeed, managerial ability has significant effect on corporate earnings quality (Demerjian, Lev, Lewis & Mcvay, 2013). However, high-ability managers are receptive to risk-taking whereas low ability manager refrain from risk-taking (Yung & Chen, 2018). This does not mean, of course, that the negative attitude toward employing PwD comes from management inadequacy. It may simply be the result of a lack of knowledge. Rational decision‐making is dependent on having access to complete and accurate information (Beck, Fuller & Unwin, 2006). Greater awareness of the risk involved in a certain decision increases the decision-maker’s need to analyze the relevant data. Therefore, managers who are aware of their lack of knowledge regarding PwD may simply turn to risk avoidance as a default behavior. This behavior may be easily remedied, however, through providing organizational information in an integrated manner via human-resource training.

This study has several potential contributions. First, previous studies that have investigated attitudes toward PwD in the workforce typically focus on the internal work environment (e.g. Chi & Qu, 2004), such as the effect of PwD on productivity and integration capabilities. This is the first study that we have encountered that extends the scope of employers’ concerns to their audience, in other words, the reaction of the external workplace, including customers and suppliers. Second, this study validates and provides a useful tool that may be employed both by practitioners and academics for future research and extensions. Third, this study considers the recent global events resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, a time when PwD are at an even greater risk of unemployment. The study constructs a single factor model, which is easier to understand and more relevant to a wide range of circumstances (Gibson, Lhabitant, Pistre & Talay, 1998), in this case, including economic downturns.

**Methodology**

*Measurement tool*

We have developed the Service From People With Visual Impairment (SPVI) scale consisting of 6 items (Table 1). Some of these items were collected from other studies, although no study has yet specifically investigated employers’ concerns regarding their customers’ discomfort in receiving service from people with visual impairment or blindness. The item (Q7) “Organizations / Employers would prefer employing a person without a disability over a visually impaired / blind person” (McDonnall, Crudden, & Zhou, 2013) was also added to the survey, to be used in the predictive validity section. These items were reviewed by four experts in the area of employment of people with blindness or visual impairments. Each item included a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A pilot test (n = 38) was conducted to evaluate the instrument, using personal interviews of managers in charge of employees in their organization, and with hiring authority. Based on psychometric analyses (utilizing Cronbach-alpha and Exploratory Factor Analysis), the scale was deemed to be satisfactory for further research.

The final survey was distributed using Online Panel Data (OPD). OPD is an advantageous system for field testing to support measurements development (Wetherell, 2019). A screening question was used to determine whether the respondents had hiring authority, and only those who did were invited to complete the survey.

*Sample*

We collected 1,036 completed questionnaires. Of the respondents, 57.2% (593) were female and 42.8% (443) were males; 32.6% (338) were between the ages of 25-35, 39.3% (407) were between the ages of 36-45, and 28.1% (291) were between the ages of 46-65. In terms of education, 14.8% (153) had completed high school, 19.2% (199) had post-secondary education, and 66% (684) had university education.

*Procedure and analysis*

First, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) (Copeland et al., 2010) was performed to assess the SPVI scale’s dimensions, followed by Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) for convergent and discriminant validity (Eckhaus & Sheaffer, 2019a). For prediction validity, we employ Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the model’s fit.

Model fit was estimated using CFI, TLI, NFI, RMSEA, and the ratio CMIN/DF. Values ​​of CFI, NFI, and TLI >0.95 and RMSEA <0.08 are considered good fit (Hinz et al., 2017). The CMIN/DF ratio should be as small as possible (Zhao & Zhu, 2014). Typically a ratio <3 is considered good fit (Fukutake et al., 2020).

We used SPSS v.26 for EFA, and AMOS v.26 for CFA and SEM.

**Results**

*Exploratory Factor Analysis*

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.8, greater than the recommended value of 0.6 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2012). Additionally, Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant (χ2 (15) = 1857.2, *p* < 0.001). The loadings were all ≥ 0.6 (Table 1), which is highly rigorous. Given these indicators, factor analysis was deemed to be suitable with these 6 questionnaire items. A principle-components factor analysis of the 6 items using varimax rotations was conducted. Eigen values showed that the variables load onto one factor, explaining 50.31% of the variance. The factor-loading matrix is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Factor loadings for 10 items.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| # | *Item* | *Loading* |
| Q42 | A visually impaired / blind employee will find it difficult to give the same standard of customer service as an employee without a disability. | 0.79 |
| Q45 | A visually impaired / blind employee will find it difficult to explain the company's products face to face. | 0.75 |
| Q43 | A visually impaired / blind employee will find it difficult to give a presentation. | 0.75 |
| Q44 | A visually impaired / blind employee will find it difficult to lecture in front of an audience. | 0.71 |
| Q40 | A visually impaired / blind worker will find difficulty in working with finances. | 0.65 |
| Q41 | Customers may feel discomfort in accepting help from an employee who is visually impaired / blind. | 0.60 |

Cronbach’s alpha examined internal consistency for the scales, showing adequate alphas of 0.80.

*Confirmatory factor analysis*

CFA was performed to for convergent and discriminant validity of the scale.

CFA showed good fit to the observed data. CMIN/DF=1.94, p>.05, CFI = 1, TLI = 0.99, NFI= 1, RMSEA = 0.03. Model loadings are presented in Figure 1. All loadings are significant at p<0.001, and are >0.50 (Beauducel & Herzberg, 2006).



Figure 1. SPVI model loadings.

*Criterion (predictive validity)*

We assumed that respondents who reported a high score for Q7, implying a negative attitude towards employing people with VI disabilities, would also report a high score on the SPVI measure. Because most respondents marked a rating of 4 or 5 to Q7 (Table 2), generalization was possible, and we modeled these two scores. A correlation was made between the scores, as they are branches of the same variable. To assess the instrument’s predictive validity, we employed SEM.

The hypothesized model showed a good fit with the data, implying strong support for the hypothesis: CMIN/DF=1.91, CFI = 1, TLI = 0.99, NFI=0.99, RMSEA=0.03. Figure 2 illustrates the model and standardized coefficients. Both ratings of the score 4 (labeled Q7.4) and the ratings of the score 5 (labeled Q7.5) were statistically significant in their effect on SPVI (p<0.001, p<0.05, respectively).

Table 2. Q7 Rating frequencies.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Rating | N | % |
| 1 | 18 | 1.7 |
| 2 | 31 | 3 |
| 3 | 133 | 12.8 |
| 4 | 369 | 35.6 |
| 5 | 485 | 46.8 |
| Total | 1036 | 100 |



Figure 2. SEM standardized coefficients.

**Discussion**

Using an OPD helped overcome the problem of socially desirable response bias. This problem arises when the respondent’s rating is motivated by the desire to avoid embarrassment and repercussions (Latkin, et al., 2017), resulting in an inaccurate rating. The anonymity of the OPD is adequate to reduce or avoid this problem. Another solution that was used to avoid socially desirable response bias is the formulation of the independent variable item as an indirect estimation rather than a direct question (Fisher, 1993): “employers prefer...” rather than “I prefer....” Indeed, the high ratings, unfortunately, regarding the negative attitude towards people with VI (Table 2) confirmed that socially desirable response bias was not a problem in this instrument.

According to virtue theory, individuals make active decisions about where to work, and how to behave at work, on the basis of personal values (Barclay, et al., 2012). Furthermore, virtue theory suggests that a variety of moral virtues, such as purity and loyalty could lead to status attainment (Bai, 2014). This implies that employees who practice virtue as part of the organization’s values, will be more productive, and more loyal to the organization. Organizations using a virtue theory approach find competitive advantage though higher productivity, reduced absenteeism, and positive morale (Arjoon, 2000). By practicing virtue, organizations might better support employment opportunities and accommodation for PwD (Barclay et al., 2012). Moreover, PwD, were found to be loyal and highly motivated workers (Lindsay, Cagliostro, Albarico, Mortaji & Karon, 2018), and can, therefore, support the company’s success.

The findings of this study are also supported by prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), which posits that people’s decision-making is based on evaluation of losses and gains, with more weight on the former. That is, employers place greater weight on the possibility of losing profit, rather than the advantages arising from the employment of PwD.

According to the agency theory, since executives’ employment security and income are both tied to one firm, they are assumed to exhibit risk aversion in decisions regarding the firm, in order to lower the risk to their personal wealth (Donaldson, 1961; Williamson, 1963). The results of this study support this approach. Employers demonstrate a negative attitude towards people with visual impairment, due to unjustifiable concerns that they may deter customers, and thus reduce profit. These concerns may have increased, as the results show, due to the current global recession caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

This study offers several contributions to the scholarship on this subject:

First, although previous studies have dealt with negative attitudes toward PwD within the workplace, this is the first study to confront the problem of employers’ negative attitude regarding possible discomfort in the external-workplace environment, including suppliers or customers who receive service from people with visual impairment. Thus, this study investigates the dimensions of this negative attitude, suggesting that solutions targeted to typical concerns such as workplace accommodations, will not be enough to properly support the employment rate of PwD. Pinto and Ert (2018) specify that “Additional research is required to understand how to overcome the barriers that limit the contribution of this important population to the labor market” (p.114). In order to overcome a problem, we first need to understand the extent of its manifestation.

Second, we have developed a single factor model. Single factor models are simple to use (Capon & Go, 2016, p. 364), and can therefore be used in practice, for example, by human resource departments, to measure perceptions and attitudes of employers. They can also be extended in future research.

Third, single factor models are often more robust to structural change (Wegener & Basse, 2019), and therefore may be effectively employed in regular times as well as economic downturns, such as the current Covid-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, economic crises or recessions are unfavorable for the employment of PwD in general (Burke et al., 2013), and even more so for people with visual impairment, who suffer from a lower employment rate than those with other disabilities (Martz & Xu, 2008). Employment challenges for people with visual impairment are more important than ever.

**Limitations and future research**

Indeed, the OPD allowed the collection of responses from a specific niche, namely, people who have hiring authority in their organization. These respondents exhibited risk aversion regarding their company’s profit, in their negative attitude towards the employment of people with visual impairment, which has probably increased during the current uncertainty of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the pool of respondents was collected from the same country, and different cultures have different norms and attitudes towards risk-taking and uncertainty (Li, Griffin, Yue & Zhao, 2013). Future studies may extend this research by collecting an international pool of respondents, and investigating national uncertainty levels and their relation to the developed measure. For instance, future studies may extend the proposed model with Hofstede (1991)’s cultural model. Hofstede’s model includes five categories, one of which is the Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI):the degree to which members of a given culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations.

The results of this study also highlight the lack of knowledge that executives may have with regard to people with visual impairment disabilities. There are many success stories of PwD in the workforce, including people with visual impairment, and clients who have specifically appreciated service from PwD (Kulkarni, 2016). Future studies may extend this research by investigating the array of areas where employers lack knowledge regarding people with visual impairment disabilities and explore possible solutions for transmitting and completing this knowledge. Such studies may provide another step for improving the quality of life of people with visual impairment disabilities. And this indeed may benefit the broader population, since enriching the happiness of our others in our community and surroundings can have a tremendous positive impact on our own happiness (Eckhaus & Sheaffer, 2019b).

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