

## **Disability management and vocational rehabilitation in Japan: research into practice**

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### ***Abstract***

Research findings regarding disability management and vocational rehabilitation in Japan will be reviewed in order to draw recommendations for future research and practice. Specifically, they include: (1) employers' attitudinal barriers toward employing individuals with psychiatric disabilities, (2) effect of disability management training seminars for employers, (3) job development initiated by private companies for employees with intellectual disabilities, (4) natural support provided by other employees at the worksite, and (5) staff burnout of vocational rehabilitation service providers.

Although the employment rate of individuals with disabilities has been increasing in recent years, many of them quit or lose their jobs. They quit the jobs mainly because they lose motivations to work. But there must be more complicated reasons that involve employers, employees, family members, community members, human service providers, physical environment, societal attitudes, and public policies. The paper will attempt to delineate significant factors contributing successful disability management in the workplace.

### ***Research into Practice***

The most important single factor that maximizes success in a disability management is "a human resource management policy committed to managing disability, including attitude enhancement and a thorough understanding of disability" (Brodwin, M. 2008, p.514). A successful vocational rehabilitation in the private-for-profit sector gives prospective employers hope and opportunities to actively get involved in the true normalization of individuals with disabilities in our mainstreaming society.

Understanding employers' negative attitudes toward disability employment becomes a significant concern when making a human resource management policy. Researchers have identified what negative attitudes are common among employers and how such attitudes could be ameliorated. Ozawa and Yaeda (2007) studied 358 employers representing 14 large Japanese industries, and analyzed the nature of negative attitudes toward employing persons with psychiatric disabilities. They found that "employer motivation for employing people with psychiatric disability correlates with fear, prejudice, and prior experiences employing those with psychiatric disabilities" (p.105). It is obvious that employers can be motivated well when they feel safe about hiring individuals with disability. But often times, they feel fear because they do not see those individuals with psychiatric disabilities on a daily basis at work place. How can we help them understand more about disability?

Nemoto (2006) studied how employers' attitudes can be changed by giving training seminars for employers to enhance their understandings of disability and disability management and vocational rehabilitation. The study found that the attitudinal change may not easily occur just by giving disability awareness seminars to employers (Nemoto, 2006). No significant attitudinal difference was also found between seminar participants and non-participants. The employers' overall attitudes did not change significantly before and after the seminar. Rather, an interesting finding was that the employers showed more positive attitudes than service providers did ( $p < .01$ ). It was rather a shocking result for direct service providers and vocational rehabilitation service providers. Another interesting finding was that employers aged above 50 years old had more positive attitudes toward workers with disabilities than 20, 30, and 40 years old employers groups did ( $p < .01$ ). It could imply that more experienced, older employers may be more generous to hiring people with disabilities in general in Japan. While this is rather a psychological, personal factor, there might be an organizational factor contributing hiring people with disabilities within the company. Since private companies hiring more than 56 employees without disabilities must reach the mandatory employment rate of 1.8% in Japan, many have been initiating job development activities within the company in order to meet the quota. Otherwise, they would have to pay the fine or levy of \$500 per "would-have-employed" individuals with disability.

One example of disability management practice can be illustrated as follows. Ishii and Yaeda (2010) studied how employers' job development initiatives are related to the number of tasks performed by employees with intellectual disabilities. Some of the job development activities initiated by those 150 large companies were "analyzing job content and simplifying job processes" and "listing tasks suitable for employees with intellectual disabilities" (p.11). It was concluded that the key must be the "initiative" and the "commitment" for disability employment by the private companies that created more work opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities. It would also give a company a better social image for providing effective disability management.

Another example of disability management practice is the use of "natural support" technique in supported employment. While a job coach creates more natural work environment for both employees with and without disabilities, it has not been clarified as to how such natural support can be constructed on the job. Wakabayashi and Yaeda (2010) studied how "natural support" by co-workers is being formulated within a company. According to the study, the three factors forming the natural support for workers with disabilities were: (1) positive human relationship within the work place, (2) reliable relationship with service providers, employers, and employees, and (3) employers' confidence for disability management.

In Japan, many job coaches are feeling pressure to achieve vocational rehabilitation outcomes as service providers. By conducting a national mail survey with the 1,126 vocational rehabilitation agencies and facilities in Japan, Ishihara and Yaeda (2009) examined the work stress currently

perceived by the vocational rehabilitation service providers. By conducting a confirmatory factor analysis (n=398) applying the “Multiple Indicator Multiple Cause Model”, they found that “insufficient work support skills”, “job burden for work support”, “insufficient understandings by stakeholders” and “human relationship” were the four major work stressors that would in turn increase higher work stress responses such as low energy, anxiety, fatigue, uneasiness, depression, and physical burden. Among those, it was found that the “human relationship” was the most strongly related factor to those work stress responses.

### ***Recommendations***

Above those research findings should encourage and stimulate the current practice of disability management at workplace for Japanese with disabilities. Recently, the actual employment rate of individuals with disabilities has been increasing in Japan since introducing supported employment. However, there are still many employees with disabilities quitting or losing their jobs. Many of them quit their jobs by losing motivations for work and many of them have expressed that they “could not keep up with the good human relations”. This is true with not only employees with disabilities but also those without disabilities.

Since disability management and vocational rehabilitation involves many stakeholders including employers, regular employees, employees with disabilities, family members, community members, direct job coaches, vocational rehabilitation professionals, and special needs education teachers (Yaeda, 2004, 2006, 2009), more sophisticated research must be designed in order to clarify significant factors contributing successful collaboration of disability management practice. For example, studies identifying factors contributing mutual satisfaction among those stake holders are encouraged. Action research may be an effective approach that involves both researchers and stakeholders at once. By transferring research findings to everyday practice in disability management, the work place can be universally accessible not only for individuals with disabilities, but also for all of us.

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