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“Give Me a Job, Give Me Security, Give Me a Chance to Survive:”¹ A preliminary study of employment among postsecondary graduates with disabilities

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to explore the job search process (e.g., duration, sources of information regarding job opportunities) and strategies, including factors that assist postsecondary graduates with disabilities. We highlight the fact that postsecondary education seems to mitigate a lot of barriers associated with obtaining employment when an individual has one or more disabilities. Supportive factors most often cited by our participants were contacts, volunteer work or internship, work experience and skill set. Participants were also asked to provide advice to other graduates with disabilities who were searching for a job. We categorized this advice into the “four P’s” of employment: practical (technical and down to earth), personal (qualities), professional experience (experience in the field), and people (contacts and networking). It is important to mention that the advice provided by our participants not only applies to graduates with disabilities, but also to the population of postsecondary graduates without disabilities. The question of whether or not to disclose one’s disability is also addressed. Finally, we discuss future directions for research pertaining to employment and postsecondary graduates with disabilities.

Keywords: Employment, graduates with disabilities, postsecondary education, job, career, advice, interview

Introduction

People go to college and university not only because they enjoy being in school but also because they want to get work in their field of study (Coates & Edwards, 2009; Fichten

et al., 2012). As graduation approaches, it is normal that postsecondary students - and particularly students with disabilities - become concerned with finding a job (Guilbert, Bernaud, Gouvernet, & Rossier, 2016). This concern is motivated by a variety of factors, such as disclosing one's disability, obtaining accommodations in the workplace, and finding the right fit between one's dream job and the reality of doing so given one's disability (Martiniello, Barile, Budd, Nguyen & Fichten, 2011).

Well educated young adults are entering the workforce in record numbers. Between 11% and 14% of junior/community college and university students have a disability in Canada (Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (Ontario), 2012). Understanding employment and successful job search strategies of this new crop of postsecondary educated individuals with disabilities is vital given that postsecondary students with disabilities graduate at the same rate as students without disabilities. The main difference is that they take additional time to do so (Jorgensen, Fichten, Havel, Lamb, James, & Barile, 2005; Wessel, Jones, Markle, & Westfall, 2009; Arim, 2015). Thus, postsecondary graduates with disabilities tend to be substantially older than their peers without disabilities. As well, it is important to note that approximately half of these students did not disclose their disability to their school (Fichten, Heiman, Havel, Jorgensen, Budd, & King, 2016); this is also the case of workers with disabilities, who often choose not to disclose their disability (Santuzzi & Waltz, 2016).

Large-scale Canadian surveys have not yet published data on employment rates of recent postsecondary-educated individuals (e.g., Arim, 2015), although recent Canadian studies on employment of junior / community college students 3 to 10 months after graduation show that over 90% of those who did not continue their studies were employed (Fichten et al., 2012). In addition, 90% of Bachelor's degree graduates with disabilities were employed 6-7 years after graduation (Conway & Montgomery, 2014). Overall, in Canada, obtaining a postsecondary degree reduces the gap in the employment rate between graduates with and without a disability (McCloy & DeClou, 2013). Accordingly, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (2011) reported that 74% of graduates aged 15 to 64, with an undergraduate degree or higher, and who have a disability are employed, as compared to 84% of those who do not have a disability; thus only a ten percent difference in the employment rate nationally. However, there is a 21% difference in the employment rate of graduates with and without

disabilities when they have only obtained a high school diploma, with 54% of graduates with disabilities being employed and 75% of those without disabilities being employed. Indeed, Turcotte (2014) showed that for university graduates with a disability, there was no significant difference between those without a disability and those with a mild or moderate level of disability. However, for those with a high school diploma or less, employment was significantly and substantially lower for those with all levels of disability than for individuals without a disability (see Chart 2).

In their review of the literature, Lindstrom, Kahn and Lindsey (2013) discussed barriers to getting a job and career advancement that individuals with disabilities face, including the reality that, too often, graduates with disabilities are underemployed or work in low-skill jobs. A variety of barriers were listed by Nolan and Gleeson (2016). These include the cyclical nature of certain medical conditions; medication side-effects; lack of work experience; loss of disability related benefits; prejudice; fear and discrimination; accessibility issues; low expectations for individuals with disabilities; employer lack of knowledge and understanding of disability issues. Moreover, a study by Boman, Kjellberg, Danermark, and Boman (2015) showed that the type of disability has tremendous influence on employment opportunities, and that higher education does not necessarily mediate the relationship when the ability to work is seriously impaired (Turcotte, 2014). For example, among individuals aged 25-64 in the labour force (i.e., employed or looking for a job), employment rates of Canadian university graduates with a mild or moderate disability (77%) did not significantly differ from those without a disability (83%). However, the employment rate of university graduates with a severe or very severe disability was lower at 59% (Statistics Canada, 2014). Just the mention of a disability can be enough for an employment opportunity to slip away, even for qualified and experienced applicants (Ameri, Schur, Adya, Bentley, McKay, & Kruse, 2015).

Such findings are worrisome, considering the fact that employment can lead to positive attitudes about life in general, and that it is linked to confidence in the future and in oneself (Chen, 2015). Other positive outcomes associated with employment among individuals with disabilities include a positive quality of life, social inclusion, good self-esteem, a sense of purpose and belonging, higher social status, and satisfaction regarding social connections – as well as greater income stability (Cocks, Thorensen, &

Lee, 2015). Thus, it is important to encourage individuals with disabilities to find employment.

Given the employment rate discrepancies between recent graduates with and without disabilities, and given the importance of obtaining a job for individuals with disabilities, it is vital that we better understand the nature of successful job search strategies for these individuals. One might then ask, "How we can increase employment for individuals with disabilities?" Several studies have found that individuals with disabilities who have postsecondary education have better employment outcomes than their peers with no postsecondary education. For example, the rate of employment for people who have a university degree is higher than that of individuals who did not complete university who, in turn, generally do better than those who never attended college; this is true of individuals with and without disabilities (Barile, Fichten, Jorgensen & Havel, 2012; Jorgensen et al., 2015). In fact, Barile and colleagues (2012) and Fichten and colleagues (2012) found that after completing a junior / community college diploma, the difference in the employment rate between graduates with and without disabilities was not significant.

Although postsecondary education can increase self-confidence and marketability in students with disabilities, it does not always directly prepare students to enter the labour market (Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer, & Acosta, 2005). Training opportunities in the workplace (e.g., apprenticeships, internships, etc.) may provide the needed experience and lead to higher employment outcomes among graduates with disabilities (Cocks, Thorensen, & Lee, 2015; Fichten et al., 2013; Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer & Acosta, 2005; Oswald, Huber & Bonza, 2015).

As for the actual job search process, the literature suggests several strategies that postsecondary graduates with disabilities can use to obtain employment. Some report that individuals with disabilities can rely on employment agencies or specialized employment services to find jobs (Hemphill & Kulik, 2016; McCloy & DeClou, 2013). Networking (i.e., the use of informal sources - Mowbray, Hall, Raeside, & Robertson, 2017), working on one's communication skills, involvement in on-campus activities, and building a good resume were also seen as helpful strategies (Oswald, Huber, & Bonza, 2015). But what about recent postsecondary graduates who have succeeded in finding employment? What do they say about their job search strategies and experiences? We

were able to find only one investigation that studied this issue. Regrettably, there were only five participants in this report who had graduated and who were employed (Nolan & Gleeson, 2016).

The scientific literature on successful employment strategies for recent graduates without disabilities uses language that is qualitatively different from that used in the disability related literature. Indeed, scientific studies typically investigate theoretical models and the conceptual bases of successful job searches. Nevertheless, Stevenson's (2016) review of the literature shows that successful job search strategies related to finding employment were: seeking information about job opportunities rather than about career-related self-exploration, intense searching that involves actively gathering job information from a variety of sources, and being persistent. Furthermore, job search strategies that showed openness to a wide range of job possibilities were more successful than those that focused on a few options (Stevenson, 2016).

Consistent with some of these findings, the popular press suggests that searchers need to start early, emphasize volunteer or internship experiences, and engage in offline networking (Post, 2017).

Present Study

Since finding employment after completing their studies is a major concern for students with disabilities, and since there are important unique barriers to finding employment for these individuals, we wanted to know, from successfully employed postsecondary graduates with disabilities themselves, how they obtained their job. In this preliminary study we interviewed 16 postsecondary graduates with disabilities who were currently or who had recently been employed. By doing so, we hoped to get a clearer understanding of successful job search strategies among postsecondary graduates with disabilities. Points of interest include program of study, type of employment (full- or part-time), how participants found out about their job, how long it took them to get their job, factors that helped them get their job, and advice to recent graduates with disabilities in search of a job. The rationale for conducting this preliminary investigation was that since there are conditions unique to the employment of individuals with disabilities, effective strategies and the job search process would be different from those of the general population. The objective of this study was to obtain a first impression of successful job search strategies for recent postsecondary graduates with disabilities. With this overview one

can compile a preliminary series of guidelines to assist recent graduates with disabilities in search of employment.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 16 postsecondary graduates with disabilities (13 females, 3 males). Graduates' self-reported disabilities included visual impairment (n = 1), hearing impairment (n = 3), mobility impairment (n = 2), learning disability (n = 2), chronic health problems (n = 1) and multiple disabilities (n = 7; e.g., visual impairment and mental illness; neurological impairment and chronic health problems). The categories used to classify the various kinds of disabilities were based on previous research projects (Fichten et al., 2014). Three participants graduated from a junior / community college and 13 from a university. Average age was 34 years (range = 25 - 52 years, median = 33).

Measures

After reading the literature in this area, questionnaire creation, group feedback, revisions and piloting, the participants were asked the following open-ended questions:

- 1) Did you graduate and what was your most recent program of study? ;
- 2) (a) Are you currently employed? Are you employed in a full-time (35 hours or more per week) or part-time (less than 35 hours per week) capacity? or (b) Have you had a job since you graduated from post-secondary education? Were you employed in a full-time or part-time capacity?
- 3) (a) What is your job? How long have you had it? or (b) What was your job? For how long did you have it?
- 4) How did you find out about your job?
- 5) How long did it take you to find your job?
- 6) What helped you get your job?
- 7) What advice would you give a recent graduate who has a disability to help them find a job?
- 8) Is there anything that you would like to add?

Responses to questions 4, 6 and 7 were coded by two coders, trained to a minimum of 70% inter-rater reliability, in accordance with a coding manual (Jorgensen, Marcil, Havel, Lussier, Schaffer & King, 2016). Spot-checks of reliability were high, ranging from 85.7% to 91.1%.

Procedure

The research protocol was approved by the Dawson College Research Ethics Board. The participant list was created using the Adaptech Research Network database of individuals who have participated in one of our previous studies (Fichten, Nguyen, Budd, Barile, Asuncion, Jorgensen, Amsel, & Tibbs, 2014) and who agreed to be contacted for future studies. The database contains information such as date of birth, type of disability, program of study, and graduation date. Inclusion criteria for the current study were that the participant: attended an English language post-secondary institution, had a job at the moment of their entry into the Adaptech database, and had a disability. This resulted in 24 potential participants. All were sent email invitations which included the information and a consent form which specified an honorarium of \$20. The email also provided an explanation of the goal of the study and the interview process, and asked for a convenient date and time for the interview. If potential participants did not reply to the email, a team member phoned to invite them to participate. A total of three emails or phone calls were made before a participant was considered unreachable. Five individuals could not be reached. Among the 19 who could be contacted, 16 agreed to participate, for a response rate of 84%.

When a participant agreed to take part in the study, a date and time for the interview was scheduled. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, by phone, Skype or email and lasted between 10 and 20 minutes. The interviewer served as the note taker as interviews were not recorded. Upon completion of the interview \$20 was mailed to each participant.

Results

Descriptive Data

Questions 1, 2, 3 and 5 provided data about the participants, as well as about their job.

Question 1 was concerned with the graduates' program of study. Three participants had graduated from a junior / community college program, seven had obtained a bachelor's degree, and six had obtained graduate degrees. The programs of study yielded a very diverse list (e.g., sociology, law, translation, pastoral ministry, psychology).

Question 2 inquired about full- and part-time employment status. Thirteen participants currently held a job. Three individuals had been employed but at the time of the interview were unemployed by their own choice (e.g., going back to school). When asked about their current or last job, 12 were employed full-time and three part-time; only one graduate did not provide this information.

Question 3 examined the nature and the duration of employment. Participants provided a varied list of jobs. Examples included: electrical engineer, job coach, store manager, high school science teacher, and graphic designer. The average duration of employment was five and a half years, ranging from seven months to 16 years (participants who had worked at their job while they were students included the time worked while studying).

Question 5 explored the duration of the job search. Participants spent an average of two and a half months (range = 0 - 12 months) in search of a job (see Table 1). The "0" category in Table 1 represents participants who did not have to search for a job as they were already working at their place of employment as a volunteer, trainee, or in a paid position at the time of graduation.

Coded Data

Responses to Questions 4, 6 and 7 were coded into categories of responses.

Question 4 asked participants how they learned about the availability of a job. Responses were coded according to four categories. From most to least frequently cited these were: employment service, personal contacts, volunteering/internship, and other. Most graduates (69%) learned about their jobs through employment services or through contacts (see Table 2). Following are examples from each category.

Employment service examples included: Multiple job sites; Found out about the job through the provincial employment agency; Through an employment agency; Posting for a position on a job bank at a university.

Personal contacts examples included: A friend who was a teacher called to talk about a six-month job contract; Friend who was employed recommended me to work with a client; Contact was a mother who already worked there; Contact was a teacher working at the school; A friend of a friend; Significant other's employer knew somebody who needed an employee.

Volunteering/internship examples included: Did an internship as part of a program of study and got hired right after the internship finished; Had an internship and after the internship was over they offered me a job there.

Other examples included: Was already working on a contract basis; Through working in the field for 15 years before; When employed on a previous contract, attended a workshop at the current place of employment.

Question 6 pertained to strategies used to obtain the job. The responses to this question were coded according to five categories, from most to least frequently mentioned: contacts, volunteering/internship, already working in the field, skill set, and other. Frequencies are available in Table 3. Following are examples from each category.

Contact examples included: Knowing someone in the business; Networking helped me get the job; Someone I knew was working at the firm and put in a good word for me after they saw my CV; Contacts were also very useful.

Volunteering/internship examples included: Past work and volunteering; The internship helped a lot; Volunteered to work there.

Already working in the field examples included: Was already working in the field; Had been working a long time in the field.

Skill set examples included: Have programming skills; Speaking English in a French city.

Other examples were: I am enthusiastic and energetic; Scored well on assessment that company gave to all potential employees; My personality helped me get the job; Boss appreciated my enthusiasm; Boss liked that I had a journalism degree in addition to a graphic design portfolio; The job agency helped with writing a strong resume; Negotiation helped me get my job; Quality of my past performance.

Question 7 asked participants if they had any advice for recent graduates with disabilities looking for employment. This question was coded according to four categories: the “four P’s” of employment (i.e., practical, personal, people, and professional experience). Frequencies are available in Table 4. Following are examples from each category.

Practical advice was expressed as “down to earth” suggestions which were often framed as instructions or things that recent graduates with disabilities should do. Examples included: Get involved as soon as possible with things in your field; Recent graduates should know exactly what tasks they are being hired to complete (job description); Once a CV is submitted it is important to follow-up with potential employers; Do not start by talking about your disability, wait until you are hired to disclose; Do as many interviews as possible; Write about your disability on your CV – some companies have quotas for hiring people with disabilities; Find a job by understanding your abilities; Work on your CV in order to get an interview; Prepare for the interview!

Personal advice was related to the personal qualities of the recent graduate with disabilities, to their personality, and was usually framed in a positive and optimistic way. Examples include: Whether you apply for a job or not should not be determined by what you think you can and cannot do; Accept yourself; Embrace who you are; Be patient; Resolve not to give up; Do not limit yourself; Everyone can work; We are still capable; Don’t let anything stop you.

People-related advice was concerned with contacts, networking or anything related to other people. Examples include: Networking with other people; Network: it is the easiest way to address first impressions where people assume what you can and cannot do; Having someone to vouch for you is good; Meet as many people as possible.

Professional experience-related advice dealt with getting experience in the field of employment or the specific occupation, no matter the type of experience (volunteering, internship, fewer number of hours, trial period). Examples include: Internship or volunteering really helps with contacts; You need work experience - volunteering or internship (even unpaid); Get experience – volunteering or part-time job.

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Discussion

To summarize, our results show that most graduates worked full time, all graduates found their job in less than 12 months - most in less than 2 months - and most graduates learned about their job through personal contacts or from a career site/employment center. Advice participants would give recent graduates with disabilities who are looking for a job include: work on your CV, network to get contacts,

volunteer so that employers will see what you can do, apply to many places, even if you get out of your comfort zone, be resilient, open yourself to new possibilities, and apply to multiple fields/occupations to increase your chances of getting a job.

Even though research has constantly shown that barriers to employment and to career advancement exist for individuals with disabilities (Ameri, Schur, Adya, Bentley, McKay & Kruse, 2015; Boman, Kjellberg, Danermark & Boman, 2015; Erickson, Lee & von Schrader, 2014; Lindstrom, Kahn & Lindsey, 2013; Zarifa, Walters & Seward, 2015), higher education seems to be an effective way to overcome some of the obstacles (Conway & Montgomery, 2014; Fichten et al., 2012; Jorgensen et al., 2015; Turcotte, 2014). This is good news, as more and more individuals with disabilities are attending postsecondary institutions (Fichten et al., 2012; McCloy & DeClou, 2013).

In the present study of employed postsecondary graduates with disabilities, most participants held skilled positions, such as lawyer or translator, even though not all were working in their field of study (e.g., degree in pastoral ministry, working in a youth center as a counsellor). This finding is not consistent with those of Lindstrom, Kahn and Lindsey (2013), who reported that graduates with disabilities often worked in low-skill jobs. Lindstrom and colleagues (2013) also found that graduates with disabilities had very few career advancement opportunities, which our results tend to contradict. Although not specifically concerned with job advancement, our study showed that even in relatively low-skill fields, our participants were high up in the hierarchy (e.g., store manager).

In terms of strategies used by our participants to obtain employment, consistent with findings of Hemphill and Kulik (2016) and with the suggestions in the literature (e.g., Oswald, Huber & Bonza, 2015; Post, 2017) networking seems to have been an important strategy. Indeed, a third of our participants reported contacts as being one reason as to why they got their job. However, the similarities stop there. While Hemphill and Kulik (2016) talk about communication skills, on-campus activities and a good resume, our participants talked about volunteering or doing an internship at their place of employment before being hired, their skill set in general, their experience in the field and their general qualities (e.g., personality, enthusiasm). One reason for the difference might be that our sample was older than Hemphill's and Kulik's (2016), thus our participants had time to volunteer or gain experience in their field. In addition, Fichten

and colleagues (2013) showed that volunteering or an internship were only slightly related to success in finding a job, although previous job-related experience has been identified as a key difference between young adults aged 15-34 with and without disabilities (Till, Leonard, Yeung, & Nicholls, 2015).

It is worth mentioning that Hemphill and Kulik (2016) found that individuals with disabilities relied heavily on job agencies or service centers to obtain employment. This may have been due to their approach, as only about one third of the graduates with disabilities in our study heard about job opportunities through these services. Moreover, their actual reasons for obtaining the job (strategies, help factors) were different.

Four P's of Employment

Participants in the present study were also asked to provide advice for potential graduates with disabilities searching for a job. Their answers were divided into the “four P’s” of employment: people, practical, personal, and professional experience. Not surprisingly, this advice is closely related to the strategies that helped our participants obtain employment.

For example, the “contacts” element of strategies translates into the “people” part of the advice; this was related primarily to networking, a concept that is among the most commonly recommended job search strategy to new graduates (e.g., La Rose, 2013).

“Volunteering/internship” and “already working in the field” are related to “professional” experience. This is an oft recommended strategy for job search. A previous investigation found that internships were related, although slightly, to finding a job (Fichten et al. 2013).

The “skill set” section of strategies translates into the “practical” advice. When it came to advice for new graduates with a disability this meant “down to earth” instructions about what to do. Examples are, get involved as soon as possible with things in your field and follow-up on submitted CVs.

A large part of the “other” category relates to the “personal” part of the “four P’s.” Advice such as don’t be daunted by delays and don’t give up characterize this category.

It is interesting to note, however, that even though the “practical” advice dominated the answers, “skill set” was the least frequently mentioned component among the

strategies, although it was mentioned by 1/3 of Canadians as the reason for being out of the labour force (i.e., neither employed nor looking for work) (Till, Leonard, Yeung, & Nicholls, 2015).

The literature shows that choosing to disclose or not to disclose a disability in the workplace is a difficult decision (Martiniello, Barile, Budd, Nguyen, & Fichten, 2011; Nolan & Gleeson, 2016). Results from the present study are consistent with this. For example, one participant mentioned that disclosing a disability could only be beneficial, as some employers have quotas for hiring individuals with disabilities. This suggests that graduates need to carefully research the information provided by the employer. Two participants advised against disclosing a disability, as this could lead to prejudice. In this case, they suggested showing the employer what one can do before disclosing, if disclosing at all.

Limitations and Future Research

An important limitation of the present study pertains to the sample size; this of course raises concerns about power and representativeness. Moreover, the nature of participants' disabilities could have influenced the results (e.g., Boman et al., 2015). Topics for future research include larger samples, using standardized measures, evaluations of opportunities for advancement, and factors related to keeping a job. Topics described by Chen (2015), Cocks and colleagues (2015), and Madaus and colleagues (2015), such as degree of similarity between employment and certification obtained, job satisfaction, perceived job competency, self-esteem, salary and social inclusion should also be further explored.

Implications

The famous question of disclosure: Should one disclose one's disability or not? This is not always a choice, as some individual cannot hide their disability (e.g., someone who is a wheelchair user). On the other hand, employers cannot provide accommodations if they are not aware of their employees' needs. Thus, as a general recommendation, individuals should disclose only if: (1) their disability might impact their work performance, (2) the gains of disclosing (i.e., accommodations, quotas for employment) outweigh the potential pitfalls (i.e., discrimination – not getting the job), and (3) they are

comfortable disclosing their disability. For more information, see the Government of Alberta - ALIS (Learning Information Service) (undated).

An important goal of this investigation was to provide a series of recommendations to help graduates with disabilities successfully obtain employment. Another very important implication of the present study is that the “four P’s” of employment are likely to apply to graduates with and without disabilities. Advice such as, “Don’t give up” or “Prepare for the interview” apply to everyone. This might have to do with the fact that completion of a postsecondary degree mitigates some barriers to employment for postsecondary graduates with disabilities, reducing the discrepancy in the employment rate between graduates with and without disabilities (Barile et al., 2012; Fichten et al., 2012; Jorgensen et al., 2015). Therefore, the take home message of this study is that for postsecondary graduates with disabilities strategies and advice for obtaining employment do not seem to differ substantially from those which are useful to graduates in general.

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Table 1

Job Search Duration

Duration of Job Search	Frequency
0 (did not have to search)	6
≤ 2 months	3
2 - 6 months	2
6 - 12 months	4

Table 2

How Did You Find Out About Your Job?

Category	Frequency
Employment service	6
Personal contacts	5
Volunteering/internship	2
Other	3

Table 3

What Helped You Get Your Job? Strategies

Category	Frequency
Contacts	5
Volunteering/internship	3
Already working in the field	3
Skill set	2
Other	11

Table 4

What Advice Would You Give To a Recent Graduate Who Has a Disability to Help Them Find a Job?

Category	Frequency
Practical	12
Personal	6
People	4
Professional experience	3

Notes

1. Shaw, T. (1978). Blue collar man. On Pieces of Eight [Vinyl]. Chicago, US: A&M ↵



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