

Employers' Attitudes Toward Hiring Persons with Disabilities and Vocational Rehabilitation Services

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This article describes a study of employers' attitudes toward hiring people with disabilities and toward the state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency. The study examined attitudes of employers in two states, one in the Midwest and one in the Southeast. In all cases, employers were known to have hired people with disabilities and to have worked with the state VR agency. The study found that employers stated that they were glad they hired the person they did, but expressed reservations about hiring people with certain types of disabilities. Employers did not express a high degree of knowledge about the state VR program, and satisfaction with VR was mixed.

While the United States economy continues to demonstrate strong growth and low unemployment, many people with disabilities are still struggling to enter the labor market (National Organization on Disability, 1998). People with disabilities often find employment difficult to attain and feel excluded from the labor market because of their disabilities (Kregel & Unger, 1993; Satcher & Dooley-Dickey, 1992). This difficulty is often traced to the attitudes of employers toward hiring people with disabilities and the environment of acceptance or non-acceptance employers create (Satcher & Hendren, 1992; Wright & Multon, 1995). The purpose of this paper is to increase our understanding of employer attitudes toward hiring people with disabilities.

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Background

Vocational rehabilitation professionals recognize the problem of employer attitudes (Thomas, Thomas, & Joiner, 1993) and note that negative attitudes are often identified as a major barrier to successful job placement. Because successful job placement and the encouragement of employers to effectively integrate people with disabilities into the workplace are central functions of vocational rehabilitation professionals (Gilbride & Stensrud, 1992; Mullins, Rumrill, & Roessler, 1996), understanding and addressing employer attitudes are imperative.

Unfortunately, identifying and addressing employer attitudes and perceptions are monumental tasks (Martin & Viecelli, 1988). Negative attitudes are kept in place by myths regarding people with disabilities as workers (Kilbury, Benshoff, & Rubin, 1992; Satcher, 1992), by ineffective rehabilitation placement methods, and by employer hiring procedures designed solely to avoid making any risky hires (Gilbride & Stensrud, 1993; Gilbride, Stensrud, & Connolly, 1992; Wiseman & Gomez-Mejia, 1998).

If rehabilitation professionals are to fulfill their responsibility to effectively serve consumers and employers, they can begin by correcting those attitudinal, perceptual, and procedural barriers that currently limit the ability of people with disabilities in attaining quality employment outcomes. Some evidence exists to suggest that if effective interventions are made, employers' receptivity toward hiring people with disabilities can be improved (Chism & Satcher, 1997; Douglas, 1994; Levy, Jessop, Rimmerman, & Levy 1992; Satcher & Hendren, 1992; Zahn & Kelly, 1995). However, in order to address employer concerns, rehabilitation professionals must have more complete and accurate data about employer needs and attitudes (Millington, Butterworth, Fesko, & McCarthy 1998).

There is also some evidence that employers consider rehabilitation professionals to be credible sources of intervention.

Employers have generally favorable attitudes toward state vocational rehabilitation professionals (Gilbride & Stensrud, 1993), and would look to them for technical assistance (Greenwood, Johnson, & Schriener, 1988). However, in order for rehabilitation agencies to expand into the role of a business consultant, rehabilitation agencies must learn how to develop and maintain working relationships with employers that lead to confidence and trust (Fry, 1997).

Gilbride and Stensrud (1992, 1999) suggest rehabilitation professionals can be an essential component in this quest for equality by skillfully providing consultation services to the business sector. They assert, however, that the focus must switch from merely locating employment for persons with disabilities to addressing the work needs of the employer and demonstrating to the employer genuine concern and help toward accomplishing the employer's goal of a stable, competent work force. Unfortunately, little information exists about employers' perceptions and concerns about hiring people with disabilities.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate in more depth the attitudes and perceptions of employers toward hiring people with disabilities and toward the state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency. The study collected data on employers who had hired a consumer of the state VR system. The consumers were all closed by the VR agency as competitively employed and rehabilitated. Employers were contacted approximately 1 year after this known hire of a person with a disability.

The three central research questions of this study were: (1) what are employers' attitudes and perceptions toward hiring persons with specific disabilities, (2) what are employers' perceptions of the effectiveness of services provided by VR, and (3) are there differences in attitudes of midwestern and southeastern employers.

Method

Instrument: Employer Hiring Practices and Perceptions Survey (EHPPS).

Given that little research has been conducted on employer perceptions of hiring people with disabilities, a research committee (that included rehabilitation counselors, community development specialists, and a consumer representative) was formed in a Southeastern state to develop a pilot instrument.

During the pilot phase, the project team generated instrument items, a list of the most common disabilities found on state VR caseloads, and identified the list of specific VR services to assess. The instrument was then piloted with 106 employers in that state. After obtaining the pilot data, the committee analyzed the results and comments from employers and made recommendations to improve the instrument's comprehensiveness and clarity utilizing survey methodology suggestions from Fowler (1993) and Litwin (1995). Many items were reworded to reduce ambiguity, some items were eliminated, and a few others were added.

At the completion of the pilot phase a second committee was formed. This second committee included representatives from the first committee (two VR professionals from the Southeastern state) and rehabilitation professionals from a state in the Midwest. The second committee included supervisors and rehabilitation counselors from both the state agency and the Veterans Administration, a consumer, and a research consultant. This new committee was formed to review the instrument's reliability and validity. Members of the committee analyzed results from the pilot data, and reviewed every item on the EHPPS. This process of rigorous review of pilot data by the second committee improved both the content and construct validity of the instrument.

The final instrument had 69 questions and was divided into three sections. The first section consisted of eight questions that dealt with general employment data. Questions included the number of employees, job title of the contact person, previous knowledge of employing a person with a disability, number of employees with a disability hired, disability types, accommodations provided, and whether they were glad they had hired a person with a disability.

In the second section, employers identified the job positions "most often" and "second most often" open and typically filled by external job applicants. Employers were then presented with 14 different types of disabilities and asked to consider "how hard do you think it would be to hire a person for this job" for each disability. Perceptions were scored on a 5-level Likert-style scale with responses ranging from 1 = "impossible" to 5 = "no problem at all."

The third and last section of the survey examined employer awareness of VR and perceptions toward VR services. Awareness was explored by asking (a) if they had been contacted by the state VR office, (b) if the contact was a job coach, and (c) the number of times VR had contacted them in writing, by telephone, or through a personal visit. Employer perceptions toward the effectiveness of VR services were scored on a 4-level Likert-style scale with responses ranging from 1 = "very effective" to 4 = "very ineffective." A four level scale was used to eliminate employers' ability to choose the middle point, thus forcing them to state if they viewed services as generally effective or ineffective. Twenty questions explored basic and advanced VR services, such as job modifications, personnel needs, accommodations, job analyses, accessibility, and compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. VR services were divided into basic and advanced competencies based upon the placement model of Gilbride and Stensrud (1999).

Sample

Fifty employers in each of four administrative VR districts, two (of thirteen) districts in a Midwestern state and two (of eight) districts in a Southeastern state, constituted the research population (total sample population was 200 employers). These two states were chosen because of their ethnic and labor market diversity. The specific districts within each state were identified by the state VR administrator as broadly representative of the state.

The researchers selected employers who had hired clients from one of these four VR offices during fiscal year 1997. Only employers who had hired a VR consumer were sampled to ensure that the study was being conducted with an employer who had hired a person with a disability (even if they were unaware of having done so). Further, focusing the study on employers who had hired a VR consumer increased the probability that the employer had contact with a VR professional.

Procedures

The researchers contacted employers by telephone. The researchers chose the telephone survey rather than the mail or personal interview procedure due to the anticipated greater response rate. Interviewers began the survey by asking to speak with the personnel director or the individual in charge of hiring. They then briefly explained the purpose of the survey noting the approximate time allotment of 10 minutes. Those who agreed to participate in the survey were then given the option of scheduling a convenient time to complete the survey or completing the survey during the initial phone call. One-hundred twenty-three employers agreed to participate and completed the survey, 60 in the Southeastern state and 63 in the Midwestern state (for a 62% response rate).

The researchers documented responses on the EHPPS during the course of the interview. Only those who responded that someone had contacted them from the state VR office were asked to complete section 3, the questions on VR effectiveness. Answers to "how hard" it would be to hire for Job 1 and Job 2 were rounded up to the next highest whole number, for example, "between 2 and 3" would be considered a 3.

Results

The number of employees of the Midwestern employers ranged from 3 to 2,500 ($M=227$, $SD=533$, median=67), while the Southeastern employers ranged from 7 to 650 employees ($M=97$, $SD=138$, median=42). Thirty-five (57%) managers, 18 (30%) personnel directors, 4 (6.5%) supervisors and 4 (6.5%) owners answered the Midwestern surveys. In the Southeastern state, 38 (64%) managers, 15 (25%) personnel directors, 4 (7%) directors, 1 supervisor and 1 owner completed the survey.

When asked if they had "ever hired a person with a disability before," 55 (89%) of the Midwestern employers and 47 (80%) of the Southeastern employers responded affirmatively. Employers who responded that they had hired a person with a disability before were then asked if they knew "the person had a disability before you hired him/her." In response, 44 (80%) of the Midwestern employers and 47 (100%) of the Southeastern employers responded they did know. Employers were then asked, "if you have hired people with disabilities, how many people have you hired." Responses ranged from 1 to 25 ($M=3.9$, $SD=4.4$, median=3) for the Midwestern employers and from 1 to 50 ($M=5.2$, $SD=8.3$, median=3) for the Southeastern employers.

As shown on Table 1, in answer to "what disability(s) does your employee(s) have that you know of" the majority response was mental retardation for both the Midwestern and Southeastern states. Employee disabilities also included deaf, mobility, psychiatric, and blind. Less frequently noted disabilities (amputee, cerebral palsy, diabetes, brain injury, and learning disabilities) were categorized as other disabilities.

| | Midwest | | Southeast | |
|--------------------|----------|---------|-----------|---------|
| | <u>n</u> | Percent | <u>n</u> | Percent |
| Mental Retardation | 11 | 28 | 19 | 40 |
| Deaf | 8 | 20 | 7 | 15 |
| Mobility | 6 | 13 | 4 | 9 |
| Psychiatric | 5 | 13 | 3 | 6 |
| Blind | *0 | | 4 | 9 |
| Other | 10 | 25 | 10 | 21 |

* Vocational Rehabilitation and Department for the Blind function independently in the Midwestern state.

When asked if they had "provided accommodations for employees with disabilities," 38 (72%) of the Midwestern employers and 21 (38%) of the Southeastern employers responded affirmatively. The accommodations employers reported that they provided included installing a TTY; adjusting the height of office equipment such as chairs, desks, time clocks, and vending machines; providing flexible schedules; installing a power door, providing a telephone headset; and improving accessible parking. Employers in both states almost unanimously stated they were glad they hired a person with a disability. In the Midwestern state 46 (96%) of the employers and in the Southeastern state 47 (100%) of the employers responded yes when asked "are you glad you hired a person with a disability."

Job 1 and Disability Variables

Employers were asked to name the "job in your company that most often is open and needs external applicants." The majority of these jobs required little advance training. The few positions that were not entry level (for example Registered Nurse) appear on both Job 1 and Job 2 with no apparent significance. Cashier is cited as the most frequent Job 1 and food service is the most frequent Job 2 in both the Midwestern and Southeastern states. With this job in mind, the employers were then asked to consider "how hard do you think it would be to hire a person for this job" with the following disabilities. Employers were asked to respond on a 5-level Likert-style scale of 1=impossible, 2=difficult, 3=moderately difficult, 4=easy, or 5=no problem at all. Unsure responses were not entered into the data analysis.

As indicated on Table 2, employers in both the Midwestern and Southeastern states thought it would be easier to hire persons with a cancer diagnosis, heart impairment, or living with HIV for the job most often open and filled by external applicants in their business. These same employers also indicated that it would be

Table 2
Employers' Perceptions of the Difficulty in Hiring Someone with a Specific Disability for Job 1

| Disability | Midwest | | Southeast | | p value |
|-------------------------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|---------|
| | <u>M</u> * | <u>SD</u> | <u>M</u> * | <u>SD</u> | |
| Moderate/Severe MR | 1.8 | 1.6 | 1.3 | 0.7 | .1190 |
| Blind | 2.0 | 1.3 | 1.8 | 1.1 | .4510 |
| Brain Injury | 2.1 | 1.2 | 2.7 | 1.2 | .0056** |
| Mobility Impairment | 2.2 | 1.4 | 2.5 | 1.4 | .1946 |
| Back Impairment | 2.6 | 1.3 | 3.2 | 1.1 | .0136** |
| Mild Mental Retardation | 2.7 | 1.4 | 2.3 | 1.1 | .0973 |
| Deaf | 3.4 | 1.3 | 3.5 | 1.2 | .5398 |
| Arthritis | 3.4 | 1.1 | 3.8 | 1.2 | .0742 |
| Mental Illness | 3.6 | 1.2 | 2.9 | 1.3 | .0043** |
| Emotional Illness | 3.7 | 1.1 | 3.1 | 1.2 | .0100** |
| Respiratory Impairment | 3.7 | 1.2 | 4.0 | 1.2 | .1099 |
| HIV | 3.9 | 1.2 | 4.3 | 1.3 | .0809 |
| Heart Impairment | 4.0 | 1.2 | 4.2 | 1.2 | .4402 |
| Cancer | 4.2 | 0.9 | 4.5 | 1.0 | .1631 |

* Scale 1=impossible, 3=moderately difficult, 5=no problem

** Significant at the $p < .05$ level

more difficult to hire persons with moderate or severe mental retardation or persons who are blind for the same job position. Significant differences were found between Midwestern and Southeastern employers' ratings of consumers with brain injury, back impairment, mental illness, and emotional illness. The Midwestern employer responses were more favorable than Southeastern employer responses for hiring persons with mental illness or emotional illness. In contrast, the responses of Southeastern employers indicated they were more willing to hire a person with a brain injury or a back impairment.

Job 2 and Disability Variables

Employers were also asked to "think of the second most often filled job in your company." As in Job 1, employers were then asked to consider "how hard do you think it would be to hire a person for this job" with the following disability. Responses to this inquiry were recorded in the same manner.

Job 1 and Job 2 positions provided by employers were similar in skill and ability level. Table 3 lists the response data for these variables. Significant differences were found between the two states for moderate/severe mental retardation, brain injury, emotional illness, and mental illness. As in Job 1, the

Midwestern employer responses indicated they were more willing to hire persons with mental illness or emotional illness. In addition, the Midwestern employer responses were more favorable for hiring persons with moderate/severe mental retardation. Southeastern employer responses indicated a stronger willingness to hire persons with a brain injury.

Perception of Vocational Rehabilitation Services

The researchers asked employers about their awareness of VR and perceived effectiveness of agency services. In response to the question of "have you had contact with someone from the state Division of Vocational Rehabilitation," 11 (22%) of the Midwestern employers and 21 (37%) of the Southeastern employers responded affirmatively. Employers who indicated that they had been contacted by VR were then asked whether that individual was a job coach. Five (45%) of the Midwestern employers and 9 (21%) of the Southeastern employers responded that their contact with VR was through a job coach.

When asked for the number of contacts from "someone from VR, through letters or telephone," the Midwestern employers averaged 2.6 contacts ($SD=3.2$) and Southeastern employers averaged 2.5 contacts ($SD=2.7$). In response to "how many times has

Table 3
Employers' Perceptions of the Difficulty in Hiring Someone with a Specific Disability for Job 2

| Disability | Midwest | | Southeast | | p value |
|-------------------------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|----------|
| | <u>M</u> * | <u>SD</u> | <u>M</u> * | <u>SD</u> | |
| Moderate/Severe MR | 1.7 | 0.9 | 1.1 | 0.4 | <.0001** |
| Blind | 2.0 | 1.3 | 1.9 | 1.2 | .6348 |
| Brain Injury | 2.1 | 1.0 | 2.8 | 1.1 | .0020** |
| Mobility Impairment | 2.1 | 1.4 | 2.7 | 1.4 | .0662 |
| Mild Mental Retardation | 2.6 | 1.3 | 3.2 | 1.1 | .0843 |
| Back Impairment | 2.7 | 1.3 | 2.4 | 1.0 | .2074 |
| Arthritis | 3.2 | 1.2 | 3.6 | 1.2 | .1119 |
| Deaf | 3.5 | 1.3 | 3.6 | 1.1 | .5728 |
| Emotional Illness | 3.7 | 1.0 | 3.1 | 1.2 | .0167** |
| Mental Illness | 3.7 | 1.1 | 2.9 | 1.3 | .0037** |
| Respiratory Impairment | 3.8 | 1.2 | 4.1 | 1.1 | .1188 |
| Heart Impairment | 3.8 | 1.2 | 4.3 | 1.2 | .0949 |
| HIV | 3.9 | 1.2 | 4.3 | 1.4 | .1361 |
| Cancer | 4.2 | 0.9 | 4.5 | 1.0 | .1974 |

* Scale 1=impossible, 3=moderately difficult, 5=no problem

** Significant at the $p < .05$ level

someone from VR visited your company in person over the past 6 months," the Midwestern employers averaged 1.1 visits ($SD=1.5$) and Southeastern employers averaged 1.4 visits ($SD=1.8$).

Vocational Rehabilitation Effectiveness Variables

Employers were asked to "evaluate the activities" of VR on a 4-level Likert-style scale of 1=very effective, 2=effective, 3=ineffective, or 4=very ineffective. Employer responses of "did not receive this service" were not entered into data analysis. As indicated on Table 4, employers' satisfaction with VR services was mixed. This finding is based upon a very small n . Also, because of this very small n no statistical tests could be run. However, the few Southeastern employers that had been contacted by VR staff, appeared to be more satisfied with VR services than the Midwestern employers. Very few employers in either state reported receiving advanced services such as cost-effective accessibility plans, accommodations designs, or providing career development counseling.

Discussion, Summary, and Conclusions

In this study most employers responded that they had hired a person with a disability before, that they were aware they hired a person with a disability, and that they were glad they had done so. These findings suggest that employers who have previously hired a person with a disability are receptive to continuing to hire such persons.

A majority of employers in this study believed it would be easier for persons with a heart impairment, with a cancer diagnosis, or persons living with HIV to fill the positions most often open and filled by outside applicants. At the opposite end of the scale, a majority of employers believed it would be more difficult for persons with moderate or severe mental retardation or persons who are blind to perform the job duties of a specified job. This employer perception might be a result of a general negative attitude toward people with those disabilities (Wright, 1988), or a lack of experience (or perhaps a negative experi-

ence) with consumers having those disabilities. Alternatively, the results cannot rule out the possibility that the employer has an accurate view of the ability of a person with those disabilities to perform the essential functions of the job under consideration. However, these findings are similar to those of Greenwood, Johnson, and Schriener (1988) who also found employers generally were not willing to place individuals with mental disabilities in a variety of jobs. They found that 44% of employers expressed above average to extreme reservations with placement of persons with mental disabilities in production jobs.

The purpose of asking employers to identify two different jobs was to evaluate whether (a) they had a generalized view of the capacity of people with specific disabilities or (b) they tried to match, within their knowledge base, the disability type with the demands of a specific job. Because employers identified similar types of jobs on both lists, the results of this study do not provide a clear test of this difference. However, it is interesting that Midwestern and Southeastern employers did differ significantly in responses concerning mental illness, emotional illness, and brain injury results on both Job 1 and Job 2. It appears that the Midwestern employers consider it easier to hire a person with a mental disability. In contrast, Southeastern employers indicated it

Table 4
Employers' Perceptions of VR Effectiveness

| Service | Midwest | | | Southeast | | |
|---|---------|----------|------|-----------|----------|------|
| | n^* | M^{**} | SD | n^* | M^{**} | SD |
| Effectiveness of VR personnel | | | | | | |
| Understand business needs | 10 | 1.9 | 1.0 | 18 | 2.0 | 0.8 |
| Provide useful information | 9 | 1.9 | 1.3 | 16 | 2.0 | 0.7 |
| Explain the role VR can play | 10 | 2.3 | 1.3 | 18 | 1.8 | 0.7 |
| Explain the benefits from hiring | 10 | 2.6 | 1.1 | 17 | 1.8 | 0.5 |
| Basic competencies | | | | | | |
| Explain financial incentives available | 7 | 2.4 | 1.3 | 13 | 2.0 | 0.8 |
| Refer relevant job history applicants | 7 | 2.4 | 1.0 | 18 | 2.6 | 0.9 |
| Refer ready-to-work people | 7 | 2.6 | 1.1 | 19 | 2.4 | 1.0 |
| Modify jobs | 3 | 2.7 | 0.6 | 8 | 2.6 | 0.9 |
| Keep in touch | 9 | 2.9 | 1.5 | 16 | 2.4 | 1.1 |
| Evaluate potential workplace barriers | 6 | 3.4 | 0.5 | 9 | 2.4 | 1.0 |
| Advanced competencies | | | | | | |
| Provide disability issues training | 4 | 2.3 | 1.5 | 5 | 2.2 | 1.3 |
| Perform ergonomic analyses | 3 | 2.3 | 1.5 | 5 | 2.6 | 0.5 |
| Assist with networking | 4 | 2.5 | 1.9 | 8 | 2.1 | 1.0 |
| Identify/Address personnel needs | 8 | 2.8 | 1.2 | 14 | 2.3 | 0.7 |
| Perform job analyses | 6 | 2.8 | 1.3 | 4 | 2.5 | 1.0 |
| Develop/Improve programs | 3 | 3.0 | 1.0 | 4 | 2.0 | 1.2 |
| Provide career development | 3 | 3.3 | 1.2 | 3 | 2.3 | 1.2 |
| Develop cost-effective accessibility plans | 2 | 3.5 | 0.7 | 6 | 2.2 | 1.2 |
| Design accommodations | 4 | 3.8 | 0.5 | 5 | 2.4 | 0.9 |
| Assist with ADA compliance | 1 | 4.0 | 0 | 8 | 2.3 | 0.9 |
| * n = Number Responding | | | | | | |
| ** Scale 1=very effective, 4=very ineffective | | | | | | |

would be easier to hire a person with a physical disability. Perhaps the Midwestern employers are more familiar, and thus are more comfortable, with persons they know to have a mental disability, while Southeastern employers may be more familiar with persons they know to have a physical disability. It is also possible that a general negative bias toward mental or physical disabilities varies between the states.

Employers did not answer questions about VR effectiveness if they did not acknowledge contact from VR. In some instances, employers told the surveyor that while they had been contacted, they could not recall if the contact was from VR. Responses of employers who acknowledged contact with VR ranged from very effective to very ineffective. This wide response range was especially true of the 11 Midwestern employers citing VR contact. The results also indicate that many employers provided accommodations without the assistance of VR. Because employers equate job coaches with VR and form their impressions of VR from this contact, rehabilitation counselors should work more closely with employers. Increased contact of employers by rehabilitation counselors should result in employers developing a more comprehensive view of the rehabilitation process, thus strengthening VR-employer relationships.

Employers reported that they were glad that they had hired a person with a disability. This finding offers an excellent opportunity for future job development. It also suggests that the attitudes of many employers who have hired a VR consumer are somewhat open and positive. These attitudes offer an additional opportunity to expand openness to other disability groups.

The majority of employers in this study did not realize they had been served by VR. However, all employers contacted were known to have hired a VR consumer. The low percentages (Midwestern 22% and Southeastern 37%) of employers reporting VR contacts may be the result of the expanded use of Community Rehabilitation Programs to make direct placements and follow-up contacts. Those employers who said they had been contacted by someone from an agency but were not sure if the contact was from VR were not counted as having VR contact in this study. The apparent lack of awareness of who may have been contacting the employers highlights the need to increase the visibility of the VR agency. VR agencies need to develop a more systematic approach to the management of relationships with employers. As Vandergoot (1987) found, employers that were contacted the most, hired the most.

The attitudes of employers who recalled having contact with VR were quite mixed. Employers seemed to like VR in general but were less satisfied with specific services. VR needs to expand upon this generally positive global impression by providing specific services that employers view as useful and effective. If employers viewed VR as providing effective specific services they may be more inclined to initiate contact with VR, thus increasing vocational opportunities for consumers with disabilities.

It is important to note several limitations of this study. First, the population was restricted to employers who had hired a person with a disability within fiscal year 1997 and to employers within

the two selected districts of each state. Second, employers may not have been completely candid in answering the survey questions. Considering the impact of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), employers may have felt pressured to respond with "politically (or legally) correct" answers. Examples of employers seeming to provide "correct" answers include stating that "we made a building accommodation" and "we have made everything accessible." It is important to always consider that employers may find the legal mandates of ADA intimidating and therefore cautiously answer questions concerning employment of persons with disabilities.

In summary, helping people with disabilities look for and secure employment has always been and most likely will continue to be an essential element of the VR mission (Gilbride & Stensrud, 1999; Gilbride, Stensrud, & Johnson, 1994). This research indicates that VR professionals may be able to improve the employment outcomes of people with disabilities by assisting employers to recognize the potential of employees with certain types of disabilities to perform the essential functions of specific jobs. It also suggests that VR should consider systematically managing their relationship with employers so employers know they were served by VR. Many employers state that they are satisfied with having hired persons with disabilities yet they do not recognize the important role VR has in this success. Further, they are unaware of the role that VR can play in meeting their need for a qualified and dedicated workforce. These results suggest that VR (and more importantly consumers) could benefit from more commitment of agency resources into the development and maintenance of employer relationships. Increased attention to employers' perceptions and needs may enhance employers' willingness to use VR as a resource, with a resulting increase in both employers' political support for the public rehabilitation system, and employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

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