

The Role of the Supervisor in Successful Adjustment to Work with a Disabling Condition: Issues for Disability Policy and Practice

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Results from an investigation of the role of supervisors in the process of adjusting to work with a disabling condition are presented. Workers with disabling conditions were interviewed about the responsiveness of their workplaces to their needs. Analyses showed that successful adjustment to work was related to the ability to complete job requirements, get along with others at work, see a future at work and feel good about work. Many supervisory behaviors were associated with these factors including the extent to which supervisors treat workers fairly, allow workers to participate in decisions related to their work and utilize the workers' skills. Implications for the development of workplace policy and disability management efforts are discussed.

KEY WORDS: disability; policy; supervisor; Americans with Disabilities Act.

INTRODUCTION

Few would argue with the assumption that supervisors play a key role in the return to work and job maintenance of workers with disabling conditions. Supervisors are often in the best position to identify problems at work as a consequence of the disability, offer support to the worker, develop appropriate accommodations, monitor and evaluate their effectiveness, and educate others in the department about the impact of the disability on the flow of work or relationships. Despite the recognized prominence of supervisors in the process of helping workers with disabilities adjust to work and maintain work little information is available about *how* supervisors might be most effective in their efforts. The purpose of this paper is to explore the repercussions of different supervisory behaviors on adjustment to work with a disabling condition and identify the individual or workplace characteristics that affect this be-

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havior. This information has implications for disability policy, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) implementation, and the development of training and education initiatives for supervisors involved in disability management efforts.

THE EMERGING ROLE OF SUPERVISORS IN DISABILITY MANAGEMENT

Developments in the employment of people with disabilities have expanded the role and responsibilities of supervisors in maintaining employees at work, in participating in a full scale disability management program to contain costs and in opening the door to new hires. The American with Disabilities Act of 1991 mandates that employers provide reasonable accommodation to otherwise qualified workers with disabling conditions except under conditions of undue hardship (1). Many workers with a disabling condition, for example, who experience the onset or worsening of illness or disability while on the job are, *prima facie*, "otherwise qualified." Since prior to the onset of the disabling condition these workers were fulfilling the requirements of the job, the employer, in these instances, is obligated to assist return to work or job maintenance.

Supervisors have educational, supportive, and administrative functions (2). Employers have begun to recognize supervisors' natural tie to help fulfill the mandates of the ADA. They are most familiar with the requirements of a job, how the job might be partitioned, and the effects of job accommodations on departmental functioning. Supervisors are also instrumental in communicating with both workers with disabilities and co-workers about return to work and job maintenance issues.

Supervisors are essential to a comprehensive disability management effort (3). The supervisor is part of a team, along with persons in medical, personnel, and benefit departments, the EEO, the EAP, union representatives, and others who ensure the effectiveness of a disability management effort. Escalating health care costs and expanding employee health care needs provide additional reasons that employers turn to disability management.

Finally, the role of supervisors in the successful employment of people with disabilities is expanded by the evolving understanding of the need to achieve competitive employment for certain people with disabilities (4,5). This new approach relies upon the natural supports of the supervisor and co-workers in the work system rather than outside professionals to help integrate and maintain people with disabilities at work. Supervisors offer training, monitor performance to help identify problems and provide the social support that is crucial to successful adjustment. This assistance fulfills the recognized need for *ongoing* support (6). Although a job coach from outside the workplace can meet this function initially, as he or she withdraws from the workplace the ongoing attention is lost.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUPERVISORY BEHAVIOR AND SUCCESSFUL ADJUSTMENT TO WORK WITH A DISABILITY

Although experience tells us that supervisors are central to successful return to work and job maintenance of people with disabilities, there are few systematic

investigations of the supervisory behavior to support experience. Akabas and Gates (7) interviewed over 250 workers nationwide experiencing the recent onset of a disabling condition about the factors that affect the probability of return to work. Results showed that many factors beyond health problems caused by the disability influenced return to work including financial problems, personal and family problems, and problems communicating with health care professionals. Significantly, a major determinant of return to work was the responsiveness of the supervisor to the worker. The length of time out on disability increased significantly for workers who perceived that their supervisors did not care whether or not they returned to work and reported that their supervisors were inflexible toward accommodation (i.e., supervisors made it clear that workers could only return when they were able to perform 100% of their usual job tasks).

El-Bassel (8) also reports that the support of supervisors affects the probability of return to work through the influence of support on well-being. She interviewed 185 women with disabilities employed by the City of New York. The results showed that the women with more extensive work support networks experienced significantly greater well-being and that well-being was a significant predictor of return to work.

Other researchers have demonstrated that the support of supervisors is crucial to the experience of work for all people. For example, House (9) and Mitchell and Moos (10) provide evidence that supervisory support affects the negative experience of stress. House (9) writes "...the quantity and quality of people's social relationships with spouse, friends, co-workers, and supervisors appear to have an important bearing on the amount of stress they experience, their overall well-being, and on the likelihood that stress will adversely affect their overall well-being" (p. 7).

Job satisfaction is another frequently cited indicator of work experience that is affected by supervisory behavior. Employee surveys of job satisfaction show that satisfaction is enhanced when supervisors are perceived as fair and supportive (11, 12). Conversely, satisfaction is affected negatively when there is a "failure of supervisors to recognize employees for good work performance; failure of supervisors to take appropriate action to correct nonperformance by employees; lack of fairness; uniformity and consistency by supervisors in administering company policy; and the existence of favoritism" (p. 727) (12).

Along with the experience of work, supervisory behavior is associated with specific work outcomes such as performance and promotion. For example, Mott (13) found higher performance among workers when their supervisors were "helpful to employees when necessary, willingness to stand up for employees with his own supervisor, avoids belittling employees, and receptivity to employees on work problems" (p. 163). Packard (14) reports that performance is positively correlated with a supervisory style that fosters participation in decision making.

In sum, many studies suggest that supervisors influence the experience of work and work outcomes for healthy workers. Several studies indicate that some of these relationships apply to people with disabilities. The investigation reported here explores these relationships systematically to better characterize the relationship be-

tween supervisory behavior and successful adjustment to work with a disabling condition.

METHODS

Sample

A total of 104 workers with disabling conditions were interviewed in depth about their experience of work with a disabling condition. Workers were identified through health service organizations in the New York Metropolitan area. These organizations included Multiple Sclerosis Society, Cancer Care, The Jewish Guild for the Blind, the League for the Hard of Hearing, the Lighthouse, the Lupus Foundation, the Transplant Support Network, and the Retinitis Pigmentosa Foundation.

Participants represented a wide range of occupations including, for example, City employees, bank workers, school teachers, secretaries at large corporations, and hospital support staff. They tended to be women (68%), unmarried (64%), white (82%), with at least some college experience (88%). The median salary was \$30,000.

For most participants, the onset of disability was relatively recent. Although the onset ranged from 1.54 years to nearly 56 years, the median time of onset was 4.16 years. Further, disabilities are permanent for 80% of the participants. Most expected their condition to hold steady (47%), some expected it to improve (14%), and some expected it to worsen (24%). The remaining 15% were unsure of their prognosis. The most prevalent disability among this sample was cancer (26%) followed by hearing impairments (20%), multiple sclerosis (19%), vision impairments (16%), lupus (8%), and post-transplant problems (6%). The remaining 6% experienced a variety of other problems.

The Interview

Participants were administered an in-depth structured intake assessment interview. Previous research provides an understanding of the factors that interfere with successful adjustment to work with a disabling condition including: (1) the quality of the physical work environment and workplace responsiveness; (2) characteristics of the disabling condition; (3) supervisory responses to the problems caused by the functional limitations; and (4) personal characteristics and work status. Interview questions operationalized these factors. These measures were used previously and found to be reliable and valid for people with disabilities (7,15).

Quality of the Physical Work Environment and Workplace Responsiveness

Quality of the physical work environment was measured by questions that asked about levels of heat, noise, lighting, crowding, ventilation, presence of hazardous substances, and the safety and reliability of machinery. An additive scale

representing quality of the environment was constructed from these questions. The reliability of the scale was measured using Cronbach's alpha. The coefficient for this scale is .62.

Responsiveness of the workplace was measured by questions that asked whether or not there is a formal employment maintenance policy, the employer will modify equipment, the employer will negotiate changes in routines, the employer will negotiate changes in job design, the employer offers transitional work, the employer provides transfers, the employer offers retraining, the employer offers comprehensive health insurance, the employer encourages supervisors to accommodate, and there is an Employee Assistance Program available to workers. An additive scale representing responsiveness was constructed from these measures (Cronbach's alpha = .73).

Characteristics of the Disabling Condition

Measures of disability related characteristics include type of disability, date of onset, whether or not the condition is permanent and whether or not the condition is worsening, holding steady, or improving.

Supervisory Responses to the Problems Caused by the Functional Limitations

Several dimensions of supervisory behavior were assessed by the interview. Perceptions of supervisor responsiveness were obtained through questions developed by Caplan *et al.* (15) which asked about:

- how responsive the supervisor is to the worker's needs.
- how well the supervisor instructs the worker in task expectations.
- how fair the supervisor is in assigning tasks.

Participants were also asked:

- how fairly the worker feels he/she has been treated generally.
- whether or not the supervisor avoids the worker by leaving him/her out of conversations or activities.
- whether or not the supervisor is overprotective of the worker.

Perceptions of supervisory support were obtained through questions developed by Caplan *et al.* (15) which asked about the extent to which the supervisor:

- makes things easier for the worker at work.
- makes it easier for the worker to talk with him/her.
- can be relied on.
- listens to personal problems.

A scale of supervisory behavior was constructed from the variables that were positively and significantly intercorrelated. These included whether or not the supervisor was responsive to the worker's needs, provided instruction about expectations, assigned tasks fairly, treated the worker fairly, and the four measures of supervisory support. The reliability coefficient, Cronbach's alpha, for this scale is .84.

In addition to the questions that asked directly about the supervisor, workers were asked about the quality of the job over which the supervisor has control. Questions asked about the workload, the extent to which job responsibilities and expectations were clearly defined, the extent to which the worker experienced conflicting requests, the extent to which skills are utilized and the extent to which the worker participates in decision making relevant to his or her job (15). An additive scale was created using these factors to represent the quality of the job. All factors were included except the variable representing the extent of conflicting requests. This variable was excluded because of nonsignificant and/or negative correlations with the other variables. The measure of reliability, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha, for the scale is .63.

Personal Characteristics and Work Status

Measures of individual characteristics include age, gender, marital status, race, and level of education. Work-related characteristics include number of years working for the current employer and salary.

Measures of Successful Adjustment to Work

Four criteria were used to assess the extent to which adjustment to work with a disabling condition was successful. These include:

- The worker was able to complete the requirements of the job.

Participants were asked about the extent to which their disabling condition interferes with the ability to complete job tasks and maintain job routines such as getting to work on time, working a full day, working overtime, and so on.

- The disabling condition did not interfere with the worker's relationship with his/her supervisor.

Along with job tasks and job routines, the quality of relationships with one's supervisor can be affected by the onset of disability. Participants were asked about the extent to which their relationships with their supervisors were affected by their disabling conditions.

- The disabling condition did not interfere with the worker's promotion potential.

Project participants were also asked three questions about their perceptions of their future at work. They asked to rate on a 5-point scale how certain they were of their future career, how certain they were of opportunities for promotion and how certain they were of whether or not their skills would be useful in 5 years. These questions, developed by Caplan *et al.* (15), were combined into an additive scale representing future work uncertainty (Cronbach's alpha = .75).

- The worker feels satisfied with his/her job, he/she is doing something worthwhile and, does not worry about the disabling condition at work.

The adjustment process is not just a matter of what someone can, or cannot do. It is also a matter of how someone *feels* about what he or she is doing. Some may be able to complete job requirements but, if they feel unhappy and dissatisfied

with their work, then the process is not successful. Feelings regarding work were measured in several ways:

- **Perceived job satisfaction:** Frequently, this measure is used as an indicator of the quality of work life for workers without disabilities. It is of interest to determine if this measure also captures the feelings of workers with disabilities.
- **The extent to which someone feels he or she is doing something worthwhile:** In the course of the in-depth intake interview workers complained that they were not being used to their full potential. Reduction of job responsibilities often occurred without a proper assessment of ability leaving the worker in a job that felt demeaning or worthless.
- **The extent to which someone worries about the disabling condition at work:** This measure is an indicator of the distress that often accompanies working with a disability. It is hypothesized that the experience of distress interferes with successful adjustment to work.

Thus, successful adjustment to work can be viewed as a combination of being able to fulfill the requirements of the job, getting along with one's supervisor, seeing a future at work, and feeling good about work. In order to summarize these variables into a "job adjustment" scale an additive scale was created. The reliability of the scale, calculated using Cronbach's alpha, is .75.

RESULTS

Supervisory Behavior that is Associated with Adjustment to Work

What role does the supervisor play in the adjustment process? Looking at the correlations among the job adjustment scale and the measures of supervisory behavior reveals that adjustment is enhanced by nine of the 12 supervisory variables significantly (only workload, instruction in task expectation and avoidance behavior are not related to adjustment). As shown in Table I, the variables that have the strongest relationship with adjustment are the extent to which skills are utilized, the extent to which the worker participates in decisions and whether or not the worker perceives he/she is being treated fairly. That these measures surface as important fits with qualitative impressions of the adjustment already described. That is, workers felt that because of their disabling conditions job responsibilities were reduced in such a way that their jobs no longer used them to their potential. Further, few workers experienced open communication with their supervisors that allowed them to participate in decisions about their work. In fact, for many, communication about their conditions, and the need for accommodation, was non-existent. The workers had decided not to disclose their conditions at work. These workers preferred to suffer the consequences of hiding their problems over the possible discrimination that they perceived would result from disclosure. Thus, logically, the feeling of not being treated fairly presents itself as a strong determinant of adjustment.

Table I. Correlations Among Employee Reported Supervisory Behaviors and Job Adjustment

Supervisory behaviors	Job adjustment
Workload	.08
Clear expectations	.22*
Conflicting requests	.22*
Use of skills	.35**
Participation in decision making	.33**
Supervisor unresponsive to needs	-.22**
Supervisor does not instruct	-.11
Supervisor does not assign tasks fairly	-.18*
Supervisor is supportive	.16*
Worker is treated unfairly	-.34**
Supervisor avoids worker	-.03
Supervisor overprotective of worker	.18*

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .001$.

Characteristics of the Worker, the Disability and the Workplace that Are Related to Adjustment

Successful adjustment to work with a disabling condition is related to supervisory behavior but, to what extent is it also a function of the individual or the work environment? Perhaps, for example, type of disability determines the success of adjustment independently of supervisory behavior.

Again, looking at the correlations between the job adjustment scale and measures of individual characteristics, disability characteristics, work status, and work environment show that older, married workers are better adjusted to work than younger, single, divorced, or widowed workers ($r = .21, p < .05$ and $r = .17, p < .05$, respectively). Further, adjustment is less likely the more problems there are with the physical environment ($r = -.20, p < .05$). One explanation for the significant demographic variables is that older, married workers are more likely to have outside support networks to help them adjust to work with a disabling condition better than those who might not have such supports. Evidence for this interpretation is a significant correlation between family support and marital status ($r = .26, p < .01$). The finding that the physical environment affects adjustment is supported by case histories. For example, one study participant was a school teacher with MS. As the summer approached the teacher's classroom became very hot. Heat often triggers an exacerbation of MS. The school was not air conditioned and the Board of Education policies prohibited fans in the classrooms.

Disability characteristics were not significant. This result is consistent with the view that functional limitations, not diagnosis, are key to determining adjustment (7).

Table II. Predictors of Successful Adjustment to Work

Variables in the equation	Beta	T	Sig
Work factors under the supervisor's control	.296	3.33	.001
Supervisory behavior	.276	3.11	.002
Age	.192	2.18	.032
Multiple R = .473			
R square = .224			
Adjusted R square = .201			
Standard error = 1.75			

Building a Model of Factors Related to Adjustment

Although the correlations provide an indication that there is a significant association, these results do not identify the independent contribution of each to adjustment to work. Entering the significant variables into a regression analysis helps to identify the contribution of supervisory behavior while controlling for individual and workplace characteristics.

Stepwise multiple regression analysis confirms the importance of job factors under the supervisor's control, supervisory behavior, and age to successful adjustment to work with a disabling condition. The contribution of these variables to explaining the variation in adjustment is found in Table II. Together, these variables explain 20% of the variation in adjustment.

DISCUSSION

In sum, the results of this investigation show that successful adjustment to work with a disabling condition is complex. Adjustment is a function of the extent to which completing job requirements and the relationship with one's supervisor is affected by the functional limitations caused by the disabling condition, feelings about work, and the sense that the job offers a future. The most important factor affecting adjustment is supervisory behavior and aspects of the job that are under the supervisor's control. Work status and the disability characteristics are not significant, although results do show that older workers are more successful at adjusting.

The finding that work status and workplace responsiveness were not correlated with adjustment was unexpected. It was expected that length of employment and salary would affect adjustment. For example, people who have been employed longer might be considered more valued employees and be better able to secure the help they need to fulfill job requirements. It was also expected that workplace responsiveness would relate to adjustment. That is, it was hypothesized that the

Table III. Correlations Among Supervisory Behaviors and Workplace Responsiveness

Supervisory behaviors	Workplace responsiveness
Supervisor not responsive to needs	-.17*
Supervisor not provide instruction	-.23**
Supervisor not assign tasks fairly	-.22*
Supervisory support	-.25**

* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.

more support and services available through the workplace, the better the adjustment. In this instance, a clue as to why workplace responsiveness is not related to adjustment is found in the significant relationship between workplace responsiveness and supervisory behavior (see Table III). These results suggest that interview respondents might view their supervisors as the conduits of responsiveness. If their supervisors are responsive, then the workplace is considered responsive. The respondents do not associate the indicators of general workplace responsiveness with their needs directly. This interpretation is consistent with the observation of Bunker and Wijnberg (16) who write "While upper level employees may have a variety of contacts from which they derive their experience of the organization, first level operators acquire much of their sense of the workplace from the style and substance of their supervisor's communications and behavior" (p. 62).

This study contributes to the understanding of factors associated with successful adjustment to work with a disabling condition. It is, however, only a beginning. The investigation is cross-sectional, showing significant associations among factors but it is not able to show causal relationships. Past research supports the causal interpretation of the data provided, i.e., supervisory behavior affects adjustment, however, future research needs to observe these factors over time to determine a more precise understanding of the relationships. Further, although the model presented here explains 20% of the variation in adjustment, clearly there are other factors that were not included in this study that affect adjustment. These might include individual factors such as previous work history or support of the health care provider in job maintenance. It might also include organizational variables such as the benefit and insurance structure (i.e., resistance to seeking a better job because of fear of losing insurance), problems negotiating transitional employment when there are collectively bargained contracts and the union representative is not included in the process, a lack of coordination among departments involved in the job maintenance process (e.g., EAP, medical, benefits, employee relations, legal, risk management) and the availability of services and resources in the community. Future research might consider these factors as well.

Study results, however, do have implications for disability management policy and practice. Results suggest that the role of supervisors has many components:

- Supervisors are the conduit for workplace policies and practices.
- Supervisors affect adjustment through the support they offer.

- Supervisors affect adjustment by acting fairly.
- Supervisors affect adjustment through their supervisory styles and management capacity that includes the extent to which the worker is included in decision making, the worker's skills are used, expectations are clear and requests are not conflicting.

In relation to the development of workplace policy and disability management efforts this suggests:

- Supervisors require training on issues of concern to workers with disabilities such as how to accommodate, how to evaluate the effectiveness of the accommodation, how to conduct performance appraisals for accommodated workers, and how to insure that their behavior is not discriminatory. For example, the supervisory behaviors that come into play for all workers are intertwined with the behaviors that are unique to workers with disabilities. Supervisors need training on how to distinguish between the extent to which problems exist because of inadequate accommodation and the functional inability of the employee.
- Disability policies must be evaluated not only in relation to their opportunities for accommodation but their opportunities for promotion and preserving status at work.
- Disability policies must be articulated clearly. Management must be sure that supervisors understand policies because supervisors will, in many instances, be the primary source of information about policies to employees.
- Need for accommodation should not be translated into loss of ability to perform the essential functions of a job. Maintaining the use of the skills and expertise that the worker has to offer should be a priority.
- Workers with disabilities and supervisors should have a shared role in the accommodation process. The value of participation is great. It establishes a line of communication between the worker and the supervisor. It increases the understanding of the worker about what accommodations are possible. It increases the understanding of the supervisor about what assistance is needed. Finally, it helps to create a sense of commitment to the process for both supervisors and workers.
- Adjustment to work should be recognized as more than task accommodation. Outlets to resolve problems with relationships and feelings of stress, well-being, and self-esteem should also be available. The EAP might be an appropriate place within an organization to handle these adjustment issues.

Controlled outcome studies should be conducted to determine the effectiveness of these policies and practices in enhancing successful adjustment to work with a disabling condition.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported, in part, by a grant from the National Institute of Disability and Rehabilitation Research, U.S. Department of Education (#DE H133A00020). The author expresses her sincere gratitude to Dr. Sheila Akabas,

Director of the Workplace Center, for her invaluable insight and support. The author also gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the dedicated staff from Cancer Care, Jewish Guild for the Blind, New York City Chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, League for the Hard of Hearing, The Lighthouse, National Transplant Support Network, Retinitis Pigmentosa Foundation, and Lupus Foundation.

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