

National survey demonstrates that Americans with disabilities are striving to work and overcoming barriers

by Anna Brennan-Curry | Apr 16, 2018

DURHAM, NH - A multidisciplinary team of researchers at Kessler Foundation and the University of New Hampshire, Institute on Disability (UNH-IOD), have authored a new article that identifies how Americans with disabilities are striving to work and overcoming barriers to employment. Their findings are detailed in *Striving to work and overcoming barriers: Employment strategies and successes of people with disabilities*, which was published online February 26, 2018 by the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*. The authors are John O’Neill, PhD, and Elaine Katz, MS, CCC-SLP, of Kessler Foundation, and Vidya Sundara, PhD, OTR/L, Andrew Houtenville, PhD, Kimberly G. Phillips, PhD, Tracy Keirns, PhD, and Andrew Smith, PhD, of UNH.

People with disabilities experience persistent obstacles to employment, resulting in poorer labor force participation, higher unemployment rates, and lower wages earned compared to people without disabilities. Identifying the strategies and resources necessary to sustain people with disabilities in paid employment is the first step toward increasing the participation of this population in the workforce. Findings of the 2015 Kessler Foundation National Employment and Disability Survey (KFNEDES) show that people with disabilities are actively engaging in job preparation and job search activities, and successfully negotiating barriers at work.

“Approximately 69 percent of those surveyed are striving to work, which is defined as working, actively preparing for employment, searching for jobs, seeking more hours, or overcoming barriers to finding and maintaining employment” said Elaine Katz, senior vice president of grants and communications at Kessler Foundation. “By focusing on the successful outcomes of jobseekers and employees with disabilities, rather than the barriers, we are reframing the discourse and adding to the growing body of knowledge on best employment practices.”

A substantial percentage of employees reported experiencing – and overcoming – barriers to finding and maintaining employment, including insufficient education or training, negative attitudes of supervisors and coworkers, inaccurate assumptions on ability, pay disparity, and lack of transportation. Over 42 percent of survey respondents were currently working, with 60.7 percent of those working more than 40 hours a week. Other findings showed that approximately 50 percent of the respondents used workplace accommodations and were satisfied with their jobs, and nearly 90 percent felt accepted in their workplace.

“This review highlights the strategies people with disabilities use to search for work and navigate barriers, a topic largely overlooked in contemporary disability and employment research,” explained John O’Neill, PhD, director of disability and employment research at Kessler Foundation. “Our hope is that this information will aid the development of targeted policies and programs that foster long-term increases in workforce participation among Americans with disabilities.”

Further research exploring the efficacy of practices that employers use to recruit, hire, train, and retain people with disabilities in their organizations, from the unique perspective of supervisors of employees with and without disabilities, is presented in the [2017 Kessler Foundation National Employment and Disability Survey: Supervisor Perspectives](#).

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