

# **Impacts of physical disability on an individual's career development.**

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## Impacts of physical disability on an individual's career development.

### **ABSTRACT**

Despite 'career' becoming a somewhat nebulous term, career development remains a proactive and dynamic process aimed at meeting the needs of both the organisation and the individual. Although the limited literature deals with disability in general, rather than specific physical disabilities, it does suggest the relationship between career development and disability is complex and individuals with a physical disability still face discrimination through stereotyping and perceptual generalisations. There are several other issues relating to physical disability and career development which are identified from this paper as requiring further investigation. These include confidence and self-esteem issues associated with having a physical disability, attitudes towards careers and who is perceived as being responsible for career development, and whether having computing skills reduces the gap between inability and independence. In particular, these are considered from the perspective of individuals who have a physical disability that confines them to a wheel chair.

*Keywords: career development, career management, physical disability, HRD*

### **INTRODUCTION**

What constitutes a 'career' has become a vexed issue and managing people in terms of career development has become increasingly complex. Conventional definitions of career such as that proposed by Klatt, Murdick & Schuster (1985) that 'a career is an upward advancement in an organisation or professional hierarchy' do not have the same relevance in the new millennium. Australian research (Marchant, 1998) indicates that part-time and casual employment has increased and is fast becoming the main work option and careers will take on a 'boundary less' characteristic. According to Parker & Inkson (1999), career progress will occur out of inter-organisational self-development rather than intra-organisational hierarchical advancement. Labour market conditions, workforce flexibility, and restructuring will also invariably impact on both individual and organisational career development boundaries.

In this context, the impact for individuals with a physical disability is not evident. From their perspective, career aspirations may be quite legitimate. However, employment barriers exist in the form of lower status, lower income jobs and the changing face of the employment landscape is affecting how Australians work. The presence of a physical disability further influences individual career development goals.

Human resource literature (Werner & DeSimone 2006; Stone 2002) highlights some of the intricacies involved for management when devising career development programs within their organisations. Dealing with individuals who have a specific physical disability, such as confinement to a wheel chair, adds yet another dimension for managers who are concerned with this function

This paper presents a conceptual examination of the limited available literature about the impact of physical disability on an individual's career development. It does this by considering the overall question "*what are the main impacts of physical disability on an individual's career development?*" and it concludes with a number of issues requiring further investigation. Issues that deal with personality and behaviour are not considered in this paper, although these have potential to impact on individuals and their decisions to be or not to be career minded.

## **WHAT IS A CAREER AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT?**

The first distinction, to be made, is what is the difference between a career and a job? Marchant (1998) proposes that a job has little change or development whilst a career is an unfolding sequence of an individual's work experience over time, which involves continuous learning. Werner & DeSimone (2006) also have a similar viewpoint and suggest a career involves a sequence of related jobs. However, Marchant (1998) believes this sequence will not always occur with the same or similar organisations. Klatt et al (1985) also describes a career in terms of upward advancement. A career could therefore be defined as the ongoing pursuit of professional growth, in a related area of employment that involves continuous learning and development.

Having established a working definition of career, it is also important to understand the paradigm in which a career can be developed. The traditional view of a career implies upward movement will occur within one organisation, with management having a major input (Klatt et al, 1985). A more contemporary view suggests the individual should take responsibility for planning their career and the

career may involve horizontal and vertical movements within and between organisations in order to achieve advancement (Werner & DeSimone, 2006; Marchant, 1998; Parker & Inkson, 1999).

Career development provides a framework for planning and shaping the progression of an individual in line with organisational needs and their own potential and preferences (Armstrong, 1991). It should be a program that features a proactive approach designed to meet the needs of both the organisation and the individual (Nankervis et al, 2005). Highlighting the complexity involved with career development was National research released in 1999 by DBM Australia. Their findings revealed 80% of HR professionals believed the responsibility for learning and development rests with the individual. However, 44% reported their employees rejected the idea that it was their responsibility to maintain and develop their skills and competencies to achieve goals set by the organisation (HR Focus, 2000). There is no available literature that reports the perceptions of physically disabled employees regarding whose responsibility career development should be.

Staff are regarded as a competitive edge possessed by an organisation. This equips organisations with foresight to keep pace with staff development needs and to support individuals to reach their personal goals (Hansen, 1996). Poor alignment of individual and organisational goals, values and competencies is costly and often leads to diminishing motivation, commitment and performance and an increase in staff turnover (HR Focus, 2000). Managers play an important role in career development, because they have knowledge regarding an individual's ability and limitations and can provide relevant information about career paths and opportunity within the organisation (Werner & DeSimone, 2006).

## **REPORTED IMPACTS OF PHYSICAL DISABILITY ON CAREER DEVELOPMENT**

Smith's (2002:59) exploratory study of vision impaired people in the workplace noted that 'despite [an] increasing focus on diversity, limited research has been devoted toward understanding the needs of disabled people in the workplace compared to other groups'. No research appears to have been conducted in relation to individuals who have a physical disability that confines them to a wheel chair.

There are two common approaches to defining physical disability. Firstly, the health approach targets conditions or limitations that impair normal functioning, and secondly, the work disability approach which examines conditions that limit or prevent an individual from working (Davies & Dipner, 1992). In accordance with the health approach, Stone & Collea (1996) define disability as a physical or mental impairment that limits one or more major life activities. The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cwlth)* defines disability, in relation to an individual, as *the total or partial loss of the person's bodily or mental functions*. For the purpose of this study, physical disability was examined with regards to the loss of an individual's bodily function (ie. confined to a wheel chair) and the impact of this on career development.

The relationship between career development and physical disability varies between individual and disability, within different labour markets and the individual's stage of life (Szymanski & Hanley-Maxwell, 1996). Career development is a lifelong developmental process that is influenced by an individual's learning experiences and characteristics of different environments. Factors such as an individual's abilities, gender, education, interests, and culture may influence relationships and performance in a working environment. When these factors are applied to the career realm, the implication is one of a complex and dynamic relationship between disability and career development (Szymanski, Hershenson, Enright & Ettinger, 1996). How a physical disability influences an individual's career development is dependent on the interplay and magnitude of influences such as lack of confidence, few role models, and limited occupational selections (Szymanski & Hanley-Maxwell, 1996). Having a disability may exert little influence on the career development and plans of some individuals, whereas others may find that the same disability affects their career aspirations, self-esteem and life experiences in general. By their explanation, 'a disability, in and of itself, does not determine career development but is more accurately perceived as a risk factor potentially influencing career development' (Szymanski & Hanley-Maxwell, 1996:49).

To ensure maximum benefit is derived by both the physically disabled individual and the organisation, it is important to closely monitor career development. Anna Diamantopoulou, Commissioner for

Employment and Social Affairs of the European Commission, reported that for those people with disability who do find employment, many have limited career paths and career options, largely due to their more limited access to education and training opportunities (Disability World, 2000). She recommends that the focus on education and training must shift to that which is structured, valid, and able to provide worthwhile employment opportunities.

Klatt et al (1985) point out that career management is related to all HRD functions that include training and development and promotion. This is an area where the organisation can assist with career development opportunities. Management do not have to take responsibility for career development, however, they can seek a joint venture between the organisation and the individual with a physical disability. The presence of a physical disability may impact on the dynamics of career development and result in the need for a more proactive part by the organisation. It may be that keeping within a more traditional career context, where career development lies within the one organisation, is more practicable for an individual with a physical disability.

This may also prove beneficial to the organisation. Parker & Inkson (1999) assert that an increase in career mobility usually brings a cost to the organisation due to the loss of talent and labour turnover. They suggest that the organisation provide learning via non-traditional internal career moves as a way to offset the cost and encourage loyalty. Retaining the best staff and providing continuous skill development, aimed at increased productivity, is another option suggested by Anderson (1999). These alternatives place the focus on equipping the individual and providing development opportunities. If mobility is not an option for some individuals with a physical disability, simply due to the nature of the injury, then encouraging career dependency may be advantageous to the organisation.

A challenge facing organisations is the integration of employees with a physical disability into the workforce in accordance with disability legislation. Legislation is aimed at ensuring facility/design to accommodate individuals with disabilities will improve and become the norm (Davies & Dipner,

1992). It can assist individuals with physical disability in obtaining jobs, but it does not necessarily mean this will lead on to a career.

The nature of the job elicits stereotypical images about the requirements of the job and the way in which it is performed. Physically disabled people are more likely to be stereotyped and therefore, the generating of a set of beliefs about them is more likely. For example, Odone (1998) reported that a survey conducted by the Leonard Cheshire Foundation in the UK showed one-third of the respondents thought that a person in a wheelchair was less intelligent than an able-bodied person. It was also revealed that one-half thought it would be virtually impossible for a disabled person to get any kind of job (Odone, 1998). This type of stereotypical thinking can result in physically disabled people not being selected for a job, not being recommended for promotion, not receiving rewards and career development may be affected by organisational belief systems and culture rather than the lack of opportunity or the ability to progress (Stone & Colella, 1996).

The development of high-technology solutions is an area where individuals with a physical disability have been able to work towards gaining their highest level of professional accomplishment (Davies & Dipner, 1992). For example, American research examining the effect on earnings for people suffering spinal cord injuries (Krueger & Kruse 1995), found that there is no apparent gap for those individuals employed in positions that required computer usage. Working with computers improves employment outcomes because computer technology can negate the limitations of many disabilities and the lack of computer skills itself restricts work in a number of occupations. Although their research indicated that people who suffered a spinal cord injury generally experienced a steep decline in employment, hours worked and weekly earnings, it was not to the same extent of individuals not employed to use computers at work.

People with a disability have mainly been employed in part-time, lower status jobs that offer little chance for advancement and their income level is as much as 35% below that of their non-disabled counterparts (Stone & Colella, 1996). Australian research (Marchant, 1998) indicates that part-time

and casual employment has increased and temporary contract employment is fast becoming a work option. It is also Marchant's belief that careers will become increasingly 'boundary less' as individuals pursue advancement horizontally as well as vertically and in more than one organisation.

Labour market conditions, workforce flexibility, and restructuring will invariably impact on both the individual and organisational career development boundaries (Parker & Inkson, 1999). What the impact is for individuals with a physical disability is not evident, however, this does indeed pose some dissonance between career ideology and career reality for an individual with a physical disability. From their perspective career aspirations may be quite legitimate, however, employment barriers exist in the form of lower status, lower income jobs. In light of reported employment conditions within Australian workplaces, further impediments exist. The changing face of the employment landscape is affecting how Australians work and the presence of a physical disability further influences career development goals for individuals.

## **CONCLUSION**

To further explore the reported impacts of physical disability on career development, the following issues require further consideration. Firstly, are people's perceptions of an individual influenced by the presence of a physical disability? and does stereotyping occur within the workplace which can impact on career development, especially through equitable training and promotion opportunities? Secondly, will confidence and self-esteem issues associated with having a physical disability have any impact on career development? Thirdly, who is perceived to be responsible for career development? that is, the individual, the employer, or is it a joint partnership and does management support career development and does it apply equitably? Furthermore, what training and development has been provided as part of career development and has this had an impact on career development? Additionally, what is the individual's attitude towards career advancement? and how do they see opportunity arising, for example, is there any and if so, will it be upward or horizontal? Also to be considered is the question of whether or not the ability to use a computer reduces the gap between



inability and independence, thereby reducing the impact of physical disability on career aspirations?

Finally, have individual's earnings improved by using computers in the workplace?

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