



A Model of Successful Work Experience for Employees Who Are Visually Impaired: The Results of a Study by Dawn B. Golub

The rate of unemployment is unacceptably high among people with visual impairments and those who are blind. Compared to 82% of working age (21 to 64) individuals employed either by an employer or have their own business, 31% of blind and 44% of visually impaired individuals of the same age range are employed (Wolffe & Candela 2002, p.59). Undoubtedly, age, education level and health status of individuals who are visually impaired will impact their employment status. The corporate culture plays an essential role in successful employment.

In the past, visually impaired individuals were believed to be “unfit” for the corporate structure, as other workers did not know how to relate to workers with a disability and workers with a disability could not compete successfully with their sighted peers. In addition, some sight peers have described that physical disabilities such as blindness were stigmatized and individuals with disabilities made others feel uncomfortable since they did not know how to interact with them socially and at work.

This study recruited participants to answer the following five research questions:

1. What types of corporate culture and organization structure empower people who are visually impaired to succeed?
2. What specific social skills are used by people who are visually impaired and successfully employed?
3. How do successful workers with visual impairments make others feel comfortable?
4. What factors contribute to work success?
5. What specific steps do corporations take to enable their employees with visual impairments to succeed?

These questions were developed to review best practices of employers of individuals who were visually impaired to create a toolkit for others to be a model of their success and help employees identify factors that would enable their success in the workplace.

Model for Employers:

- **Core Values Flow from the Top Down:** Employers need to understand that an organization’s intrinsic values impact their employees’ success. An employer can implement core values that view diversity as a strength, rather than as an accommodation, through its mission statement and the personnel policies of their organization. They can share the organization’s values with new employees, implement

a program to increase awareness of diversity, educate employees to dispel myths of people with visual impairments and encourage an environment that respects each other's abilities.

- **Fill the Toolbox:** If employers are going to hold their employees accountable for their work, they must provide essential tangible tools that employees need to perform their jobs well, such as screen readers, software, and braille printers. Employers can fill their toolbox by asking employees what equipment they need to do their job well and also ensure that that new and upgraded equipment is accessible.
- **Accessibility and Accommodations:** It is important to provide accessibility and accommodations in all aspects of work. All equipment and facilities should be accessible to all employees, and all employees should receive the same information that is shared with other employees. This is essential when non-electronic communications may not be accessible to everyone, such as when outside speakers or events provide materials of information ahead of time. Successful organizations recognize the importance of accommodations as part of what they need to provide.
- **Attitude Counts:** Employers should strive to make the employee's disability as "transparent" as possible; encouraging others to focus on the individual employee rather than their disability. Employers need to provide assistance when needed but should not take the lead when offering help. Individuals with disabilities don't want help with things unless they ask for it; they don't like being treated as a person with a disability.
- **Words Speak as Loudly as Actions:** Employers understand their visually impaired employees can benefit greatly by having their fellow workers and employees provide verbal cues that gives them enough information about their surroundings without "overdoing it."
- **Expect the Same Performance:** Once the employer has made accessibility accommodations, it is important to remember that the employer should expect the same performance from all employees because other colleagues will be more willing to accept them. If anything malfunctions, then it's the employer's job to ensure that these tools are back in place so the employee can do their job effectively.
- **Mutual Accommodations:** The final step is for employers to recognize that differences among individuals are substantial and must be accommodated for regardless of whether they add value. It's normal for people to have different perspectives. Employers need to make meaningful changes in company policies and institutional practices to implement a mutual accommodation model so that every employee feels safe, valued and respected. The goal is to acknowledge, respect and value differences.

Model for Employees

- **Your Comfort Is Contagious:** Employers have stated that when an individual with a disability is comfortable with their visual impairment and asks for what they need, it helps the individual and their employer to succeed. Employers suggested that workers who are visual impaired help others get past the discomfort they may feel about visual

impairment by demonstrating that disability is not the most important thing about visually impaired people.

- **Blindness Competencies:** Employers have said that blindness competencies are the key to success. Employees with a visual impairment should be up-to-date in their orientation and mobility, braille, and assistive technology skills; maintain a variety of strategies to cope in case a system fails; and establish systems by which information can be accessed quickly. During interviews, candidates should demonstrate their competence and have specific ideas for how to manage the details of the work and transportation.
- **Be an Ambassador for Blindness:** Like it or not, it's important for employees with a visual impairment to be an ambassador for blindness. Employers felt that the awkwardness of a coworker was not a reflection of the individual but pointed out that the person who is visually impaired had more responsibility than anyone else for ameliorating awkwardness in a relationship with colleagues. Employers suggested that employees with visual impairments actively work at putting others at ease by engaging them in conversation; maintaining a broad variety of hobbies and interests, so they have lots of things to talk to others about; using humor to diffuse the others' discomfort; making people feel comfortable when they ask questions about blindness, adaptive equipment, or how work is completed; and asking employers and coworkers if they want to learn how to be a sighted guide. Making others feel comfortable when they ask questions is important.
- **Positive Attitudes:** Employers suggested that employees with visual impairments be as positive and competent as possible, work hard, avoid using their blindness as a crutch or excuse, and view challenges as new opportunities. If you have an attitude that you are there to do the same job as everybody else and you don't want to be treated differently, then people are going to interact with you, and you'll be integrated well.
- **Work Etiquette:** Employers encourage good work etiquette by suggesting employees with visual impairments approach fellow workers after confirming they are not in the middle of a task and that it is a good time to talk, they can leave a chair free for someone else to sit, and they can listen for conversational cues when interacting with others at work.
- **Insist on Being Held to the Same Standard:** Once workers with visual impairments have the necessary accommodations, employers suggested they insist on being held to the same expectations as their coworkers in terms of work performance, and on taking full responsibility for their duties. Not expecting to be treated differently from anybody else is really what governs the way other people treat them. As a person with a visual impairment, you can expect other people to automatically adjust to you. You have to be out there and understand and show people how. It's a matter of education. If you're not willing to do that yourself, then other people are not going to know how to relate to you unless you help them out.
- **Mutual Accommodations:** Finally, people who are visually impaired need to help their employers move toward a model of mutual accommodation – a situation in which the employer, employee and other staff members are comfortable talking about different

ways to accomplish tasks and discussing different perspectives – by acknowledging their own differences while respecting and valuing differences in others.