





Challenges in the Reintegration of Disabled Individuals into the Workforce

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ABSTRACT

The reintegration of disabled individuals into the workforce presents significant challenges and opportunities for enhancing workplace diversity and inclusivity. This study aims to explore the barriers and supports experienced by disabled workers as they navigate their return to employment, highlighting the complex interplay of personal, societal, and institutional factors that influence their reintegration process. This qualitative study utilized semi-structured interviews with 31 disabled individuals who have attempted to re-enter the workforce. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to capture a diverse range of disabilities, ages, and employment backgrounds. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis facilitated by NVivo software, focusing on reaching theoretical saturation where no new themes emerged from the data. Three main themes were identified: Employment Barriers, Support Systems, and Positive Experiences. Employment Barriers included categories such as Physical Accessibility, Social Attitudes, Workplace Policies, Technology and Tools, and Legal and Institutional barriers. Support Systems highlighted Government Programs, Community and Networks, Employer Support, and Personal Strategies. Positive Experiences encompassed Successful Accommodations, Employer Engagement, Career Development, and Advocacy and Awareness, illustrating facilitative aspects that aid reintegration. The study underscores the necessity of a multi-layered approach to the workforce reintegration of disabled individuals. Effective accommodations, proactive employer engagement, and robust support systems are crucial for overcoming the significant barriers these individuals face. Enhancing these areas can significantly improve employment outcomes for disabled workers, promoting a more inclusive and diverse workforce.

Keywords: Disability, Workforce Reintegration, Employment Barriers, Support Systems, Workplace Accommodations, Qualitative Research, Disabled Workers

1. Introduction

Reintegrating into the workforce is a multifaceted challenge for disabled individuals, encompassing various dimensions of physical, psychological, and social adaptation. This complexity is not merely an outcome of the individual's medical condition but is profoundly influenced by societal structures, workplace cultures, and policy frameworks. As the global workforce evolves, the inclusion of disabled individuals becomes imperative not only from a rights-based perspective but also as a critical economic strategy (Ahmadi & Valizadeh, 2021; Keramati, 2021).

Disabled individuals often encounter significant barriers in the workforce, ranging from physical accessibility issues to prejudicial attitudes and inflexible work policies (Edmonds et al., 2021). These challenges are exacerbated by the precarious nature of modern employment landscapes, where nonstandard job roles often lack the stability and support mechanisms essential for people with disabilities (Edmonds et al., 2021). Moreover, the disparity in health status and access to adequate healthcare services categorizes disabled individuals as an unrecognized population in public health discourses, further marginalizing them from mainstream employment opportunities (Krahn et al., 2015).

Research on military veterans reentering civilian life underscores similar challenges, where the reintegration process is affected by the individual's ability to adapt to new social roles and overcome institutional and personal barriers (Elnitsky et al., 2017). This adapted ecological model is applicable to the broader context of disability reintegration, highlighting the need for multifaceted support systems that address individual, community, and systemic levels (Elnitsky et al., 2017). For instance, the heterogeneity in disabilities—ranging from physical impairments to cognitive challenges—calls for tailored rehabilitation outcomes and community reintegration interventions, as noted in studies on individuals with spinal cord injuries (Gupta et al., 2019).

The significance of self-perception in the reintegration process cannot be overstated. Research by Griffin and Stein (2015) on U.S. veterans emphasizes the role of self-perception in employment prospects, suggesting a similar influence among disabled populations (Griffin & Stein, 2015). This self-perception is often shaped by societal attitudes and the degree of social and institutional support available, reinforcing the need for comprehensive policies and workplace practices that promote inclusivity (Ben-Sira, 1989).

The integration of disabled individuals into the workforce not only enhances diversity but also enriches the work environment, fostering a broader understanding and acceptance of differences. Successful workplace accommodations, such as flexible schedules and adaptive technologies, have shown to significantly improve employment outcomes and overall well-being for disabled workers (Poffenberger et al., 2022). These accommodations, however, must be part of a larger discourse on equity and inclusion, which involves adjusting workplace cultures and policies to be genuinely inclusive (Schönherr et al., 2004).

Furthermore, the concept of 'potency' or the capacity to adjust to life changes plays a crucial role in the rehabilitation and reintegration of disabled persons (Ben-Sira, 1989). This capacity is often influenced by the availability and effectiveness of vocational rehabilitation programs and the active engagement of employers in creating inclusive work environments (Lietaert & Kuschminder, 2021; Stern, 2016). Thus, understanding these dynamics is essential for developing strategies that not only address the immediate needs of disabled individuals but also foster long-term sustainability in their workforce participation.

In summary, this study will explore the challenges faced by disabled individuals as they reintegrate into the workforce, drawing on qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews. By examining the interplay of individual experiences with broader social and institutional frameworks, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on disability inclusion, advocating for a holistic approach to understanding and facilitating workforce reintegration for disabled individuals.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This qualitative study utilized semi-structured interviews to explore the challenges faced by disabled individuals in reintegrating into the workforce. The primary aim was to gain in-depth insights into the experiences, barriers, and facilitators encountered by these individuals.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to include a diverse range of disabilities, ages, genders, and employment backgrounds. Inclusion criteria required participants to be adults with a disability who have attempted to enter or re-enter the workforce within the past five years. The study aimed for theoretical saturation, where no new themes were identified in the data, dictating the sample size. This was achieved after interviewing 35 participants,

ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the experiences under investigation.

Participants were informed about the study's purpose, their rights to confidentiality, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. All participants provided written informed consent. Data were handled and stored according to data protection regulations to ensure participant confidentiality and privacy.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for both guided questions and the flexibility for participants to share their experiences and perspectives comprehensively. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted via video calls to accommodate participants' varying physical needs and geographical locations. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

The interview guide was developed based on a review of existing literature and preliminary discussions with disability advocacy groups. Key areas covered in the interviews included:

- Personal employment history
- Perceived barriers to employment
- Support systems and resources available
- Personal strategies used to overcome employment challenges

- Experiences with employer accommodations and attitudes

2.3. Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then imported into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, which was used to facilitate thematic analysis. Initial codes were generated inductively from the data, and these were subsequently grouped into broader themes in an iterative process, refining the coding scheme as more data were analyzed. Regular team meetings were held to ensure reliability and consistency in coding, with discrepancies discussed and resolved through consensus.

3. Findings and Results

In this qualitative study, a total of 31 participants were interviewed to explore the challenges faced by disabled individuals reentering the workforce. The demographic composition of the participants varied, including 16 females (52%) and 15 males (48%), ensuring a balanced gender representation. The age of participants ranged from 22 to 54 years, with the majority falling within the 30-40 year age group (45%). With respect to the type of disability, 13 participants (42%) reported physical disabilities, 10 (32%) had sensory impairments, and 8 (26%) identified cognitive or mental health-related disabilities.

Table 1

The Results of Qualitative Analysis

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts (Open Codes)
Employment Barriers	Physical Accessibility	Building access, Public transport, Workplace layout
	Social Attitudes	Stereotyping, Discrimination, Low expectations
	Workplace Policies	Inflexible hours, Inadequate leave policies, Lack of part-time options
	Technology and Tools	Inadequate adaptive technologies, High cost, Lack of training
	Legal and Institutional	Insufficient enforcement of laws, Complex bureaucracy, Lack of awareness
Support Systems	Government Programs	Financial aid, Employment initiatives, Training programs
	Community and Networks	Peer support groups, Non-profit organizations, Online communities
	Employer Support	Mentorship programs, Disability advocates, Accessibility officers
	Personal Strategies	Self-advocacy, Networking, Continuous learning
Positive Experiences	Successful Accommodations	Adjustable workstations, Flexible scheduling, Remote work options
	Employer Engagement	Active listening, Regular feedback, Inclusive culture
	Career Development	Promotions, Skill development, Job stability
	Advocacy and Awareness	Workplace seminars, Disability rights workshops, Inclusion campaigns

In the qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interviews, three main themes were identified that encapsulate the experiences of disabled individuals re-

entering the workforce: Employment Barriers, Support Systems, and Positive Experiences. These themes were further broken down into subcategories, each enriched with

specific concepts derived from the open codes generated during the analysis.

3.1. *Employment Barriers*

Participants identified several Physical Accessibility challenges, including "difficulties with building access, inadequate public transport options, and unsuitable workplace layouts." One participant noted, "I couldn't even get into the building on my first interview, which was disheartening." Social Attitudes also posed significant barriers, with reports of "stereotyping, overt discrimination, and generally low expectations from employers." Another individual lamented, "My abilities are often underestimated, just because I use a wheelchair."

Workplace Policies were frequently cited as restrictive, particularly "inflexible working hours and inadequate leave policies, which don't consider medical appointments or flare-ups of conditions." Additionally, the category of Technology and Tools revealed gaps in "provision of adequate adaptive technologies, the high costs associated with them, and a lack of proper training on their use." One respondent highlighted, "The software I need is too expensive for my small company to afford."

3.2. *Support Systems*

Support was available through various channels, with Government Programs such as "financial aid, targeted employment initiatives, and specialized training programs" being crucial. However, individuals often felt that these were "too generic and not tailored to individual needs." Community and Networks, including "peer support groups, non-profit organizations, and online communities," were vital. A participant shared, "Connecting with others in similar situations gave me the strength to keep pushing for what I need at work."

Employer Support through "mentorship programs, disability advocates in the workplace, and accessibility officers" played a critical role in easing the integration process. Personal strategies, grouped under Personal Strategies, such as "self-advocacy, networking, and continuous learning," were also fundamental. "I've had to become my own biggest advocate," said one interviewee, emphasizing the need for proactive engagement.

3.3. *Positive Experiences*

Despite the challenges, many participants reported Successful Accommodations that made significant differences, such as "adjustable workstations, flexible scheduling, and options to work remotely." Employer Engagement was critical, with efforts like "active listening, regular feedback, and promoting an inclusive culture" improving workplace environments.

Career progression and stability, categorized under Career Development, were cited as positive outcomes for those who received adequate support. One respondent joyously shared, "Getting that promotion felt like a validation of my capabilities beyond my disability." Advocacy and Awareness efforts, including "workplace seminars on disability rights and inclusion campaigns," also contributed to better understanding and integration.

4. **Discussion and Conclusion**

In this qualitative study, three main themes were identified that encapsulate the experiences of disabled individuals re-entering the workforce: Employment Barriers, Support Systems, and Positive Experiences. Each main theme is comprised of various categories that collectively provide a detailed view of the multifaceted challenges and supports experienced by the participants.

The theme of Employment Barriers reveals the obstacles faced by disabled individuals in the workforce. This theme is divided into several categories: Physical Accessibility, Social Attitudes, Workplace Policies, Technology and Tools, and Legal and Institutional barriers. For Physical Accessibility, participants mentioned challenges such as building access, public transportation issues, and unsuitable workplace layouts. Social Attitudes encompassed issues like stereotyping, discrimination, and low expectations from others. Workplace Policies highlighted inflexible working hours and inadequate leave policies, which were particularly restrictive for disabled workers. Technology and Tools revealed deficits such as the lack of adequate adaptive technologies, high costs, and insufficient training. Lastly, Legal and Institutional barriers included issues like insufficient enforcement of laws and complex bureaucratic processes that hinder accessibility.

The Support Systems theme underscores the assistance and resources available to disabled individuals. This theme is categorized into Government Programs, Community and Networks, Employer Support, and Personal Strategies. Government Programs were noted for providing financial

aid, employment initiatives, and training programs, though they were often perceived as too generic. Community and Networks included support from peer groups, non-profit organizations, and online communities that facilitated sharing experiences and advice. Employer Support was characterized by in-house resources like mentorship programs, disability advocates, and accessibility officers. Personal Strategies involved self-advocacy, networking, and continuous learning as key tactics employed by individuals to navigate their work environments effectively.

Positive Experiences detailed the successful outcomes and supportive interactions that facilitated the reintegration of disabled individuals into the workforce. This theme included categories such as Successful Accommodations, Employer Engagement, Career Development, and Advocacy and Awareness. Successful Accommodations included adaptive workplace settings like adjustable workstations and flexible scheduling. Employer Engagement pointed to active listening and regular feedback from employers, fostering an inclusive culture. Career Development covered advancements and training opportunities that supported career growth. Lastly, Advocacy and Awareness highlighted efforts to increase disability rights awareness through workshops and campaigns, enhancing the overall inclusivity of the workplace environment.

Central to our results was the identification of key barriers such as physical accessibility, social attitudes, and inadequate workplace policies that align closely with the findings of Edmonds et al. (2021), who highlighted similar challenges within nonstandard and precarious employment settings. These barriers often exacerbate the already difficult circumstances for disabled workers, requiring concerted efforts for meaningful inclusion and accommodation (Edmonds et al., 2021).

Our participants frequently cited physical inaccessibility and restrictive workplace policies as substantial hurdles. These findings are consistent with those of Edmonds et al. (2021), emphasizing that such structural limitations can severely dampen the well-being of disabled workers, affecting their motivation and ability to seek or maintain employment (Edmonds et al., 2021). Similarly, the issue of social attitudes, including stereotyping and discrimination, echoes the concerns raised by Krahn, Walker, and Corrae-de-Araujo (2015), who argue that persons with disabilities constitute an unrecognized disparity population, often sidelined in both health and employment sectors (Krahn et al., 2015).

Support systems emerged as a critical theme in our study, with governmental programs and employer-supported initiatives providing essential resources for reintegration. This aligns with Elnitsky et al. (2017), who noted that adapted ecological models could be effectively applied to understand the reintegration of service members, suggesting that similar frameworks could be beneficial for disabled individuals (Elnitsky et al., 2017). Furthermore, the importance of personalized support systems is underscored in the work of Gupta et al. (2019), who advocate for tailored rehabilitation and community reintegration interventions for people with spinal cord injuries, highlighting the diversity within the disabled community itself (Gupta et al., 2019).

Positive experiences, particularly successful workplace accommodations and active employer engagement, were noted to significantly influence reintegration outcomes. This finding is supported by Poffenberger et al. (2022), who discuss the necessity of making emergency medicine accessible for learners and physicians with disabilities, thus underscoring the broader applicability of such accommodations across various professional fields (Poffenberger et al., 2022). The impact of employer engagement is further supported by Griffin and Stein (2015), who found that self-perception of disability significantly affects employment prospects among U.S. veterans, indicating that positive reinforcement and supportive workplace cultures can enhance self-esteem and employment stability (Griffin & Stein, 2015).

The theoretical implications of our findings suggest that reintegration processes must be viewed through a holistic lens, considering not just the physical but also the psychological and social dimensions of disability. Ben-Sira (1989) provides a useful framework here, suggesting that the concept of 'potency,' or the capacity to adjust and readjust in life, is crucial in the rehabilitation of disabled persons. Practically, this means that policies and interventions need to be dynamic and responsive to the evolving needs of the disabled workforce (Ben-Sira, 1989).

This study has explored the multifaceted challenges and support systems involved in the workforce reintegration of disabled individuals. Key findings revealed significant barriers that include physical accessibility issues, restrictive workplace policies, and prevalent social attitudes of stereotyping and discrimination. On the positive side, our findings also highlighted the crucial role of support systems, such as government programs and employer initiatives, which significantly aid in reintegration. Moreover, positive experiences, especially successful accommodations and

proactive employer engagement, were identified as strong facilitators for successful employment outcomes.

The findings of this study underscore the complex interplay of barriers and supports that disabled individuals encounter in their pursuit of reintegration into the workforce. It is evident that while significant challenges persist, effective supports, particularly in the form of tailored accommodations and inclusive employer practices, can markedly enhance employment outcomes. These insights are crucial for fostering a more inclusive workforce where disabled individuals are not only employed but are also supported to thrive.

This study is not without its limitations. The reliance on qualitative methods and a relatively small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the use of semi-structured interviews, while providing depth, might have introduced subjectivity in the responses. The study also focused primarily on participants from specific regions, which may not fully capture the diverse experiences of disabled individuals in different geographic and socio-economic contexts.

Future research should aim to expand the demographic and geographic diversity of participants to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Quantitative studies could be employed to complement and quantify the qualitative insights gained from this study, providing a broader statistical context to the issues at hand. Additionally, longitudinal studies could explore the long-term outcomes of workforce reintegration efforts to better understand the enduring impacts of current practices and policies.

The implications for practice are clear: there is a need for more comprehensive and personalized support systems that address both the individual and systemic barriers faced by disabled workers. Employers should be encouraged to implement flexible policies and create inclusive environments that genuinely accommodate the diverse needs of disabled employees. Policy-makers should also consider enhancing legal frameworks to enforce the adoption of such practices and ensure that supportive measures are not just recommendations but requirements. Ultimately, a concerted effort among government bodies, employers, and community organizations is essential to forge a path towards a truly inclusive workforce.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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