

Exploring Supervisors' Attitudes of Working with Youth Engaged in an Inclusive Employment Training Program

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Volume 20, numéro 3, décembre 2012

Emploi et approches inclusives : le droit des personnes ayant des incapacités à participer, par un travail décent, au développement économique

Work and Inclusive Approaches: The Right of People with Disabilities to Participate, by Way of Decent Work, to Economic Development

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086599ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1086599ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Réseau International sur le Processus de Production du Handicap

ISSN

1499-5549 (imprimé)

2562-6574 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Lindsay, S., Mcdougall, C. & Sanford, R. (2012). Exploring Supervisors' Attitudes of Working with Youth Engaged in an Inclusive Employment Training Program. *Développement Humain, Handicap et Changement Social / Human Development, Disability, and Social Change*, 20(3), 41-51.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1086599ar>

Résumé de l'article

Bien que le droit au travail soit une composante essentielle de la citoyenneté, les personnes ayant des incapacités demeurent encore aujourd'hui sous-représentées sur le marché du travail. Occuper un emploi s'avère particulièrement important puisqu'il permet de réduire leurs probabilités d'affronter des difficultés financières et de vivre de l'isolement social, et ce, tout en augmentant l'estime de soi et la qualité de vie. La plupart des recherches sur les perceptions des employeurs en lien avec l'embauche de personnes ayant des incapacités se sont concentrées sur les adultes et peu sur les jeunes. L'objectif de cette étude était d'explorer les impressions des superviseurs quant au fait de travailler avec des jeunes ayant des incapacités dans le cadre d'un programme d'entraînement au travail. **Méthode** : L'échantillon a été constitué en collaboration avec les superviseurs des jeunes prenant part à un programme d'entraînement au travail, lequel était géré par un centre de réadaptation pour enfants situé dans un centre urbain important. Un questionnaire descriptif a été remis à tous les superviseurs concernés. Trente-six questionnaires ont été complétés pour un taux de 92% de réponse. **Résultats** : Nos résultats montrent que la plupart des superviseurs se sentaient préparés à l'arrivée du jeune et que les tâches de supervision ne leur demandaient pas de temps supplémentaire. Certains superviseurs ont eu certaines inquiétudes initiales quant aux aménagements nécessaires à apporter à la charge et au milieu de travail, mais ces dernières ont rapidement été dissipées. La plupart d'entre eux ont rapporté avoir eu une expérience positive et que le fait d'avoir travaillé avec ces jeunes leur a permis de remettre en question leurs perceptions sur les personnes ayant des incapacités. **Conclusions** : Nos résultats rappellent l'importance d'offrir des opportunités aux superviseurs de travailler avec des jeunes ayant des incapacités puisque cela leur permet de reconsidérer les stéréotypes et leurs attitudes négatives à l'égard des personnes ayant des incapacités.

Exploring Supervisors' Attitudes of Working with Youth Engaged in an Inclusive Employment Training Program

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Article original • Original Article

Abstract

Background: Although employment is a right of citizenship, people with disabilities remain under-represented in the workforce. Employment is especially important for people with disabilities because it can alleviate financial hardship, social isolation, improve confidence and quality of life. Most research exploring employers' views of hiring employees with disabilities has focused on adults while little is known about employers' experience of working with youth with disabilities. The purpose of this study was to explore supervisors' views of working with an adolescent with disabilities as a part of an employment training program. **Method:** The sample was drawn from the supervisors of youth taking part in an employment training program, run through children's rehabilitation hospital in a large urban centre. A descriptive questionnaire was sent to all supervisors who worked with a adolescent with disabilities as part of an employment training program. Thirty-six questionnaires were completed with a response rate of 92%. **Results:** Our findings show that most supervisors felt prepared when youth arrived and that supervising them did not take up much extra time. Some supervisors had a few initial concerns about workplace accommodations and workload but these were quickly resolved. Most supervisors who worked with youth with disabilities reported a positive experience and that having them in the workplace also had the added benefit of challenging some of their assumptions about people with disabilities. **Conclusions:** Our findings emphasize the importance of supervisors having an opportunity to work with a person with disabilities because it can help to break down negative attitudes and stereotypes.

Keywords : employment, youth, adolescent, life skills, occupational therapy, supervisors' attitudes

Résumé

Bien que le droit au travail soit une composante essentielle de la citoyenneté, les personnes ayant des incapacités demeurent encore aujourd'hui sous-représentées sur le marché du travail. Occuper un emploi s'avère particulièrement important puisqu'il permet de réduire leurs probabilités d'affronter des difficultés financières et de vivre de l'isolement social, et ce, tout en augmentant l'estime de soi et la qualité de vie. La plupart des recherches sur les perceptions des employeurs en lien avec l'embauche de personnes ayant des incapacités se sont concentrées sur les adultes et peu sur les jeunes. L'objectif de cette étude était d'explorer les impressions des superviseurs quant au fait de travailler avec des jeunes ayant des incapacités dans le cadre d'un programme d'entraînement au travail. **Méthode :** L'échantillon a été constitué en collaboration avec les superviseurs des jeunes prenant part à un programme d'entraînement au travail, lequel était géré par un centre de réadaptation pour enfants situé dans un centre urbain important. Un questionnaire descriptif a été remis à tous les superviseurs concernés. Trente-six questionnaires ont été complétés pour un taux de 92% de réponse. **Résultats :** Nos résultats montrent que la plupart des superviseurs se sentaient préparés à l'arrivée du jeune et que les tâches de supervision ne leur demandaient pas de temps supplémentaire. Certains superviseurs ont eu certaines inquiétudes initiales quant aux aménagements nécessaires à apporter à la charge et au milieu de travail, mais ces dernières ont rapidement été dissipées. La plupart d'entre eux ont rapporté avoir eu une expérience positive et que le fait d'avoir travaillé avec ces jeunes leur a permis de remettre en question leurs perceptions sur les personnes ayant des incapacités. **Conclusions :** Nos résultats rappellent l'importance d'offrir des opportunités aux superviseurs de travailler avec des jeunes ayant des incapacités puisque cela leur permet de reconsidérer les stéréotypes et leurs attitudes négatives à l'égard des personnes ayant des incapacités.

Mots-clés : emploi, jeunes, adolescents, compétences personnelles, handicap, ergothérapie, attitudes des superviseurs

Employment is important because it provides a key avenue to alleviate poverty, while improving social inclusion, life skills, independence and overall well-being (Graffam et al., 2002; Morgan & Alexander, 2005). Evidence consistently shows that employment can offer many personal benefits, such as improved physical, social and psychological well-being (Hernandez et al., 2000; Kregel & Unger, 1993). Sadly, people with disabilities often do not have the same opportunity to experience such benefits because they remain under-represented in the workforce despite programs and policies to increase their participation (Hunt & Hunt, 2004; Levy et al., 1992; Lindsay, 2011a, 2011b; McFarlin et al., 1991). Indeed, the employment rate for people with disabilities is consistently much lower than their typically developing peers (Gilbride et al., 2003). This is not a result of an unwillingness to work (Siperstein et al., 2006); but rather, people with disabilities often experience barriers such as negative attitudes, lack of accommodations, training and social support, limited accessibility, and inadequate transport when seeking employment (Berry, 1995; Bruyere et al., 2006; Kay et al., 2011; Lindsay 2011a, 2011b; Siperstein et al., 2006; Unger, 2002). In a competitive labour market where skills and experience are highly prized, people with disabilities may be increasingly disadvantaged (Lindsay et al., 2012a).

Although there is a growing literature on transition to employment for youth with disabilities much of this literature focuses on the barriers encountered and the likelihood of obtaining employment. Further, most employment training programs for youth are geared towards mental health and/or intellectual disabilities, while there has been much less focus on youth with physical disabilities. Some research has begun to describe the experiences of youth in such employment training programs (Lindsay et al. 2012); however, there is still a gap in knowledge about employers' and supervisors' attitudes towards working with such youth. This is important because there is an increased emphasis on independence and employment readiness skills given the increased life expectancy among youth with childhood onset disabili-

ties (Kingsnorth et al., 2007). Early work opportunities are critical for youth with disabilities to provide a context for career development by exploring interests and abilities, providing skill development and facilitating integration into society (Hartnet et al., 2011; Siperstein et al., 2006). Yet, adolescents with disabilities often lag behind their peers in acquiring essential life skills and work experience (Forsyth & Jarvis, 2002; Gall et al., 2006; Kingsnorth et al., 2007; Lindsay et al., 2012a).

Exploring ways to improve the inclusion of youth with disabilities in the workforce is critical because the social and economic impact of the exclusion of people with disabilities from the workforce is significant. For example, the International Labor organization estimates that the annual loss of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) due to the exclusion of people with disabilities from the labor market is over \$1 trillion (US) (Canadian Association for Community Living, 2010). Improving inclusion is also important from a human rights perspective. Specifically, the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) emphasizes the need for equal opportunities to freely chosen work, effective access to guidance programs, placement services, training and opportunities for advancement.

Employers' and supervisors' perceptions of people with disabilities

Employers' attitudes toward people with disabilities play an essential role in whether they become employed and how they are treated in the workplace (Morgan & Alexander, 2005). Research on employers' experience of working with people with disabilities is mixed. Some studies report generally positive attitudes toward people with disabilities (Graffam et al., 2002; Hernandez et al., 2000; Kregel & Unger, 1993; Levy et al., 1992; Lindsay et al., 2012b). Research on adults with disabilities has shown numerous benefits of having them on staff; workers with disabilities have been found to be hard working, honest (Graffam et al., 2002; McFarlin et al., 1991; Morgan & Alexander, 2005), punctual, reliable (Kregel & Unger, 1993) and to have higher job retention rates



(Hunt & Hunt, 2004). Furthermore, some studies report that employers who have hired an employee with disabilities tend to be more positive about employing a worker with disabilities in the future (Gilbride et al., 2003; Graffam et al., 2002; Levy et al., 1992; Lindsay et al., 2012a; Siperstein et al., 2006;).

When employers are asked about their experience with accommodating workers with disabilities (e.g., restructuring jobs, modifying work environment) some claim that they are able to make accommodations with little or no cost (Bruyere et al., 2004, 2006), while others report great concerns over the cost of accommodations (Kaye et al., 2011; Morgan & Alexander, 2005; Siperstein et al., 2006; Unger, 2002). Other concerns that employers describe include the appropriateness of a job (Hernandez et al., 2000), amount of supervision, training, and accommodations, in addition to issues about safety, cost, and potential litigation (Berry & Meyer, 1995; Kaye et al., 2011; Morgan & Alexander, 2005; Siperstein et al., 2006). Negative attitudes towards people with disabilities are another key barrier preventing employers hiring someone with disabilities (Berry & Meyer, 1995; Diska et al., 1996; Hartnett et al., 2011; Kaye et al., 2011; Unger, 2002). This is problematic because the exclusion of people with disabilities from the workforce perpetuates isolation and poverty.

This research addresses several gaps in the literature on employment among people with disabilities. First, previous studies on adults tend to focus on attitudes towards hiring and/or the cost-effectiveness of hiring a person with disabilities while less is known about the actual experiences of supervising someone with disabilities. Second, most studies focus on adults while little is known about working with youth with disabilities. Youth who start life with disabilities who are often unable to gain work experience and skills at the same rate and time as their typically developing peers may be disadvantaged in competition for employment in their adult years. This represents an additional barrier to those typically faced by employees or employment seekers with adult-onset disabilities. Understanding supervisors' experiences of

working with youth is important because it could assist rehabilitation clinicians and youth transition counselors in designing programs and services to enable more youth with disabilities to participate in employment and to be included as full citizens. This has the long-term potential to reduce workforce exclusion, isolation and poverty. Increasing the employment and retention of people with disabilities in the workplace are key goals for rehabilitation professionals (Hartnett et al., 2011).

Theoretical Approach

- The Role of Social Contact on Improving Attitudes towards People with Disabilities

Social context plays a significant influence in the development of attitudes (Shannon et al., 2009). For example, negative societal attitudes are a main barrier for people with disabilities successfully integrating into society and the workplace. Evidence consistently shows that social proximity to people with disabilities is a major factor influencing how attitudes are manifested (Meyer et al., 2001; Shannon et al., 2009). Limited interactions with persons with disabilities may influence negative attitudes and may reinforce pre-existing stereotypes (Fichten et al., 2005; Shannon et al., 2009). One way to improve attitudes towards people with disabilities and their full inclusion in society is through enhanced social contact.

According to Allport's (1954) social contact theory, negative attitudes can be minimized through contact, community sanction, equal status, co-operation and intimate association. By having the opportunity to communicate with others, people may be able to better understand and appreciate different viewpoints, especially those of minority group members (such as people with disabilities). Allport proposed that properly managed contact between groups should lead to better social interactions. Allport argued that four criteria must be present for this to occur:

- 1- equal status where both groups take an equal status in the relationship;

- 2- common goals where both groups work together on a task;
- 3- acquaintance potential where group members get to know each other;
- 4- support of authorities, law or customs, which refers to some authority that both groups acknowledge that support the contact and interactions between the group members (Allport, 1954).

Consistent evidence shows that having contact with persons with disabilities can decrease anxiety and improve attitudes towards people with disabilities (Armstrong et al., 1987; Marmion Newberry; Piercy et al., 2002; Fredrickson; Barret et al., 2004; Lindsay & Edwards, 2012). However, many employers and supervisors have not had much opportunity or experience to work with a person who has disabilities. Prejudice or discrimination can result in generalizations and over-simplifications made about an entire group based on incomplete or inaccurate information (Allport, 1954). If there are more opportunities for employers to learn about people with disabilities then their prejudice in hiring them may be reduced. In this study we draw on findings from an employment training program for youth with disabilities to highlight how increased social contact with youth with disabilities helped to improve their understanding and attitudes towards people with disabilities.

Methods

A descriptive qualitative methodology drawing on brief questionnaires was used for this study to examine supervisors' perspectives of working with adolescents with disabilities. Ethical consent was obtained from the research ethics board of a children's rehabilitation hospital.

Youth Employment Training Program

Many physical, environmental and social barriers make it very difficult for youth with disabilities to find summer and part-time jobs. This youth employment training program was developed on the understanding that early work experience is a foundation for meaningful adult

participation in community life. The objective of the program is to enable youth with disabilities to experience personal growth, to explore career interests, and to develop essential life skills (e.g., social communication skills, problem solving and teamwork). In this program, high school students with diagnosed physical and/or learning or cognitive disabilities (aged 16-19, who have no prior paid work experience) prepare for volunteering or working. The program is offered through a rehabilitation hospital in a major urban centre in Canada. It runs over a 12-month period and includes the following components: supported work experience (i.e., two placements, including one 3-week program during the summer which takes place at the hospital and one in the spring break in the community (1 week)); skill building workshops; individual assessment, counseling, coaching; and peer mentor meetings. The focus of this paper is on youth's first placement in the hospital because their experience in the second placement in the community, is described in further detail elsewhere (Lindsay et al. 2012b). The program provides workplace insurance coverage for participants. Also, during the work placements, supports are provided to youth and supervisors as needed. These supports include: identification and funding of any required equipment; support for problem-solving accessibility concerns; job coaching to assist participants in learning the position requirements and/or learning work-related life skills; and assistance if problems arise. Most of the youth have physical disabilities including cerebral palsy, spina bifida and some have acquired brain injury or autism. Participants are paid an honorarium by the program at the end of the placements (i.e., no cost to employers).

Sampling

The sample was drawn from an employment training program, which is run out of a children's rehabilitation hospital (see Lindsay et al. 2012a for a full description of the employment program and methods). Supervisors who participated in this program (see anonymized placements in Table 1) were chosen based on the particular department having available entry-level work and matched with youth's inter-



ests and abilities by program staff. The majority of supervisors were administrative staff who typically do not have managerial roles and so, participation in this program represents a first experience supervising an entry-level worker. A questionnaire was sent to each supervisor after the youth completed their placement as part of the standard evaluation of the employment training program. For this paper, three years of placements (n=39) were included. Thirty-six questionnaires were completed for a response rate of 92%.

Data Gathering

Brief questionnaires asked about how prepared supervisors felt before the youth arrived; how much support they received from the employment training program; and whether supervising a youth with disabilities added to their workload and whether they would supervise a youth with disabilities again. Open-ended questions were used to help foster flexibility and included: What was the best part of working with a youth with disabilities?; How did supervising the youth impact their perspective on working with people with disabilities?; and was there anything that made the experience of supervising a youth with disabilities less than positive? Data were collected from August 2009 to August 2011.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the descriptive statistics of the first four questions of the survey. The remainder of the questions were open-ended so we used a qualitative analysis approach whereby one member of the research team and a research assistant read through each of the responses several times to develop a list of common themes. An inductive process of thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data where an in-depth understanding of the supervisors’ experience was developed (Green & Thorogood, 2004; Grbich, 2007). This research used general guiding questions and a semi-structured design so that categories could emerge from the data. A constant comparison method was used with continual adjustment throughout the research process.

Analytical decisions made during the analysis were documented in an audit trail. This process helped to ensure that the codes and themes identified encompassed the range of ideas expressed by the participants (Grbich, 2007). The trustworthiness of the findings was established by code-recode and peer examination.

Results

The first work placements of this employment training program for youth with disabilities took place within several different departments of a large children’s rehabilitation hospital in a major urban center. Placements were based on youth’s interests and availability of supervisors. This included a variety of sectors of entry-level work (e.g., office/clerical, hospitality, recreation) (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: WORK PLACEMENTS OF YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

<u>Hospital work placements</u>
Reception
Augmentative & alternative communication
Dental Department
Fundraising
Resource Centre (library)
Therapeutic Recreation
Transportation
Volunteer resources
Arts centre
Day care
Human resources
Mail room
Food services
Day patient / nursing education
Administration
Information systems
Aquatics
Finance
Clinical technology

Table 2 highlights how well prepared supervisors felt they were for supervising a young employee with disabilities. The majority of supervisors felt well prepared before the youth arrived. Of the two who said that they were not well prepared for supervising a youth with disabilities, one said that they would have liked to have a better understanding of the worker's preference and knowing a little more about them in advance. All of the supervisors felt that they received enough support from the employment training program staff during the youth's placement. Most supervisors (75%) said that supervising a youth with disabilities took a manageable amount of time while 16% said it did not add additional time and 2.7% felt that it took too much time to supervise.

TABLE 2 : EMPLOYER'S PERCEPTIONS ABOUT EMPLOYING A YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

		Hospital Placements n=36
Did you feel well prepared before your participant arrived?	Not well prepared	2 (5%)
	Somewhat prepared	6 (16.6%)
	Well prepared	28 (77.7%)
Did you receive enough support from the employment training program staff during the placement?	Not enough	0
	Enough	36 (100%)
	Too much	0
To what extent did supervising a youth with disabilities add to your workload?	Not much additional time	6 (16.6%)
	A manageable amount of time	27 (75%)
	Too much time	1 (2.7%)
Would you supervise a youth with disabilities again	Yes	24* (100%)

* Totals for this question are different because it was only asked in one year of the program.

Our results showed that supervising a youth with disabilities involved making some accommodations in the workplace and modifying the workload. Supervisors also reported how having a youth with disabilities in the workplace helped to improve their understanding of and attitudes toward people with disabilities.

Accommodations

Some supervisors had initial concerns about accommodating youth with disabilities. For example, a few supervisors did not fully realize the additional time and effort it took to integrate the youth into work settings. One person captured it best, "This exposure enabled me to realize the tremendous amount of effort they [the youth] need to make to fit into the position" (participant #11). The primary concerns for supervisors often centered on physical accommodations in enabling youth to move around the office space in their wheelchair or walker.

Minor accommodations were often made to the workspaces including switching office chairs, adjusting the desk height, modifying the work schedule such as implementing breaks. Some supervisors, for example, needed to make the workplace more accessible, "The physical place in our office is very small so I'm glad that we were able to accommodate him by having him transfer to my office chair" (participant #14). Feedback revealed they were quite willing to make these necessary accommodations and felt that they had an overall positive impact on the youth's performance. Others described how their job coach helped them to make their workspace more accessible. For instance, "her job coach was helpful in helping to troubleshoot these [accommodation difficulties] and we managed to cooperatively come up with some useful strategies" (participant #1). Supervisors realized that they needed to be flexible and accommodating to address the youth's needs. Specifically, one person commented, "employers need to be very flexible to ensure that the needs of each are addressed" (participant #18).



Workload Content and Quantity

Matching youth with a suitable amount of work was a gradual process for many supervisors. Some regretted not having sufficient tasks to assign, while others felt that the workload could have been tailored more appropriately. For example, supervisors described how they needed to break down the tasks into more manageable, easy to understand steps.

Supervisors often modified the tasks after getting to know the youth. For instance, one person explained, "Once I understood his abilities, we were able to change the work given to him which he completed accurately and with minimal supervision" (participant #10). Meanwhile, others emphasized the importance of understanding the youth's needs while also being cognizant of how they might affect project task assignments. Those working with the youth said that they should "have tailored her workload more appropriately" (participant #9). Supervisors also noted the importance of matching interests and abilities to specific tasks. In sum, the content and amount of work was an issue that was raised at first but was quickly addressed by the supervisors.

Improving Understanding and Attitudes towards Youth with Disabilities

Overall the majority of supervisors who worked with youth with disabilities commented that their experience was positive and it also had the added benefit of challenging some of their assumptions about people with disabilities. For example, one of the supervisors who typically sees children with disabilities everyday in their workplace stated: "I myself had made some hasty assumptions about the students abilities based on our initial meeting that didn't prove to be accurate: good lesson for the future" (participant #9). Others said that the best part about supervising a youth with disabilities was "Observing the youth interacting with clients. Clients enjoyed talking to the participant and the participant was able to build great rapport with clients" (participant #28).

Most supervisors recalled a pleasant experience working with youth with disabilities and commented on their positive attitude. For example, supervisors' assessments of youth commonly included something like this, "His friendly, positive attitude is a particular area of strength. His positive personality impressed all his co-workers" (participant #1). Other supervisors commented on their customer's response to the youth with disabilities in the workplace. For instance, "Some of our clients seemed very considerate towards them and dealt with them with amazement" (participant #11). This employment opportunity helped to highlight to both the staff and clients the abilities of people with disabilities.

Another supervisor had a similar experience and commented that the youth they worked with was a "very positive and pleasant individual and all of the staff members who had reason to deal with him felt that way also. So getting a chance to meet him was the best part" (participant #2). Having the opportunity to work alongside a youth disabilities helped to shape their understanding of people with disabilities, "Once you interact with a person with disabilities, there's so much that you can learn from them. It also improves teamwork in the department" (participant #14).

Several supervisors described the work placement as an opportunity to improve their mentoring skills and share knowledge with the youth. For some supervisors this was their first experience working with a person with disabilities, "Personally, this was the first time I had the opportunity of working/supervising a person with disabilities. For me it was a great experience and a very gratifying one" (participant #13). Thus, this skill building training program seemed beneficial for youth and those working with the youth.

Several supervisors reported experiencing a shift in their perceptions about people with disabilities. In some cases, these shifting perceptions sparked a new understanding of accessibility and highlighted areas for improvement. Even those who already had prior experience working with a youth with disabilities said that

they had not realized their full potential in the workplace until they worked with them closely and saw their skills in action:

I think it offered everyone perspective on our pre-conceived notions regarding people with special needs. Even though we all work with special needs clients on a daily basis, I still found that for myself, there were assumptions that were completely incorrect about my participants based on our initial brief meetings (participant #9).

Some supervisors conveyed being pleasantly surprised by the skill level of these youth:

It was a surprise that they are already in good hands, what they had learned in school and that they are properly preparing themselves for the future at any workplace (participant #36).

The underestimation of youth's skills may have been a result of stereotyping them or recognizing that they may not have as many skill building opportunities compared to their typically developing peers. Supervisors working with the youth began to realize the importance of providing them with an opportunity to build their skills, which could help them to succeed in their future. For example, one person said, "Having a participant reiterates the importance of providing opportunities to individuals with disabilities so they learn valuable skills to lead a fulfilling life" (participant #31). Others commented that the best part about supervising a youth with disabilities was "being able to support an individual working toward independence in the workplace" (participant #12).

Some commented on how taking part in this employment training program for youth with disabilities helped them to realize the importance of providing youth with disabilities with a "valuable life experience" (participant #15). Another supervisor echoed the importance of this, "I enjoyed the opportunity to give someone a work experience and to explore options for the future" (participant #24)

One of the supervisors had an opportunity to see that the youth had roles beyond just being

a 'patient' or a person with disabilities. For instance, "Working with a youth who was also an in-patient and how capable his computer skills were" (participant #42). Such encounters in working with youth helped to shape positive attitudes towards youth with disabilities, as described by the people supervising the youth in their work placement in our study. Having the opportunity to work with a youth with disabilities "increased awareness of everyone's ability not disabilities" (participant #17). Other people commented that they "appreciated the opportunity of meeting a youth, who, with some support, will really be able to provide / accomplish a body of work that meets typical workplace expectations" (participant #20). Along with that was also helping youth to build self-confidence throughout their work placement. For instance, one person reported, "I think the best part is being able to watch the youth gain some self-confidence in their abilities in a work place" (participant #34). In sum, supervisors' recounted an overall positive experience of working with youth with disabilities in that it helped them to develop more positive attitudes towards people with disabilities.

Discussion and Conclusion

Increasing the employment and retention of people with disabilities in the workplace are key goals for rehabilitation professionals. Youth, their families and schools are also keenly interested in increasing opportunities for young people with disabilities to participate in meaningful work. Our findings show that within the context of this employment training program most supervisors felt well prepared for supervising a young employee with disabilities. Supervisors reported that they received an appropriate amount of support from the training program. The framework within this training program may be a key factor in supervisors agreeing to offer work experiences and/or employment for a youth with disabilities. Some people had a few initial concerns about employing a youth with disabilities especially with regards to physical accommodations and workload. This is consistent with past research showing that employers often have concerns about hiring a person with disabilities (Kaye et al., 2011;



Lindsay et al., 2012b; Morgan & Alexander, 2005; Siperstein et al., 2006) citing factors such as appropriateness of a job, supervision and accommodations. It should be noted that some of the workload adjustments described by supervisors may have been required for any entry-level adolescent employee and may not be challenges related specifically to young workers with disabilities.

In our study most people reported improving their assumptions about people with disabilities over the course of the program. Past research also shows that those who have hired an employee with disabilities are likely to be more positive about hiring a worker with disabilities in the future (Gilbride et al., 2003; Siperstein et al., 2006). Thus, this emphasizes the importance of having an opportunity to work with a person with disabilities because it can help to break down negative attitudes and stereotypes (Hartnett et al., 2011; Kaye et al., 2011; Schartz et al., 2006). Our findings are also consistent with Allport's (1954) social contact theory, which suggests that negative attitudes and discrimination can be minimized by opportunities to communicate with and work alongside others. In this instance, having an opportunity to work with a youth with disabilities helped their supervisors to better understand their capabilities. In reflecting on Allport's criteria under which these interactions would occur, we notice that the acquaintance potential where group members get to know each other and the support of authorities appeared to help in understanding youth's employment abilities. Similar to other employment settings, it was not an equal status. Although they had common goals, the supervisor oversaw the youth's work (i.e., they did not complete tasks together). This is similar to our findings of community-based employers' perspectives of supervising a youth with disabilities.

We recognize that this may be a unique situation where the context of the job placement involved common objectives with clear expectations and specified accommodations, consistent with Allport's theory. However, our findings are also consistent with paid work placements with community employers (Lindsay et al.,

2012) based on the same employment training program. Further work is needed to assess the extent to which each of Allport's criteria influences the interactions with people with disabilities within an employment context.

Improving the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workforce is critical to enabling a diverse workforce to supply different ideas and perspectives, which have the potential to produce higher quality work because it brings a broader set of perspectives, approaches and ideas to problem solving (Cox, 1993). Further, a diverse workforce can better understand the varied expectations of a diversified clientele (Knouse & Chretien, 1996).

This research addresses several gaps in the literature on employment among people with disabilities. First, previous research on adults tends to focus on attitudes towards hiring and/or the cost-effectiveness of hiring a person with disabilities while less is known about the actual experiences of supervising someone with disabilities. Second, most studies focus on adults while little is known about working with youth with disabilities. Focusing on younger age groups is critical because they arguably have the most to gain from early employment experiences, and such experiences may expand their employability as adults.

This study is limited in that the findings are suggestive rather than generalizable due to the small sample and that the program took place within a hospital and not a community employment setting. This first work placement for youth was to help them gain employment skills while being within a familiar and comfortable setting where people are accommodating of disabilities. Other community-based workplace settings may not be as accommodating where youth could encounter stigma and negative attitudes. However, further work is needed to confirm whether this is the case, especially over longer employment durations. Hospital employers, who have regular contact with people with disabilities may be sensitized to them (better attitudes). However, many of the supervisors had not worked directly with a person

with disabilities and several admitted that they had pre-conceived notions about their abilities.

In addition, the length of the youth employment training program is short relative (3-week placement) compared to supported employment interventions typical with adults. This was a result of youth's schedules (i.e., they are still in school) and also the cost to run the program. Furthermore, the negative aspects of working with youth with disabilities may also be under-reported because the supervisors involved in our employment program may have been more positive about people with disabilities to begin with since they agreed to participate and are also part of the same hospital offering the employment training program. The questionnaire-based data collection did not allow for in-depth exploration of emerging themes and was limited in that it was part of an evaluation to gather feedback on the employment training program. Despite these limitations, our findings are consistent with past research on youth with disabilities working in community based settings (Lindsay et al. 2012).

There are several directions for future research. First, there needs to be further examination to determine whether exposure to working with young people with disabilities in a training context impacts future hiring practices. It may be that some supervisors are willing to participate in training programs for youth with disabilities but might not hire youth with disabilities in competitive circumstances. Second, future research should explore whether employers' experiences of working with youth with disabilities differs by type of and size of company.

Acknowledgements

Funding for this employment training program is made possible by annual donor funding from *Capital One*. Funding for the data analysis of this paper was provided by an institutional start-up grant. We are also grateful for the research assistance from Suzanne Robinson and Meghann Proulx.

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