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**Episode 24:** Facilitators and Barriers to Employment for People with Physical Disabilities: Results of a National Survey

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SHARON PARMET, HOST:

On this episode of INside the OUTcomes, we'll be talking about the barriers and facilitators to employment for people with physical disabilities and the factors that make it more likely that someone with a disability will stay employed. My two guests are my colleagues in the Center for Rehabilitation Outcomes Research at Shirley Ryan AbilityLab, [Emily Dinelli](https://www.sralab.org/research/labs/cror/news/emily-dinelli-combining-clinical-work-and-research-help-people-who-use-prosthetic-devices), a graduate research assistant in CROR and [Angelika Kudla](https://www.sralab.org/researchers/angelika-kudla-ms-lcmhca), a senior project coordinator. Emily and Angelika are each the lead authors on papers\* on findings about employment based on a national survey of people with disabilities. Welcome to the podcast, Angelika and Emily.

\*Dinelli EJ, Crown D, Kudla A, Capraro P, Sheth M, Trierweiler R, Munsell E, Heinemann AW. [Facilitators and barriers to employment for people with adult-onset physical disabilities: results from a U.S.A. survey](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39213121/). Work. 2024;79(3):1433-1450. doi: 10.3233/WOR-240087. PMID: 39213121.

Kudla A, Dinelli EJ, Capraro P, S Crown D, Sheth M, Trierweiler R, Munsell E, Wong J, Heinemann AW. [Person-, Job-, and Environment-Related Factors Associated with Long-Term Job Retention of People with Physical Disabilities](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39488815/). J Occup Rehabil. 2024 Nov 3. doi: 10.1007/s10926-024-10245-4. Epub ahead of print. PMID: 39488815.

EMILY:

Thank so much for having us, we’re so glad to be here.

ANGELIKA:

Yeah, it’s fun. I’m happy to finally be on the podcast.

SHARON:

Okay, so Emily, I'm going to start with you. Can you tell me a little bit about this national survey, why you conducted the survey, who was surveyed? And just describe it a little bit.

EMILY:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. Thanks so much for wanting to hear about this project. It's been near and dear to our hearts. We've worked on it for several years now.

And just to give some background, it's a part of a larger [Rehabilitation Research and Training Center](https://www.sralab.org/research/labs/Disability-Employment) that's been ongoing for the past, like six years. So many people have contributed to this project, the data collection and the planning. We've had advisory councils who've given really great input in this project. So thank you to everyone who's been a part of this, and this has kind of been the last step to this project. It's crazy to see it come to an end.

In the survey, we really wanted to understand the experiences of employment for people with physical disabilities, because that's mostly the population we serve at the Shirley Ryan AbilityLab, and we wanted to understand it both from the employee's perspective and the employer’s perspective.

Today we will really just be focusing on the employee perspective through our papers as they were both focused on the employee survey. But throughout the project we really wanted to understand this phenomenon through a holistic view both sides of the story, to understand really what it means for a person with disability to return to work, what barriers exist, what role job accommodations play in that, returning to work and maintaining a job, and what rehabilitation professionals and employers can focus on to improve employee employment rates and retention for people with physical disabilities. And we really did focus on the needs of people with physical disabilities because we know there are disparities when it comes to employment for this population. People with disabilities historically have higher rates of unemployment compared to those without disabilities. Yet many people with disabilities are willing and able to join the workforce, but just may need the appropriate accommodations to do so. So because of this reality, we really wanted to gather data that was representative of the United States, a national sample that could be generalizable to people all over to help support the needs of people with disabilities, with joining the workforce.

SHARON:

So with this national survey, can you tell us a little bit more about who answered the survey questions? How many people? What were some of the questions like?

EMILY:

Yeah. So we actually partnered with this market research company called Slice EMR to gather our sample. We had a large sample. We had 2,000 people who responded both to the employee survey and then 2,000 more employers who responded to the employer survey. So they were really key and getting the people that we wanted for this survey. They have a very large research panel of like 500,000 individuals which they built using various recruitment processes.

But through that research panel you can identify demographic and geographic characteristics that allowed them to fulfill our stratification targets for education level geography. And we did want a stratification of people who did work after their disability. And for people we had a similar… about 25% of the sample that didn't work after their disability onset. So we had a little bit of difference in experience there.

And first, as to what types of questions we asked these individuals, we asked a lot of questions. Obviously, we asked, did they work for pay after their disability or not? And for those who didn’t, what was their reason for not working after their disability? To really understand what went into making that decision and what barriers exist there. We also asked for people that did work after their disability, while they were working at their longest held job. We kind of focused like we focused on longest held job because employment can really shift over time and, and we wanted to think about what factors go into keeping a long term job. So we wanted them to focus on, what went into keeping your longest held job since your disability diagnosis? And we asked how important were the following for working after your disability and questions or some of the response or the questions were, was it important to have opportunities for advancement in the workplace? How important was it for making enough money to pay your bills, for having financial security to support yourself and your family and having health benefits and disability insurance, those types of factors. How important were they in your decision to stay working at this job? We also asked questions about, were they promoted? Did they receive help from family and friends with keeping their longest held job? And what factors affected the ability to stay at that job? So we got a lot of we have a lot of information and we can't talk about it all now, but we did ask so many questions.

ANGELIKA:

I additionally just will add that the national survey, since as Emily mentioned before, this was a project that went on for several years. So we had a Midwest survey and so we had a bunch more questions there. So we kind of went through a trial and error of which questions and which factors we really wanted to focus on. But the main key points were that we really wanted to look at like personal identifiable health related disability related factors as well as employment related factors like how the job treats them. And then obviously, because of the grant and our project being really focused on job accommodations, we had a very large amount of job accommodation questions as well, which as Emily said, there was a lot of information we can't talk about at all today, but I'm sure we can share some.

SHARON:

Well, I want to mention that, yes, this was all supported by a grant and it was supported by a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research. I want to just make sure people know that. So, Emily, what were some of the findings?

EMILY:

So we looked at both person-level variables and work-related variables and what role they play in returning to work after disability onset and also maintaining employment at a long term job after disability onset.

And some of the key variables we found that were associated with staying in a long-term job after disability were receiving a job accommodation from an employer, support from human resource managers, having opportunities for advancement in the workplace and health care benefits. And so I'll talk about each of these a little more specifically.

And for when we think about job accommodations, those who reported that they received a job accommodation from their employer were about 17% more likely to still be working at their long-term job compared to those who did not. And I think this is a really important finding and actually one we're digging into more with our third paper, that is still being analyzed right now and prepared for dissemination. But I think it highlights the role that employers play in creating an accessible and accommodative environment for their employees. And with this variable, we don't get into the specifics of the type of job accommodation, but I think future work should consider what types of job accommodations and who received them and who didn't receive them, and how can we find ways to make sure that people with disabilities have the support they need in the workplace. So I found this variable or this finding really interesting.

And also we asked questions about various factors that were either helpful in keeping their job or more difficult. And as I mentioned, human resources, that that role, that role that human resources plays in the employment of people with disabilities was significant. And people that reported that when HR attitudes towards them were helpful in keeping their job, there were almost 30% more likely to still be working at that job. And this might indicate that when people with disabilities feel supported by their HR department, they're more likely to stay at their job. And I think it's just an important finding that the HR department, you play a such a significant role in the likelihood of staying at a job, the comfort and the enjoyment of a job. I think that is a really key finding from this aspect of the study.

And we also saw that people that reported opportunities for advancement in the workplace when that was really important to them, were almost 50% more likely to still be at that job compared to those who did not report it as important. And while advancement might look different from job to job, I think a big takeaway from this is that when people with physical disabilities feel empowered for growth in their workplace, they're more likely to stay. And there's so much that people with disabilities can bring to a place of employment and employers, they can like use this finding to maybe support how they think about encouraging growth and advancement for their employees, especially those with disabilities in the workplace. So I really found that a valuable finding as well.

And then the last one I'll talk about was that one of the biggest associations we saw in our study was that people who reported that it is important for them to keep their health and disability benefits were about 65% more likely to still be working at that long term job. And these findings are consistent with other research that found people with low severity, high-cost health conditions are more likely to keep working if they rely on their employers health insurance. And I think this highlights the fact that people with physical disabilities, they might have high-cost medical needs and employers should consider these needs when determining the provision of health benefits for their employees, the resources they offer to them. I think that's so valuable for this population and really helps them retain their jobs because they feel supported by their employer. They can get their medical needs met. They can have additional resources that might be provided by the employer that benefits their health and well-being and even their mental health. So I think that's an important thing that employers can take away from this is how can I support the needs of my employees, especially from a health perspective.

SHARON:

Well, those are really fascinating findings, and I think they do go a long way to inform employers on what they can do to support and retain people with physical disabilities in the workforce. Angelika, you just yesterday sent me a link to your paper that you were the lead author on in the Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation. And you took a different spin on the findings from the same survey that Emily described. So can you tell us a little bit about your paper or your findings, what you looked at?

ANGELIKA:

Yeah, definitely. I think Emily's paper, as she said, covered a lot of working with people with disabilities, and then she compared not working with the disability. We kind of wanted to go a step further and really focus on job retention.

So this paper focused on the sample size of the people with disability physical disabilities who have worked in their job. And we kind of split the group between those who have worked less than four years and more than four years just based on the national average across the general population. This was also just a really important survey and results to do this kind of long-term job retention. As most studies in the past have looked at job retention for people with physical disabilities are limited to typically around 90 days, which is usually like a, you know, a probationary period amongst most employers or around six months where state vocational rehab services followed. So having a survey that looks at long term job retention more than four years plus, it was truly, I would say, the uniqueness of this survey.

Some of the findings we talked about are kind of similar to what Emily found. But I think what we really found is that several factors that actually had an associated increased likelihood of long-term job retention is increased age, improve mental health outcomes, job promotions, viewing career as advancement opportunities as important. Something that Emily mentioned and job accommodations as well as commute was a big one.

We also looked at the decreased likelihood of long-term job retention and those who reported viewing financial security as important. Also looking at whether it's important to disclose a disability status to coworkers. And then also, we did notice that there was a big disparity between males and females. The few that I want to focus on is that job accommodations was about a 53%, 53.5 to be exact percent likelihood of increased job retention, which is a huge probably one of our more significant findings. And to Emily's point, we are looking at the different job accommodations in a further paper. But this shows that just in general, employers that provide job accommodations are more likely to retain their employees with disabilities, not only get people with disabilities, but retain them for a longer period of time.

The other finding that I think was really important was that those who had to commute showed a decreased likelihood and keeping their job for a longer period of time. And so it shows the importance and especially it kind of supports with studies that came out after Covid, that hybrid work or remote work can be truly beneficial for a lot of employees with disabilities and how they would more likely retain their job for a longer period of time.

Also, people who improved had an improved mental health outcome had an also likelihood of retaining their job for a longer period of time. And I think that's a really important finding. That also is like a binary finding where individuals who have disabilities are more likely to stay at their job if they have improved mental health. But also there are studies out there that show that people with disabilities have better mental health who are employed than those who don't. So really having employers who can support people with disabilities, with employment assistant programs, having resource groups for people with disabilities, having supportive coworkers and supervisors and overall leadership can go a really long way for the job retention of people with disabilities.

SHARON:

Now you mentioned that there was a big difference in men and women that you found. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

ANGELIKA:

Yes, we did find that females had a decreased likelihood of staying at their job longer, basically. It is a finding that is unfortunately common and consistent across the board for people with disabilities as well as people without disabilities. I think the key take away for the discrepancy between male and female is a big one, and I definitely think that is something that needs to be further researched into why. And also the other thing I would say that also needs to be researched, why is exactly the mental health discrepancies there, too, because that could be important as well as financial factors, family factors, your living situation kind of all comes together as to maybe why we see that discrepancy between the male and females.

EMILY:

Yeah, and I'll add to that. I feel like whenever we think about females and the role of work, it is often women and this would mean we would need to further research this. But often women have so many roles of their often caregivers in their home. They're often working and often they could be taking care of other family members, not just children. And so I think it would be really fascinating to look at the roles that these women had that responded to this survey and how the onset of disability impacted their ability to participate in the community to re integrate into those roles. It's hard to say exactly why that disparity exists. We do see it's consistent across other areas of research, but I think it highlights the need for more research focused on females and their experiences, their health outcomes and hopefully future studies do focus on this phenomenon.

ANGELIKA:

I agree. And I think even our sample size like taking away statistical analysis, our sample size of women and females, I should say, that worked less than four years is greater than those females that worked more than four years and kind of supports the fact that we do need more research on it.

Unfortunately, it's a study and finding across a lot of different areas, and we found it pretty consistent with people with disabilities and people without disabilities as well.

SHARON:

So we kind of touched on some things that employers could do to help support people with physical disabilities in the workplace. But what are some policies that help people with physical disabilities remain employed?

ANGELIKA:

If a employer isn't providing a job accommodation, having policies that maybe provide other supports, like I said, employee resource groups, making sure that they offer some kind of health advantage, wellness overall, general groups could be really important. And I think the clinical implications is that vocational rehab counselors know of these struggles of employment, but really focusing on regular PCP, doctors and PTs. It's being kind of a interdisciplinary group that really helps people with disabilities get not only back on, you know, back to work, but making sure that they keep their job for longer times and then that way improves their overall health outcomes as well. So as we talked about, you each have sold out different kinds of data from this national survey, but we're not done plumbing the depths of the data here.

EMILY:

We are actively working on a third paper regarding this employee survey, and this paper is really digging into the nitty gritty of job accommodations. We looked at 28 different job accommodations and we are looking at what person related variables and work-related variables are associated with their tenure. So whether we're looking again at that threshold of are they working beyond that four year threshold, which is the national average or not, as well as their satisfaction. And I am really excited about this paper because I don't know of many other papers that have gone into the depths of the different types of job accommodations that are received as well as the different industries these people are working in. If they're self-employed or if they're not self-employed, if they're in a goods producing industry versus a service producing industry. And through our models, we're going to be able to control for those variables to then look at how impactful each specific job accommodation is on their tenure and their satisfaction. So that's on the horizon as well as our papers focused on the employer survey. So we'll have several papers that should come out of that survey as well. But the next one up is this job accommodations paper.

SHARON:

Well, I am looking forward to having both of you back on the podcast and I know that the survey looking at specific job accommodations is led by Deborah Crown, who's part of our group, and she will certainly be a guest on the podcast to talk more in depth about that one. But I just want to thank you both for being on. This has been an insightful conversation and looking forward to what's next.

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