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LOOKING ON THE BRIGHT SIDE: EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS EXPERIENCED  
BY EMPLOYED, TOTALLY BLIND NEW ZEALANDERS AND HOW THESE  
WERE MINIMISED OR OVERCOME

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research is to discover what employment barriers exist for totally blind, employed New Zealanders, and reveal the factors which led to success for the 22 study participants. Chapter one introduces the topic of employment barriers experienced by people with disabilities, focusing on those with vision impairments in particular. The work programmes of a number of State and voluntary sector organisations is briefly reviewed, as these relate to the amelioration of barriers to education and employment. Two New Zealand studies relating to employment blindness issues, undertaken 21 years apart, are introduced, compared and contrasted. The purpose of research into employment barriers and the success factors important in redressing those barriers is outlined.

The majority of studies reviewed in chapter two are international. These examine employment barriers and success factors relating to people with a range of vision impairments: from partial to total vision loss. Chapter three outlines the methodology and methods used in the present study. The chapter includes information relating to research design and proceedings, major concepts and variables, setting and apparatus, ethical and political issues and analysis of research findings. Chapter four describes the results of the study in depth, exploring the barriers to employment for totally blind New Zealanders and postulating explanations for the phenomena associated with success. Finally, chapter five discusses the findings from the study (noting trends also evident in the literature), examines these in the light of contemporary vocational issues, makes recommendations based on research findings and recommends further research.

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## List of Abbreviations

EEO: Equal Employment Opportunities

MSD: Ministry of Social Development

NGO: Non-Government Organisation

RNZFB: Royal New Zealand Foundation of the Blind

SSC: State Services Commission

VIEW: Visually Impaired Experienced Workers

## Chapter One: Introduction

The topic of this thesis is: Employment barriers experienced by employed, totally blind New Zealanders and how these were minimised or overcome. The thesis is presented in five chapters. Chapter one introduces the research topic and the purpose of research. It provides an overview of important issues regarding employment barriers for people with disabilities in general and those without sight in particular. Chapter two reviews the literature relating to employment barriers. It also examines the success factors identified as being important components in reducing the impact of these barriers. Chapter three examines the methodology and methods used in this study in detail. Chapter four describes the results of the study in depth. It explores the barriers to employment for totally blind New Zealanders, and postulates explanations for the phenomena associated with success factors. Chapter five discusses the findings from the present study (noting trends also evident in the literature), examines these in the light of contemporary vocational issues, makes recommendations based on research findings and recommends further research.

The New Zealand Government has shown its commitment to employment for people with disabilities in a number of ways during the past decade, including policy statements and funding initiatives. Nevertheless studies show that people who experience blindness are still markedly underemployed (Beatson, 1981). In the present study, 22 employed, totally blind New Zealanders are asked to identify barriers to employment, and to indicate how these barriers have been minimised or overcome.

### *Importance of Work*

Employment is very often viewed as the major defining measure of worth and social status in western society (Crudden & McBroom, 1999; Tillesley, 1997). Paid work is an important source of self-esteem and financial independence, for those allowed to participate (Equal Employment Opportunities Trust, 2000; Freedman & Fesko, 1995; Hunt, 2002; Walls and Fullmer, 1997). Almost the first question one can expect to be asked in New Zealand is: What do you do? Meaning: What work do you do? However, for people with disabilities the question often becomes: Do you work?

### *Employment Issues for People with Disabilities*

*Pathways to Inclusion: Ngā ara whakauru ki te iwi whānui* (2001) notes that “People with disabilities have the same right to participate in their communities as other citizens, particularly through employment opportunities” (Department of Labour, 2001, p. 22). Objective four of the *New Zealand Disability Strategy* (2002) is to “Provide opportunities in employment and economic development for disabled people.” The strategy is achieved through the work programmes of a range of Government agencies. Among these, the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) manages a Training and Job Support Fund developed jointly with the Department of Labour, to help overcome disability-related barriers to employment. Workbridge Incorporated administers the fund.

The Ministry of Education provides supplementary student grants to a number of educational institutions to assist tertiary students with disability related expenses to compete for employment. The Ministry of Health contracts Enable Services (formally

the Equipment Management Service) to provide adaptive equipment necessary for employment. The New Zealand Public Service provides specifically for the employment of people with disabilities on merit via Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policy which is enshrined in the *State Sector Act 1988. Moving Forward: EEO for People with Disabilities in the Public Service* (State Services Commission, 2002), describes the provision of EEO disability as aiming to “identify and remove all aspects of policies, procedures, and other institutional barriers that create inequality for people with disabilities.”

Progress with EEO Disability has been slower than with some other groups. Progress reports published by the State Services Commission (SSC) between 1994 and 2001 illustrate that a diminishing number of people with disabilities have been appointed to Public Service positions during this time. The trend is for people with disabilities to leave, rather than join the Public Service. The percentage of people with disabilities working in Public Service positions was less than the percentage of people with disabilities in the New Zealand labour force, which was 14% in 2001. Just 8% of Public Service staff had a disability in 2001. This figure further decreased in 2002 to 7%.

As part of a commitment to increase the diversity of the State sector, the SSC Mainstream Programme facilitates the creation of two-year employment placements within a range of State sector organisations. These placements are made available to those with the most significant disadvantage in terms of the affects of disability. Placements are created to provide opportunities for people who would not otherwise gain employment on merit within the State sector.

Despite increasing business interest in the advantages of programmes promoting equal employment opportunities for groups such as women and Maori, people with disabilities, including those with vision impairments, are still greatly under-represented in regular private and public employment settings (Butler, Crudden, Sansing & LeJeune, 2002). Even where people with disabilities are employed, they are frequently subject to occupational segregation, usually working at basic grade casualised, and often part time jobs, for minimal remuneration, with few opportunities for upward mobility (Barnes, Thornton & Maynard Campbell, 1998; Beatson, 1981; Bennie, 1996; Mank, 1994; Szymanski, Johnston-Rodriguez, Millington, Rodriguez, & Lagergren, 1995; Walls & Fullmer, 1997). Just 40% of those identifying as having a disability were employed in 2001, as against 70% of people without disabilities (Statistics New Zealand, 2001, p. 17).

#### *Employment Issues for People with Vision Impairments*

People with significant vision loss are no less affected than other disability groups by the issues discussed above. At the last Census of Population and Dwellings in 2001, approximately 81,500 New Zealand adults identified as having a significant vision loss that could not be corrected by glasses or contact lenses (Statistics New Zealand, 2001, p. 66). However, the published data do not identify people with significant vision loss separately in the unemployment rates. In both the United States and United Kingdom, only 30 to 40% of working age adults with vision impairments are employed (Bruce, McKennell & Walker, 1991; Hagemoser, 1996; McNeil, 1996; Roy, Dimigen & Taylor, 1998). The United States Commission for the Blind (2002)

reports that 46% of people with vision impairments and 32 % of people who experience blindness (legal blindness) in the United States are employed.

Similar employment rates have been identified in relation to New Zealanders with vision impairments. Beatson (1981) reported an employment rate of just 40% and 21 years later La Grow (2002) reported a rate of 39%. Beatson's (1981) study of the employment status of members of the then Royal New Zealand Foundation for the Blind (now Royal New Zealand Foundation of the Blind - RNZFB) illustrates the high level of unemployment and under-employment apparent at the time. Beatson (1981) found that when the unemployed and the so called "unemployable" were combined together, 28.5% or over one quarter of the population under study were "in a state of enforced inactivity" (p. 13). When Beatson (1981) added those identifying as "house-wives", "students" and "retired," only 573 of the total 1419 surveyed, or 40%, were employed. Forty eight percent of those working were employed in one of just 4 job types. Eighty workers were also employees of sheltered workshops. Beatson (1981) found no employers or managers with vision impairments.

Beatson (1981) asked who would have the best employment opportunities, someone blind when they sought their first job or someone blind after already having been in the workforce as a sighted person? Over a third of research participants experienced significant sight loss before taking up their first job. Beatson (1981) contends that " people have a considerably better chance of being in paid employment if they were blind since infancy, than if they went blind later in life" (p. 23). Once labelled "vision impaired", the degree of impairment was not particularly relevant to employment status. He further noted the functionally blind were in fact over-

represented in professional and technical careers. Beatson (1981) concluded that people who experience blindness are markedly under-employed. Thirty eight percent of women were in the lowest socio-economic group, as compared to just 12.5% of the total female workforce. This is an over-representation of 27%. Men with vision impairments were over-represented by 36%.

New Zealanders with vision impairments have access to a range of employment related services, provided by a number of public and voluntary sector organisations. Along with those previously noted, the RNZFB employs a number of vocational employment advisors to assist clients to gain and maintain employment. The RNZFB, together with the Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand, commissioned a range of studies into the barriers faced by New Zealanders with vision impairments to participation in paid and unpaid work, as well as to tertiary study. The resulting (unpublished) report: *Increased Participation of Blind People in the Workforce* (2002) examines the difficulties experienced by registered members of the RNZFB regarding participation in the latter activities. The report notes specific barriers to participation identified by both member and allied agency focus groups, such as negative attitudes, lack of disability related information and lack of access to equipment and transport, as well as strategies useful for overcoming these barriers. The report also identifies vocational services most wanted by people with vision impairments themselves, and suggests a number of follow-up studies aimed at increasing participation of New Zealanders with vision impairments in both the paid and unpaid workforce.

A major study highlighted within the RNZFB report is that of La Grow (2002), who investigated the employment, unemployment and underemployment of adult New Zealanders with vision impairments. The purpose of the research was to:

1. Determine the level of employment, unemployment and underemployment for RNZFB members, aged between 18 and 65 years;
2. Identify the barriers to employment and/or advancement for this group; and to
3. Solicit from research participants, possible solutions for breaking down these barriers.

Of 170 randomly selected RNZFB members contacted, 150 people (67 male and 83 female) agreed to take part in a telephone survey. Participants self-reported vision loss as follows: no useful vision – 18%; a little useful vision – 58.7%; and a lot of useful vision – 22%. Two participants did not reply to the question. Data were analysed using standard statistical range and frequency measures. Ninety-one of the 150 people surveyed were not currently involved in paid employment. Of these, 55 were not interested in work, 21 were actively seeking employment and 15 were interested but not currently actively looking for a job. La Grow (2002) does not discuss the reasons for the lack of interest in employment by the 55 people reportedly not interested in work. This information may have provided some insight into whether these people were uninterested for similar reasons to those of the general population, or whether this was largely due to barriers perceived by study participants, relating to their vision loss (Kirchner, Johnson and Harkins, 1997). The rate of unemployment was reported at 14% but when those interested but not actively seeking work were added, the total rose to 24%. This figure was set against an unemployment rate for



the whole New Zealand population of 5.3% as at the March 2002 quarter, and 5% in March 2003 (Statistics New Zealand, 2003).

Whereas Beatson (1981) used socio-economic status to determine underemployment by implication, La Grow (2002) specifically asked research participants their views regarding the number of hours worked, the match between the demands of the job and the qualifications required, the rate of pay for the job and the chances for advancement compared to sighted peers. La Grow (2002) notes that 26.7% reported that the number of hours worked was about right and 23.4% stated the number of hours was a bit too few or way too few. Nineteen percent felt that they were underemployed in terms of their skills and qualifications, 18.5% felt their chances of promotion were less than for their peers and 28% reported believing that they were under paid. Based on these figures, the rate of under-employment was 20 to 25%. Those research participants who were employed worked in areas such as service provision, occupations involving unskilled labour, professional and managerial positions, sales and clerical jobs. Numbers employed in the private sector equalled 45.8%, while 23.7% worked in the public sector, 28.8% were self-employed and 5.7% listed their employer as "other". Over two thirds of participants (69.2%) reported always or mostly having been employed. The average tenure of employed participants was 6.5 years. They reported 7.2 years as the average length of service in their previous positions. Gaps between jobs tended to last an average of 5.2 years, which is a significant period of time out of the work force.

Although Beatson (1981); Hagemoser (1996); Roy, Dimigen & Taylor (1990); Roy, Dimigen & Taylor (1998) & Wolffe, Roessler & Schriener (1992), found degree

of impairment was not particularly relevant to employment status, both Tillesley (1997) and La Grow (2002) note a direct correlation between amount of vision and rate of employment. La Grow's (2002) study illustrates this specifically viz: 26% of employed participants had no usable vision, 35% had a little usable vision and 64% reported a lot of usable vision.

Gender alone did not impact significantly; 43.2% of males and 36% of females were engaged in paid employment. However when gender was tabulated with amount of usable vision, the interaction effect was marked: women with the least vision were least likely to be employed and those with the most vision were most likely to be employed. A significant gender gap also existed where women and men had no useful vision, with men being more likely to be employed (38%) than women (14%).

Kirchner, McBroom, Nelson & Graves (1992) also note that blind women have lower incomes than blind men or sighted women. La Grow (2002) found that women with other health conditions were less likely to be employed than men with other health conditions. Therefore, women with no usable vision and other health conditions were less likely to be employed than any other group in the study.

Although the report notes no significant relationship between age and employment status, La Grow (2002), like Beatson (1981), found an apparent trend between age at onset of vision loss and employment status. Those congenitally vision impaired and those who acquired their impairment in young adulthood were more likely to be employed, as against those adventitiously vision impaired after the age of 40 years. Only 25% of the latter were engaged in paid employment (Hagemoser, 1996). Education alone appeared to have little effect on employment status. However,

a curvilinear relationship between educational attainment and employment status was evident, in that those at either end of the educational spectrum were the least likely to be employed. A significant finding from this study was that 100% of those who reported having been apprenticed or having gained workplace qualifications were employed. On the job training was specifically noted by 27 participants as having been of most benefit to them, in terms of gaining/maintaining employment and promotion (Prezant & Rodriguez, 2001). A further 10 people mentioned attendance at work related courses as being very helpful and 3 had found work experience valuable. By contrast, Tillesley (1997) suggests that: "educational attainment, rather than vocational qualifications, may provide better employment outcomes for visually impaired persons" (p. 4). Training in life skills, gaining tertiary qualifications and computer/typing training were also cited in La Grow's (2002) study as relevant to gaining/maintaining employment.

The preferred reading format of participants was typically linked to degree of vision impairment and did not have any noticeable impact on employment status in this study. Similarly, Erin, Corn, and Wolffe (1993), found no appreciable differences in the learning and study strategies of secondary school students, by preferred reading medium. Furthermore, Fireison & Moore (1998) found that, although people who had attended a special school had a Braille literacy level of 72.2%, they actually earned significantly less than did those who had attended regular schools or a mixture of school types.

### *Employment Barriers*

Employment barriers are a fact of life for all people who experience blindness, whether such people are new to the workforce or well on the way to fulfilling long held career aspirations. Both the studies conducted in New Zealand noted above and those conducted abroad suggest that barriers to employment for people with little or no vision relate to negative attitudes, ignorance, access issues and functional limitations caused by the vision impairment itself.

The *Human Rights Act 1993* prohibits employment discrimination against people who experience blindness, specifically mentioning those who use guide dogs for mobility. This applies to both the private and public sectors. The act makes it illegal to discriminate against a person with vision impairment by excluding them from employment for which they are qualified or by insisting on tasks difficult or impossible for the vision impaired person to perform, which are in any case not essential to the job.

The role of attitude towards disability is the most commonly discussed factor affecting people with all disabilities and yet it is one which is most often avoided by researchers when examining the disability sector (Barnes, Thornton & Maynard Campbell, 1998). This attitudinal barrier was highlighted with the publication of findings from the New Zealand Disability Strategy discussion document, released for consultation in August 2000. *Making a World of Difference: Whakanui Oranga* (2000) identified the issue of negative attitudes towards people with disabilities as the biggest barrier facing this group. This barrier was also identified as the number one issue for those surveyed for both the Public Service as Employer of Choice and

Career Progression and Development surveys, conducted by the SSC in 2001. Hasse (2003) contends that the two greatest barriers to hiring people with any sort of disability are lack of work-place experience on the part of people with disabilities and negative employer attitudes (see also Prezant & Rodriguez, 2001).

The Human Rights Commission advises that of the 786 complaints received for the 2001/2002 financial year, 50 dealt specifically with complaints alleging employment-related discrimination on the grounds of disability (Personal correspondence, 3 June 2003). This may not appear to be a high figure but is by far the largest category of complaint received during this period. It reflects widespread stereotypic thinking amongst the general population and systemic employment discrimination against this group. It also highlights the need for systematic investigation and collection of meaningful data on the employment of people with disabilities.

### *Purpose of Research*

In a study to determine research priorities regarding people with vision impairments, Pillay and Thorburn (1997) identified issues relating to vocational options as needing further investigation. The studies reviewed in chapter two examine employment barriers and success factors relating to people with a range of vision impairments: from partial to total vision loss. The present study on the other hand, investigates employment barriers experienced by employed, totally blind New Zealanders and identifies the factors which have led to successful employment outcomes. Since the literature suggests that those with the least amount of vision experience the greatest difficulty gaining and maintaining long term and meaningful

employment, study participants were recruited on the basis of total blindness, that is having no usable reading vision and reliance on a white cane or guide dog for mobility. Participants were asked about their experience of employment barriers and what factors, including personal attributes, had assisted them to minimise or overcome these barriers. Aspects such as the setting and achievement of employment goals and dreams and other factors identified by participants are also highlighted within this study.

It is envisaged that the knowledge gained from this research will assist people with vision impairments to focus on their employment dreams and set/achieve goals; identify, remove and minimise the barriers to the achievement of these goals; and utilise the strategies identified by research participants to succeed in their chosen careers. The data collected may be of use to policy makers and programme developers when reviewing vocational services for people with vision impairments. The findings of this study may also be of value as context for further research into employment outcomes for people with disabilities and assist to redress any imbalances revealed.

This approach to the study of employment barriers experienced by people with vision impairments was guided by the objectives of the New Zealand Disability Strategy (included as Appendix F). The research was also guided by the notion of disability as a social construct: people with vision impairments are disabled by physical, systemic and attitudinal barriers to the attainment of meaningful long term employment.