

Title:

Midlife blindness and employability: the correlation between societal perceptions of blind people and those who support their employment

Abstract

This paper is based on a qualitative research study relating to the phenomenon of midlife blindness and the resulting effects on a person's employment, employability and the resultant retraining requirements. People, post blindness have to readjust their overall lives and reassess their employment options. The research investigated the affordance of employers (Billett, 2001b), influences and supporting frameworks that have an effect on employment of people post blindness. The participants in this study recalled and relived their experiences via semi-structured interviews. The participants' views of engagement i.e. the degree of which they aspired to enter into employment is a basis of the research. Moreover, this engagement also requires participants to undertake training relevant to their new career directions post blindness. Additionally, the roles of co-workers to allow engagement within the workplace for the person seeking employment and the attitude toward training needs within the company was also investigated.

Semi structured interviews were conducted in 2013. The participants were from five states across Australia. The findings of the research suggested the major components in regaining employment were a persons' determination to gain employment (engagement); positioning (VET retraining) towards the new employment, the presence of a significant other and the societal perceptions of the abilities of the blind (affordances), and hence, their perceived employability. Historically the blind have been institutionalized and were generally employed within low skill based areas. Over recent years the institutions have closed yet the employment rates, by and large, have not changed perceptibly. Technological changes allow blind people to perform effectively within the workforce that were once the realm of sighted people. This paper explores the importance of the significant others and the dissonance between them; training, both formal and informal, requirements for employment of the blind and how the significant other affect the re-entry to the workforce.

Keywords: Blindness, Disabled employment, Significant others

Introduction

The impetus of the research is that the researcher has lived the midlife vision loss, losing vision in mid 2010. The research was sparked due to the high proportion of blind people who are unemployed after vision loss i.e. 58% (Vision Australia, 2012b) and the need for a better understanding of the issues that they have to face (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). The participants were aged between 30 and 60 years of age. The research investigated the situations and experiences that the participants have gone through, and then gained attempted to gain employment.

The focus of the research is of midlife blindness and resultant effect on employment and perceived employability. The research interrogated and extrapolated data to describe the perceptions the participants towards their vision loss. Moreover the research investigated the need for the vocational retraining requirements for the participants and how significant others afforded them entry to the workplace and how this changed the boundaries of employment (Billett, 2001b, Billett, 2001a, Gibson, 1977).

The World Health Organization (WHO) in various fact sheets estimates that there were 285 million people who are visually impaired with 39 million blind and 246 million classified as low vision (WHO, 2012). The socio-economic impact of rehabilitation, treatment, loss of production, and social losses are incalculable due to the very complexity of the variables involved.(Crewe et al., 2012).

Unlike people who have vision impairment for their entire life, midlife blindness is a crisis that others do not have to confront. Not only do people who lose vision in midlife have to overcome the psychological and physical aspects to their new world, they also have to rediscover themselves, retrain for everyday life and then when they have gained competence and confidence in these areas they then have to look towards supporting themselves and their families. In the Vision Australia's Employment Report 2012, the overall blind employment rate is 42% (Vision Australia, 2012b). Employment and the benefits of employment determine many factors of people's lives. Employment generally increases the well being, overall happiness, health and quality-of-life for the majority of people of working age (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012) Employment for disabled people, as a whole, is more difficult and more challenging than for those who are referred to as "*normal people*". The Australian Bureau of Statistics states that 94.8% of non-disabled people are employed, as opposed to 17% of disabled people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Statistics from around the world suggest that disabled people typically live in poverty, or pseudo-poverty due to their inability to gain and retain suitable employment. (Goertz et al., 2010).

The WHO has various conventions for people with disabilities that details the rights that disabled people should be entitled to i.e. education, health, freedom from discrimination and the right of equal employment opportunities are amongst the many rights within the charters. These charters have been accepted across the world and various countries have legislated for the rights of the disabled. e.g. Australian Anti-Discrimination Act (Basser and Jones, 2002).

Literature Review

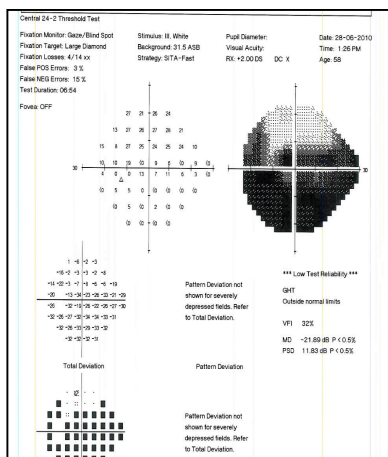
Perceptions of blindness typically are of total loss of sight or of a person who has no light awareness. However, in Australia there are three groups of blindness classifications - Vision impaired, legally blind and totally blind (Vision Australia, 2012a). Worldwide the WHO estimates that by 2020 blindness and low vision will double in number (West and Sommer, 2001).

Worldwide the major causes of blindness according to the WHO are cataracts and

glaucoma. These are reversible eye diseases that can be treated at a relatively low cost (WHO, 2012). There is a vast array of visual conditions and causes of blindness, far too many to discuss in this paper (Vision Australia, 2012a).

The point at which a person is considered blind as opposed to legally blind and visually impaired is a measurement called the Snellen Scale, the typical eye chart (Vision Australia, 2012a). The Snellen scale in Australia is 60/60 or 20/20 in the USA. The numbers are not a ratio but a comparison of what a person can see as opposed to the average of the population. A person who has 60/60 vision sees what the average person can see at 60 metres. These Snellen ratings are called the visual acuity.

Another determinant, that can be used to classify a person as blind is the field of view. This is the angle a person can see from the focal, center point of the vision. This angular



measurement up or down, left or right. To be classified as legally blind the field of vision must be less than 10° (Vision Australia, 2012a). This is measured using a light box of intermittent LED lights and maps the field of vision. A map of the eye is produced showing dark and light areas or non-visible and visible areas; the greater the white areas, the greater the field of vision. (see Fig. 1). This is an eye with less than 10° field of vision. The mapping generates a picture of the eye plotting light and dark areas. The dark areas are areas of no vision. Fig 1 has a reading of less than 10° fields. If this were the better eye the person would be diagnosed as being functionally blind.

When a person who has enjoyed normal vision for a period in their life is diagnosed as being blind typically a feeling of grief and loss overwhelms them. Researchers have suggested that there is a need for counseling services to overcome this feeling of loss (Omansky, 2011, Thurston et al., 2013, Omede Andrew and Tenimu, 2013). The counseling requirements are different for all people and at varying times. Various researcher reports (Dutta et al., 2008, RNIB, 2012, Nyman et al., 2010) suggest that the counseling needs are not a linear process and that people may require constant and continuing counseling, whereas others may require limited services from counseling providers (Morris, 2001).

For the purposes of this research the midlife period was deemed to be between 30 and 60 years of age. This period is perceived to be a period of consolidation of work experiences together with vast changes in private lives, and a could be considered as stressful period due to these factors This period also is the period where people tend to plan and create their future retirement strategies (Boerner et al., 2006).

People who lose vision in these midlife periods have to deal with the normal stresses as outlined by Boerner and then have an added stress of vision loss (Boerner et al., 2006, Sharts-Hopko, 2009). There are functional, and life experience differences between those

who have whole of life blindness, as opposed to people who acquire blindness during midlife. The normal life experiences, tensions and stresses that people endure in their midlife periods are coupled with the effects of blindness. The blindness creates drastic changes to their own attitudes along with changes in societal expectations of the blind (Boerner et al., 2006).

Societal attitudes can be positive and negative towards disabled people depending on the personal outlook and predispositions towards the disabled. Researchers (Morris, 2001, Shakespeare, 1993, Shakespeare and Watson, 2001) argue that there are norms due to historical perspectives of the disabled. Shakespeare and Morris argue that there is a social model of disability whereby a medical construct and a social construct tend to prejudice peoples thinking, and in turn, the societal treatment of disabled people (Shakespeare and Watson, 2001, Morris, 2001). These prejudices, or at least attitudes, are reflected in the ways people are accepted within the workplace and the learning opportunities that are offered to employees (Billett, 2001b).

The rights of the blind and disabled people have been formally addressed by the WHO Charters on discrimination towards the disabled. The Australian government's policies, as with the majority of the worlds governments, have implemented the WHO policies via the Anti-Discrimination Acts 1992 (Basser and Jones, 2002). Discrimination although legislated against can, and does still exist and can be overt or covert, real or imagined (Anderson, 2011). Discrimination and stigmatization is a barrier to employment whether it is real or imagined (Benoit et al., 2012).

In research by Crudden there emerged traits for blind people who were successful in dealing with and gaining employment post blindness. These traits included family support, age of loss of vision and the existence of a significant other (Crudden et al., 1998). The participants of Crudden's research were children transitioning from school to work. Although the effects of the combination of blindness, family and children were not a factor in the research the concepts are transferrable to older unemployed people.

Methodology

The research methods employed for the study to investigate the research objectives, and goals used a two-fold lens i.e. case study interviews, and researcher reflection using an auto ethnographic lens. Grounded theory methodology of the interview data was employed to discover themes and interpret the findings. "A grounded theory should explain as well as describe. It may also implicitly give some degree of predictability, but only with regard to specific conditions." (Corbin and Strauss, 1990)

The case study participants were people who satisfied criteria of being blind or legally blind, have only one disability, were employed prior to vision loss and were employed post vision loss. The participant selection processes involved advertising via numerous email distribution lists within blindness associations. These associations were Vision Australia, Guide Dogs NSW/ACT, Retina Pigmentosa Association and Blind Citizens

Australia. These email lists were Australia wide. Participants were from all states except Tasmania, ACT and Northern Territory.

The challenge at the beginning of the research was to devise methods to both advertise and attract people who fit the criteria to reply and to participate within the study. Originally the plan and the methods for the data collection was to be Sydney-based, and so face-to-face interviewing techniques were envisaged. The original concept of interviews was also changed in line with the changes due to location of the various participants. The use of semi-structured qualitative interview methods originally planned was modified to be a more conversational semi-structured style that allowed the participants to feel more comfortable in their own homes or workplaces.

Findings and discussion

The participants generally displayed similar traits, determination and actions and reactions to their vision loss, their outlook on life and their employment needs. The population studied had a slim majority of men (55%) with the major age of vision loss in the 40-50 groupings, one in the 30-40 group and no participants in the 50-60 age group. The researcher was not included for analysis purpose; he lost vision in the 50-60 group.

Age Ranges	Female	Male
30-39	0	2
40-49	5	4
50-59	0	0
60+	0	0

Table 1 Gender age

Counseling

The majority of participants reported emotional issues when they were diagnosed as being blind. One participant, Builder, organised his own private counseling services for whole of person and did not seek a psychologist specializing in blindness and disability modalities. Builder has a degenerative eye disease and as time went on had to use the long cane. To use a long cane Builder attended a mobility and orientation training course. This course teaches people how to safely travel for their daily requirements. The course also had sections with a specialist psychologist who principally worked with the blind and disabled. Builder stated that the specialist psychologist was extremely accurate in his assistance for his particular requirements in overcoming his personal and family problems and assisted greatly with his work worries. Builder was losing more vision every week and needed discover a way to maintain his employment. Builder did not feel as though there was overt discrimination from employers or the community but did say that sections of his immediate workforce were unaware of his worsening blindness.

“What I found from the guide dogs fellow was that he hit the money, he hit the spot. He knew a lot of the challenges that we were going through at almost you are talking on a similar sort of level. “

Bruce Blac
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Discrimination

A major issue for the majority of the participants was the notion of discrimination and when to disclose their blindness. Most of the participants had experienced what they perceived as discrimination. The following outlines some of the discrimination issues.

Schoolie, who said that she had hidden the fact that she was blind and never disclosed her vision loss to her employer, as she feared that disclosing her blindness would jeopardize her position. She used her previous skills as a schoolteacher to work as a reporter on a regional newspaper. She reported on sporting and other external events, mailing her stories and photographs to the editor. Schoolie completed a PhD post blindness which she believed would assist her in regaining employment.

“I applied to that and I got the job. But nobody realized I couldn't see so I used to make rough notes and they were rough because when I tried to read them I could not. I could not let anybody else see them”

A man who was a Chartered Accountant and regional trucking company manager in Victoria, CPA Farmer, moved states thinking that he would easily obtain a new position after all he had experience as a logistics manager, held a Accountant Degree and was a Fellow of Chartered Accountants and was only 56. He soon realized that the opportunities for people of his age were few. He detailed an interview for a logistics position that he applied for, He was told towards the end of the interview to select a car as part of his salary package. He told the interviewer that he was legally blind and could not drive. The interviewer became angry and accused him of deceit, as he should have said something earlier. The position was then given to another person. The interviewer had a perception that the logistics manager had to drive to do the job. CPA Farmer had evaluated the job description and argued that he could get to wherever he needed to go by public transport in a fast and efficient manner. The perception of the role was that he had to drive.

Another female participant maintained her employment. Her managers and supervisors attempted on many occasions to terminate her employment but she tenaciously fought every step until she wanted to retire. She reported numerous acts of discrimination from the managers and co-workers. She was forced to relocate many times and changed her job tasks in attempts to encourage her to resign. Fighter learnt to use JAWS, a screen reading program, and over time co-workers realized that she could accurately proof read their documents with the assistance of JAWS and her new learnt skills of accurate reading.

The reinvention of a person toward the new direction of re-employment involved modifying and/or recreating a persons skills and abilities with training and access to employment. The willingness of a person to reinvent, and hence retrain is a measure of a persons' engagement (Billett, 2001b) and is critical to the success of reinvention. In the case of Schoolie she had to leave teaching, undertook a PhD, and changed career to reporting albeit in a small regional paper. She learnt computer and research skills along with the use of basic screen readers via her PhD. Builder was constantly repositioning himself within the company to maintain his employment. Builder was afforded

opportunities to reposition and retrain albeit through informal training for each positional change. Fighter was moving to new positions and using new technologies to increase her productivity within the company. The majority of participants had to undergo either formal or informal training.

The majority of the participants had to change career and look in a new career direction. A man who was a *maître d'hôtel* in New York, Blind Chef, lost his vision in 18 months consequently resigning and returned to Australia. He decided to change career and enrolled in various university courses to attain skills for his new career. He also was post 50 and had issues of age and inexperience that hampered his career aspirations. Another participant, Reflex, retrained as a reflexologist, She said she could work by using her hands. She had to retrain in new areas for her new career. Her retraining and subsequent self-employment was as a suggestion from a supervisor of a large mining firm she used to contract for. He knew that the contract positions were to be significantly reduced. The manager allowed Reflex time to retrain and organised accommodation within a high-rise office complex for her to be self-employed and operate her new business. He was a significant influence on her ability to continue to work past the end of the contracting periods.

A man who spent 25 years on a production line in a gearbox manufacturer after he was legally blind, Gearbox, had the assistance of a people who organised his position and retraining. The first worked as a case manager for the Commonwealth Employment Service. He took interest in Gearbox and arranged for retraining services in completely new areas to those that Gearbox had previously worked. After the training was completed he organised an interview and the new position. He originally worked in the building industry and moved to a production worker on an assembly line.

Fighter had the assistance of a friend who was a social worker who would attend formal meetings and advocate on behalf of her and assist with Anti-discrimination issues that she was not aware of. The social worker was significant in her maintaining her position until her retirement. The social worker taught Fighter how to advocate and how to research her situations and needs. Although the friend was a social worker he was a significant other who allowed Fighter to continue to engage in her employment.

Significant Others

Builder had worked for a large building firm as a on-site construction worker and became known to a head office manager. The building company eventually merged and the manager was promoted to a higher level within the new structure. The manager had his sub-managers assist Builder to continually reposition himself within the company from construction onsite to design off site and eventually to head office in the design and construction division, The sub-manager relating that the GM had wanted to find a niche position for Builder for the next 15-20 years. The manager created new employment opportunities, and informal retraining to allow Builder to continue to be employed post blindness.

CPA Farmer eventually found mid term ongoing contract employment with a charity. He

used his accountancy skills to change the policy and culture of the organisation. His manager recognized that he was a great asset to the charity and created opportunities that were non-existent to keep CPA Farmer at the charity.

“She has a social conscience and seen how can given the opportunity can develop their own abilities and bring good things to organisations. She has been one pushing this and without her I don't think the company would have employed anybody with a disability.”

Blind Chef attempted to gain employment after completing a Masters degree in Public Policy and was unable to. He offered to volunteer in a position to gain experience. The manager of the department offered him a position and then guided Blind Chef towards a public policy position with another company and continued to assist Blind Chef with the position. Blind Chef is now in a national public policy position and still has the assistant of the original significant other. His retraining included a Masters in Public Policy at a Sydney University and he is currently undertaking a PhD in Public Policy fields.

A woman who lost her vision due to her retina detaching numerous times did not have the support of her manager. She experienced negative affordances, as she was not offered any participation. She attempted to fight to survive but her position was terminated. She struggled to gain permanent positions accepting volunteering positions in the hope she would gain a fulltime post. She did not have support from anyone, not even her family. The families' attitude was that she was blind and should stay at home. There were no co-worker or supervisor support and she never gained a permanent position.

The affordances within the workforce i.e. the degree by which an individual is invited to participate (Billett, 2001b) where both employees and employers created a collegial workplace is fundamental to personal reinvention, skill acquisition and long term employment. Engagement by employees i.e. the degree by which individuals engage with what is afforded them is also a factor in employment. Moreover the culture of the workplace can increase the workplace learning as many learning opportunities can only be accomplished at work in informal training scenarios (Billett, 2001a). Informal and formal training was undertaken by 82% of the participants, 50% completing Certificate 3 or above qualifications and 33% undertaking a postgraduate university degree.

Conclusion

The findings of the research regarding training and employment are that a combination of factors is at play when people lose vision in mid life. Firstly overcoming the grief of the loss, the turmoil of regaining emotional stability and the acceptance of the loss and the notion of disablement. The person has to determine their levels of engagement in their employment ambitions, i.e. the determination a person has to reinvent themselves. Secondly a direction toward a new career and the setting of the retraining requirements that is necessary to achieve the desired employment outcomes. A holistic assessment of a persons skills and abilities has to be undertaken and any skill gaps have to be plugged by retraining, either formally or informally.

Gaining employment is another challenge due to the affordances offered by society as to the perceived abilities of blind people. As mentioned earlier some 58% of blind people who want to work are unemployed, a huge untapped pool of willing employees. Governments, Blindness Associations and major companies should develop and implement an awareness programs to change the perceptions towards the blind.

The vast majority of the participants undertook formal training at or above AQF Certificate 3 levels that directly or indirectly assisted in employment post blindness. They were employed and their positions maintained because people assisted them, they became significant others, sponsors, patrons and mentors.

The research investigated the factors affecting people who lose vision in midlife and their employment prospects; the role of training, both formal and informal was shown to be a major element in their employment post blindness. Future research specifically investigating formal training opportunities for people who lose vision in mid life and the affects on employment is recommended.

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