

Employers discriminate against qualified workers with disabilities, study reveals

6 November 2015, by Dory Devlin



The research team carefully crafted robust resumes and matched the experience to job openings on a major job-search website. No employer was applied to twice. There were two candidate profiles—one with six years' experience, the other about a year out of college. Candidates with and without disabilities were equally qualified. One-third of the cover letters mentioned no disability, while one-third revealed a spinal cord injury and the other third Asperger's syndrome, both conditions chosen because they would not affect the accounting abilities required.

Researchers at Rutgers and Syracuse universities found that employers discriminate against qualified job applicants with disabilities. Credit: Shutterstock

Employers are more likely to discriminate against highly qualified job applicants who have disabilities than equally qualified candidates who do not, according to a study by Rutgers University and Syracuse University.

In the first field study of its kind in the United States, researchers sent out more than 6,000 fictitious resumes and cover letters for advertised accounting jobs. The overall result: Employers expressed interest 26 percent less often in candidates who disclosed disabilities in cover letters.

"Field experimentation like this allows us to capture real-world experience," said Mason Ameri, one of the researchers and a Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations doctoral candidate. Previous research on similar discrimination has centered on surveys of human resources personnel and company leaders and involved hypothetical scenarios, which researchers say may not always prompt honest responses.



Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations research team members. Front row, left to right, professors Patrick McKay, Doug Kruse and Lisa Schur. Standing behind them, Ph.D. candidates Mason Ameri, left, and Scott Bentley. Credit: Renee Walker

Overall, less than 5 percent of applicants mentioning disabilities were contacted by employers, while 6.6 percent of nondisabled applicants received expressions of interest. The 1.71 percentage point gap represents the 26

percent lower chance of employer interest for applicants with disabilities.

The drop in interest in disabled candidates was just about the same whether a spinal cord injury or Asperger's was mentioned. More surprising and troubling to researchers was that the more experienced applicants with disabilities were 34 percent less likely to get responses than their nondisabled counterparts, who received the most interest.

"People with disabilities are often told to get an education, get the qualifications needed for jobs," said Lisa Schur, a Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations professor and research team member, noting people with disabilities are more likely not to have college degrees. "Our findings indicate that that's not enough. The gap is greater for people with disabilities who have more education, experience, and qualifications, which is a sobering finding."

The study, "The Disability Employment Puzzle: A Field Experiment on Employer Hiring Behavior," was published by the *National Bureau of Economic Research* and received some funding by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR). A similar field approach has been used in well-regarded research documenting race and gender discrimination.

Only 34 percent of working-age people with disabilities were employed in 2013, compared to 74 percent of those without disabilities, according to studies cited by the researchers. That employment gap has not narrowed since the Americans With Disabilities Act was passed in 1990, though this study found that the law appears to be having a positive effect on medium and large companies that must adhere to it. Discrimination was more prevalent among private companies with fewer than 15 employees.

"Based on past research, we anticipated we'd see discrimination, but we didn't anticipate the magnitude of the effect," said Meera Adya, director of research at the Syracuse University Burton Blatt Institute, who teamed up with the Rutgers

researchers after securing the initial grant for the study.

Up next for the research team is a look at how [job applicants](#) with disabilities seeking low-skilled jobs fare with employers. Plus, Ameri will focus his dissertation on interviewing employers about what they are concerned about when they assess applicants with [disabilities](#).

"We need to know what goes through employers' minds when they encounter disability," said Douglas Kruse, a Rutgers economist and professor in the School of Management and Labor Relations. "That will provide tremendous value in combination with the field experiments."

More information: The Disability Employment Puzzle: A Field Experiment on Employer Hiring Behavior. *NBER*. (DOI): 10.3386/w21560

Provided by Rutgers University

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