

Building Confidence: Attitudinal Barriers and Employment for Youth with Disabilities

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Executive Summary

Attitudinal Barriers to Employment of Youth with Disabilities

Young adults with disabilities experience a higher unemployment rate than their peers without disabilities. Post-secondary education helps with finding employment but not enough for youth with disabilities to find work at the same level as those without disabilities. Literature on the topic suggests that transition and vocational programs can play an important role in increasing the likelihood of hiring youths with disabilities (Alsaman & Lee, 2017; Benz et al., 2000; Chambers et al., 2009; Dutta et al., 2008; Gold et al., 2013; Goodman et al., 2020). The goal of this report is to present the survey study on how attitudinal barriers affect the employment likelihood of young adults with disabilities. Attitudinal barriers related to levels of confidence, perceptions of discrimination, as well as performance expectations remain understudied. The theory of this report is that these attitudinal barriers decrease employment opportunities.

The Effects of Attitudinal Barriers

The present study uses a mixed methods approach, combining the quantitative analysis of survey results with a qualitative analysis of the main themes that emerged from the discussions in the focus groups. Survey responses come from 450 respondents across Canada. Three focus groups were conducted and included 3-5 participants in each session. The main themes of the focus groups revolved around disability disclosure, workplace accommodation, and attitudinal barriers.

Findings

The findings from the quantitative study suggest that confidence is an important factor that has a negative effect on the chances of employment of youth with disabilities. The effect of transition programs is not as significant in this study because most post-secondary students go through the programs that only assist with résumé and interview preparation rather than programs that provide work experience. A surprising finding is that young people with disabilities with high perception of performance expectation for themselves are more likely to be employed, which is likely due to their willingness to work more and the relative insignificance of the work taking longer hours for them. Youth with disabilities' perception of discrimination against them does not seem to be an important factor in the quantitative results, but is more prevalent in the focus groups. This is evident through discussions about the reactions of employers to a disability disclosure. Focus group participants reported feeling as though some employers changed their attitudes following the disclosure and decided not to hire them, likely due to their disabilities.

Conclusion

Attitudinal barriers are factors that have an impact on the employment of young people with disabilities. A person's low confidence has a strong negative effect on their getting employment; as confidence increases, the likelihood of getting employed increases as well. There is a great variation in experiences of young people with disabilities and attitudinal

barriers are only a fraction what affects employment outcomes. However, these barriers can be paid attention to and addressed by transition programs, vocational training, or employment programs.

Introduction

Youth with disabilities experience greater difficulties with gaining employment in comparison to their counterparts without disabilities. Youth with disabilities typically have higher unemployment rates than their peers, and those who do find employment are more likely to be underemployed (Government of Canada, 2014). Most research in this area focuses on those who finish high school, while post-secondary students are somewhat understudied.

Previous studies have reached different conclusions about how much a person's disability impacts their employment prospects. Evidence from such studies suggests that there is no significant difference in employment outcomes between youth with and without disabilities with post-secondary education (Madaus, 2006). However, the evidence from at least Canada suggests the contrary (Government of Canada, 2014). In the literature, the major factor that has been identified as helping youths with disabilities to gain employment is participation in vocational training or transition programs that help participants with gaining experience. However, attitudinal barriers to employment are rather understudied.

The contribution of this study is to focus on attitudinal barriers as predictors for employment outcomes. The survey conducted for this study presents a unique dataset to test the proposed assumptions and theory. The survey data focuses on young people with disabilities who either graduated from college, university, or at least participated in post-secondary courses. Along with the quantitative analysis of the survey data, focus groups comprised of 12 volunteers from the 450 survey participants contributed qualitative data.

Literature Review

Vocational Training and Transition Programs

The primary determinant of successful employment outcomes identified in the literature is participation in either vocational training or transitional programs that support the participants' transition from high school to work (Alsaman & Lee, 2017; Benz et al., 2000; Chambers et al., 2009; Dutta et al., 2008; Gold et al., 2013; Goodman et al., 2020). The outcomes are affected by different factors that range from the severity of disability and the amount of volunteer and work experience held by each individual. Because most research that focuses on vocational training and transition programs focuses on high school students, there is a lack of studies that focus on post-secondary students. Most of these studies use quantitative methods that range from chi-squared tests to logistic regression where the employment outcome is the binary dependent variable where one either receives a job or does not. The data for such studies comes from national or regional representative surveys.

Structural and Contextual Factors

Some studies look at whether school structural factors have a significant effect on the employment outcomes of youth with disabilities (Lindsay et al., 2015). This study analyzed the interview responses of both youth and employers. The results show that youth with disabilities have fewer social connections in comparison to their peers which often leads to reduced employment. There are also structural barriers such as policy, funding, the overall state of the economy, and the perception of stigma and discrimination from employers. Employers often lack knowledge and awareness about the issues of youth with disabilities and their accommodation (Lindsay et al., 2015). There is also evidence of contextual factors having an effect on employment outcomes of youth with disabilities (Alsaman & Lee, 2017). The findings from this study demonstrate an indirect effect of state unemployment rates on the employment outcomes of youth with disabilities (Alsaman & Lee, 2017). Therefore, contextual and structural factors should be taken into consideration.

Parental Influence

The other factor that has been identified as possibly significant in affecting the employment outcomes of youth with disabilities is overprotection from family members. Some studies have shown that the parents of a young person with a disability can prevent their child from gaining volunteer or work experience. Parents often feel that their child either does not need the experience or cannot do the job (Lindsay et al., 2015).

Gaps in the Literature

Most studies do not research in-depth the attitudinal barriers of youth with disabilities to gaining employment. Only one study mentions the perceptions of discrimination that surfaced in the interviews with youth with disabilities (Stodden et al, 2005). There are not enough large-n studies that focus on this type of factor. Thus, a large-n study with sufficient data for testing employment outcomes and attitudinal barriers such as self-confidence, perception of higher performance expectation, and perception of discrimination is needed.

Theory

The study under discussion in this report focuses on attitudinal barriers to gaining employment for youth with disabilities. In particular, the study examines the effects of perceptions of discrimination, self-confidence, and the perception of performance expectation and how these factors affect employment outcomes. The main dependent variable of the study is employment outcome which is a binary variable in which there is either gained employment or no employment. Attitudinal barriers act as independent variables, and they are supposed to be explanatory factors.

The other possible theory to test is the indirect effect of attitudinal barriers. The majority of the literature identifies vocational training and other transitional programs as the main explanatory variable. Thus, the attitudinal barriers can act as a mediating variable which means that it impacts the relationship between the participation in transition programs and employment outcome. The expectation is that greater attitudinal barriers will decrease the likelihood of gaining employment for youth with disabilities. However, that effect is

difficult to test because of a relatively small sample size, so only the direct effects are tested.

H_1 : The greater the perception of discrimination, the less likely to gain employment.

H_2 : The lower self-confidence is, the less likely to gain employment.

H_3 : The greater the performance expectation is, the less likely to gain employment.

Data and Methods

The data for the study came from a survey that was administered online via the Disability Foundation's [website](#). The survey was promoted to youth with disabilities in the 17-29 age group who are located in Canada. Focusing on this age group covers a gap in research on this topic. Most studies look at high school graduates and not university or college graduates. The survey's questions were focused on the topic of attitudinal barriers as well as the possible workplace accommodations for youth with disabilities. The survey also investigated respondents' participation in transition programs since it is an important control variable. The scale of the survey is national, and Canadian universities and colleges were contacted to help promote the survey to their students. Disability organizations were also asked to share advertisements on social media.

The quantitative aspect of the study involved analysis of survey results using methods such as logistic regression to analyze how different variables, such as transition programs, performance expectation, perception of discrimination, and confidence, impacted respondent's employment status. In order to understand the results of the quantitative study, one needs to explain the method of analysis. The results are presented in log odds the interpretation of which requires explanation. The log odds generally range from -2.7 to 2.7, where -2.7 is close to 1% likelihood of an independent variable having an effect on the dependent variable while 2.7 is close to 99% likelihood of an event happening. 0 log odds mean that the effect of an independent variable is 50% likelihood of an independent variable having an effect on the dependent variable.

The second stage of the study is qualitative with the focus groups as the primary method of data collection. The qualitative aspect of this project consists of three focus groups that were conducted online via Zoom. The number of participants in these focus groups ranged from 3 to 5 people and these sessions lasted 1-2 hours. The focus groups consisted of the people who took the survey and agreed to participate in the qualitative stage of the research process. The participants' backgrounds were diverse and included young people from across Canada. Focus group participants included those living with both visible and invisible disabilities and consisted of a variety of physical disabilities. In these focus groups, the goal was to gauge the personal perspectives of young people with disabilities in terms of their experiences with employment and/or the application process. The focus groups included discussions on topics that were also touched on in the survey. In particular, the discussions revolved around transition programs, performance expectation, the perception of discrimination, and self-confidence. Additionally, in the discussions the topics of more flexible schedules, disclosure of disability, and accommodations were brought forth.

Questions from the researcher attempted to gain insight into the employment experiences of focus group participants and gain a deeper understanding of the attitudinal barriers to employment that each participant faced. The main themes that emerged during these conversations were: (1) participation in transition programs, (2) disclosure of disabilities, (3) accommodations, (4) performance expectation, and (5) confidence. Additional themes that arose included: the need for more flexible schedules, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the job search, and the view of remote work versus in-person work.

Key Concepts and Measures

Discrimination

The attitudinal barriers referenced are an overarching term for three specific perceived barriers such as perception of discrimination, self-confidence, and performance expectation. Youth with disabilities often face workplace discrimination; their alleged inability to do job tasks properly or quickly enough makes many employers prioritize candidates who do not have disabilities.

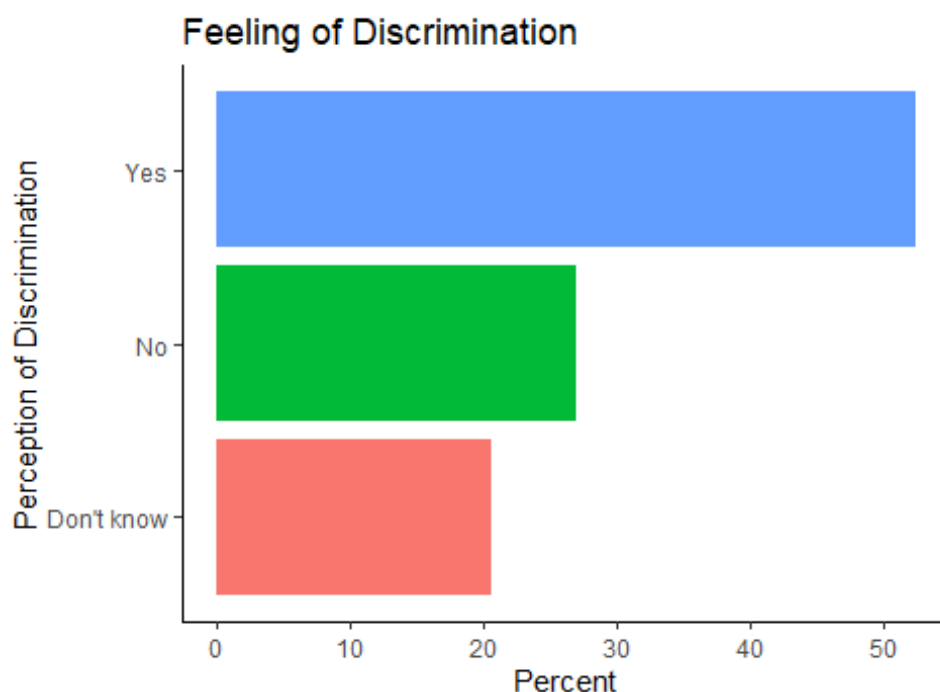


Figure 1: Perception of Discrimination from Employers During the Hiring Process Among Youth with Disabilities

Confidence

Self-confidence can have a major effect on the employment outcomes of youth with disabilities. High levels of self-confidence offer many benefits in all aspects of life. For some youth with disabilities, self-confidence could become an issue since their disability could be perceived as preventing them from competing for jobs and becoming employed. Thus, youth with disabilities who have high self-confidence may have a higher chance of employment. For the purposes of this study, self-confidence was measured on a self-

assessed scale from 1 to 10 where 1 is the lowest self-confidence, and 10 is the highest self-confidence.

Because assigning a numerical value to one's confidence level can be difficult, the study also asked respondents to indicate their level of confidence as ranging from "extremely confident" to "extremely not confident". Figure 2 shows that most respondents felt confident rather than not confident in performing job tasks as well as the coworkers without disabilities. This may show that confidence may not be much of an issue for most of the respondents in the survey.

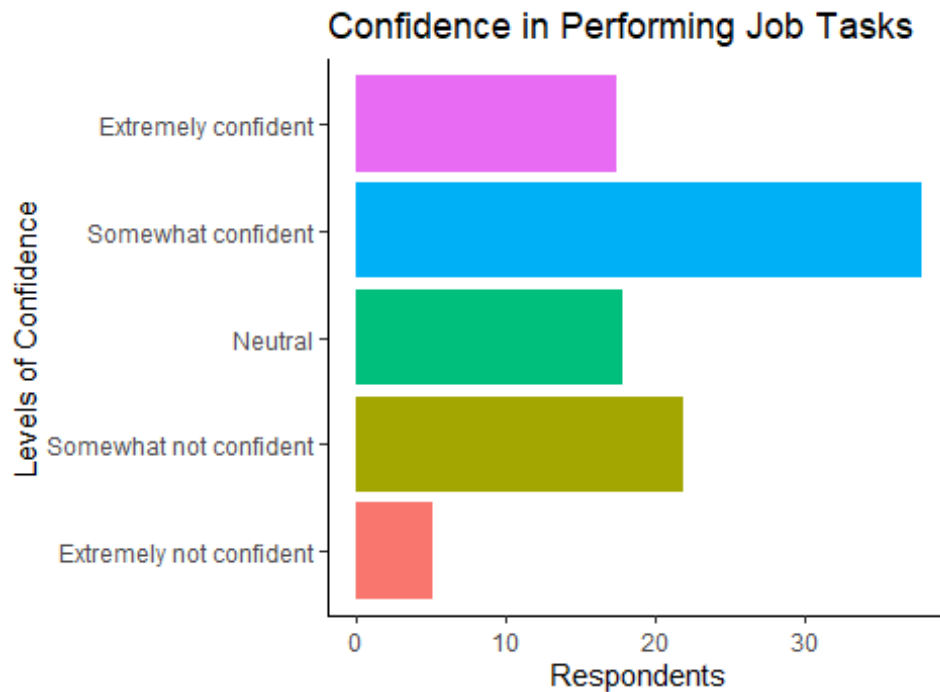


Figure 2: How confident are you in your ability to perform work tasks as well as co-workers without disabilities in the same amount of time?

Performance Expectation

Performance expectation is a concept that relates to an individual's ability to evaluate one's performance and compare it with the job's requirements. For the purposes of this study, performance expectation was assessed by looking at whether a person felt they needed more hours to complete a task than a person without a disability. Most survey respondents indicated that they need more hours than a person without a disability to perform the same tasks (Figure 3). This may show that youth with disabilities could benefit from accommodations that would support them completing employment tasks.

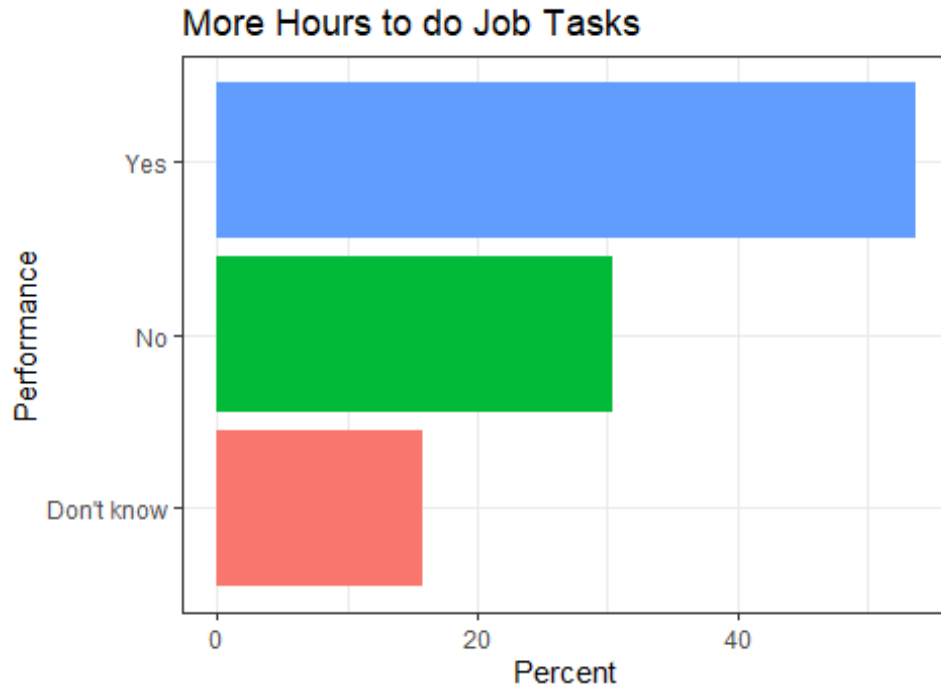


Figure 3: Do you feel that you would need more hours than a person without a disability to perform the same job tasks?

Transition Programs

A transition program is a program that assists with the period of transition between studies and employment. Services offered by such programs may range from assisting with résumés, cover letters, and other services that help with job applications. Moreover, transition programs can offer experience in certain fields or employment co-op opportunities, as well as other types of hands-on experience. Vocational training programs offer career-specific skills in different occupations. Figure 4 shows that most survey respondents have participated in some sort of transition program or vocational training.

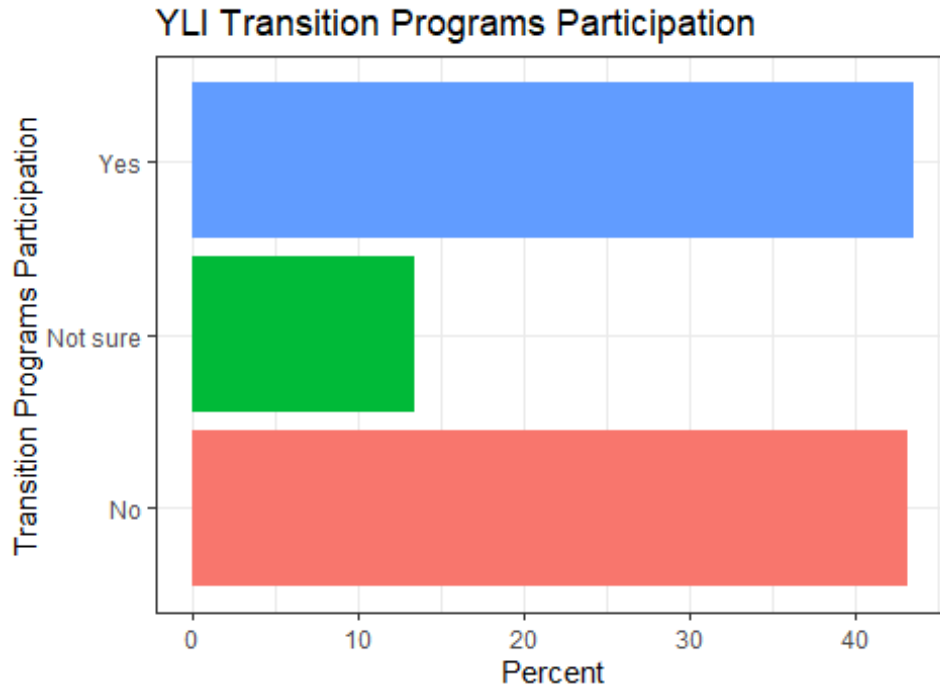


Figure 4: Participation of Young People with Disabilities in Transition Programs

Employment Outcome

The employment outcome is a binary variable in nature because you can be either employed or unemployed, so the respondents answer either yes or no. In the acquired sample of youth with disabilities most of the respondents are employed with half of the employed respondents working full time and another half working part-time. These rates are consistent with the Statistics Canada data which shows that the sample may be representative of the population.

Analysis

Quantitative Study

H₁: The greater the perception of discrimination, the less likely to gain employment.

H₂: The lower self-confidence is, the less likely to gain employment.

H₃: The greater the performance expectation is, the less likely to gain employment.

The first model tests the relationship between the attitudinal variables and respondents' employment outcomes. In this model, the concept of confidence is represented with the numeric variable. The results show that discrimination does not have a significant effect on the employment outcomes of youth with disabilities. The discrimination variable has a negative coefficient, but it is too close to zero and it is not statistically significant, so the first hypothesis is not supported. On the other hand, the confidence variable is statistically

significant and it has a positive coefficient, which means that the higher the confidence, the more likely a person to be employed. However, the coefficient is not very high, which means that the probability of getting employed with higher confidence is a bit more than 50%. Nevertheless, the results still support the second hypothesis. There is also a variable that represents a concept of participation in transition programs. It has a positive coefficient which means that there is a higher likelihood of employment for a person who participated in some sort of transitional or vocational program. The result is not quite statistically significant though since the p-value is not equal or less than 0.05. This lack of an effect of the participation in transitional programs can be explained by the broader term of transitional program that was used in this study. In other words, for university graduates programs that just help with resumes and application process do not seem to be as effective as programs that put young people in working positions. This finding is echoed in the focus groups of this study. There is a surprising finding where performance expectation has a positive coefficient and it is statistically significant, which means that youth with disabilities who indicated that they needed more hours to perform job tasks than a person without disability, are more likely to gain employment than others. This goes contrary to the stated third hypothesis, so it is not supported. Only the second hypothesis is supported according to this model.

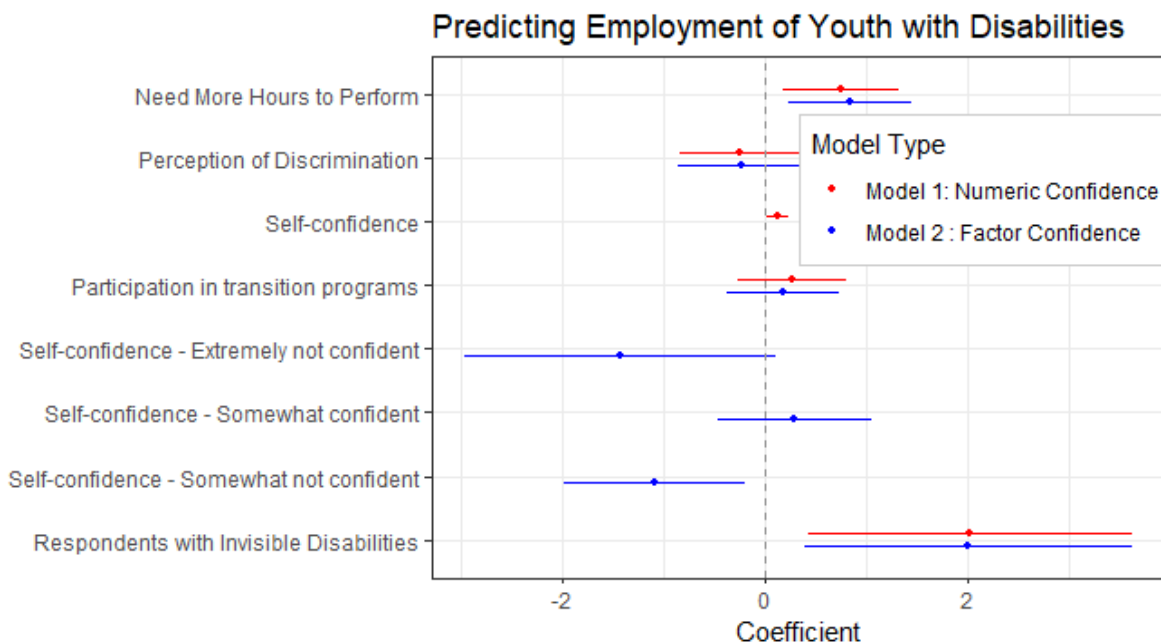


Figure 5: Logistic Regression Models 1 and 2

The second model includes a confidence variable that is categorical instead of numeric. The results in this model are similar to the first model; however, the confidence variable shows somewhat different results. Discrimination and transition are still not statistically significant, and they show similar coefficients. Moreover, self-confidence shows a similar dynamic to the first model. Since the variable is split into categories, in this model one of the categories becomes a reference category, which means that the other categories that are presented in the model are compared to the reference category. In this case, respondents who indicated that they are extremely confident are the reference category.

The results show that people who indicated that they are extremely not confident, they are less likely to be employed with a high likelihood, but that result is not quite statistically significant. A similar result is for the survey respondents who indicated that they are somewhat not confident with the coefficient that is less negative and this result is statistically significant. These results show that there is a chance that youth with disabilities who have low self-confidence seem to be less likely to gain employment than people with higher self-confidence. The result for performance expectation still remains similar with a positive coefficient.

Both models include the type of disability as control variables, which means that different types of disabilities can have a different effect on someone's employment likelihood. Young adults with invisible disabilities have a higher likelihood of getting employed than those with other types of disabilities and that result is statistically significant. The impact of sensory disabilities on employment outcomes is also statistically insignificant amongst the study's respondents. These results pertain only to our survey results, and the type of disability is a contextual effect, but it is not a defining factor. This is further explored in the focus groups in which disclosing a disability is often problematic.

With these results only the second hypothesis can be supported with high confidence even though there are trends that may suggest that low self-confidence could be an issue for youth with disabilities in gaining employment. Moreover, performance expectation may have a reverse effect to what was expected of it theoretically, so youth with disabilities who are expecting to work more hours than youth without disabilities makes one more likely to be employed.

Qualitative Study

Transition programs are an effective pathway to employment for young people with disabilities based on the focus group discussions; however, they are only effective with certain stipulations. The transitions programs that only assist with resumes, cover letters and other aspects of the application process do not seem as effective in gaining employment as ones that teach skills and work with employers to put young people with disabilities into paid or unpaid positions. From these initial placements these people have the opportunity to be hired. The effectiveness of programs that only teach the basics of the job application process lack practical advice in them, so these programs are too general according to the focus group participants.

The impact of disability disclosure seems to be highly dependent upon the type of disability and the receptiveness of employers. The focus group participants who have disabilities that are not immediately apparent tend not to disclose their disabilities unless it is necessary because of the nature of a job or because their employer needs a better understanding of their situation. For those with a physical or sensory disability that is apparent, disclosure is necessary because of the possible need for accommodations during the interview process. Most participants indicate that often there is a shift in employers' perception of them as a candidate after the moment of disclosure, and some of the participants feel that there is discriminatory behaviour towards them when they find out about the candidate's disability. The focus group participants claimed changes in the voice and attitudes of

employers. Their job application was denied; focus group participants described their belief that their disability reveal is a big factor in that rejection.

The process of asking for accommodations is heavily dependent upon the employer and their understanding of disability. Focus group participants indicated that employers offer accommodations when they understand their employees. In the case of employers who lack that understanding, the process of asking for accommodations is difficult and the likelihood of receiving accommodations is low. There are also participants that are concerned about their colleagues' perception of them when they take longer breaks than others, so they need to balance their privacy with a positive relationship with their colleagues.

Performance expectation is assessed in terms of the time participants take to complete certain tasks in comparison to their colleagues without disabilities. The general sense among the focus group participants is that they may take longer than others in certain tasks, but that highly depends on the type of disability and the type of tasks. For example, one of the participants felt that she needs less time to complete tasks at her current job because her disability helps her deal with a hectic schedule and other chaotic things that can happen at her job.

More flexible schedules are more desirable for the focus group participants, but the full-time 40-hour week can work if they like the job. Most participants do need some sort of more flexible schedule for various reasons that range from longer breaks to a dedicated time to attend medical appointments. Moreover, the participants identify that full-time schedule can be draining both mentally and physically. However, if longer breaks are permitted, working longer hours is possible.

Confidence can be an issue for young people with disabilities and issues with confidence mostly come up in interviews. The focus group respondents identify that they may have issues with confidence during the interview process because of the reactions of the employers to their disability and the rejection of their candidacy. For some of the participants, their disability symptoms may appear as a lack of confidence because during an interview their migraines, for example, can strike at any moment. Thus, in an interview employers can view it as an issue. There are participants who indicated that confidence in themselves and their abilities is not an issue for them personally. However, these people require more understanding and patience from their employers.

The opinions on remote work vary among the focus group participants because for some that is a preferable way of working, while others cannot work remotely because of their condition, or they just prefer working with people. Remote work positions have become more prevalent due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These positions offer more flexibility as commuting to work is no longer necessary. This can be especially beneficial for people with physical disabilities for whom movement in general may be difficult. Most focus group participants find that a work-from-home set-up is helpful because it eliminates the commute and the flexibility of working from home reduces both mental and physical drain from working that may emerge away from home. However, there are other participants who still prefer working on-site because of their disability. For instance, some remote

positions require being on the phone which is quite difficult for people with conditions such as hard of hearing. Other participants prefer working on-site because they miss the in-person interactions.

Overall, the main attitudinal barriers that have been outlined in this study can present a challenge to young people with disabilities during the hiring process. However, among the focus group participants the attitudinal barriers appear in varying terms because of the type of disabilities and employer's reactions. The majority of the focus group respondents have indicated that they felt that there was some degree of discrimination from employers because of their disability, so for those with less visible disabilities avoiding disclosing their disability becomes a lot more viable option to ensure positive employment outcomes. Other participants felt their employers were very understanding and provided the necessary accommodations and fostered an inclusive environment in their workplace.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results from this study do not seem to support the proposed theory so far. There is no conclusive evidence that youth with disabilities' perception of discrimination has an effect on employment outcomes. Both models do not show that there is a higher or lower likelihood of gaining employment when the perception of discrimination is in the model. There is a possible explanation that perception of discrimination does not directly affect employment outcomes, but it may have an indirect effect on gaining employment. There could be a similar dynamic with self-confidence where it may have a stronger presence when it is in combination with some other variable.

Self-confidence could have a direct impact though because in the second model there is some evidence that low self-confidence has a negative impact on the employment outcomes, but the results are not conclusive enough.

The positive effect of the performance expectation on the likelihood is an unexpected result that is contrary to theory. A possible explanation for such a result could be that this performance expectation in fact allows for greater dedication and resilience that makes a person more likely to get employed. The willingness to work more hours may translate into a stronger work ethic that results in a higher likelihood of gaining employment. This unexpected finding should be investigated further either with different methods or a different approach.

There could be a specific reason for the results not being in line with the theory which can be addressed to improve the study. The sample size of the study is over 450 respondents, which is most likely not enough to be fully representative of the Canadian population of youth with disabilities; thus, more responses to the survey could change the results somewhat.

The focus groups have expanded the results from the survey and added personal experiences to the study. The focus group participants emphasized the importance of their disability disclosure and the change in attitudes of the employers towards them. Thus, discrimination from employers is more significant than the survey results may indicate. Transition programs that just help with resumes and the application process in general do

not seem to be effective at getting youth with disabilities employed. The programs that appear more effective are the ones that place young people with disabilities in jobs that are either paid or unpaid. The effect of performance expectation based on the evidence from focus groups is still questionable. The focus group participants indicate that they need to work more hours than others, but the effect of that perception is difficult to identify because some participants who expected to work more were employed and others were not. The effect of confidence is also questionable since lack of confidence may appear because of disability symptoms or because of the employers' rejection of their candidacy.

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