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Career Success Attributes of Men and Women with and without Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

Studies indicate that adults with learning disabilities (LD) face many challenges in the working world. They struggle to find jobs (Minskoff, Sautter, Hoffman & Hawks, 1987), are usually employed in professions with a lower status than individuals with typical development (TD), are paid less, present higher percentages of unemployment (Dickinson, Verbeek & Wages, 2002; Kranstover, Thurlow & Bruiniks, 1989; Murray, 2003) and are discharged or resign more frequently (Carroll & Ponterotto, 1998).

These challenges are most likely derived from the fact that the difficulties which adults with LD face as children do not dissolve in adolescence but rather continue to affect their social and academic functioning (Cosden & McNamara, 1997; Deshler, 2005; Lenz & Deshler, 2004). Adults with LD are sometime required to accomplish complicated tasks in their places of employment. While working on various projects, they may be required to write essays and reports (Thomson, 1989). They may have to comprehend, analyze and implement written information (Reich & Shapiro, 1992). They will often continue their education in the form of professional training courses, which require the taking of examinations (Thomson, 1989).

Despite their difficulties, some adults with LD successfully cope with these challenges and develop successful careers. Many previous studies attempted to discover the qualities that assist adults with LD to succeed in building and developing careers. These studies explained how people who had experienced cognitive and academic difficulties throughout their school years, and had struggled in the fields of reading and writing as children, manage, nevertheless, to succeed in their places of employment. The studies offered reasons why some adults with LD are able to overcome the various difficulties and reach significant achievements, while others are not able to do so.

Reiff, Ginsberg & Gerber (1995) have conducted in-depth interviews with subjects who were very successful in their academic career, as well as with subjects whose success was defined as mediocre. Their study found various attributes that contributed to the successful career development of adults with LD. These attributes are reframing, learned creativity, the use of a social support system, perseverance and goal setting.

The above findings have been validated by a series of studies held in the Frostig center in California by Goldberg, Higgins, Raskind & Kennet (2003). These researchers conducted a series of studies in which they observed, for a period of 10 and 20 years, 41 people with LD. they conducted in-depth interviews with the subjects and transmitted intelligence and educational achievement measurement tests. These studies identified six personal characteristics, or attributes, which assisted adults with LD to build and develop their careers. These career success attributes are: proactivity, goal setting, emotional stability, social support system, self-awareness and perseverance.

The current study is based on these six career success attributes for the following reason: these success attributes have been defined as such as a result of thorough clinical studies and in-depth interviews which were conducted with LD subjects and their families by Goldberg et al. (2003). The subjects of our research have learning disabilities similar to those of the subjects examined in the above-mentioned studies. As Goldberg et al. (2003) points out, these six attributes are much more successful at predicting success than are other variables, such as IQ, age, gender, socio- economic level and others. In addition, these success attributes are similar, and in some cases even virtually identical, to success attributes found in the studies of Reiff et al. (1997), Wehmeyer (1996) & Werner & Smith (1992).

The purpose of the study is to examine the differences in these six career success attributes between men and women with LD, compared to men and women without LD.

The comparison to individuals with TD can assist us to determine whether these success attributes are as common among individuals with LD as they are among individuals with TD. Furthermore, this study is the first to examine these success attributes in a quantitative manner. This allows a more accurate measurement of these attributes, which until now were examined qualitatively.

Gender comparison in these career success attributes is a point of this study. This way, we can indicate whether the career success attributes affect men and women differently. In the past, gender differences were found in other career success attributes suggested by other researchers (Fink, 2002). It is, therefore, important for us to examine the differences between men and women in these six more widely- accepted career success attributes, which were found in the studies of Goldberg et al. (2003).

100 subjects participated in the study. 50 of them were with LD and 50 were without LD. Of the 50 subjects with LD, 23 were men (46%) and 27 were women (54%). Of the 50 subjects without LD, 16 were men (32%) and 34 were women (68%). The age of the subjects ranged from 25 to 60. They were all employed in their jobs for over a year.

The LD group was sampled from support institutions assisting adults with LD, centers supporting students and adults with LD in higher education, night classes for individuals with LD and various foundations assisting adults with LD. The data was collected from the participants using a questionnaire for assessing the six career success attributes.

The analysis of the results of the study indicates that all six success attributes are found more frequently in adults without LD than in adults with LD. This finding could explain the challenges with which adults with LD are forced to cope in their workplace, such as difficulty in finding work and the higher degree of employment termination compared to individuals with TD.

In addition, gender differences were found in four out of six success attributes. In subjects without LD, the success attributes "emotional stability" and "perseverance" were found to be higher in men than in women, and the success attributes "goal setting" and "self-awareness" were found to be equal among men and women. However, in subjects with LD, all of these four success attributes were found to be higher in women, then in men.

The latter finding can be explained by the gender differences found in previous studies in favor of women when dealing with difficulty or crisis (Long, 1988, Tamres, Janicki & Helgeson, 2002, Mano-Negrin & Sheaffer, 2004). Another explanation could be derived from the feeling of women with LD who in addition to their LD have to deal with the gender gap in work conditions, a fact that can lead them to activate coping strategies based on the success attributes.

It should be noted that no gender differences were found in the two success attributes "proactivity" and "social support system" among subjects with LD and among individuals with TD. In both research groups, men and women scored equally in these success predictors.

The results of the study indicate a gap in favor of the TD individuals as opposed to the LD individuals, in all six career success attributes. As a result, it may be reasoned that there is great importance in offering consultation and guidance to adolescents and adults

with LD prior to their entering the working world. Providing LD adults with tools based on the six success attributes is of crucial importance. This way we can truly hope to enhance their chances to build successful careers. This could minimize the numerous struggles and challenges with which adults with LD face in the field of employment. They can be guided to set goals efficiently. They can be given tools to help them persevere at work despite the obstacles. They can be encouraged to ask for assistance from their immediate environment. The results of the study indicate that the emphasis should be placed in guiding men with LD, since this was the group that scored lowest in most career success attributes.