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The impact of stuttering on employment opportunities and job performance

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact that stuttering has on job performance and employability. The method involved administration of a 17-item survey that was completed by 232 people who stutter, age 18 years or older. Results indicated that more than 70% of people who stutter agreed that stuttering decreases one's chances of being hired or promoted. More than 33% of people who stutter believed stuttering interferes with their job performance, and 20% had actually turned down a job or promotion because of their stuttering. Results also indicated that men and minorities were more likely to view stuttering as handicapping than were women and Caucasians. These findings suggest that people who stutter believe stuttering to be handicapping in the workplace. The results may be helpful for clinicians who work with people who stutter.

Educational objectives: The reader will be able to: (1) describe the impact that stuttering can have on employability and job performance and (2) be better able to explain how factors such as gender, ethnicity, and stuttering severity can impact the belief that stuttering is a handicapping condition.

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The U.S. economy underwent drastic change during the last century. Ruben (2000) reported that at the beginning of the twentieth century, 80% of Americans were employed in jobs that depended on manual skills. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, 62% of Americans made their living in jobs that depended on their communication skills. Ruben stated that employers who do not require strong verbal communication skills still expect their employees to be able to keep up in today's fast-paced, communication-driven workplace. For people who stutter, this expectation can have a tremendous impact on their quality of life, especially with regard to employment opportunities and job satisfaction. Because so many jobs now require good communication skills, many, if not most stutterers, may be unable to attain the social status that accompanies the more prestigious occupations and professions (Van Riper, 1982).

It is not uncommon to find people whose stuttering has negatively impacted their work or even their entire choice of careers (Peters & Starkweather, 1989). Although there may be several reasons stuttering negatively impacts one's work and/or career choice, it is fair to say that this is not simply because it takes people who stutter longer to say what they need to say. According to Gilmore (1974), equal opportunity for the communicatively disabled can be restricted in two ways: (1) by the negative attitudes of the non-disabled, and (2) by the resulting negative attitudes the disabled may develop towards themselves. The communicatively disabled, writes Gilmore, can experience rejection, penalty, and consequent anxiety, frustration, and withdrawal. People who stutter, therefore, may be underemployed because of both the attitudes of society as well as their own attitudes about their speech.

It has been well documented that the general public has a less positive view of people who stutter (Hulit & Wirtz, 1994). In a review of the literature, Lass et al. (1995) noted that this has been found for a wide variety of groups, including college students, teachers, school administrators, and speech-language pathologists, just to name a few. Nurses have judged physicians who stuttered to be more afraid, tense, and nervous and to be less mature, intelligent, secure, and competent than physicians who do not stutter (Silverman & Bongey, 1997). College students have rated lawyers who stutter as being less intelligent, employable, competent and educated than lawyers who do not (Silverman & Paynter, 1990). In a study of vocational rehabilitation counselors' attitudes toward stuttering, Hurst and Cooper (1983b) found that 50% of the counselors agreed with the statement that most stutterers have psychological problems. Almost three-quarters (70%) of the vocational rehabilitation counselors indicated that employers appear to discriminate on the basis of speech problems alone and 78% indicated that stuttering appears to be vocationally handicapping.

In the largest survey to date of employers' attitudes toward stuttering, Hurst and Cooper (1983a) found that many employers held negative attitudes toward people who stutter. In their survey, 30% of employers agreed that stuttering interferes with job performance; 40% agreed that stuttering interferes with promotion possibilities; 44% agreed that stutterers should seek employment which requires little speaking; 85% agreed that stuttering decreases employability to some degree; and only 9% of employers agreed that the stutterer should be hired when given a situation in which two applicants are equally qualified in all other respects. The authors concluded that stuttering is a significant vocationally handicapping problem.

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