



Enabling the Disabled: Vocations for the Visually Impaired

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT People who are blind or visually impaired can perform almost any job, the possibilities have multiplied manifold for the different jobs that the people who are blind or visually impaired are engaged in today or will be in the future. Vocational rehabilitation is an outcome of the employment process. It may be achieved through open, self or sheltered employment, gainful occupation or income generation. The first step towards the vocational rehabilitation of the visually handicapped begins with awareness of the disabled people regarding their rehabilitation rights and the general population recognizing those rights and feeling responsible towards them. The foremost step is aiding towards education of the visually handicapped. Visually handicapped persons can post-education take up skill development courses in daily living, communication, home-management and travel techniques. Almost all the countries of the world have various laws in place for providing vocational rehabilitation to visually handicapped persons. A positive environment at work, encouraging attitude of employers and proper skills are necessary in order for any person to perform to his/her maximum potential. Visually handicapped persons require special environment that will allow optimal use of their talents and maximization of their work output.

INTRODUCTION

Careers and jobs are an important part of everyone's life. Getting a proper vocation and becoming financially independent are vital to a feeling of achievement and success. A vocation of one's own choice and the financial independence or the feeling of self-esteem that comes with it, however, doesn't always come easily, especially if a person has vision loss. Careful consideration and advance planning by the visually disabled are key elements to successful entry in to their field of choice. People who are blind or visually impaired can perform almost any job e.g. lawyer, artist, accountant, secretary, customer service representative, food service worker, factory worker, financial analyst, teacher, medical transcriptionist, day care worker, counselor, computer programmer, cook, salesperson, clerk, and more^[1]. The possibilities are tremendous of the different jobs people who are blind or visually impaired are engaged in today or will be in the future. Increasing awareness about the visually handicapped people and the various laws that have come into effect for the protection of their rights and also the general change in the mindset of society as well as the visually handicapped themselves has led to improved work-related conditions for these people. Available assistive technology makes it easier for people who are visually impaired to perform many jobs that they never could have before. Proper training, appropriate tools, the ability to sell oneself, and a willing attitude on the part of employers constitute a winning formula.

DISCUSSION

Vocational rehabilitation is an outcome of the employment process. It may be achieved through open, self or sheltered employment, gainful occupation or income generation. ILO Recommendation No. 99, Paragraph 1 (a) reads: "For the purpose of this recommendation the term 'vocational rehabilitation' means that part of the continuous and coordinated process of rehabilitation which involves the provision of those vocational services e.g. vocational guidance, vocational training and selective placement, designed to enable a disabled person to secure and retain suitable employment"^[2].

The first step towards the vocational rehabilitation of the visually handicapped begins with disabled people getting aware of their rehabilitation rights and the general population recognizing the rights of the handicapped and feeling responsible towards them. There may be difficulties in accessing the institutions which offer vocational training or job information and employer concerns about the prospective employees' ability to perform. There is evidence to prove that visually handicapped persons can perform most jobs as well, as most of their normal counterparts or sighted people can and this includes technical and professional jobs. Awareness of rights can be done both ways by way of utilization of the media. Using the media is one of the most important – and most effective – activities an advocate can engage in. This helps in two ways, one, we can

directly make visually handicapped people aware of their rights and second, human interest stories especially TV interviews can put a human face on disability and dispel myths, introducing individuals who become not just "people with disabilities," but distinct and likable human beings with real needs and real problems^[3].

It is more difficult to vocationally rehabilitate visually handicapped persons in India because there is higher incidence of visual impairment, near non-existence of social security benefits, higher prevalence of visual impairment in the working age group, limited education and training facilities, majority of them are illiterate, confined to their homes and high rates of unemployment and rampant underemployment^[4]. Also, Work is essential for every human being, not only for the sake of money and for economic independence, but also because it contributes to self esteem and self dignity leading to an abiding joy for life. For persons with disabilities, it is still more important as the self esteem and financial gains generated out of it would offset to a great extent the negative impact of disdainful attitude of the society^[5].

The most important and first step is aiding towards education of the visually handicapped. Every child with disability is entitled to free education in an appropriate environment up to the age of 18 years. The Government is supposed to set up special schools for imparting education to children with disabilities, promote their integration into normal schools, and provide them opportunities for vocational training^[6]. Children who have studied up to the fifth class can continue their education as part-time students through open schools or open universities, and are entitled to special books and equipment free of cost from the Government. All Government educational institutions and aided institutions have to reserve up to 3% seats for persons with disabilities^[6]. In addition, the Government regulates recognition of institutions for persons with disability, especially those with severe disabilities^[6]. It is also the Government's duty to develop new assistive devices, teaching aids and special teaching material so that these children have equal opportunities in education^[6]. The Government has to set up teacher training institutions for teaching children with disabilities, prepare comprehensive education schemes, provide transport facilities for attending school, provide books, uniforms and other material, give scholarships, re-structure the curricula and provide amanuensis for blind students^[6].

Coming to the vocational training of visually handicapped, a plethora of vocational training courses are being offered by the various countries by legislations, as also by the voluntary agencies and NGOs. Visually handicapped persons can now take up skill development courses in daily living, communication, home management and travel techniques. Assistance is also provided by the government and voluntary agencies by way of vocational assessment, career guidance and crisis management, liaison with potential employers for job-identification and in-service training, on-job training to acquire and sharpen skills and involvement of placement professionals in selective placement matched with the persons' interest, abilities and job requirements.

All these steps of making visually handicapped persons educated, qualified and technically sound for taking up a variety of vocations are essential in order for them to be able to get equipped for pursuing a variety of careers of their own choice. It is not the unavailability of the jobs that is the pressing issue but the ill-equipped and ill-pre-

paredness of the visually handicapped that is the stumbling block in their taking on competitive jobs and working alongside the normal population. A closer connect between employers and prospective employees through training agencies is therefore necessary to generate necessary positive feedback for getting the visually handicapped persons a fair chance to work with the normal population.

After the education and training of the visually handicapped is complete, the next step is providing employment to the disabled. Almost all the countries of the world have various laws in place for providing vocational rehabilitation to visually handicapped persons. A positive environment at work, encouraging attitude of employers and proper skills are necessary in order for any person to perform to his/her maximum potential. Visually handicapped persons require special environment that will allow optimal use of their talents and maximization of their work output. Some realistic and effective changes which can be made to make the work environment more conducive to the working of the visually disabled are^{[1][7]}:

1. Adjustment of lighting by removing or replacing bulbs, repositioning lights and adjusting curtains and drapes.
2. Voice, tape-recorded or e-mail messages to the employees or amongst colleagues, instead of handwritten notes.
3. Desk or laptop computers adapted with screen-reading (synthesized speech), screen magnification, and/or optical character recognition (OCR) software.
4. Scanners, larger-than-average monitors, and/or Braille display devices can be added as peripherals.
5. Large print, tactile, or talking calipers, scales, tape measures, thermometers, blood pressure cuffs, calculators, money identifiers, and cash registers.
6. Aids to mobility for people who are blind or visually impaired include long canes, dog guides, electronic travel aids, special telescopes to read signs, use of public transit, and carpooling.
7. Signs in large print with adequate contrast at level with eyes throughout the office building with a similar format at each change in direction, signs at toilet facilities, near stairs, door handles and doorframes and window frames.

The various avenues of employment are from the unorganized sector or the organized sector. The former include self employment, professional employment, home-workers, cooperatives and community based rehabilitation. The latter include open employment, special employment, sheltered workshops, transitory employment workshops and on-the-job training centers^[3]. The various jobs that can be taken up by the visually handicapped are accountancy, banking, child care assistance, computer programming, counseling, employment liaison officers, file clerk, insurance, masseur, medical-transcriptionist, nutritionist, personnel-staffing, pharmacist, radio-anchor, receptionist, sales person, social workers, teacher, typist and volunteer coordinator^[8]. But a visually handicapped person may also be self-employed and enter into business as an entrepreneur thereby not only owning his/her own business but also will be able to provide employment to others^[4].

CONCLUSION

While disability can be prevented and controlled to some extent it cannot be totally eradicated. Today the expectations of the disabled people in India, like in all other countries of the world, are higher than ever before. Unlike in

the past, the disabled are now known to demand, fight for and win their civil rights which are equivalent to those of the rest of the population. Gone are the days therefore when visually handicapped persons were seen as a liability by any nation. Now-a-days, not only are they fast integrating into the educational system but are showing and demanding equal participation in the development of their respective nations by contributing towards the net national income. Planning and implementing a range of services aimed at making them independent in all respects can help restore the rights and dignity of the disabled people. The Government of India has developed national, regional and district level support centers to provide services to effectively meet their requirements for aids and appliances, education, training, employment and other suitable rehabilitation services. Both state and central Governments offer concessions and other facilities to these persons, such as integrated education schemes, scholarships and fellowships for education and vocational training, job reservation in the Government sector, and economic assistance like rebate in income tax and loans at soft interest rates to make their vocational rehabilitation a reality. The need of the hour is to make the disabled people aware of their rights and strengthen and enforce this law on the ground which has been set up especially for them to achieve economic independence and self-actualization.

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