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Employing Deaf Persons: A Zimbabwean Employers Perspective

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Abstract:

The study explored the views of the Zimbabwean employers regarding the employment of deaf persons. The study was motivated by the need to find the cause to the rapid increase of the number of deaf persons looming the streets of Harare. A mixed design methodology was employed. The respondents were ten employers of deaf persons based in Harare. A questionnaire was used to collect data. The results have shown that the majority of employers believe that deaf employees have the same vocational competencies as their hearing counterparts. It has also been found that employers are skeptical of employing deaf person for fearing to lose clients. The results also showed that employers of deaf persons do not get training on the communication needs of deaf persons. The study recommended that there is need for the government to give corporate tax rebates to employers of deaf employees. It is also recommended that treasury introduce a fund for the purposes of funding projects of deaf school leavers.

Keywords: Hearing impairment, deaf, employer, transition, sign language

1. Introduction

In the field of disability studies and special needs education, the success of any service is judged by the ability of the service to enable people with disabilities move steps towards independent living. Being gainfully employed is the wish of every person with a disability. Freiberg (2003) views transitional services as outcome oriented, coordinated activities designed to move students with disabilities from school to activities such as college, vocational training, integrated employment, adult education, adult services, independent living and community participation.

This research was motivated by the unusual trend that the researchers observed in the streets of Harare. There has been a great increase in number of unemployed (formal employment) people with hearing impairments looming the streets in Harare. The age range of those people varies from as young as twelve years to an average of fifty five years. Despite having many people with a wide range of disabilities, why has there been such a sharp increase among those with hearing impairments? Having been an educators and activists for people with hearing impairments for a long time the researchers can reveal that school leavers with hearing impairments can be as productive as their hearing counterparts.

The looming of deaf people in the streets also made the researchers wonder whether enough education concerning life skills development has been given to students with hearing impairments. Our engagement with some of them shows that their self determination is hugely bruised. This is supported by a research carried out by Lehmann et al (2003). They observed that among all the types of disabilities they studied, youths with hearing impairments had the least self determination, self concept, self esteem and self advocacy. The majority of the elderly men were once formally employed by different organizations before they made a decision to trade in the streets and are not willing to work formally again. Despite the fact that during years of economic decline buying and selling brought some income for this population they are now faced with a huge task of searching for jobs as the economy recovers. The million dollar question therefore is what went wrong? Has there been something wrong with the employers? It is against this background that the researchers deemed it necessary to carry out an in-depth study into the concerns of employers regarding the employment of deaf school leavers.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Hearing Impairment vs. Employment

According to the American Individuals with Disabilities Act IDEA (2004) learners with disabilities are expected to leave school prepared to live independently, pursue meaningful careers and enjoy integration in the economic, political, social, and culturally. The

focus of this study was specifically on learners with hearing impairments. Their pursuit of careers and integration in all the aspects raised above was paramount.

The question that is normally asked by many lay people is whether learners with hearing impaired have personal attributes, skills and abilities that can be used to pursue meaningful careers. According to research carried by Shea and Bauer (1994), learners with hearing impairments were found to possess all the cognitive, communicate, social and physical competencies required to do many careers that can be done by the hearing people. In this study, employers' main concern was communication. It was established that many employers and potential employers lacked education on the communication options available for workers with hearing impairments. It was also established that employers in the heavy industry feared that employing people with hearing impairments exposes them to the dangers associated with the industrial accidents. It was also observed that some deaf people did not have knowledge on where to get career information.

The American Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services (ADRS) has proved that a lot can be done to improve the employability of school leavers with hearing impairments. According to the current website of the Department posted 2009 (<http://www.betterhearing.org/blog>) Montgomery and 10 other cities in Alabama developed video phones, level the playing field for the deaf by providing equal access to career center services. These videophones have got interpreters who provide career information to the deaf and these have proved to be very effective and efficient. Current research has shown that there has been significant increase in the deaf being employed following introduction of these videophones.

According to the Canadian Association for the Deaf (2007) its 1998 survey showed that the unemployment rate for Deaf people was unacceptably high. Fewer Deaf people were employed in esteeming professions and very few were in high level positions. The Association also established that the high unemployment rate among the Deaf Community were patronization, inappropriate education methodology and systematic discrimination. In addition, the survey established that the educated a Deaf person become, more likely the deaf person is to become employed or underemployed.

Also, the Canadian Deaf Association established the following facts:

- The Deaf Community is its own best employers, particularly in the field of education and services.
- Deaf employment is weak in the professions and in the high technology field.
- There are a significant number of Deaf people who are self employed.
- Potential employers are reluctant to hire Deaf workers because of assumptions that communicating with them is too much trouble and meeting their needs in the workplace would impose a financial strain.

A recent study by Berke (2009) also concurs with the claims made by the Canadian Deaf Association above. Berke established the following employers' fears and concerns in his British study;

- Employers fear that it will cost a lot to have a deaf employee because of needed accommodations.
- Communication concern
- Concern about English

In this current study all the issues raised in the above studies were causes for concern. One of the research questions needed to find out the issues and concerns raised by employers of Deaf people. The study also sought to find out the major employment field of Deaf people. It is imperative at this point to explore the success stories for employing deaf persons.

Berke (2007) went further to find out the validity of the issues concerns, fears and raised by the employers and got interesting information. First he established that it does not cost a fortune to employ the Deaf in Britain. The cost was so minimal and tax credits are available for deaf employers. Concerning communication Berke found out that with increased technology, communication between employers and deaf employees is easier than ever. The use of e-mail, instant messaging, chat programs and text paging has been found to be very effective. In addition it was established that the use of the telephone is no longer the barrier because of the ability to use relay services. The concern about English has been found to be genuine to some extent. Many deaf job applicants were found to have problems with good English. However, Berke suggested that employers should bear in mind that the level of fluency in English is not a reflection of a deaf person's intelligence. Thus, employers were encouraged to look beyond English and to encourage deaf employees with weak English skills to continue to work to improve their skills. In the whole question of negative attitudes was found to be the major driving factor for the employees' fears and concerns.

This concurs with an article in the Journal of Vocational rehabilitation, Volume 16, number 2/2001 "Why Businesses Don't Employ People with Disabilities in General". Fears of additional supervision and loss of productivity, fears of being stuck forever with an employee who does not work out and fear of damaged goods from having to hire a disabled person were found to be a question of attitudes. It is against this background that the current research sought to find out whether the same claims were applicable locally in Zimbabwe.

2.2. Employment Status of Deaf People in Southern Africa

In July 2008, the Global Survey report of the Regional Secretariat for Southern and Eastern Africa (RSESA) published an in depth survey on the status of Deaf people. By slotting the survey in its own section it was deemed it gives the situation closer home as Zimbabwe was part of the study. While in lesser detail focus will be given to other countries in SADC the major focus is on the Zimbabwean situation. The findings of this survey were of great interest as they would be compared and contrasted to the current research. The respondents of the study were the Deaf Associations and the Zimbabwe National Association of the Deaf (ZIMNAD) represented Zimbabwe.

Firstly, respondents were asked whether their countries have any anti-discrimination laws in the area of employment, especially for deaf people. It was NO for Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Botswana and Sudan had specific legislation for Deaf employment. Secondly Deaf Associations were asked whether they had any official figures on the number of Deaf people who are in paid employment. In Zimbabwe it was 74 against a Deaf population estimated at 1.5Milloin by ZIMNAD and at 700 000 by the National Association of Societies for the Care of the Handicapped (NASCOH). Thirdly the respondents were asked the most areas of work in which Deaf people are employed in. In Zimbabwe it was education, Sign Language, welding, carpentry, painting, cleaning, shoe repair and hairdressing. Fourthly, ZIMNAD was asked to give the percentage of unemployed Deaf people and reasons. No figure was given, not only by ZIMNAD but by all the 19 Deaf Associations in different countries. The following reasons were mainly given:

- Negative attitudes from hearing counterparts.
- Negative attitudes by employers
- Poor education among Deaf people.
- Scarcity of job opportunities.
- Lack of career guidance in schools.
- Lack of supporting laws.
- Communication problems
- Ignorance

The fifth, question was whether the country provides employment services to assist the Deaf and whose responsibility it is. For Zimbabwe it was no and so for 14 of the 19 respondents. Lastly the Deaf Associations were asked to indicate their main areas of need and the following were the main issues raised:

- Improved access to media
- Employment
- Improved communication with the public
- Financial assistance

The RSESA study above is directly linked to the current study on the aspect of employment. The major issues raised are also the major issues sought in the current study.

3. Methodology

The study used the mixed methods design where both qualitative and quantitative techniques and methods were applied. The sub-research questions were designed in a way that they require qualitative responses. However, some questions which were derived from the research questions demanded quantitative presentation and analysis. These were based on the responses gathered from the respondents. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) define mixed methods research as the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study or set of related studies. Rossman and Wilson (1985) cited by Johnson et al. (2007) identified three reasons for combining quantitative and qualitative research that is to enable confirmation or collaboration of each other through triangulation, to develop analysis in order to provide richer data and to initiate new modes of thinking by attending to paradoxes that emerge from the two data sources. In this study both qualitative and quantitative data were collected concurrently and then analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods. The population of the study included all the current 12 employers of deaf persons in Harare. Initially the researchers needed to include all the 12 employers in the sample but the other two declined to participate. The remaining 10 were automatically included as the representative sample. The questionnaire was the sole data gathering tool used. The questionnaires were distributed and collected back within a period of ten days.

4. Findings

4.1. Biographic Data of Employers

Variable	Group	Number	%
Sex	Males	8	80
	Females	2	20
	Total	10	100
Deaf people employed	0 – 2	7	70
	3 – 4	-	-
	5 – 6	2	20
	6 +	1	10
	Total	10	100
Trade Type	Textile	2	20
	Public Service	2	20
	Construction	4	40
	Carpentry	2	20

	Total	10	100
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Table 1: Biographic data of Respondents (employers) (N = 10)

From Table one above it can be deduced that most of the employers who completed the questionnaires were males. These were 60% more than females. In addition the majority of the employers employed very few deaf people in the range of 1 – 2. Lastly mostly most employers were into construction. Other three trades were textile, carpentry and public service and these contributed an equal 20% each.

4.2. Issues and Concerns raised by employers

The central research question of this study sought to find out the major concerns raised by employers as far as the employment of deaf school leavers is concerned.

Employers were asked whether they think Deaf employees are competent at work as their hearing counterparts.

Response	Frequency	%
YES	10	100
NO	0	0

Table 2: Work competency of Deaf persons

All the employers believed that Deaf employees are equally competent as their hearing counterparts.

Employers were also asked whether they received any training on the needs of people with hearing impairments, see table 3 below.

Response	Frequency	%
YES	0	0
NO	10	100

Table 3: Whether employers received training on needs of deaf employees

The results show that all employers studied were not receiving any training concerning issues to do with deafness.

Question 10 of the employers' questionnaire sought an evaluation of vocational skills for Deaf persons by employers.

Performance	Good		Poor		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Time Management	8	80	2	20	10	100
Inter-personal Communication	7	70	3	30	10	100
Money and banking Skills	9	90	1	0	10	100
Self-advocacy	10	100	0	10	10	100
Functional Vocational Evaluation	6	60	4	40	10	100
Team Work	5	50	5	50	10	100
Decision Making	8	80	2	20	10	100
Volunteering	5	50	5	50	10	100
General Behaviour	9	90	1	10	10	100
General Work Performance	10	100	0	0	10	100

Table 4: Vocational Evaluation by Employers

From table 3 it can be deduced that employers rate workers with hearing impairments very well especially self-advocacy (100%) and general work performance (100%) said it's good. Poor rankings were in functional vocational evaluation and team work.

4.3. Employers' challenges with Deaf Employees

The following are the major challenges and problems raised by all the 10 employers.

- Communication challenges as no backup services given to employers.
- Hearing counterparts sometimes isolate and by-pass Deaf workmates on critical issues.
- Clients are skeptical of Deaf workers.
- Inability to communicate with the Deaf workers by phone during emergencies as messages delay, especially when they are far.

One employer had this to say.

“If one introduces to clients people with hearing impairments, there is a general cynicism which is only cleared once they are exposed to the quality of their work.”

The employers were also asked to comment on the issues and concerns raised by employers and work challenges for the Deaf in general.

Issue	F	%
Communication challenges	30	100
Slowness in doing tasks	10	33.3
Stereotyping	25	88.2
Lack of knowledge on deafness	15	50
English language prerequisite for finding a job	25	88.2

Table 5: Employer concerns (N= 10)

The results show that the communication barrier remains the major challenge faced by the employers in their endeavor to employ Deaf persons.

5. Discussion

The research results have shown that the entire employers feel Deaf are confident, competent to do their work as hearing counterparts. On the other hand, employers (100%) said they were not receiving training with regards to the needs of workers with hearing impairments. Other concerns raised include, lack of self advocacy, mediocre team work and volunteering, communication problems. 80% of the employers also indicated that hearing employees isolate the deaf peer, clients were also said to be skeptical of deaf persons. To confirm this deaf persons in the streets confirmed isolation during meetings. In terms of competency, the results have confirmed a lot of researches previously carried. These include one by Berke (2007) who said deaf workers are equally competent workers. The results also match those by the Canadian Deaf Association (2007) that Deaf people are mainly self employed.

It is unfortunate that this research study could not target potential employers as these could be hard to come by. Their question would only be just by whether they would employ a deaf person. As such the concerns raised by the current employers can help to deduce on behalf of potential employers. The fact that the employers are not getting training makes them skeptical to employ more deaf persons. They fear that they would not be able to communicate with them, thus the communication concern is central to all the other issues and concerns. For example when employers said deaf persons lack self advocacy it does not mean that they cannot self advocate. The issue is when they try to do so through sign language no one want to give them an ear as communication breaks down. They are left out of meetings because no one is able to interpret proceedings for them. In the same vein they cannot be said to be lacking in volunteering because they can only do so when they are informed of expectations. The only substantial issue according to the assessment of the researchers is the skepticism by clients when they see a deaf person behind a desk. This has been confirmed by a lot of researchers such as Berke (2009). The 2008 Global Survey Report Regional Secretariat for Southern and Eastern Africa (RSESA) showed that Zimbabwe's Deaf persons face negative attitudes from employers and hearing counterparts. This has been confirmed in the current study. Also the two researches tally on issues such as lack of career guidance in schools and need for improved communication with the public among others.

6. Conclusion

There are so many deaf school leavers looming the streets in Harare. Many of these have got skills which can enable them get employed and live productive lives as confirmed by employers. However, employers have shown that they are skeptical employing deaf person due to the communication barrier. Employers also fear losing clients after employing deaf persons. The findings show that a lot of community awareness about deafness is required. This will improve an understanding of deafness by the wide society in general and by the potential employers in particular. Further recommendations are given below.

7. Recommendations

It is recommended;

- That the government introduces a sign language training academy where staff in companies that employ deaf persons is trained for free.
- That treasury introduces a fund for the purposes of funding projects of deaf school leavers.
- That schools and organizations for the deaf provide support services to deaf persons in employment as well as their employers.
- There is need for the government to exempt corporate tax for organizations that employ deaf person and other disabilities.
- That employer seeks for interpreter services from deaf organizations when required.
- Those persons who are deaf be exempted from the requirements for English language as a prerequisite for employment.

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