Career Support for Persons with Visual Impairment: A Literature Review on the Issues Related to the Employment of Persons with Disabilities in Japan

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Abstract

Japan faces several qualitative and quantitative issues regarding the employment of persons with disabilities. While Japanese vocational rehabilitation laws encourage private companies to make their work environment more inclusive with reasonable accommodations, such companies employ persons with disabilities mainly to achieve the mandatory employment rate. The present study uses a multifaceted literature review and explores the current issues regarding the employment and career support for persons with visual impairment. The results suggest that expanding job selections based on systematic job matching is urgent for not only persons with visual impairment but also other individuals with disabilities in Japan.

Keywords: visual impairment, employment, career design, job matching

1. Introduction

Currently, there are about 4,287,000 persons with disabilities in Japan. Of these, 423,000 work at competitive employment and about 4.5% (92,000) are visually impaired employees (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2019a).

The Japanese vocational rehabilitation law, the Act to Facilitate the Employment of Persons with Disabilities, aims at stabilizing the employment rate of persons with disabilities and securing their workforce. Under this act, the ratio of the number of eligible employees with disabilities to that of regular employees is used as a benchmark. This quota employment ratio is calculated at least once every five years. Based on this ratio, private companies are mandated to employ a certain number of persons with disabilities. The quota rate was 2.3% until 2022, but it has been increased to 2.7% up till 2026 after the act was amended. Measures have also been taken for employing persons with disabilities who work less than 20 hours a week—they account for 0.5 persons in the quota.

In the U.S., 44.2% of the persons with disabilities were employed as of 2017 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Blind or visually impaired employees account for 44% of the workforce, compared to those without disabilities (79%).Furthermore, about 65% of visually impaired employees have a master's degree or more(American Foundation for the Blind, 2017). In Germany and France, 57% persons with disabilities are employed. Moreover, they have a higher level of social participation compared to the situation in Japan (Ebersold& Zander, 2021; Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2022).

Consequently, there is a need to address the discrepancy in the employment conditions for persons with disabilities in Japan and overseas. It is particularly noteworthy that the number of employed persons with visual impairment in Japan is remarkably lower than that in other countries. There may be two differences in the employment of persons with disabilities between Japan and the U.S.

One difference is the pre-determined versus open employment opportunities. While visually impaired Japanese are employed only within the pre-determined, limited roles (Sashida et al., 2019), the U.S. system is more open and competitive. Instead of providing equal employment opportunities, Japanese employers tend to employ persons with disabilities because it is an obligation to do so.

The other difference is the generalist versus specialist perspective. Japanese employers may prefer to hire more generalists who are able to work under various situations. A strategy to produce "convenient" employees who can be used anywhere may prove impractical in the future (Sakuragi, 2004). By contrast, the U.S. seems to focus on hiring more specialists whose abilities are better matched with their selected jobs. When it comes to the employment of individuals with visual impairments, the current Japanese vocational rehabilitation system seems to exclude many qualified individuals who are otherwise employable based on their real abilities. As the American Foundation for the Blind (2017) noted, the work environment of people with disabilities should better match the characteristics of employees with disabilities.

These two differences (pre-determined versus. opened and generalists versus specialists) might have been discussed elsewhere in the past already, but since the diversity and inclusion concept has been articulated globally, now is the time to review the employment of persons with disabilities, focusing on those with visual impairment.

More diverse working styles and employment values of people with disabilities are required to build a more inclusive society globally (Sashida et al, 2018). However, according to the Public Employment Security Office in Japan, 63.6% of the persons with visual impairment were employed in the acupuncture and moxibustion industries(Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2022; Sashida et al., 2019). The fact that these individuals are afforded social participation only in such specific areas is problematic for their employment in Japan (Nonaka et al., 2013).

A Japanese study reported that it is believed that suitable occupational fields for persons with visual impairment are limited (Sashida et al., 2018). As many as 80% of the persons with visual impairment are in the same working position, even after being promoted. They have few opportunities for career advancement under the seniority-based organizational model with a separate work evaluation system. Their average annual income is less than three million JPY, which is rather low among other similar age groups of the non-disability population.

The career advancement of workers with visual impairment may be largely dependent on the attitudes of the employers. The attitudes of superiors toward persons with disabilities in the workplace and scope for career development play a key role in job selection and retention (Fujii et al., 2017; Sashida et al., 2015, 2018).

Thus, the purpose of the study was to review the literature on employment and career support of individuals with visual impairments.

2. Methods

Using CiNii, Google Scholar, and JDream III as search engines, a literature review was conducted from July of 2022 to March of 2023, using the following keywords: career design, career development, talent management, parallel career, employment, persons with disabilities, work environment, career formation, and career support.

2.1. Definitions of search keywords

1) "Career design" refers to the concept of proactively designing and building one's career to realize a desired future self.
2) "Career development" refers to the way of thinking involved in planning one's career for the medium- or long-term and is linked to the work experience that one accumulates over a long period (Miyajima, 2012; Uchi& Okada, 2016; Waterman et al., 1994).
3) "Talent management" refers to strategic personnel allocation and career development in an organization by centrally managing the information related to employees' "abilities, qualities, talent, skills, experience, and other factors" as part of personnel management efforts (HR Management Association).
4) "Parallel career" refers to engaging in a secondary activity along with one's career. Secondary activities are activities not performed for earning an income, such as working for another company or being self-employed (Drucker, 2009; Ishibashi, 2022; Yanase, 2022).

3. Results

In total, 72 articles were identified. The analysis of these articles was based on the following two premises: "issues and theories related to careers" and "employment issues for the individuals with visual impairment in Japan." Regardless of whether one has a disability, the studies on careers were broadly categorized into the following four types: 1) role models for career design, 2) specific skills needed to build a career, 3) organizing and integrating career theories, and 4) theory application on the job.

3.1. Role models for career design

Having a good role model may lead us to design our own careers. We might even get a second job to work toward the career path we want so that we could further fulfill our lives. Many people who have such "parallel careers" are tackling the challenges by utilizing their "portable skills." It is evident that recognizing and utilizing such skills, which should serve as the strengths to keep working, is key to building a second, parallel career (Miyajima, 2012; Uchi& Okada, 2016).In today's work environment, designing a career in a manner that integrates "self-oriented motives" with "other-oriented actions," rather than having these at loggerheads, is an important skill (Ishibashi, 2022, pp. 7–9).

3.2. Specific skills needed to build a career

Research on individual abilities and characteristics in the context of career development theories has made significant progress. Numerous studies have focused on process theories to understand various career behaviors (Matsutome& Kikuchi, 2006; Okada, 2013; Okuda, 2022; Szymanski & Parker, 2009; Watanabe, 2018). Other studies have also indicated that through repeated engagement in work activities and the development of their professional careers, workers can influence their psychological and social development (Okada, 2013). Additionally, it has been found that women who have settled into suitable careers can conductively deal with personal conflicts and flexibly respond to adversity, a characteristic referred to as "career maturity" (Watanabe, 2009, pp. 8–10).

3.3. Organizing and integrating career theories

Research on vocational rehabilitation and career counseling have support such that their theory and practice can be systematized (Matsutome& Kikuchi, 2006; Okada, 2013; Szymanski & Parker, 2009). However, some areas require further exploration, such as theories and practices for matching the characteristics of the Japanese labor environment with that of workers and theories that explore supporters' perspectives.

3.4. Theory application on the job

Regardless of the organizational model, it is evident that effective communication with employers and superiors plays a crucial role in the career support of individuals with visual impairment. In order to ensure long-term engagement and active participation of individuals in their workplace (e.g., for a decade or more), it is crucial to establish an environment that offers ongoing vocational training even after they start their job. This includes acquiring specialized skills relevant to their occupation and fostering an atmosphere that provides necessary support and cooperation (Nonaka et al., 2013; Sashida et al., 2018; Sashida et al., 2019).

Moreover, while career guidance should be provided to them at an early stage, Japan's current education system does not provide them access to a wide range of occupations. "Getting a job" is first and foremost a short-term goal. In fact, the reality is that job selection is [often] carried out without considering post-hire job matching or career support (Han &Hatano, 2018; Ishikawa, 2021; Nonaka et al., 2013; Sashida et al., 2018; Sashida et al., 2019).

Individuals with visual impairment encounter various challenges in their career development, including factors like commuting distance, transportation options, the progression of eye disease, limited work experience, managing childcare and family responsibilities, establishing a stable lifestyle, developing self-reliance through training, and dealing with frequent job changes. These issues pose significant obstacles to their professional growth and advancement. Considering these challenges, employers, persons with visual impairment, and their supporters need to provide comprehensive support and cooperation to find a resolution (Nonaka et al., 2013; Okuda et al., 2022: Sashida et al., 2018; Waterman Jr et al., 1994).

4. Discussion

By focusing on the "job matching" and "career design" concepts, this study attempted to identify the factors necessary for the career development of persons with severe visual impairment. In order to resolve the current employment issues that persons with disabilities face in Japan, the following four actions are imperative. First, persons with disabilities must acquire specialized skills for specific jobs. Second, they must be matched with jobs that align with the characteristics of their disability, which is referred to as "job matching." Third, they must be provided with sufficient resource support, such as job coaching support in the workplace, technical support through information technology, and collaborative support of vocational and medical rehabilitation. Fourth, work environments must be modified through the provision of more reasonable accommodations.

Currently in Japan, determining which job is suited for a person is up to the company (Shirafuji, 2022). In terms of career design, individual differences play a key role, regardless of whether or not a person has a disability. In terms of career development, concepts such as integrated self-oriented motivation, other-oriented action, and decision-making related to career are important.

Additionally, a review of literature on second careers revealed that having portable skills, a career vision, and career knowledge and skills are important for sound career development and appropriate job matching.

Employers' attitudes toward workers with disabilities are linked to the productivity and retention of such employees after they are hired. A question of how to handle the workplace environment has a major impact on designing a career by individuals with visual impairment. Nothing can be achieved sufficiently without proactive cooperation in the workplace.

Previous studies have not identified reliable means to evaluate whether a person is suitable for the job. When it comes to employment, persons with visual impairment might face the following three issues: "difficulty in dealing with written documents," "workflows and systems within the organization," and "getting around on foot." It is commonly believed that figuring out how to offer proper support for these issues is tied to providing career support in a job matching process. For example, as a mode of commuting, "getting around on foot" is considered particularly stress-invoking for workers with visual impairment and reasonable accommodations must be provided. This has resulted in the rise of new work styles, such as telework (working remotely using PCs and other electronic devices) and "workation" (a Japanese original expression meaning the combination of "work" and "vacation"). These new work styles are expected to expand the scope of career development and serve as a means of career support for persons with visual impairment.

5. Conclusions

The present study found specific ability indicators and job matching determinants necessary for individuals with visual impairment to develop more sound careers. It is necessary for employers to define specific job descriptions for visually impaired people and clarify "disability characteristics" and "supportive environment" in the job descriptions, as well as a comprehensive talent management matching process for career development. Future research questions may include the following.

1) What are the factors necessary for the career development of the visually impaired?
2) What kind of matching conditions are necessary for talent management of the visually impaired in a company?
3) What is the role of vocational rehabilitation in supporting job matching for the visually impaired?

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