

Finding what improves employment outcomes for people with disabilities

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(Medical Xpress)—Deirdre O'Sullivan, assistant professor in the College of Education's department of educational psychology, counseling, and special education, recently published research about what factors affect the length of employment for individuals with disabilities and discovered an unusual predictor in the study that may help improve employment outcomes for this group.

O'Sullivan's study confirmed that factors such as work efficacy and agreeableness were predictors of length of employment, much like studies involving individuals without [disabilities](#). However, the surprise was that individuals with disabilities who expressed a trait called openness, or those who are more intellectually curious, creative and attentive to their inner feelings, reported longer periods of employment. This is the first study that O'Sullivan is aware of that found a significant relationship between openness and length of employment.

"Efficacy and personality are important predictors of work outcomes for people with disabilities," said O'Sullivan. "Positive personality expression was a better predictor of length of employment when both personality and work efficacy were considered in the model, specifically openness and neuroticism [the tendency to be emotionally unstable or reactive]."

O'Sullivan said this is important because the employment rates for people with disabilities are still too low, particularly competitive employment rates, despite policies, programs and laws designed to

improve these rates.

"I'm interested in investigating factors known to be important in vocational settings as they manifest for people with disabilities," said O'Sullivan. "As we learn more about the specific personality traits that are valued by employers, rehabilitation counselors can address this through assessment with their clients who are at increased risk for unemployment or underemployment."

According to O'Sullivan, [vocational training](#) and job readiness training has historically focused on skills and education as ways to improve abilities to do the job. An additional focus is on person-environment fit.

"The person-environment fit paradigm assumes that successful job outcomes result from individuals and employers matching on interests, abilities and to some extent, personality trait expression," said O'Sullivan. "One possible shift in thinking about the person-environment fit is helping people manage personality expression in the workplace so as to provide a better fit if needed."

O'Sullivan said that this research is encouraging because she believes people can learn how to manage their personality expression optimally if so desired. In addition, rehabilitation and vocational counselors can focus on this during vocational training, such as personality assessments with the goal of helping people learn how to develop and express [personality traits](#) optimally in order to promote job tenure.

"Rather than assume that we must fit into our work environment, we may be able to make shifts in our personality expression," said O'Sullivan. "This could be relevant for people adjusting to a new disability as their disability symptoms impact personality expression. Sometimes a job change is needed. Sometimes the job tasks need to be accommodated. For some, shifts, even very modest shifts, in personality

expression, may be the best solution."

Her research, titled "Five factor model of [personality](#), work behavior self-efficacy, and length of prior [employment](#) for individuals with disabilities: An exploratory analysis," received awards from both the National Rehabilitation Association and the American Rehabilitation Counseling Association. It is published in "Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin" with co-authors David Strauser and Alex Wong.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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