

Strong family ties improve employment options for people with childhood-onset disabilities

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Family and close friends play an integral role in helping people with childhood-onset disabilities attain quality employment as adults, a new study from Oregon State University has found.

"Having a disability from childhood has wide-ranging impacts on early childhood development, schooling, socialization and more," said David Baldrige, an associate professor of management in the OSU College of Business and one of the study's authors. "If your social network is already more limited because of your disability, your strong [family](#) ties become even more important."

The findings underscore the value of social supports for people with disabilities to assist them in building those networks and, when they are employed, navigating the workplace in an effort to secure more hours or access jobs that require more advanced skills, Baldrige said. The study was published recently in the journal *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*. Co-authors are Alison M. Konrad of the University of Western Ontario; Mark E. Moore of East Carolina University; and Yang Yang of Rowan University.

People with disabilities make up roughly 15 percent of the world's population but as a group they have received little attention from management scholars. Much of the existing research on employment for people with disabilities focuses on employment status, with less attention

paid to employment quality, Baldrige said.

Those with childhood-onset disabilities - meaning they were born with a disability or acquired one as a minor—are among the most marginalized populations when it comes to employment. They are often unemployed or underemployed in jobs that do not provide adequate hours for financial self-sufficiency or fulfillment because their skills and abilities are underutilized.

"You can't just look at whether they are working or not," Baldrige said. "Are they using all of their skills to the best of their ability?" The researchers' goal with the new study was to better understand how social capital may be linked to improved employment opportunities for people with childhood-onset disabilities. Social capital is the value of employees' social networks, which are comprised of people that employees know, and includes strong ties to family and friends and value created by interactions with people in their social networks.

Using data from Statistics Canada, a national sampling of Canadians that includes information on employment, family size, [close friends](#) and disability, the researchers analyzed relationships between family size, numbers of close friends, employment hours worked, skill utilization and disability, including severity and type of disability.

They found that those with larger families also tended to have more close friends. Those with strong ties to family and friends had access to more hours of paid employment. Severity and type of disability were not significant factors with regard to hours worked or use of skills.

The researchers also found that men with childhood-onset disabilities who also had children were more likely to have more work hours and be in jobs that best utilized their skills, though that effect was not present for women in the study.

Overall, the findings raise concerns that people with childhood-onset disabilities who have few family members or close friends may have difficulty overcoming barriers to adequate [employment](#), Baldrige said.

"For people with childhood-onset disabilities, these strong family ties are more important," he said. "It's also critical for families to understand that part of their role is to help the person with disabilities to expand their network beyond the family."

Teaching children with childhood-onset disabilities how to develop [social capital](#) also could help them build the strong network of friends and family that can help them in the workplace, he said. That kind of network is becoming more and more valuable for everyone as the world changes, and as workplaces change, they may bring with them more opportunities for people with disabilities, he said.

"It's getting harder and harder to train people for a specific job these days, but if you can listen, understand, write, and think critically, you can use those skills in a lot of different contexts," Baldrige said. "The upside for people with disabilities is that jobs are becoming more specialized and more flexible, and can be built around what people can do, and what they can't do doesn't matter as much."

Providing social supports to workers—such as mentoring and career advice—could help people with childhood-onset [disabilities](#) identify and seek opportunities to better use their skills in the workplace and work more hours if they desire, Baldrige said.

"Organizations have a responsibility to create open, inclusive climates and to develop leaders who are inclusive of all human differences, including disability," he said. "And employees need to learn to advocate for themselves in responsible and positive ways. Sometimes those conversations are hard for [people](#)."

More information: David Baldrige et al, Childhood-onset disability, strong ties and employment quality, *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* (2017). [DOI: 10.1108/EDI-11-2016-0093](https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-11-2016-0093)

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