Problems of Unemployment Faced by Visually Impaired People

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ABSTRACT
In Zimbabwe there are no comprehensive programmes to assist visually impaired school leavers to find employment. The problems faced by visually impaired people in getting employment were the thrust of this study. The study was carried out in Mashonaland East, Mashonaland West, Masvingo and Harare provinces. Using questionnaires, data were collected from 20 unemployed and 20 employed visually impaired persons respectively and also from 10 employers of visually impaired persons. The data collected were analysed by using descriptive statistics. The study proved that visually impaired people were productive, loyal and capable of doing a number of jobs. It was further established that gender was not a factor in the employability of visually impaired people. The study revealed that lack of information by employers about visual impairment was a major cause of the problems faced in the labour market by visually impaired people. The general scarcity of jobs in the country had very little to do with the unemployment of visually impaired people. Recommendations on the employability of the visually impaired were made. The conclusion summarised the findings of the study.

Keywords: unemployment, visually-impaired, vocational skills, technical skills and policy.

INTRODUCTION
It appears that the rate of unemployment for people with visual impairments in Zimbabwe has reached alarming proportions. This is evidenced by the rising number of beggars on the streets as well as other people with visual impairments roaming the streets or just seated at home. Others do have very good qualifications but are just seated at home and cannot secure employment in the job market. Against this background it was felt necessary to find out more about the real situation on the ground as well as to determine what could be done to address the problems.

Background to the study
Visually impaired children can be prepared for adult life through meaningful inclusion in the mainstream society. In Zimbabwe education is primarily for employment purposes. Visually impaired people acquire relevant qualifications necessary for employment through integrated programmes. Despite having the necessary qualifications many of the visually impaired people seen begging in streets in Zimbabwe are testimony of how they are discriminated in the labour market. The visually impaired who have suitable qualifications for the jobs they may want to do should be given equal chances of employment like their sighted counterparts. This study therefore set out to investigate the problems of unemployment which are faced by the visually impaired in Zimbabwe.

Statement of the problem
Visually impaired people in Zimbabwe face many problems that have to do with unemployment.

Objectives of the study
- To identify the strengths and weaknesses of visually impaired people at the work place.
- To determine the problems that contribute towards the unemployment of visually impaired people.
- To determine the nature of relationships between visually impaired employees and their sighted colleagues.
- To determine the nature of relationships between visually impaired employees and their employers.
Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:
• Which vocational skills are required by visually impaired people for them to be employed?
• Are visually impaired people as productive at the workplace as their sighted counterparts?
• Which jobs are visually impaired people capable of doing?
• Why does the labour market discriminate against visually impaired people?
• Is gender a factor in the employability of visually impaired people?

Significance of the study

• It is hoped that results of this study will provide appropriate information on the types of jobs visually impaired people are capable of doing.
• It is also hoped that this study will help in identifying the vocational skills necessary for preparing visually impaired people for employment.
• It is also anticipated that the study would help create public awareness on the employment needs and expectations of visually impaired people.
• It is anticipated that the results of this study would have a positive impact on changing people’s negative attitudes about the visually impaired.

Assumptions of the study

The study assumes that:
• Visually impaired people are equally competent at the workplace.
• Visually impaired people are more work motivated, reliable and willing to learn at their workplace.
• Visually impaired people have the potential to surpass their sighted counterparts in productivity.
• Visually impaired employees are more loyal to their employers than sighted employees.

Delimitations of the study

• The study will be carried out in selected provinces of Zimbabwe.
• This study does not attempt to predict future employment patterns for the visually impaired.
• The study is not intended to overshadow the positive effects of employment on the visually impaired.

Limitations of the study

The limitations of the study were:
• Failure by the researcher to carry out interviews with representatives of employer organisations in the country.
• The researcher would have wished to have more time observing visually impaired people at work to ascertain some issues about their employability but this was impossible.
• Some unemployed respondents may not have been honest enough as they demanded assurances that the results of the study be forwarded to policy makers for consideration. They cited lack of action on previous researches in which they were respondents as their main worry.

Review of Related Literature

Many societies value work highly because it is based on work ethics. Employment enables one to contribute towards the economic development of one’s community. Dobree and Boulter (1982) point out that work generates respect for others and can be a source of pride and self-satisfaction. Despite the significance of being employed, Zimbabwe’s rate of unemployment of the visually impaired is alarming. Against this background, the literature related to the unemployment of visually impaired people would be reviewed.

Vocational Preparation

The preparation for work that visually impaired people receive during school years plays a direct and positive role in enabling them to adjust to adult life. In Zimbabwe the visually impaired are prepared for work through vocational, technical, adaptive, functional and social skills which they learn at primary and secondary schools. According to Mupinga (1989), vocations are occupations that the student is likely to find himself doing after
leaving school. Vocational rehabilitation has enabled visually impaired people to be equipped with relevant work skills for employment. Griffiths (1994) points out that new teaching techniques are providing a foundation for discovering and developing the adaptive and functional skills so important to the vocational choice process. Griffiths further shows that vocational preparation and training support PWD by helping them to sample a range of vocational areas before committing themselves to real employment.

According to Di Michael (1978) in Adewoye (1996), the basic purpose of vocational rehabilitation is to help individuals to aspire not to a theoretically ideal way of life, but to a set of practical goals where opportunities for self-dependant, personal satisfaction and social contributions are made possible.

Trends in the job market show that visually impaired employees need the support from education and training to facilitate their opportunities for taking up available jobs (Mund, 1978). Training in vocational and technical skills at some secondary and youth training centres of the visually impaired has produced manpower for industries. Regrettably, Human Resources Managers have not been very keen to hire the services of visually impaired employees.

Vocational and technical skills at primary and secondary school levels instil responsibility with a clear vocational identity. This reduces occupational experimentation. According to Nyerere (1981) in Mupinga (1989), primary education is not a preparation for secondary education, but rather a preparation for life. Nyerere further points out that PWD need to be taught, helped and conscientised on work skills.

At a conference of special educators in Dar-es Salaam, Nyerere underscored the role of vocational preparation when he indicated that schools could not afford to teach people with disabilities to be burdens in society. He emphasised the importance of job experiencing PWD before they leave school.

Tanzania, Bangladesh, Sweden, and Zimbabwe are some of the countries that offer aspects of vocational and technical disciplines from primary school level (Mupinga, 1989). In Zimbabwe, Copota, Jairios Jiri (Kadoma), Murewa and Waddilove schools offer vocational skills in weaving, wire making, chalk making, cane work, Home Economics, and Agriculture to visually impaired students. Blaug (1973) indicates that such an educational system acknowledges that some students may fail to proceed with their education beyond primary school level. Hopefully, they would be absorbed into various jobs in the open labour market.

Other countries like Sri Lanka and Kenya introduce their visually impaired children to vocational and technical skills at secondary school level (UNESCO, 1988). Other vocational training provisions for the visually impaired also exist outside the formal educational system. These can be on a full-time or part-time basis.

Sweden offers different courses at Upper Secondary School level to visually impaired persons before they join the labour market. Mund (1978) indicates that such courses include textile work, weaving, needlework, embroidery and material and yarn techniques. These courses offer skills that are related to the work that some of the visually impaired students will pursue as adults. One of Sweden’s goals in teaching skills in handicrafts and textile work is to offer a diversified skills training programme to the visually impaired (UNESCO, 1988).

To avoid narrowness in prevocational skills training, Diyasewa (1976) in Mupinga (1989) proposes that vocational training should focus on general vocations. The content should be broad enough to include many technical fields. Kravettee and Katz (1998) argue that post and pre-school vocational guidance reduce vocational instability. They also indicate that vocational guidance improves the general satisfaction of some handicapped people.

Vocational preparation should not be considered complete until the individual is able to work and become self-sufficient. It is against this background that Hewerd and Orlansky (1992) show that vocational and technical training programmes have been developed to restore the working usefulness of visually impaired people.

**Unemployment of the visually impaired**

Unless prevented by old age or serious additional infirmity most visually impaired people wish to take up rewarding careers. Unfortunately, the visually impaired have great difficulties in getting employment. Hasazi et al. (1985) established that opportunities for the employment of visually people are exacerbated by prejudices and misconception on the part of the employers and society as a whole.

Addison (1986) and Zvobgo (1990) agree that although there are no statistics available on the rate of unemployment of the visually impaired primary and secondary school leavers in Zimbabwe, the prospects of the visually impaired getting jobs are bleak. Zvobgo (1990) reported that over two hundred (200) visually impaired students graduated from Copota Secondary School from 1980 to 1989. He reveals that up to 1989 only eight (8) of these students were employed as teachers after completing their courses. A few others had completed diploma courses in computer programming and physiotherapy but were still unemployed. The majority were languishing at their rural homes or had resorted to street begging.

In a separate study Nkala (1984) found out that, of the two hundred (200) school leavers from 1957 to 1975 at the same school only five had secured jobs. Four were teachers at the school and one was an evangelist. The remainder were at their rural homes, or had applied for public assistance from the social welfare department. Nkala quotes the then principal of Copota Schools for the Blind as having indicated that he attributed the inability of visually impaired people to get jobs to societal attitudes. Despite the blind people having acquired
basic job skills at institutions like Jairos Jiri training centres and sheltered workshops, employers were still reluctant to employ them.

The Council for the Blind (1984) reported little progress in the employment of visually impaired persons. They cited reasons compounded by economic situations which were mainly rooted on the prejudice of employers. Dr Ashton (1981) indicated that the question of employment for the blind continued to be a difficult one, not only because of the absence of jobs but also because of the conservatism of employers. Mr. Zharare who succeeded Dr Ashton as Chairman of The Zimbabwe Council Of The Blind lamented that the Council had explored opportunities for gainful employment with unprecedented frustration.

Heber (1978) demonstrated that figures obtained from a United States (1970) census indicated that 85% of the employable PWD were not working.

Silape (1994) argues that most employers shun employing PWD because they claim that they could not perform well on the job. Some claim that it is costly to modify the workplace to suit the needs of the PWD. She further indicated that some employers believe that PWD do not give a good image of the company since they are not “presentable” by virtue of their appearances.

It is clear that stereotyped attitudes of employers in engaging blind persons for work remain a major barrier. Mehta (1980) argues that a tradition has grown concerning the limited forms of work that can be done by visually impaired people. This assumption has probably been based on the erroneous belief that almost every type of employment initially appears to be wholly or largely dependent on the ability to see.

Sheltered Workshops

The sheltered workshop offers a strong and unique link in the provision of rehabilitation services for the visually impaired. These workshops offer vocational training, rehabilitation and sometimes full employment for the visually impaired.

Goldenson (1978) indicates that the sheltered workshop was defined by the Association of Rehabilitation Facilities as a work-oriented rehabilitation facility. The Association shows that this facility is a controlled working environment characterised by individual vocational goals. Sheltered Workshops make use of work experience and related service to assist PWD to progress towards normal living with a productive vocational status. This definition shows that sheltered workshop work is done under supervision. The setting is also adapted to the special needs and limitations of the workers. Other services provided for in sheltered workshops include medical, psychological and social services designed to protect the client as well as assist with personal problems.

The character of sheltered workshops has undergone considerable transformation. According to Goldenson (1978), the first facilities established during the 1920s and 1930s were conceived on a custodial care model. The workshops were primarily aimed at keeping PWD occupied in a constructive manner. There was no conception that the sheltered workshops might advance to a point where they could develop marketable skills that could be used in the competitive industry.

In contrast, the objective of modern day sheltered workshops is to help the handicapped achieve the highest level of functioning. Hollins (1989) argues that the emphasis is upon development and progress towards the goals of economic self-sufficiency and a job in the outside world. At the same time, it is recognised that some trainees might not be able to attain these goals. It is for this reason that Heward and Orlansky (1992) indicate that sheltered workshops are designed to serve two types of clients.

Firstly there are those who can profit from intensive training, adjust to the work situation, and develop a high enough level of skill and productivity to enter the labour market. Secondly there are those who accept the work situation and develop some skill and productivity, but are unable to meet the requirements of the open labour market.

Transitional and extended employment characterise most sheltered workshops. Goldenson (1978) describes transitional employment workshops as geared towards moving the client to the open labour market, extended employment in the sheltered situation and additional education or further supportive services. On the other hand extended employment or long-term workshops are defined as applying to settings that offer continuing, remunerative employment to clients who have adjusted to the transitional work experience but cannot sustain competitive employment. The two services are usually offered by the same workshop. Thornburn (1978) indicates that efforts should be made to keep clients from feeling that change from transitional to extended status is a sign of failure. Clients of a rehabilitation programme should also be evaluated periodically, since some of them may eventually be capable of outside employment.

The benefits offered by the sheltered workshop are many. Hollins (1989) shows that the experience of sheltered workshops increases the visually impaired person’s self-respect and self-esteem by offering an opportunity to make a useful social contribution. It also provides the personal satisfaction of restoring old skills or developing new ones that help to compensate for an impairment. According to Dobree and Boulter (1982), sheltered workshops encourage the visually impaired people to keep active and alert instead of lapsing into a state of inertia and despair. Furthermore the work setting is especially adapted to individual needs and limitations under the watchful eye of specialists not only in vocational training but in total rehabilitation. Sheltered workshops also give opportunities to work with others facing similar problems. This enables communication to take place.
Lowenfield (1974) shows that sheltered workshops expose the visually impaired to many of the demands and disciplines found in a real work situation. These workshops also give opportunities to test personal ability and adaptability in a benign atmosphere before venturing into competitive employment. Goldenson (1989) indicates that there is also the benefit of receiving care from physicians, social workers, counsellors, psychologists, and other professionals. Each member of this multi-disciplinary team brings with him a wealth of experience for the benefit of the handicapped client.

Research has also unearthed revelations that are contrary to the intended purpose of sheltered workshops. Brickley et al. (1985) for example, link the poor competitive employment record of sheltered workshop graduates to shortcomings inherent in their training programmes rather than the actual employment potential of the graduates. This view is supported by a report of the United States Department of Labour (USDC, 1989). The report outlines statistics showing that few graduates of sheltered workshops were successfully placed in jobs. Only twelve percent (12%) were placed in employment in 1986. Brickley et al. (1985) further demonstrate that many who were placed did not keep their jobs for long.

In view of this unfavourable position, Haring and York (1983) underscore the importance of revisiting the sheltered workshops curriculum with a view to making it more accountable to the employment needs of the visually impaired. This would help expose the visually impaired people’s potential to employers as reliable employees.

**Prospects of employment for visually impaired people**

In recent decades visually impaired people have demonstrated their ability to do different types of jobs. They have proved that a disabling condition is not totally incapacitating.

There are chemical engineers, diesel mechanics, counsellors, and clerks who are blind (Mosher, 1978). Dobree and Boulter (1982) confirm that there has been an increase in the number of visually impaired people attending universities, other forms of higher and further education and specialised training courses. They further demonstrate that this has resulted in visually impaired persons taking up professional and managerial careers. Such careers include university and college lecturers, teaching, law, clergymen, social work, physiotherapy and management of small businesses. Industrial and Commercial jobs have also continued to attract visually impaired people.

The visually impaired have proved to be very good social workers. According to Dobree and Boulter (1982), the development of social services has seen many blind people serving as generic social workers. They have assisted those suffering from a broad range of physical, mental, social and financial deprivations. Those stationed at hospitals served as medical or psychiatric social workers.

Visually impaired people wishing to be physiotherapists have received training at the Royal National Institute of The Blind (R.N.I.B) school of Physiotherapy. Visually impaired physiotherapists have demonstrated that they can deal with the wide range of complicated equipment for treatment through electrotherapy.

Substantial numbers are also being recruited to the priesthood. The visually impaired clergymen have excelled in this area. Music has also attracted many visually impaired people. Some have become church organists. Dobree and Boulter (1982) indicate that the value of music as a cultural and recreational pursuit for blind people, including those who are members of pop groups, bears testimony to the potential of music. Music has enabled many blind people to earn a living from it. Examples of successful blind singers like Clarence Carter, Steve Kekana, the late Paul Matavire, Fanyana Dube and others indicate the importance of pursuing music as a career.

Law also continues to be a favourite profession for many blind people. Visually impaired people can be very good advocates, prosecutors or judges. In the commercial sector, there are visually impaired salesmen. There are also those who own and successfully manage small businesses of various types. Others have become Human Resources managers.

Journalism is also another area that the visually impaired are doing well. A UNESCO (1987) report shows that an increasing number of visually impaired people is being attracted to newspaper or radio journalism and other media of communication.

Many of the visually impaired people are very efficient administrators. Several other visually impaired people are high and primary school teachers. In Zimbabwe there are many blind teachers who are teaching in ordinary and special schools. Copota and Jairos Jiri special schools have quite a number of blind teachers who are doing well in their jobs.

Telephone switchboard operation is another job that the visually impaired are capable of doing well. Visually impaired switchboard operators have excelled in creating and maintaining the good image of the companies they work for.

Other visually impaired people are doing very well as clerks and Braille shorthand and audio typists. They have proved to be very effective in these jobs. The traditional occupations like weaving, poultry keeping, making table mats, brushes, baskets, and agriculture, hand knitting, cane work, wood working, wire making, piggery and chalk making continue to be popular with visually impaired people.
Legislation

Formulating legislation to improve the employment status of visually impaired persons should be considered seriously. Legislation helps to ensure that the employment rights of the visually impaired are protected. Laws influence policy making. Laws permit society to allocate resources in accordance with laid down procedures.

The National Council of Disabled Persons of Zimbabwe (NCDPZ, 1982) policy paper underscores the critical role played by legislative guarantees in improving employment rights of PWD. It demonstrates that legislation on employment is crucial to the inclusion of PWD into the life of the community. The policy paper also emphasises that employment of PWD should be as practicable and as similar as possible to that of the able-bodied in respect of conditions of service, status and pay. In justifying its position, the council cites the prevalence of unemployment, misemployment and under-employment among PWD people as a common spectre.

A specific law outlining provisions for employment of the visually impaired in Zimbabwe would help solve problems of negative attitudes openly exhibited by some employers. Results of a survey carried out by the NCDPZ (1982) revealed that visually impaired persons who had successfully completed training courses in different fields were openly discriminated against in industry despite assurances from the Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries that such discrimination had to stop.

In Zimbabwe legislative provision covering employment issues of the visually impaired was enacted through the Disabled Persons Act 1992. Section 9 of the Disabled Persons Act (1992) prohibits discrimination against PWD in employment. This Act stipulates that no employer shall discriminate against any PWD on the basis of a job advertisement, recruitment, abolition of a post, determination of packages, choice of person for a job, provision if employment facilities or any other matter related to employment.

While the provision is commended, the Act does not mention anything about the penalties that go with breaching any of the provisions it outlines, neither does it say anything about the course of action PWD can follow to get redress. The Act is also silent about which judicial levels have jurisdiction over specific transgressions of the law. The Act has a number of flaws. Generally, the Act lacks clarity compared to what other countries like Britain, Sweden, Norway, Jordan and Australia have done in this area.

As it is, it would be very difficult for the disabled to benefit from such a fragmented piece of legislation. Furthermore it is not clear whether this Act has had any impact on the employment status of PWD in general and the visually impaired in particular. No other legislation exists specifically to address employment issues of the PWD in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe became a member state of the International Labour Organisation Convention (ILO, 1980). This means that it adopted ILO resolutions. Nyathi (1984) expresses concern at the fact that despite this commitment to the ideals of the ILO, Zimbabwe has a lukewarm approach to employment issues of PWD. The convention provides for ensuring that specific measures are put in place to facilitate productive and gainful employment. It also calls for fair employment practices and equal opportunities in the labour market so that the visually impaired would also benefit. The convention also stresses equal access to employment offices, career counselling, vocational training and job promotion irrespective of race, ethnic group, sex or handicap.

Some countries have already taken the lead in legislating for the employment rights of PWD. Gearheart et al. (1992), and Marinell and Dell Orto (1984) give the example of the United States. They show that as way back as 1973 there was the Vocational Rehabilitation Act (P.L. 93-112). More recently there was the enactment of the Americans with disabilities Act of 1990 (P1 101-407). This legislation makes it mandatory for all federal contractors with contracts above a particular monetary value to employ PWD. Furthermore employers were required to submit affirmative action plans for review to the contracting agency.

According to the Vocational Rehabilitation Act (1973) employers were also required by law to remove architectural barriers. Employers were also responsible for revising non-job-related demands that interfered with hiring PWD. The Act further specified that any generalised statement of policy such as “All jobs in the company requiring eyesight” were evidence of discrimination. The onus was on the employers to prove that they were not intentionally breaching the provisions of this Act.

The Employment Standards Administration (ESA) of the Department of Labour enforces the law (James, 1975). Penalties for non-compliance include court action by the state for breach of contract, withholding of payments due under the contract and disbarment of the contractor from future government contracts.

PWD were also required by law to fulfill certain obligations in order to be eligible for filing a discrimination complaint. According to Mosher (1978), the disabled person must be certified as disabled in accordance with their visual loss in the case of the visually impaired. This is done on a specially designed form by the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation. Complaints are filed with the Employment Standards Administration (ESA).

These legislative milestones are clearly formulated. There are no risks of misinterpretation. The laws are so comprehensive that Zimbabwe can draw a lot of lessons from the American experience. Zimbabwe needs such aggressive laws if she has to address the unemployment problems of PWD.

The United Kingdom has also made commendable strides in legislating for the emancipation of the visually impaired. Heward and Orlansky (1992) point out that in Britain all medium sized and large employers are
legally required to maintain on their pay rolls a small percentage of PWD. This is effectively carried out through the

**Disabled Persons Employment Act of 1944.**

In countries like Canada, Australia and New Zealand legislating for employment services of the visually impaired has helped in improving employment of visually impaired people. A United Nations (UN, 1980) review reports that employment services for the visually impaired were so comprehensive and effective.

Jordan is another country that has made inroads in improving the employment status of visually impaired people. Many of the visually impaired have been able to take up various jobs.

**Disadvantages of the Quota System**

While the quota system should be commended for easing the plight of the visually impaired, its shortcomings also need to be exposed. A report of the East and Southern African sub-Regional Workshop on Disability Prevention and Rehabilitation (1982) made interesting deliberations. Delegates at this workshop in Mbabane (Swaziland) expressed reservations at this coercive method of ensuring employment for PWD. It was noted that such a stringent law was not only unpopular with employers, but also works against the interests of PWD. During recession, when economies prove to be static, it becomes difficult to enforce the quota system. It can be evaded by companies undergoing rationalisation, intensification and investment and technical change. Griffiths (1994) shows that while not mutually exclusive, these three have one of their common characteristics as job loss due to loss of output and significant investment due to changes in techniques of production. Heavy capital investment results in most work activities being taken over by machinery.

The effect is that the vulnerable groups such as the visually impaired, the unskilled and the semi-skilled will be most affected by retrenchments as employers take advantage. Such a mechanism will only prove to be self defeating.

**The Subsidy System**

Another alternative would be legislating for the subsidy system. Williams (1984) shows that in this system an employer is asked to give on the job training to the visually impaired person. The employer also gives the trainee a normal starting rate. In return the employer will receive a subsidy equivalent to the training allowance which would have been paid to the workers had they been undergoing training at a centre. The subsidy should not exceed the starting wage. The subsidy can be on a diminishing scale as proficiency improves. Shearer (1981) points out that such provisions are non-existent in developing nations.

While it is important for visually impaired people to be protected by law on employment issues, this must be done cautiously. Lowenfield (1974) proposed that the goodwill of employers should be cultivated. Without the co-operation and willingness of employers it would be futile to embark on drafting laws on employment provisions despite prior good planning.

Legislation alone may not necessarily reduce the rate of unemployment of the visually impaired. According to Mosher (1978), training programmes offered to the visually impaired should be revamped to enable the blind to fulfil certain obligations as well. Other ways of preparing the blind for employment only complement legislation. Hollins (1984) indicates that the ultimate goal is that of a more effective form of employment or rehabilitative service.

The issue of legislation, while extremely important needs not be haphazardly carried out. Other logistical considerations like community attitudes, commitment of both employers and potential employees and capacity to ensure effective implementation of the law play a pivotal role in improving the employment status of visually impaired people.

**Gender and Employment**

Opportunities for true competitive employment for visually impaired people are limited in most societies. The situation is aggravated for women. Milhang et al. (1985) found out that the rate of unemployment among young visually impaired female adults was much higher than that of their male counterparts.

In other studies Bellarmy and Horner (1987) and Rusch et al. (1987) came out with distressing findings. Bellarmy and Horner surveyed 301 female subjects who had left secondary special education programmes in nine Vermont School districts between 1979 and 1983. Only thirty-three percent of the former female students were employed.

On the other hand sixty percent of their female counterparts were employed. Rusch et al. studied another district. They found out that thirty one percent of the female visually impaired former students were employed. In sharp contrast fifty-four percent of their male counterparts had already secured employment. It was also established that 11% and 8% respectively of the employed former female students did not hold permanent
jobs. Rhodes and Valenta (1985) indicate that employment discrepancies are at variance with numerous demonstrations of the employment potential of female visually impaired persons. In Zimbabwe there is currently no literature justifying whether or not gender is a factor in the employability of visually impaired people.

**Pressure Groups**

District, regional and national organisations exert pressure regarding the employment status of visually impaired people. Pressure groups, voluntary groups and non-governmental organisations serve as agents of government in most instances. The functions of these organisations are too varied. Bellarmy and Horner (1987) indicate that some of the roles of these organisations are conducting research into potential new areas of employment and placement of the visually impaired in industrial, commercial, administrative, technical and professional occupations.

Some developed countries have central government bodies that ensure that government interests and those of the visually impaired are reconciled. Haring and York (1983) cite countries like Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States. This is a welcome development if properly adapted to the needs of developing countries. A UNESCO (1985) review acknowledges that in some developing countries charitable organisations have played a pivotal role in both vocational training and employment of the visually impaired. The review further indicates that more often than not the resultant products of the programmes initiated and run by these organisations have had little commercial value due to ill-conceived charity approaches.

The establishment of high powered national committees or councils is essential for effective rehabilitation of the visually impaired. Heward and Orlansky (1992) indicate that in the United States the establishment of the National Industries for the Blind led to the employment of more than five thousand blind people. Their workshop products were proved to be very good. Dobree and Boulter (1982) point out that given administrative, financial and technical powers national councils can prove their worth in overall solutions and implementation of decisions concerning the visually impaired.

Nyathi (1984) singled out the example of the state of Maryland in the USA. In the state Employers Advisory Councils (EAC) get actively involved in promoting employment opportunities for handicapped people. The EAC does this in conjunction with other vocational rehabilitation and employment service staff. Together they identify job applicants through interviews. Successful applicants are then offered early placement.

An ILO (1981) report highlights the advocacy role of pressure groups. It indicates that pressure groups have enabled changes in attitudes towards employing the visually impaired. The report also shows that trade unions and the general public are gradually realising the abilities of the visually impaired. Booth and Stratham (1991) indicated that economic growth has also helped to give impetus to the efforts of pressure groups. The African continent is progressing through advocacy efforts of pressure groups. A UNESCO (1985) review cites Malawi where The Malawi Council For The Handicapped (MCTH) was formed in 1972. M.C.T.H. monitors programmes that are educational, preventive, curative, and rehabilitative. It also runs vocational training and placement programmes.

Mdege (1988) in Zvobgo (1990) called for the formation of a Regional Multidisciplinary assessment Committee. The Council For the Blind (CFB) is a non-governmental organisation representing interests of the visually impaired in Zimbabwe. According to Mdege (1988), the committee would be responsible for assessment, placement, and follow-up of all visually impaired people in employment related issues. He also advocates for thorough research on the employment needs of the visually impaired. This has to be a joint venture between various organs of government, churches, pressure groups and non-governmental organisations.

The National Council of Disabled Persons of Zimbabwe (NCDPZ) is an umbrella body of all PWD in Zimbabwe. It also operates as a pressure group. Other pressure groups of the visually impaired in Zimbabwe include the Zimbabwe Association of the Visually Handicapped, The National League of the Blind, and The Association of Visually Impaired University Students. These organisations work together to lobby central government and local authorities to improve services for the visually impaired. Some are also affiliated to international organisations of the visually impaired from where they get valuable information. An NCDPZ (1992) information sheet shows that it has helped PWD get different services. The Information sheet identifies the training and funding needs of handicapped people that were made available. Great interest has also been shown in ensuring job placement for its members.

The NCDPZ acknowledges the barriers it has had to grapple with. These include negative attitudes of employers, economic difficulties, and lack of information on the part of employers. Marinell and Dell Orto (1984) indicate that employers fear high accident rates, poor attendance, lower productivity and increased costs if they employ PWD. Mosher (1978) shows that employers had unfounded fears of insurance rates for workmen’s compensation going up or the blind needing constant help in mobility.

Some employers also get worried that the handicapped might not fit in socially. Employers may also foresee problems in firing, promoting or transferring a disabled person. These worries and prejudices are unfounded and need to be dispelled through lobbying and other ways initiated by pressure groups and non-governmental organisations who hold the key to removing the stigma associated with disability.
Advantages of Employing Visually Impaired People

Evidence of benefits that accrue to employers who engage visually impaired people is overwhelming. Nkala (1984) indicates that achievements of visually impaired people at work places serve to dismiss the notion that they should live on charity.

Zharare (1984) shows that there are many instances where efficiency is guaranteed. He justifies this by indicating that disabled workers tend to remain on the job consistently during work hours. They also experience pressure to prove their worth and therefore do more. The visually impaired are also less likely to change employment too often because of the scarcity of opportunities. Employers stand to benefit from the productivity, reliability and loyalty of visually impaired people. Silape (1994) indicates that PWD stay longer in a job, hence lower staff turnover. Most PWD do not have higher rates of absenteeism than the able bodied.

Other positive findings in employing the visually impaired were given by Booth and Stratham (1991). They found that visually impaired people have a relatively higher degree of independent mobility at the workplace. They also found out that the degree of satisfaction on the part of employers from the work of the visually impaired employee was high. These findings should develop and reinforce the confidence of employers in engaging visually impaired persons.

Comparisons have also been made between the work of the visually impaired and the able-bodied. Heward and Orlansky (1992) indicate that the degree of satisfaction on the part of employers was likely to increase as the work performance of the visually impaired employees was equal to that of the able-bodied. They further indicate that sometimes the work performance of the visually impaired surpasses that of the able bodied because all their attention is focused on their work. Mosher (1978) points out that the extra demands made by visually impaired employees were also low. The punctuality of visually impaired people was also found to be another positive factor that employers could benefit from.

The visually impaired have demonstrated that they are workers who can be depended on. Employers stand to benefit immensely from employing them. Some countries offer tax concessions to employers who hire the labour of visually impaired people.

METHODOLOGY

The Research Design

The survey method was used in this study. It was selected because it is appropriate in soliciting information in a study of this nature. The survey method mainly makes use of questionnaires, interviews and rating scales in the collection of data (Best and Khan, 1993). Questionnaires, observations and informal discussions were used to collect data in this study.

Leedy (1980) and Charles (1986) indicate that the survey method is the best in carrying out an educational survey. It was selected for the following reasons:

- It gathers data from a relatively large number of respondents at a particular time.
- Respondents have time to think about their responses.
- It reflects a general idea of the problem.
- It is cost effective.

Some of the disadvantages of the survey method are that:

- The researcher is limited to testing the theories he/she has postulated on.
- The researcher assumes that he/she knows what is important and respondents cannot provide answers to questions that are not asked.

These disadvantages were overcome by first carrying out a pilot study to determine suitability of questionnaires. Open ended questions also provided respondents with a chance to express their views freely. The researcher also read widely around the topic before deciding on research questions. Charles (1988) indicates that reading widely before deciding on research questions is helpful.

Population

The population comprised all post school employed and unemployed visually impaired people from Masvingo, Mashonaland West, Mashonaland East and Harare provinces. It also consisted of employers of visually impaired people.
Sample

A sample of 20 unemployed and 20 employed visually impaired people and also 10 employers of the visually impaired were randomly selected from the population. The respondents were all from Masvingo, Harare, Mashonaland East and Mashonaland West Provinces.

Research Instruments

Questionnaires, observations and informal discussion were used to collect data in this study.

Questionnaire

The main instrument used was the questionnaire. It was chosen because it gave the respondents enough time to think about their responses. Responses were also most likely to be genuine because of the anonymity involved since no names were indicated. Questionnaires were also used because of their reputation in saving time.

Questionnaire to unemployed visually impaired persons

A questionnaire was designed and distributed to 20 unemployed visually impaired persons. This questionnaire elicited information from unemployed visually impaired persons on their views and experiences on looking for employment.

Questionnaire to employed visually impaired persons

A questionnaire was also designed and distributed to 20 employed visually impaired persons. This questionnaire solicited information from employed visually impaired people on their views and experiences about that employment.

Questionnaire to employers of visually impaired persons

A questionnaire was designed and distributed to 10 employers of visually impaired people. This questionnaire solicited information from employers of visually impaired people on their experiences and views about visually impaired employees at the work places.

Observations

Some respondents were observed at work to ascertain some of the data that had been collected. Such data related to the level of independence, work rate, mastery of job routines, initiative and level of assistance. These observations were recorded in note form. The researcher ensured that his observations did not interfere with the respondents at work.

Informal Discussions

Informal discussions with respondents were held after they had completed the questionnaires. These discussions allowed for respondents to provide important information which could not be accommodated in the questionnaires. Most respondents indicated their opinions freely. Proposals on what could be done to address some thorny issues were also given. Some respondents used this opportunity to justify some of their responses given earlier on in the questionnaire. Notes on informal discussions were recorded in point form.

Procedure

Permission to carry out the study in special and ordinary schools that employ visually impaired people was granted by Provincial Education Directors from the respective provinces. School heads for Copota Primary and Secondary schools for the Blind, Jairos Jiri school for the Blind, Murehwa Secondary School and Waddilove Primary and Secondary schools were consulted. Permission was also sought from Managers of organisations like Barclays Bank, in Harare, and Shungu Dzedu Blind people’s Co-operative Society in Chitungwiza. These organisations have visually impaired employees. Appointments were also made in advance to these organisations. The researcher personally administered the questionnaires. Questionnaires were collected soon after they had been filled in. The totally blind respondents had their questionnaire transcribed into Braille by the researcher. They then wrote their responses in Braille. This did not create any problems since the researcher is competent in reading and writing Braille. The presence of the researcher ensured a 100% return rate of questionnaires.
Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data collected. Descriptive statistics were selected because they are suitable for providing a clear reflection of findings. Huysamen (1987) indicates that descriptive statistics enable one to summarise large amounts of data and facilitate drawing conclusions about them. A rating scale was constructed. Items were constructed on a two to seven point like scale. A few items were open ended and therefore needed to be filled in.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Vocational skills required by visually impaired people

The study established a number of vocational skills that are important to visually impaired people. These include agriculture, business studies, telephone switchboard operation, physiotherapy, weaving, basketry, wire making and chalk making. The need for these skills is confirmed by the high positive response to each of these areas of employment.

Seventy-eight percent of respondents opted for agriculture. The selection of agricultural skills might have been influenced by those visually impaired people who are presently working in agriculture; Adewoye (1996) confirms the relevancy of agricultural skills to visually impaired people. They can earn a living out of farming.

Weaving was supported by all the respondents. The teaching of this vocational skill in some schools could have encouraged the respondents to choose it. Visually impaired people can weave bed spreads, chair backs, wall hangings and seat covers which they can sell for a profit. Such benefits contributed to the popularity of weaving.

Basketry was also approved by all the respondents. Evidence of the good articles in basketry that visually impaired people make could have influenced the respondents’ decision. These articles are a source of income that has sustained visually impaired people over the years.

Wire making was also very popular. Wire making involves use of tactile abilities. Visually impaired people’s tactile perception is very effective. This obviously influenced its selection by respondents. The demand for fencing wire is very high in Zimbabwe. Visually impaired people can therefore supply the market with this commodity.

The findings on vocational skills are at variance with Graves and Lyon (1985) and Bagler who noted that visually impaired students did not share the view that schools were meeting the vocational skills needed in the career discovery process.

Jobs that visually impaired people are capable of doing

The jobs that visually impaired people are capable of doing may not be separated from the vocational skills they learnt at school. The following section discusses those jobs the study found to be easily done by the visually impaired.

Agriculture

Agriculture was supported by 78% of the respondents. Due to the shortage of jobs, visually impaired people could practice farming at their homes. Success stories of visually impaired farmers might have influenced respondents’ decision to realise that farming could be done by blind people. A United Nations (1987) report confirms the job opportunities for the visually impaired offered by agriculture.

Law

Law received full support from all the respondents. It cannot be doubted that increasing technology has made it possible for the expansion of job opportunities for the visually impaired. Visually impaired people can work as lawyers, judges and prosecutors. Dobree and Boulter (1982) found out that an increasing number of blind people were joining the law profession.

Teaching

The teaching profession was also very popular. Exposure to and knowledge of visually impaired teachers could have accounted for the response of 96%. Having gone through the school system using Braille, visually impaired respondents are able to plan teaching lessons effectively. Although eye contact is important in teaching, it is not necessarily a pre-requisite. Visually impaired people can develop other strategies to deal with problems, such as indiscipline. Zvobgo (1990) and Mosher (1978) also found out that visually impaired people do well in teaching.
Woodwork

Woodwork was chosen by only 20% of the respondents. Woodwork basically involves the use of vision. There are also sharp and dangerous tools in woodwork. The blind people were probably reluctant to opt for woodwork because they feared to injure themselves with the sharp tools. Blind people would need woodwork assistants if they were to engage in woodwork. The assistants would monitor the safety in using tools and accurate measurements of objects made. This arrangement would be costly. Another limitation could be lack of knowledge of special gadgets that would be needed by the visually impaired to do woodwork. Stereotyped attitudes of visually impaired respondents could also have accounted for the low approval.

Metal Work

Metalwork was the most unpopular. It was selected by only 2% of the respondents. Like Woodwork, metalwork could have been regarded as entirely dependent on the ability to see. Another explanation could be the lack of information to the visually impaired about the job. The non availability of specialised machinery could also have accounted for this disapproval.

Engineering

Engineering received only 6% approval from the respondents. This low support could be due to fear of accidents at the work place. Lack of knowledge about specialised machinery that can be adapted for the visually impaired might have mitigated against the choice. The study’s finding on engineering contradict those of Heward and Orlansky (1992) who indicated that light engineering jobs were possible with visually impaired people.

Business Studies

Business studies were approved by 96% of the respondents. This is attributed to the critical role played by applying business skills acquired at schools or colleges to solve business related problems at work or home. Another probability is that of confidence in the visually impaired in using modern technology which is adapted to accommodate them. Access to success stories of visually impaired business people in other countries could also have had some influence.

Physiotherapy

Physiotherapy was approved by the majority of respondents. The sense of touch of visually impaired people is very sensitive. The visually impaired take advantage of this sensitivity to feel and massage the part(s) of the body of the client that need physiotherapy. While the importance of the sense of sight is acknowledged, visually impaired physiotherapists devise other ways of dealing with problems as they arise.

Social Work

Ninety four percent of respondents agreed that social work could be taken up by visually impaired people. Interaction with visually impaired colleagues who could be serving as medical and psychiatric social workers could account for this response. Press coverage of blind people serving as social workers also influenced the choice of respondents. Gearheart et al. (1992) also concur with the findings on social work.

Telephone Switchboard Operation

Telephone switchboard operation received total support from all the respondents. The tactile abilities of visually impaired people that are superior than those of the sighted influenced the strong support of the work. Recent years have also witnessed technological advances that have enabled adaptations to the switchboard. These adaptations have enabled blind people to retain their jobs and this factor could have explained respondents’ choice.

General Work

General work, weaving, chalk making, wire making and basketry also received high approval from respondents. These jobs have been traditionally known to be done very well by blind people. This awareness on the part of visually impaired people is likely to have influenced the response. A misunderstanding of what general work means could also have interfered with this finding.
Other Jobs

Other jobs strongly recommended by respondents include journalism, computer studies, typing, garment making, priesthood, Braille shorthand and audio typing and music.

Journalism could have been selected on the assumption that it involves writing and talking. The visually impaired can use Braille to write newspaper or magazine stories. The reverser Braille would be used to change the Braille to print or vice-versa. Visually impaired people could also be good radio announcers. Although journalism is not entirely about writing and talking other adaptations could be made at the workplace to suit the visually impaired journalist. A UNESCO (1987) review quotes The Daily Nation (Kenya) of 13 November 1987 as demonstrating the flexibility of journalism as an area of employment for PWD.

Computer studies could have been chosen because it involves utilising tactile perception. Visually impaired people have an effective sense of touch which they make use of. The influence of lack of adequate information about the job could not be ruled out. Silape (1994) underscores the importance of computer skills to disabled people in the modern day.

Productivity of visually impaired employees compared to the sighted

Contrary to public opinion the study revealed that there is no difference in productivity between visually impaired and sighted employees at the workplace. This finding was further confirmed by the majority of employers who rated the productivity of visually impaired employees as good or very good. Employers are in a better position to judge productivity of employees. One would expect sighted employees to be more productive than the visually impaired. The temptation of sighted employees concentrating on other things besides their work is high. The visually impaired only concentrate on their work. Visually impaired workers also withstand pressure to prove their worth at the work place. PWD do not have higher rates of absenteeism as well. Another assumption could be that due to the scarcity of employment opportunities the visually impaired employees are obliged to be productive and less likely to change employment. Observations of visually impaired employers at work that were carried out by the researcher confirmed the finding on productivity. The findings on productivity contradict those of Marinell and Dell Orto (1984) who indicated that employers were scared of low productivity and higher accident rates if they employed PWD.

Why many visually impaired persons were unemployed

Lack of information about the visually impaired people on the part of the employer was indicated as a major reason for the unemployment of visually impaired people. Employers lack information about the jobs that visually impaired people are capable of doing. Employers are also ignorant about visually impaired people’s mobility. Employers also harbour unfounded fears of higher accident rates, poor punctuality, increased costs, poor attendance and low productivity.

Silape (1994) attributes the high unemployment rate of PWD to their lack of self-esteem. She contends that some PWD want everyone to feel sorry for them and never take the initiative to look for employment.

Gender and Employability of visually impaired people

The study found out that gender is not a factor in the employability of visually impaired people. This could be because employers recruit the visually impaired for work on the basis of merit and not on one’s sex. This response could also be due to the visually impaired seeing the unemployment rate of male and female school leavers as equally high. The absence of statistical data on the role played by gender on employability of blind people might have influenced this response.

The findings on gender employability contradict those by Horiuchi and Fanning (1985), Bellarmy and Horner (1987) and Rusch et al. (1987) who established that the unemployment rate of handicapped female adults was much higher than that of their male counterparts. Silape (1994) also indicates that in developing countries most women with disabilities are unemployed, under-employed or forced to work long hours for minimal rates of pay compared to their male counterparts.

Quota System of Employment

The study established that the quota system of employment would go a long way in reducing the unemployment rate of visually impaired people. This was confirmed by 90% of respondents who strongly agreed that the system works.

This could be accounted for by the discrimination that visually impaired job seekers experience in the labour market. Another possibility could be the ineffectiveness of the Disabled Persons Act (1992) in addressing the unemployment of visually impaired people. The other possibility could be optimism in current lobbying programmes being championed by respondents’ representative groups. Another assumption could be a common
belief that anything legislated for will succeed. Yet, evidence abound of comprehensive legislative provisions that
are never adhered to.

The finding on the quota system is contrary to the deliberations of the Mbabane (Swaziland) sub
Regional Workshop on Disability Prevention and Rehabilitation (1982) which expressed reservations about this
coercive system of employment.

Sheltered Employment

Sheltered employment was also found to be a better alternative to formal employment. This could be due to the
visually impaired realising the barriers to their being employed in the formal sector and therefore opting for
sheltered employment. Another possibility could be that of the lure of free accommodation, transport and other
services offered in most sheltered workshops. The response could also be justified by the lack of information by
the visually impaired on how they are exploited in sheltered workshops compared to formal employment.
Frustration from longer periods of looking for employment could also have influenced the decision of unemployed
visually impaired respondents in particular. Some of the visually impaired respondents had families to fend for.
Some of the unemployed respondents depended on support from relatives. Some were beggars. The probability
of these two factors influencing the response could not be ruled out. Above all sheltered employment is better
than no employment at all. Brickley et al. (1985) expressed reservations at the quality of sheltered workshop
graduates.

Interactions between visually impaired and sighted employers

The study found out that the relationships between visually impaired and sighted colleagues at the workplace
were very good. This was supported by employed respondents. This was also confirmed by their employers.
Willingness by sighted colleagues to assist the blind in the work environment could account for the good
relationships. Preparedness on the part of the visually impaired to ask for help where necessary also justified this
response. A user friendly environment facilitated by the employer could have influenced the respondents’ choice
as well. Informal discussions held with respondents and observations by the researcher concurred with the
finding on interactions.

General Scarcity of Jobs

It was established that the general scarcity of jobs in the country had very little to do with the high unemployment
rate of visually impaired people. Where jobs have been available, the visually impaired have still been sidelined.
The absence of statistics on the unemployment rates of both the able bodied and the visually impaired in
Zimbabwe could account for this response. The visually impaired may not be conversant enough with the general
position of unemployment in the country. According to Silape (1994), it has become increasingly common that
people with or without disabilities, though skilled, could not find jobs in the formal labour market.

Registration for employment

Registering with employment agencies was found to be helpful to the visually impaired job seekers. The visually
impaired were obviously served the trouble of moving from company to company looking for employment.
Considering the mobility problems of visually impaired people this factor might have influenced their choice.
Limited financial resources to travel about looking for employment might have accounted for the respondents
decision. Visually impaired people may not be aware of the advantages of their physical presence when looking
for work. An application does not address certain requirements about the applicant.

While supporting registering for employment, Silape (1994) advised PWD not to indicate their disability
on application forms. She argues that this would give disabled people a chance to be called for an interview.

Employment through an acquaintance

The study established that most visually impaired people got employed because of somebody they knew.
Experiences of those who were already employed could account for this decision. Frustration from being
discriminated against during interviews could also explain this finding. Knowledge of the common practice of
getting jobs on the recommendation of an influential relative or friend is another possible assumption. Corruption
on the part of those with responsibility to hire employees could have also accounted for this finding.

Employment because of pity of employers

This study failed to prove that visually impaired people were employed because employers pitied them. Had this
been the position, most of the visually impaired people could have been in employment. Using pity as a condition

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of employment would also compromise on more important requirements of job suitability, productivity and
efficiency. Respondents might have felt it demeaning to accept that they were pitied by employers.
This finding is supported by Silape (1994) who indicated that employers should not be obliged to employ
PWD out of mercy, but should consider job requirements in terms of educational qualification and training in the
skills for the job in question.

Recommendations

This study yielded important findings on the problems faced by visually impaired people on employment in
Zimbabwe. It is hoped the following recommendations would go a long way in addressing the problems faced by
the visually impaired.

There should be a comprehensive Employment Act that would effectively cater for the employment needs of the
visually impaired and other PWD.

The government is advised to seriously consider offering tax concessions to employers who engage
visually impaired people. Such a move could go a long way in improving the employment status of visually
impaired people.

A vocational curriculum responsive to the employment needs of visually impaired people should
urgently be developed. Employer organisations like the Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries and the Zimbabwe
National Chamber of Commerce should be actively involved in drafting the vocational curriculum for the visually
impaired. Input from these organisations is essential in addressing current inadequacies of the vocational
curriculum.

Public campaigns to spread awareness about the importance of employing visually impaired people
should be carried out through seminars, workshops, television, radios, books, newspapers, magazines, political
rallies and church gatherings.

The teaching of vocational skills to the visually impaired should start from primary school level. This
would equip visually impaired children with employment skills at an early age to avoid vocational experimentation
later in life.

Affirmative action programmes should be put in place in order to improve the employment status of
visually impaired people.

Employers without visually impaired employees should be encouraged to visit employers who have
visually impaired employees for firsthand experience of the capabilities of visually impaired people.

CONCLUSION

This study helped to reveal valuable information about visually impaired people and unemployment. It
demonstrated what visually impaired people were capable of doing well at the workplace. It also exposed the
problems of the visually impaired in finding jobs.

While some employers enjoy the benefits of employing visually impaired people, the majority of
employers still missed a lot of information on the jobs that visually impaired people were capable of doing.
Education was also urgently needed on the advantages of engaging visually impaired people.

Society has an obligation to rescue the visually impaired from what Nkala (1984) calls an environment
too powerful for the visually impaired to overcome by their own efforts. This requires the coming together of
central government, local authorities, non-governmental organisations, pressure groups, human rights groups
and employers. Only then can the problems explored in this study be effectively surmounted.

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