



## BLIND INDIVIDUALS AND THEIR EMPLOYMENT IN LIGHT OF SELECTED ISSUES

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**Abstract.** This article is devoted to the blind from the perspective of difficulties in finding employment by these populations. The aim of the paper is to present selected problems faced by blind individuals in taking up employment, as this issue seems to be still valid due to its complexity. The article presents the problem of vision loss from a medical perspective. Differences in the following issues were presented: completely blind and partially sighted people. Attention was drawn to the external conditions facilitating the professional existence of blind employees in the working environment. It also focused on the numerous consequences of the inability to see in the work environment. A research report entitled *Pracodawca na TAK* carried out by the TAKpełnosprawni Foundation in 2022, concerned the employment of individuals with disabilities, including the blind. The study refers to the principles of effective employment of people with disabilities. It was prepared according to the international standard ILO Global Business and Disability Network. In Poland, the practical aspect of these principles was presented for the first time.

### OSOBY NIEWIDOME ORAZ ICH ZATRUDNIENIE W ŚWIETLE WYBRANYCH PROBLEMÓW

**Słowa kluczowe:** osoby niewidome, zatrudnienie, aktywność zawodowa

**Streszczenie.** Artykuł poświęcony jest osobom niewidomym w perspektywie trudności podjęcia przez tę populację zatrudnienia. Celem artykułu jest zaprezentowanie wybranych problemów, z jakimi zmagają się jednostki niewidome w podjęciu zatrudnienia, ponieważ to zagadnienie wydaje się ciągle aktualne również ze względu na jego złożoność. W artykule przedstawiono problematykę utraty wzroku z perspektywy medycznej. Zaprezentowano różnice

w zagadnieniach, takich jak: osoby całkowicie niewidome oraz osoby szczerkowo widzące. Zwrócono uwagę na warunki zewnętrzne ułatwiające pracownikom niewidomym egzystencję zawodową w środowisku pracy. Skupiono się także na licznych konsekwencjach, jakie niesie za sobą brak zdolności widzenia w środowisku pracy. Przedstawiono raport z badań pt. *Pracodawca na TAK*, przeprowadzonych przez fundację TAKpełnosprawni w roku 2021, który dotyczył zatrudnienia jednostek z niepełnosprawnościami, a w tym ludzi niewidomych. Badanie odnosi się do zasad skutecznego zatrudniania osób z niepełnosprawnościami. Zostało przygotowane według międzynarodowego standardu ILO Global Business and Disability Network. Co ważne, w Polsce praktyczny aspekt tych zasad przedstawiono po raz pierwszy.

## Introduction

Blind individuals exist actively in their family, educational, and work environments, where they face many challenging situations generated by their health impairment. The professional existence of a blind person, as well as other individuals who share the work environment with a blind employee, such as management and fellow workers, is undoubtedly unique. It should be emphasized that blind people encounter numerous barriers in finding employment, even at the stage of job search, including architectural or technical barriers that are often the result of insufficient knowledge or financial issues. The complexity of the issue regarding finding employment for individuals with complete vision loss is undoubtedly significant. Therefore, it seems worthwhile to consider this matter, as blind individuals exist in the closer or more distant social environment of every person. It should be emphasized that the consequences of lack of knowledge and education in this area often lead to numerous problematic situations.

As mentioned before, the article aims to present selected issues related to the employment of blind individuals. The topic, concerning an inherent aspect of human existence, namely professional functioning, is significant. The article was prepared using the Desk Research method. Selected literature on the medical perspective of blind individuals was analysed. The specific difficulties faced by the blind population in finding employment were examined. The recommended practices for employing individuals with health impairments, including visual impairments, were presented. The article utilized data from a research report titled *Pracodawca na TAK* (“Employer says YES”). The analyses were conducted by the TAKpełnosprawni foundation in 2021 and focused on the employment of individuals with disabilities, including blindness. It is worth noting

that the report was prepared according to the international standard of the ILO Global Business and Disability Network.

It seems that diagnosing the needs and problems related to the employment of blind individuals is crucial. This information can help develop useful and optimal employment practices for this population and minimize inconveniences encountered by employees without visual capabilities in the workplace. Moreover, it is essential to promote multidimensional collaboration between blind individuals, potential employers, and employers who already hire blind individuals. Undoubtedly, the topic of employment and professional activities of visually impaired individuals is complex, but it is definitely worth considering and discussing these issues.

### **Blind Person from a Medical Perspective**

In the medical context, the following categories of individuals struggling with visual impairment can be distinguished:

- People who are completely blind, meaning those in whom the absence of any visual functions has been diagnosed. This population of blind individuals does not react to any visual stimuli.
- People with residual vision, constituting individuals who are visually impaired but still retain some degree of visual ability. In the case of these individuals, the capacity for vision does not exceed approximately 5% of the standard visual acuity (Mrzygłocka-Chojnacka, 2014, pp. 8-9).

Among the blind population, different periods of vision loss can be identified. The first group comprises individuals who have been blind **since birth** or **from early childhood**. This population consists of individuals in whom visual loss was diagnosed before the commencement of their professional activities. The loss of vision in this situation can be either total or partial. The second population consists of individuals who became blind **later in their life** (Mrzygłocka-Chojnacka, 2014, pp. 8-9).

In the context of the outlined issues, it should be clarified that the distinction between the blind population and visually impaired individuals is not solely based on the age at which their vision loss occurred. This differentiation is also conditioned by whether a person has the ability to retain and acquire visual impressions in their memory that will be useful throughout their further life (Sokołowska-Kasperiuk, 2015, p. 158). Elżbieta Jurgielewicz-Delegacz emphasizes that people with disabilities, including blind individuals, can actively engage

in both social and professional life, thanks to a developed pro-social policy and its principles that focus on addressing the specific needs of this population (2016, p. 131).

It should be acknowledged that the lack of visual ability generates numerous difficulties in the cognitive process, particularly in the reception of visual stimuli. It significantly diminishes one's opportunities for full participation in cultural life and restricts their ability to live independently and fully. It also limits the possibilities for the full development of one's personality in social and professional life. There is a deficiency in the ability to manifest cognitive and aesthetic attitudes and reduced opportunities for education and engagement with literature. An individual who lacks visual capacity also struggles with the inability to acquire information that is important for a complete social existence (Walter, 2010, p. 128).

### **Specificity of employment-related issues faced by the blind population**

Numerous obstacles faced by blind individuals include difficulties in independent mobility and basic existence. In the outlined context, psychological barriers such as insufficient motivation, diminished self-belief, and resistance to change should also be acknowledged. However, it is worth emphasizing that with sufficient support, active participation of blind individuals in society, educational settings, and the workforce becomes possible (Mrzygłocka-Chojnacka, 2014, pp. 8-9).

Due to the specific limitations experienced by blind individuals, employers are obligated to adapt working conditions to the needs and capabilities of visually impaired employees. Consequently, measures and forms of support have been developed to alleviate the difficulties faced by blind workers in their work environment (Braun, 2016, p. 56). In this regard, the conditions facilitating the professional existence of blind employees can be highlighted, including:

- Adaptation of the workstation and workplace to the needs of the blind person.
- Acquisition of technical equipment aimed at providing comprehensive support to visually impaired employees and facilitating the execution of assigned professional tasks. Examples may include computers with larger-than-standard monitors, computers equipped with adaptive devices, specialized voice recorders, or other currently available braille aids.

- Support in social and professional adaptation within the organization, particularly during the first months of employment. This support involves introducing the individual to new professional tasks and familiarizing them with the work environment.
- Adequate preparation of blind individuals for employment in the open job market, which includes understanding the rules of professional functioning in both open and sheltered job market organizations. Dedicated information directed at blind employees is crucial in conveying the message that they can work in open employment organizations and achieve competitive results.
- Positive attitudes from management and other employees within the organization, demonstrated through acceptance of blind employees, as well as kindness and willingness to provide support when necessary.
- Regular evaluation of the blind employee's employment progress and continuous monitoring of their professional development by career specialists (Majewski, 2014, pp. 16-17).

The inability to have complete vision can have numerous consequences in the employment environment. The most important ones include:

- Difficulties in mobility.
- Challenges in communicating with other employees due to impaired body language and facial expressions.
- Difficulties in accessing information.
- Loss of anonymity.
- Loss of personal independence in the professional environment (Bugajska, Nowak, 2019, p. 7).

According to Marzena Sochańska-Kawiecka, the lack of motivation among blind individuals to engage in not only educational but also professional activities is a significant issue. The researcher emphasizes that in Poland, there is still a dominant rehabilitative-medical approach to disability, which consequently lowers the motivation of disabled individuals, including the blind, to seek employment. Other comorbidities and dysfunctions within the body further hinder the overall capacity of individuals (Sochańska-Kawiecka, Makowska-Belta, 2015, p. 21). Building upon the previous theoretical considerations, it should be emphasized that blind individuals, due to the impairments they face and physical limitations, are more predisposed to engage in intellectual, service-oriented, and social work rather than production or physical labour. Therefore, suitable

employment for blind individuals should aim to fully utilize their cognitive abilities and stimulate their professional interests.

- The work should take place in an architecturally adapted environment that caters to the capabilities of individuals without sight, enabling them to move freely within the organization without encountering technical difficulties.
- The execution of work should occur in an ergonomic environment where blind employees have complete physical safety.
- Blind employees should engage their two primary senses to the fullest extent, namely hearing and touch (Bilewicz, Kulczyk, 2012, pp. 44-45).

Technological solutions play a significant role in mitigating difficulties in the workplace for the blind population. Various technical devices and technological advancements have been identified in the literature to effectively eliminate the highlighted barriers. These include screen magnification programs, electronic recorders, synthetic speech, screen readers, and Braille computer terminals. These aids greatly facilitate internet activity for individuals with visual impairments or provide support (Ślusarczyk, 2017, p. 270). It is worth noting that there are now several assistive technology devices available on the market that effectively support the work of blind individuals. However, it should be emphasized that the selection is still limited. Blind employees can benefit from office-oriented devices, such as printers that enable voice message transmission. Notably, the CRMC organization in Israel has implemented a proprietary system designed to support the work of blind individuals in their call centre. The system is equipped with a Braille keyboard, and audio carriers have been developed to describe what is visible on the computer monitor screen. Additionally, Braille monitors have also been developed (Borwaski, Kesra, 2013, p. 206).

As highlighted by Elżbieta Śmiechowska-Petrovskij, blind and visually impaired individuals continuously receive new opportunities through assistive technologies with an informational and communicative character. These technologies offer various means of sending, creating, receiving, processing, and storing information in widely accessible analog and digital formats. As a result, blind employees gain significant compensatory capabilities in utilizing standard visual sources of information, successfully utilized by sighted individuals or those with a lesser degree of visual impairment (Śmiechowska-Petrovskij, 2017, p. 185). In the context of the previous issues, it is important to emphasize that blind individuals make use of the assistance of a white cane, which greatly facilitates their mobility in unfamiliar areas. Additionally, specifically designed

modern mobile applications also provide excellent support in covering distances (Jania, Rodzewicz, 2022, p. 3).

## **Recommended practices in the employment of individuals with health disabilities, including visual impairment**

As noted by Teresa Matczak, the potential of individuals facing visual disabilities in terms of their professional activity is still underutilized, which is due to existing stereotypes, as well as insufficient knowledge and education among employers (2018, p. 42). In this context, it is worth mentioning a research report conducted by the „TAKpełnosprawni” foundation in 2021, which focused on effective employment of individuals with disabilities, including the blind. As previously emphasized, the research analysis was prepared according to the International Labour Organization’s Global Business and Disability Network standards. Through these studies, it is known that when preparing recruitment processes for individuals with disabilities, including the blind, it is essential to start at the stage of candidate selection and recruitment by preparing a job advertisement in a manner that includes a clear and transparent job description, as well as all additional requirements. It is necessary to specify the requirements in such a way that individuals with visual disabilities can be assured that their disability will not hinder the performance of their professional tasks. Optimal practices for employing individuals with health impairments, including those with visual disabilities, also include a declaration of an organization’s openness to hiring employees with disabilities. In this context, it is important to clearly articulate the employer’s attitude towards disabled employees. It is also crucial to use language that is understandable for blind candidates participating in the recruitment process for a specific job position (Robińska, 2021, pp. 16-46).

In light of the outlined issues, as mentioned by Jarosław Gniatkowski, it is important to consider common phrases used in everyday speech that should not be avoided when addressing a blind person, as well as those that should be avoided in conversation with a blind individual. They are presented in the table below:

Table 1. Phrases used in everyday speech when communicating with a blind person

| Common phrases used in everyday speech that should not be avoided when addressing a blind person | Repetitive phrases used in everyday speech to avoid when addressing a blind individual   |
|--|--|
| 'Have you seen.'<br>'Have you watched.'<br>'See you'<br>'Have you read.'<br>'See you later'      | 'Here' or 'there', as these terms, in the context of the population of blind individuals and the specific nature of their disability, do not convey practical information. |

Source: Adapted from: Gniatkowski, J. (2015). *Pacjent niewidomy i słabowidzący w gabinecie i na oddziale*. Warszawa: Wyd. Amis, p. 2.

Continuing the previous considerations regarding the attitudes of potential employers seeking to collaborate with blind employees, the following issues are highlighted as crucial:

1. Consideration of diverse types of contact with potential job candidates, such as email, phone, SMS, and online applications.
2. Openness to various forms of employment, including internships and traineeships.
3. Openness to both full-time and part-time work.
4. Openness to remote and hybrid work arrangements (Robińska, 2021, p. 3).

When hiring individuals with health impairments, including blind employees, attention should be paid to the architectural accessibility of the organization. This encompasses all factors that facilitate mobility within the organization, such as accessible toilets, absence of thresholds, ramps, wide corridors, handrails, clearly marked communication routes, and easily accessible magnification software for employees with visual impairments (Robińska, 2021, pp. 16-46). Another crucial aspect is the ability for employees with health impairments to communicate remotely. This may involve non-standard forms of communication, such as email or SMS. Providing online Polish Sign Language (PJM) interpreters for deaf employees or ensuring their participation in both physical and virtual events is also essential. Research has shown that allocating a budget specifically for implementing improvements for employees with disabilities, including those who are completely blind, is a recommended practice in the employment of individuals with disabilities. In this regard, blind individuals working in an organization must continuously assess the workplace accommodations available to them, particularly in the realm of modern technologies.



It is worth mentioning that individuals with disabilities should be active experts in the field discussed above. Therefore, various initiatives involving employees with disabilities and employers should be conducted. Another recommended practice in employing individuals with disabilities, including the blind, is the implementation of a job retention and return-to-work program. Such a program is utilized when an employee acquires a disability due to aging or returns to work after injuries or accidents, but is not yet as productive as before. In this regard, it is crucial in the process of hiring individuals with health impairments to provide not only mentoring or psychological support but also assistance from vocational counsellors. It should be clarified that blind individuals require multidimensional support, particularly for those who have suddenly and unexpectedly lost their vision (Robińska, 2021, pp. 16-46).

As emphasized by Andrey Tikhonov, it should be remembered that the quality of life for blind individuals undergoes a significant change in the context mentioned above. Often, individuals who are visually impaired develop beliefs of helplessness or even a sense of meaninglessness, which is further exacerbated by prejudices, stereotypes, and prevailing social convictions that blind individuals are incapable of independent functioning, obtaining employment, or sustaining a family (2017, p. 203). Undoubtedly, the ability to access pre-retirement benefits is of utmost importance for employees with disabilities, including the blind (Robińska, 2021, pp. 16-46). Moreover, it can be emphasized that the actions of the managerial staff and a profound understanding of the organization's policy principles play a significant role in the highlighted practices. In the literature, it can be read, „In a study conducted in 2012, researchers from Cornell University demonstrated that employees are 60% more likely to disclose their disability to their immediate supervisor than to the HR department” (Robińska, 2021, pp. 16-46). Confidentiality is a fundamental aspect of the aforementioned practices in the process of employing individuals with disabilities because individuals with disabilities, after presenting their disability certificate to the employer, retain an unquestionable right to privacy. Research has shown that another optimal practice in employing individuals with disabilities is collaborative action between organizations, which includes cooperation with clients, contractors, and business partners. Employers hiring blind individuals should mutually inspire each other in terms of the established policies on diversity management. Organizations employing individuals with disabilities can also draw inspiration from the actions of other European organizations that have years of experience in building teams of employees with recognized disabilities, especially the blind.

Organizations can share optimal practices, such as developing their own individual practices to support the professional activities of individuals with disabilities, including the blind. Active activities in the field of employee volunteering or social economy, as well as highlighting diversity in employment through the use of the internet, including available marketing channels, well-known e-platforms, or publicly accessible directories, are also significant in this aspect (Robińska, 2021, pp. 16-46).

## Conclusions

The article attempts to address the issue of specific challenges in the employment of visually impaired individuals and their professional activities. It presents the problem of total vision loss from a medical perspective, emphasizing its interdisciplinary nature, as well as the difficulties faced by the visually impaired population in gaining employment. The recommended practices for hiring individuals with health impairments, including those coping with complete loss of sight, are described. Based on the review of relevant literature and selected studies, certain conclusions can be drawn. First and foremost, it should be noted that visually impaired individuals face extensive and challenging problems regarding their professional activities. The adaptation of the workplace and job position to the needs expressed by the visually impaired employee is crucial. Additionally, active support in the social and vocational adaptation of such employees within the organization remains significant. Furthermore, adequate educational and informational preparation of visually impaired individuals is important for their successful integration into the open labour market. It should be acknowledged that in the outlined context, positive managerial attitudes and acceptance of visually impaired employees by other staff members play a significant role. In terms of the needs of visually impaired individuals in their professional activities, the acquisition of specialized technical equipment that facilitates the execution of assigned tasks is indispensable. The improvement of the quality of employing visually impaired individuals undoubtedly benefits from the implementation of optimal practices based on the ILO Global Business and Disability Network, an international standard. Therefore, it can be assumed that all efforts aimed at enhancing the quality of employment for visually impaired individuals should be designed in collaboration with this population, which consists of employees deprived of visual capabilities.

The article does not exhaust the presented issue. Further analyses could address the specifics of the needs and challenges faced by employers in hiring visually impaired individuals, focusing on various sectors. Subsequent research could also examine the effectiveness of already established practices from the perspective of visually impaired employees active in the open and sheltered labour markets in Poland. In the outlined context, multidimensional education in this direction is also crucial, encompassing employers who already employ visually impaired workers, potential employers, prospective job candidates, as well as employees already active in the open and sheltered labour markets in Poland.

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