

## Research In Focus: A Weekly Digest of New Research from the NIDILRR Community

### What are Key Factors in Successfully Integrating Service Dogs in the Workplace?

Many people with disabilities use service dogs or assistance dogs to maintain independence at home, at work, and in the community. Service dogs are trained to perform specific functions such as guiding a person with visual impairments safely from place to place, alerting a person who is Deaf or hard of hearing to sounds in the environment, or providing other assistance such as pulling a wheelchair or retrieving dropped items. Some dogs can also be trained to alert a person of an oncoming seizure or a drop in blood sugar or insulin. In a recent NIDILRR-funded study, a researcher surveyed service dog handlers, trainers, and others from two different service dog groups: those using service dogs for mobility/stability and those using service dogs for medical alert/response. They wanted to know what are the elements of a successful service dog partnership, what factors are important when integrating an employee and their service dog into the workplace, and whether the type of service dog makes a difference in what factors are most important to a successful outcome.

In the study, the researcher asked people with experience in using or integrating service dogs in the workplace to rank a list of factors according to their perceived importance of those factors in the development and maintenance of successful service dog partnerships. Participants included service dog handlers and trainers, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and health professionals. For the survey, participants were asked to rank 68 factors which were divided into six major categories: Dog Preparation,

Monitoring, Co-Worker Preparation, Legal Knowledge, Employee Competence, and Information and Education. The participants rated each factor for its importance in the overall process of integrating a service dog team into the workplace. Based on participants' responses, the authors used concept mapping and pattern matching to analyze which categories were most important to each of the two service-dog groups.

Both groups rated *monitoring* as the most important element to a successful partnership. Monitoring included factors such as trainers making sure the dog and handler can work together, that the employee responsibly maintains the dog's health and good behavior around the workplace, and that the employee maintains his or her own productivity. Also included in this category were factors related to ensuring that everyone on the service dog team, from the handler and trainer to the employer and co-workers, has a full understanding of the rules, regulations, and benefits of a service-dog-friendly workplace.

Respondents in both groups rated *dog preparation* as the second most important element to a successful partnership. Dog preparation included items surrounding general good behavior of the dog controlled by vocal commands and training appropriate for the specific workplace. This category also addressed factors such as assigning a person responsible for sustaining the dog's training, conducting checks or maintenance of that training, and addressing any problems in training as they occur.

There were differences in each groups' ratings when it came to *co-worker preparation* and *legal knowledge*. The mobility/stability group rated *co-worker preparation* and *legal*

*knowledge* as significantly more important than the medical alert group. *Co-worker preparation* included leadership on the part of the employer in supporting the service dog team and allowing time for training, modeling good behavior around the dog and handler, educating staff, and addressing concerns such as co-worker allergies or fear of dogs. This category also included orientation sessions for employees to introduce the dog and its tasks, the service dog team and their roles, and service dog etiquette. The *legal knowledge* category addressed factors such as ensuring that everyone clearly understands the rights, responsibilities, and practices involved in using a service dog as an accommodation, and maintaining awareness of procedures and policies to protect everyone in the office, including the service dog team.

Both groups rated *employee competence* and *information and education* at about the same level but of lesser overall importance than the other four categories. *Employee competence* included the employee's ability to work with and communicate to the employer about their needs, articulate the reasonable accommodation that the dog would provide, and explain the dog's tasks to supervisors or managers along with any specific needs such as breaks or walks. Additional factors comprised the employee's ability to address any breaches of service dog etiquette from co-workers, the employee's understanding of the consequences of not maintaining control or care of the dog, and that the employee has the documentation and procedures in place to maintain proper training and identification of the dog. The *information and education* category's items covered general and specific knowledge about service dogs and openness toward service dogs in the workplace and the many benefits they bring to individual employees who use them and to whole the workplace.

The authors noted that no employers opted to participate in the survey, which they said might have added the important perspectives of managers and supervisors who make hiring decisions. They suggested that future research may look at why people in the mobility/stability dog group rated certain elements in legal knowledge and co-worker preparation so highly. There is little research in this area, according to the authors, and there is a need for better understanding of the role of service dogs in different environments, including the workplace. Understanding the importance of elements such as training and orientation, informed understanding of laws, and balancing issues between coworkers may help in developing programs and materials to educate and train service dog teams to transition to the workplace successfully.

**To learn more:**

The Job Accommodation Network offers information, services, and support for employers and employees seeking accommodations. Check out their extensive information on service animals: <https://askjan.org/topics/servanim.htm>

Assistance Dogs International (ADI) is a leading organization focusing on accreditation for assistance dog programs: <http://www.assistancedogsinternational.org/>

**Learn more about this study:**

Read the original article: Glenn, M., and Thorne, K., (2015) Does the purpose for using a service dog make a difference in the perceptions of what it takes to create successful

outcomes in the workplace? *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling*, 46(2), 13-19.

This article can be ordered through NARIC's document delivery service as J71989.

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