

The employment of individuals with hearing impairment in the KwaZulu-Natal private sector: Current employers' perceptions and experiences

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Abstract.

BACKGROUND: Despite policies and legislation mandating employment, individuals with hearing impairment continue to face barriers accessing the labour market, and typically experience higher unemployment rates.

OBJECTIVE: This study aimed to investigate employers' perceptions and experiences in recruiting and retaining individuals with hearing impairment in KwaZulu-Natal Provinces' private sector.

METHODS: A descriptive questionnaire survey with quantitative methods of analysis was used to obtain information from relevant stakeholders. A total of 30 responses were obtained from the 19 companies who had agreed to participate.

RESULTS: Participants who used external services during recruitment and retention were more likely to report the benefits of employing individuals with hearing impairment, this being statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Approximately 43% reported that reasonable accommodations were being provided, while 83.3% suggested that safety concerns and communication difficulties (70%) contributed towards poor employment rates amongst affected individuals.

CONCLUSIONS: Lack of familiarity with disability and the associated legislation can manifest in erroneous stereotypes, that individuals with disabilities are poor job performers and incapable of working independently. However, with the use of reasonable accommodations, which includes sign language interpreters and desensitization workshops, employers were able to successfully integrate employees who are hearing impaired into the workforce.

Keywords: Workplace, hearing impairment, employment

1. Introduction

The South African working population is increasing at a faster rate than the employed population. Alongside poverty and inequality, South Africa has predictably one of the highest unemployment rates of 27.1% (STATSSA, 2018). Technological advances and the development of schools for learners

with special educational needs in the KwaZulu-Natal Province has resulted in an increase in the national working population of individuals with hearing impairment. Furthermore, the absorption rate of employable individuals into the labour market in eThekweni has increased from 47.1% in 2015 to 49.4%, suggesting that as the number of individuals seeking employment has increased, so has the likelihood of finding a job (Republic of South Africa, 2017). In spite of this, vulnerable populations are poorly represented, accounting for approximately 1.3% of the labour force (Republic of South Africa, 2018).

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1.1. Disability within the workplace

Despite South Africa having a number of legal frameworks in place such as the Skills Development Act (No. 97 of 1998), the Employment Equity Act (EEA) (No. 55 of 1998), Code of Good Practice and Technical Assistance Guidelines on the Employment of People with Disabilities (TAG) of 2002, which promotes the employment of people with disabilities, challenges remain regarding their inclusion into the labour market, as employers are unwilling to take the assumed risks (Hindle, Gibson & David, 2010). Individuals with hearing impairment are faced with limited opportunities to access the job market and are typically rendered unemployed or underemployed, being accommodated in temporary, low-income jobs (Jang, Wang, & Lin, 2014; Bradley, Ebener, & Geyer, 2013; Jung & Bhattacharyya, 2012; Smit, 2012). Hearing impairment is a hidden disability, which significantly impacts on an individual's quality of life. The sense of hearing is critical for communicating, engaging within an environment, independence and performing activities of daily living (Shaw, 2013). Employment plays a vital role in maintaining financial wellbeing and low levels of employment have socio-economic implications, placing increased strain on government social security systems (Houston, Lammers & Svorny, 2010). The South African government, amongst most others, cannot rely on international support to create job opportunities for persons with disabilities. The challenge is to thus generate successful employment of persons with disability, specifically hearing impairment, as communication difficulties are becoming a growing concern.

With the expected transformation of the labour force, it is necessary to identify issues influencing the hiring and job retention of individuals with hearing impairment. Employers are key stakeholders towards the understanding of the barriers that impede individuals who are hearing impaired from job acquirement, optimal performance and career advancement. Information from the lived experiences of various human resource personnel and managers who employ persons with hearing impairment can offer insight into the factors contributing to their employment (Punch, 2016). The information obtained from this study are based on current issues relevant to the employment of individuals with hearing impairment, and can be used to meet the needs of employers as well as the changing nature of workplace demands (Shaw, 2013).

1.2. The effect of employers' attitudes and perceptions for not employing individuals with hearing impairment

Studies have shown that employers' attitudes strongly influence the employment experience and career advancement of disabled individuals (Matthews, 2011; Schur et al., 2009; Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2008). Investigations into employers' viewpoint towards hiring persons with disabilities, demonstrated a favorable attitude and moderate commitment (Kaye et al., 2011; Chan et al., 2010). Employers admitted they focused exclusively on job performance (Kaye et al., 2011), and in order to hire a person with a disability, the applicants had to meet the required criteria before they would be considered for a position (Gilbride et al., 2003). In a study conducted in Brazil, some companies felt employability was related to education, the company and job position being offered, while others required the applicant to demonstrate interest and responsibility (Santos et al., 2013). One of the most profound challenges restricting recruitment was a lack of adequate skills and qualifications amongst individuals with disabilities (Maja et al., 2011; Wordsworth, 2003). Education levels and severity of hearing loss influence employment and income opportunities in various ways, with the more severe the hearing loss, the less the likelihood of obtaining paid work (Stam, Kostense, Festen & Kramer, 2013; Boutin & Wilson, 2009), whereas higher or tertiary education had a more positive effect on employment (Perkins-Dock et al., 2015; Walter & Dirmyer, 2013; Schley et al., 2011; Rydberg, Gellerstedt & Danermark, 2011). For instance, Walter and Dirmyer (2013) found that individuals with hearing impairment, in the USA, with less than a bachelor's degree typically experienced a 4-5% higher unemployment rate than their hearing counterparts, whereas individuals who are hearing impaired with a Bachelor's degree experienced a 1-2% higher unemployment rate.

Additionally, unfamiliarity towards the needs of individuals with disability contributes towards the low levels of employment amongst this population (Jansson, 2015; McKinney, 2013; Kaye et al., 2011). Demand for supervision, promotability and productivity were identified as barriers towards employing affected persons (Kaye et al., 2011; Hernandez et al., 2000). Wordsworth (2003) found that biases and discriminatory assumptions have led to the belief amongst employers that their workplaces and positions were not appropriate for persons with

disabilities. Similarly, according to Barnes (2003), employers believed that the majority of the positions available within the company were not suitable for an individual with impairment. In a study that examined employers' perspective on supported employment for people with disabilities in Sweden by Gustafsson, Peralta, & Danermark (2013), participants suggested that individuals with disabilities would be unable to achieve work standards that were on par with current standards of productivity. In the current competitive and demanding market, employers emphasized the importance of being flexible and able to multitask, and expressed concern that the inability to assume different roles would be a limitation for employees with disability (Kelly, 2015; Kaye et al., 2011). Exclusion from challenging roles prohibits opportunities for individuals with disabilities to prove their capabilities, and thereby hinders their career development and advancement (Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2008).

Employers have expressed concern regarding the communication skills of individuals with hearing impairment, and that the lack of clear communication made it difficult to meet job expectations (Perkins-Dock et al., 2015; Rosengreen & Saladin, 2010). Similarly, Boutin (2010) reported that communication difficulties largely impacted on social interactions, and affected individuals may therefore be excluded and isolated. As spoken language is the main form of communication within the workplace, employees who are hearing impaired were left out the loop and the proverbial "water cooler moments," where work-related issues are often discussed (Rosengreen & Saladin, 2010, p9). In a study conducted by Punch, Hyde & Power (2007), in Australia, 49% of respondents identified participation in work related social functions as being mainly affected by their hearing impairment. Further insight into barriers influencing employment, suggested that employers were concerned over work safety (Haynes, 2014; Shuler, Mistler, Torrey & Depukat, 2014; Rosengreen & Saladin, 2010).

1.3. Concerns regarding the provision of accommodations in the workplace

Concerns regarding the cost of accommodating employees with disabilities was also a major factor influencing their employment. Despite research indicating that the provision of reasonable accommodations allowed the employer to retain an existing employee and increased productivity, evidence sug-

gests that employers viewed this as a financial obligation (Solovieva, Hendricks, Walls, & Dowler, 2010). Reasonable accommodations, such as sign language interpreters and buddy systems, are essential to successfully integrating individuals with hearing impairment into the work place (Haynes & Linden, 2012). The adoption of appropriate strategies supports more productive work performances and the ability to actively contribute to the working environment. However, due to a shift in structure and employee demands (Walter & Dirmyer, 2013) most employment environments are not disability friendly, and while the EEA mandates the provision of reasonable accommodations, employers are able to terminate employment in the event that the job requirements are not being met and reasonable accommodations cannot be provided (Maja et al., 2011).

In most cases, employers and managers lacked an understanding of the accommodation needs and availability of strategies that allow for optimal work performance for individuals who are hearing impaired (Kaye et al., 2011; Matthews, 2011). The majority of individuals who are hearing impaired therefore remained unemployed, despite being capable of working if appropriate accommodations were provided. Additionally, employers were reluctant to hire individuals with disability due to concerns of potential legal complications in the event that their employment contracts have to be terminated, or if the employee were to be disciplined for poor job performance (Kaye et al., 2011). It is evident that there are still numerous limitations regarding the inclusion of individuals with hearing impairment into employment, in South Africa. Investigating the perspective of employers' who have employed individuals with hearing impairment will ascertain the factors enabling their successful employment. Identifying enabling factors can thus be used to address barriers preventing equality in the workplace and reduce the gap between individuals with hearing impairment and those without in the labour market. Further, knowledge based on the perspective and experiences of various human resource personnel and employers who employ persons with hearing impairment can be used as an example of best practice, and to meet the needs of employers as well as the changing nature of workplace demands. The purpose of this study was to determine employers' perceptions and experiences in recruiting and retaining individuals with hearing impairment in KwaZulu-Natal Province's private sector.

2. Materials and methods

A descriptive, survey study design was used, with quantitative methods of analysis. Participants were recruited from a list of companies within the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Province's private sector that employ individuals with hearing impairment, obtained from the KwaZulu-Natal Blind and Deaf Society, KwaZulu-Natal Deaf Association and Fulton School for the Deaf. A total of 30 companies were listed within KZN that met the inclusion criteria, with participants being employers, managers or human resource practitioners. Participants must have been employed for at least six months, and were required to be involved in the recruitment and/or retention process of employees who were hearing impaired. Of the 30 companies identified and invited to participate, 19 (63.33%) agreed to do so, and were based in the eThekweni and ILembe Districts of KZN. While 50 individuals met the inclusion criteria, only 30 consented to participate and were included in the main study for analysis, which resulted in a response rate of 60% being achieved. One participant requested to withdraw from the study and therefore did not complete the questionnaire. Two participants were included in the pilot study. Furthermore, participants were lost as a result of departmental restructuring or resignation while obtaining all the gatekeeper permission letters needed for full ethical approval. Low response rates are regarded as unavoidable in such studies, and were not thought to be a cause of concern as it can be quite common in social research that requires voluntary participation (Halim, Bakar, Hamzah & Rashid, 2013).

Most responses were obtained from participants who were older than 40 years of age (46.7%, $n = 14$), and of the 30 respondents, there were equal numbers of males and females ($n = 15$). English was spoken by 65.5% ($n = 19$) of the participants, followed by isiZulu (17.2%, $n = 5$) and Afrikaans (13.8%, $n = 4$). Half (50%, $n = 14$) had up to five years of experience in their job position, 35.7% ($n = 10$) had 6–10 years, one had less than a year while, 14.3% ($n = 4$) had more than 10 years of experience. Participants represented companies from varying business sectors, with the most being from the manufacturing (41.4%, $n = 12$) and the retail (31.3%, $n = 9$) industries.

2.1. Data collection method and procedure

A descriptive questionnaire was developed to obtain the necessary information regarding the

experiences and perceptions of employers in the private sector towards employing individuals with hearing impairment. The research tool comprised of 23 questions that were divided into six sections namely; biographical/organizational information, employers' perceptions of disability and experience utilizing disability related legislation, employers' experience with recruitment and retention and the provision of reasonable accommodations, employers' perceptions related to recruitment and retention, as well as the barriers and challenges to the employment of individuals with hearing impairment and practical strategies that could facilitate recruitment and retention. The questions were adapted from research studies conducted by Perkins-Dock et al. (2015), Kaye et al. (2011) and Maja et al. (2011) as well as based on an extensive review of literature. The questionnaire included closed-ended, multiple choice and Likert scale questions. Structured projective questioning was utilised to limit social desirability bias for questions pertaining to employer attitudes towards hiring individuals who are hearing impaired, and therefore ensure greater reliability. Instead of asking respondents to comment on their organization, they were required to speculate attitudes and behaviours of employers in general (Kaye et al., 2011).

Results from the pilot study indicated that the questionnaire was easy to complete and suggested that the data collection method was appropriate. Additionally, the Chronbach Alpha co-efficient was used to measure the internal consistency of the questionnaire and a value of $p = 0.858$ was obtained, suggesting that the items on the scale were reliable. The questionnaire was delivered by the researcher to each participating company, and respondents were given a timeframe of two weeks to complete the questionnaire. However, additional time was required by some participants, and a further two weeks was permitted, in an effort to improve the response rate.

2.2. Data analysis

Data from the questionnaire was coded and analysed by administering descriptive and inferential statistics, with a non-parametric statistical test being utilised, as the questionnaire was based on categories. Simple descriptive statistics in the form of percentages and graphs were used to represent the data obtained, with Pearson Chi-squared and Fisher's Exact Test being used to assess the associations between the categories. Data was coded

on an EXCEL spreadsheet and analysed using SPSS version 25 software with the assistance of a statistician.

2.3. Ethical considerations

The research proposal was submitted for review to the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Research Ethics Committee, prior to proceeding with the study (HSS1463/016M). The study was conducted in accordance to the ethical principles, as stipulated in the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with the questionnaire being self-administered and therefore completed anonymously. The information obtained was profiled by allocating a participant number and coded accordingly. Data coded online was stored on a password protected computer that may only be accessed by the researcher.

3. Results

3.1. Employers' perceptions of disability and experiences utilizing policies enabling employment of persons with disabilities, especially hearing impairment

Half (50%, $n=15$) of the participants demonstrated a medium level of knowledge regarding disability. No statistically significant association was noted between disability knowledge and job position ($p=0.754$) or years of experience ($p=0.467$). Participants were presented with two definitions of disability and were required to indicate which they felt was more accurate. Nearly three quarters (63%, $n=17$) indicated that an individual was disabled based on their circumstances and society's inability to accommodate them. However, of concern is that 37% ($n=10$) felt that disability was the result of a physical, sensory or mental condition only, and that

it is the responsibility of the impaired individual to integrate into society.

Participants were required to indicate their perceptions regarding six South African employment policies/legislations/guidelines. The results indicated that 63.3% ($n=19$) felt that the Labour Relations Act No. 66 of 1995 was useful. More than half (66.7%, $n=20$) indicated that the Skills Development Act No. 97 of 1998 and the Employment Equity Act No. 55 of 1998 were useful. The majority, (73.3%, $n=22$) indicated that they did not know if the White Paper: Integrated National Disability Strategy, 1997, was useful or not, or if the TAG was useful or not (56.7%, $n=17$). Similarly, 56.7% were uncertain if the Code of Good Practice was useful or not.

More than half (65.5%, $n=19$) reported that the requirements of the EEA (No. 55 of 1998) were clearly outlined, 62.1% ($n=18$) suggested that its implementation was clear and 42.9% ($n=12$) suggested that the repercussions for non-compliance was clearly outlined. Almost half (48.3%) reported that the requirements of the Code of Good Practice was clear, while the majority of the participants were uncertain regarding its implementation and repercussions for non-compliance. With regards to the White Paper: INDS, the majority indicated that they were unaware of the requirements, implementation and repercussions for non-compliance. Similarly, the majority reported that they were unsure if the requirements, implementation and non-compliance to the TAG were clear. This is further detailed in Table 1.

3.2. Employers' experiences with the recruiting and retaining persons with hearing impairment

Most (92.9%, $n=26$) of the employers were aware that an employee was hearing impaired, and 62.1% ($n=18$) actively recruited employees who were hearing impaired. More than half (57.1%, $n=16$) suggested that there were benefits to employing a

Table 1
Employers' perceptions on requirements, implementation and repercussions of non-compliance of disability legislation

Policy	Requirements			Implementation			Repercussions for non-compliance		
	Yes	No	Don't Know	Yes	No	Don't Know	Yes	No	Don't Know
Labour Relations Act No. 66 of 1995	65.5	3.4	31	58.6	3.4	37.9	46.4	17.9	35.7
White Paper: INDS, 1997	20.7	10.3	69	17.2	13.8	69	14.3	21.4	64.3
Skills Development Act No. 97 of 1998	62.1	6.9	31	55.2	10.3	34.5	39.3	21.4	39.3
EEA No. 55 of 1998	65.5	3.4	31	62.1	3.4	34.5	42.9	17.9	39.3
Code of Good Practice, 2002	48.3	6.9	44.8	41.4	10.3	48.3	39.3	17.9	42.9
TAG, 2002	37.9	6.9	55.2	31	10.3	58.6	28.6	17.9	53.6

person with disability. The reported benefits included better performance, self-actualisation, organisational compliance with Black Economic Empowerment requirements, increased awareness amongst other staff members who were also given the opportunity to learn sign language and the opportunity for individuals with hearing impairment to work and prove their capabilities. The majority (33.3%, $n = 10$) indicated that the organization they worked for did not have any internal policies or guidelines governing the employment of persons with disabilities.

Only 48.3% ($n = 14$) indicated that they made use of services or resources offered in KZN to assist companies that employed persons with hearing impairment, specifically the KZN Blind and Deaf Society, eDeaf or internal training, with almost a half (46.4%, $n = 13$) reporting having done so during the recruitment or hiring processes. There was a statistically significant association between participants who used such external services or resources and the likelihood to report to benefits of employing individuals who are hearing impaired, ($p < 0.001$). Companies that did make use of external consultants typically required them for training purposes, with social workers and audiologists being the most commonly used during the placement stage to assist with the recruitment and retention process.

Less than half (42.9%, $n = 12$) reported that reasonable accommodations were provided for employees with a hearing loss. Almost all the companies that were not doing so indicated that their organization would not be willing to do so. However, when asked to indicate the steps the organization had taken or were willing to take in order to meet the needs of employees who are hearing impaired, the majority were willing to provide training on hearing loss for hearing colleagues, with nearly half (48.3%, $n = 14$) being willing to provide sign language inter-

preters. An overall 51.7% ($n = 15$) were willing to allow employees to share the work load and 48.3% ($n = 14$) indicated they were willing to provide counselling (Table 2). Of the 30 respondents, 86.2% ($n = 25$) agreed that their employees required reasonable accommodations, while 10.3% ($n = 3$) suggested such measures were too costly. The Fisher's Exact Test indicated that the type of industry did influence whether the organization would be willing to provide reasonable accommodations ($p = 0.012$).

3.3. Employers' perceptions regarding recruiting and retaining individuals with hearing impairment

Table 3 lists the potential reasons as to why employers may not be hiring individuals with hearing impairment, with concerns regarding employee safety being noted by 83.3% ($n = 25$) as the main one. The next tier of reasons were concerns over communication difficulties, particularly in meetings and trainings, and that individuals with hearing impairment rarely applied for jobs. More than half of the participants (63.3%, $n = 19$) suggested that communication difficulties affected the employee's ability to interact with co-workers and therefore contributed towards poor employment rates, while 50% ($n = 15$) were concerned about the attitudes of co-workers.

3.3.1. Barriers and challenges related to employing individuals with hearing impairment

Almost all (86.7%, $n = 26$) participants agreed that some barriers or challenges were experienced regarding hiring individuals with hearing impairment, as shown in Table 4, with communication difficulties were being the greatest challenge. More than a third (36.7%, $n = 11$) indicated the lack of sign language interpreters as a challenge. Two thirds (66.7%, $n = 20$)

Table 2
Steps employers have or are willing to take to meet the needs of hearing impaired employees ($n = 29$)

	Yes		No	
	N	%	N	%
Provide training on hearing impairment for hearing colleagues	17	58.6	12	41.4
Job sharing	15	51.7	14	48.3
Provide counselling	14	48.3	15	51.7
Provide sign language interpreter	14	48.3	15	51.7
Provide additional job support or assistance	13	44.8	16	55.2
Provide specified/modified equipment/assistive devices	11	37.9	18	62.1
Modify work station	8	27.6	21	72.4
Restructure working hours	5	17.2	24	82.8
Employees do not require reasonable accommodations	4	13.8	25	86.2
Reasonable accommodations are too costly	3	10.3	26	89.7
Work from home	2	6.9	27	93.1

Table 3
Employers' perceptions and attitudes for not employing persons with hearing impairment

	Agree		Disagree	
	N	%	N	%
Concerns about safety of the hearing impaired employee (<i>n</i> = 30)	25	83.3	5	16.7
Individuals with hearing loss rarely apply for jobs (<i>n</i> = 30)	21	70	9	30
Communication difficulties affecting participation in training activities and meetings (<i>n</i> = 30)	21	70	9	30
Employees with hearing loss cannot use the telephone (<i>n</i> = 30)	20	66.7	10	33.3
Communication difficulties affect the ability to interact with co-workers (<i>n</i> = 30)	19	63.3	11	36.7
Require extra time from supervisors and management (<i>n</i> = 30)	16	53.3	14	46.7
Communication difficulties affect the ability to understand/complete instructions given (<i>n</i> = 30)	16	53.3	14	46.7
Do not know how to handle the needs of employees with hearing loss (<i>n</i> = 30)	15	50	15	50
Concerns about attitudes of co-workers (<i>n</i> = 30)	15	50	15	50
Concerns regarding costs of reasonable accommodations (<i>n</i> = 30)	11	36.7	19	63.3
Employers are uncomfortable and unsure how to behave (<i>n</i> = 30)	10	33.3	20	66.7
Unable to do basic functions of the jobs they apply for (<i>n</i> = 29)	7	24.1	22	75.9
Employers are unable to discipline/fire employees because of potential lawsuits (<i>n</i> = 29)	6	20.7	23	79.3
Employers discriminate against applicants with hearing loss (<i>n</i> = 29)	6	20.7	23	79.3
There are no opportunities for professional development (<i>n</i> = 28)	5	17.9	23	82.1
Employees with hearing loss do not have the necessary skills/experience to perform job duties (<i>n</i> = 30)	4	13.3	26	86.7
There are no opportunities for promotion (<i>n</i> = 30)	4	13.3	26	86.7
Employers cannot ask the applicant about their impairment (<i>n</i> = 29)	4	13.8	25	86.2
Unable to work up to the same standards as employees without hearing loss (<i>n</i> = 30)	3	10	27	90
Employees with hearing loss are frequently absent (<i>n</i> = 29)	3	10.3	26	89.7
Employers are concerned about increased health insurance/worker's compensation premiums (<i>n</i> = 27)	3	11.1	24	88.9
Employees with hearing loss are poor performers and less dedicated (<i>n</i> = 30)	1	3.3	29	96.7

Table 4
Barriers and challenges encountered when recruiting/hiring persons with hearing impairment

	Yes		No	
	N	%	N	%
Communication difficulties	22	73.3	8	26.7
No availability of sign language interpreters	11	36.7	19	63.3
Misunderstanding of instructions for job applications	11	36.7	19	63.3
Inadequate qualifications	10	33.3	20	66.7
Conflict related to Deaf culture	8	26.7	22	73.3
Social based barriers	7	23.3	23	76.7
Lack of familiarity with dealing with HL	7	23.3	23	76.7
Abilities do not meet essential job requirements	5	16.7	25	83.3
Low morale amongst hearing impaired individuals	4	13.3	26	86.7
Lack of knowledge on reasonable accommodations	4	13.3	26	86.7
Physical/environmental barriers	4	13.3	26	86.7
Cost of training	4	13.3	26	86.7
No barriers	4	13.3	26	86.7
Additional cost of supervision	3	10	27	90

reported that lack of adequate qualifications was not a barrier to recruitment. Only 13.3% (*n* = 4) identified the cost of training as a barrier, with most organizations having provided training either through an internal training programme or an external organization. Social barriers were not identified as a challenge, as indicated by 76.7% (*n* = 23).

3.3.2. Strategies to facilitate recruiting and retaining of individuals with hearing impairment

Participants were required to rate practical strategies proposed that would encourage employing

individuals with hearing impairment (Table 5). The most practical solution endorsed as "very helpful," was sign language interpreters, and that enforcing of existing legislation and policies would be helpful to some degree, as indicated by 85.7% (*n* = 24) of participants. Additionally, there was strong support for pre-employment preparation of vocational skills (78.6%, *n* = 22), with all participants suggesting that this would either be very or somewhat helpful. Three quarter (75%, *n* = 21) supported more or better training on both, hearing loss and the needs of individuals with hearing impairment for other staff

Table 5
Practical strategies for hiring and retaining employees with hearing impairment, n = 28

	Very Helpful		Somewhat Helpful		Not Helpful	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Sign language interpreters	24	85.7	1	3.6	3	10.7
Pre-employment preparation of vocational skills	22	78.6	6	21.4	0	0
More/better training on hearing loss and needs of HI for staff	21	75	7	25	0	0
Written guidelines for dealing with hearing loss	20	71.4	7	25	1	3.6
Improve corporate culture/staff relations	20	71.4	7	25	1	3.6
Buddy systems	20	71.4	6	21.4	2	7.1
Improved awareness of communication strategies	20	71.4	7	25	1	3.6
Sign language classes for hearing colleagues	20	71.4	6	21.4	2	7.1
More efficient ways to recruit applicants with HI	19	67.9	7	25	2	7.1
More support from HR and management	18	64.3	9	32.1	1	3.6
A written company policy of non-discrimination	18	64.3	6	21.4	4	14.3
Desensitization workshops	17	60.7	9	32.1	2	7.1
Government programme to pay for/subsidize RAs for employees	15	53.6	8	28.6	5	17.9
External mediation for guidance on disability and RA	14	51.9	8	29.6	5	18.5
Tax breaks for hiring/retaining employees with HI	13	46.4	5	17.9	10	35.7
A diversity specialist to deal with disability issues	13	46.4	10	35.7	5	17.9
Salary subsidies for employees with HI	11	39.3	6	21.4	11	39.3
Central organization source for expertise on RA issues/requests	11	40.7	7	25.9	9	33.3
Enforce existing legislation and policies	11	39.3	13	46.4	4	14.3
Centralized fund within the organization to pay for RA	10	35.7	6	21.4	11	39.3
Probation period for employees with HI	8	28.6	13	46.4	7	25

members. Additionally, sign language training for hearing colleagues and having written guidelines for dealing with hearing loss were considered very helpful by 71.4% ($n = 20$), with written company policies on non-discrimination being considered very helpful by 64.3% ($n = 18$). They supported holding sensitization workshops (60.7%, $n = 17$) to communicate to co-workers that employees with hearing loss are effective and reliable employees. Additionally, participants agreed that more support from HR and management would be a helpful strategy when hiring and recruiting employees with hearing impairment.

4. Discussion

The results of the research study suggested that employers' perception of disability was aligned with a more current understanding, which is in keeping with the social model and follows a human rights approach. Employers acknowledged that activity and participation is limited by the way in which society is organised, and demonstrated an understanding of their role in the inclusion of individuals with disabilities into the labour market (SegomotsoTsae, 2015). The question of disability, however, is not just a social concern, but also a constitutional right (SegomotsoTsae, 2015). The six legislations, policies or guidelines included in the research study specifically

focus on employment practices, and advocated for the removal of barriers that contribute to discrimination in the workplace. While significant gains have been noted at the level of policy and legislation, employment of persons with disabilities continues to lag behind. Alarming low employment rates amongst disabled individuals suggests there is still a gap between adoption and implementation of the legislation, potentially due to a lack of clarity of the documentation (McKinney, 2013). In general, the findings of the current research study suggests that respondents have a limited knowledge of certain legislation, policies and guidelines. A lack of knowledge of legislation results in a lack of its effective implementation, which proposes a challenge to integrating and retaining employees with disabilities. The lack of usefulness of these important documents is a constraint, and suggests that the South African legislation is not sufficiently used in disability management (van Staden, 2011). Employers will inadvertently fail to consult with these guidelines if they are unaware of its existence, and will therefore be unable to effectively include and address the employment needs of disabled individuals in South Africa (Majola & Dhunpath, 2016).

Statistical significance was noted between the use of external services and the likelihood to report to benefits of employing individuals with hearing impairment. It should be noted that hearing

impaired individuals in the present research study were typically employed after being approached by an organization for the deaf, and not necessarily because of effort on the part of the employer to actively recruit an individual with hearing impairment. Companies had networked with organizations within the disability sector in an effort to understand disability needs. The external organisations that facilitated the placement of individuals with hearing impairment had typically conducted training in which hearing related concerns were addressed. Training is critical to successful integration, thus employers were more likely to report to benefits as a result of the technical support they received from external disability organizations.

Despite the provision of reasonable accommodations being a legal requirement, less than half of the participants indicated that their organization provided them for affected employees. Majority of employers were under the impression that employees with hearing impairment did not require accommodations to conduct the tasks for which they had been employed, possibly due to employees being placed in elementary positions (Gussenhoven et al., 2015). Reasonable accommodations in the workplace are not typically well understood, and this wide lack of knowledge can be identified as one of the main reasons for its poor implementation (Gussenhoven et al., 2015). In contrast to the literature, employers in the current study did not consider the cost of accommodations as a barrier to employment (Kaye et al., 2011; Donnelly & Trochim, 2006).

Interestingly, from the standpoint of the employer, individuals with hearing impairment rarely applied for positions. This was consistent with a study by Kaye et al. 2011. The reason for which, possibly being two-fold. Firstly, hearing impaired individuals may lack confidence due to social isolation and feel that they are unable to meet job requirements (Snyman, 2009), and continued rejection from previous applications may have resulted in despondency (van Staden, 2011). Secondly, individuals with hearing impairment may not actively seek employment due to a lack of employment choices, resulting in accepting work that is less than desired or a preferred reliance on disability grants (Shaw, 2013). Dependency on social welfare has had a disempowering effect (van Staden, 2011), and individuals with hearing impairment are not willing to forego disability grants for potentially temporary work. While the contextual challenges in South Africa cannot be ignored, the continuous exclusion of persons with disability

from the workforce will remain a financial burden on the state.

Similar to the literature, concerns about the attitudes of co-workers were considered a significant barrier by the study respondents (Jansson, 2015; Kaye et al. 2011). Negative attitudes and perceptions are a constant predicament that individuals with hearing impairment face (Gida & Ortlepp, 2007). Negative attitudes caused by myths contribute to the ideology that hearing impaired individuals are different and not equivalent to their hearing counterparts (Snyman, 2009). These attitudes may not present as openly hostile, but emphasizes the difference between co-workers, and as a result, discourages the hearing impaired employee (Smit, 2012). These attitudes and perceptions are driven by a lack of understanding and often lead to isolation, and unsupportive working environments (Baldrige & Swift, 2016; Punch, 2016). It is therefore essential for authoritative figures to engage in ongoing communication with hearing impaired employees to ensure that their needs are being met (Punch, 2016). In contrast to the literature, the lack of adequate qualifications was not considered to be a barrier to employment, possibly due to the individual with hearing impairment being employed in a low skilled role within the company.

Communication difficulties in various situations were identified as the main barrier to the employment of hearing impaired individuals (Punch, 2016; Perkin-Dock et al., 2015). Arguably, modernization has changed the face of the labour market, and this shift has placed increased demands on communication and interpersonal skills (Gustafsson et al. 2013). The workforce has seen a shift away from physical labour and emphasis is now placed on employment which involves greater interpersonal communication (Neitzel, Swinburn, Hammer & Eisenberg, 2017), consequently changing the employment status of hearing impaired individuals and potential earning rates (Walter & Dirmyer, 2013). Communication skills are also central to receiving task related instructions and meeting workplace demands, and the lack thereof may impact on relationships between co-workers, and resultantly individuals with hearing impairment may be excluded or isolated (Boutin, 2010). Additionally, the lack of clear communication makes it difficult for hearing impaired employees to perform job requirements and meet job expectations (Rosengreen & Saladin, 2010). However, employers in the current study displayed cognisance of the communication difficulties experienced by individuals with hearing impairment and indicated a willingness

to take necessary steps to meet their needs. Employers therefore demonstrated some understanding of the negative impact that hearing impairment has on the ability to meet work place demands.

Employers, in the current study, further recognised the importance of sign language interpreters in facilitating the employment of individuals who are hearing impaired. The presence of a sign language interpreter is effective in ameliorating challenging situations as a result of communication difficulties, and serves as a bridge between the employer and employee with hearing impairment (Punch, 2016; Haynes, 2014). Vocational counselling was identified as significant in promoting job attainment and enhanced occupational outcomes (Perkins-Dock, et al., 2015; Boutin, 2010). Training and coaching in advance prepares the employee with hearing impairment to interact with hearing colleagues thereby reducing chances of isolation. Increasing occupational opportunities for individuals who are hearing impaired should involve educating staff on deaf awareness through training and disability sensitisation workshops (Miceli et al., 2002). Studies have shown the effectiveness of these workshops in overcoming negative stereotypes and that the education programme provided a solution to discrimination in the workplace (Shier, Graham & Jones, 2009; Potts, 2005; Miceli et al., 2002). Additionally human resource professionals and management are essential for fostering work environments that are supportive and inclusive of individuals with hearing impairment (Baldrige & Swift, 2016). More support from HR and management would effectively reduce the burden placed on individual supervisors.

4.1. Implications

The research study recognized the importance of the employers' perspective, which is essential for ensuring the successful employment of individuals with hearing impairment and providing work support measures. The strategies to facilitate the employment of individuals with hearing impairment that were highlighted in the study can be collaborated to enhance existing literature and create more disability specific guidelines that may be endorsed by relevant stakeholders to advocate for increased and better employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Findings of the current study may also be used by educators, vocational programmes to enhance curricula, and thereby ensure that employees who are hearing impaired are provided with

transitional skills, in alignment with the needs of employers.

Current management of patients with hearing impairment should go beyond just the fitting of hearing aids, and rehabilitation should focus on empowering patients to lead an independent life that includes enhancing their employment potential. Audiologists, educational facilities, vocational programmes and employment organizations should develop a shared vision and work collaboratively to create pathways into employment for individuals with hearing impairment. Findings suggest that educational facilities should strengthen occupational awareness amongst students with hearing impairment. Implications for information on vocational rehabilitation services, job placement services and job support to be more accessible to individuals with hearing impairment are noted for improving employment outcomes.

4.2. Possible limitations

Due to the willingness of organizations to participate and the limited availability of organizations employing individuals with hearing impairment, the results obtained were based on a small sample size. Additionally, the sample population was limited to a specific geographical location, in KZN, which poses a challenge regarding the generalization of the research findings. The current research findings are specific to the employment of individuals with hearing impairment and cannot be generalized to other disabilities. The research study focused specifically on companies that have experience with employing individuals with hearing impairment, and it would be interesting to note the responses of a non-purposive sample.

5. Conclusion

The development of legislation that promotes the employment of individuals with disabilities is a progressive step in the right direction, but has not been sufficient in promoting employment and addressing challenges to the integration and retention of employees. The current findings indicate that legislative mandates are not being fully realised in terms of enhancing the occupational outcomes for individuals with hearing impairment. Employers, employees and health professionals need to be knowledgeable regarding their rights and obligations in terms of disability legislation and the implications of hear-

ing loss within the workplace in order to foster a more supportive working environment. New knowledge was gained; of particular importance were the various reasons for the non-employment of individuals with hearing impairment in a South African context, and the practical strategies to address these barriers. Renewed efforts to address and manage these constraints is central to creating employment opportunities for individuals with hearing impairment, which not only allows affected individuals to acquire wealth independently, but further reduces the strain on their families and the government to provide for them. It is hoped that the findings of the study encourages reformed recruitment and retention strategies among employers, and guide organizations in disability management. In this regard, affected individuals will have the opportunity to achieve their potential and fully participate in a work environment that is satisfying and supports improved quality of life.

Future research on a larger scale should be conducted and aim to include an increased number of participants from various geographical locations. A comparative study focusing on the viewpoint of employers who have no experience with having employed individuals with hearing loss would substantiate the study findings. The current research study focused on the employment of hearing impaired individuals with predominantly reported congenital deafness. Additional research is needed on employers' perceptions and willingness to retain employees that acquired deafness during employment.

Conflict of interest

None to report.

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