Industrial and Organizational Psychology
PERSPECTIVES ON SCIENCE AND PRACTICE

Invisible Disabilities and Employment Testing

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Santuzzi, Waltz, Finkelstein, and Rupp (2014) present an interesting point of view on the topic of invisible disabilities, both from the employee's perspective as well as the organization's. However, there is an area of importance to industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology that was largely ignored in their review. For practitioners involved in the employment testing field (preemployment or otherwise), invisible disabilities pose a special challenge. For employment testing applications, most of the issues that Santuzzi et al. raise are spot on. At the same time, there are unique issues in the testing arena that should be raised in more detail. In this reply, it is argued that testing individuals with disabilities is a special area of ''challenge'' for I–O psychology, and some suggestions are outlined for advancing the field in that specialized area.

Purpose of Accommodation

According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), accommodations to the employee application process must be offered when applicants present themselves with qualified disabilities. Like Santuzzi et al.'s description of job accommodation, the purpose of accommodation in the employee selection and recruiting process is not to offer unfair advantage to the disabled applicant but rather to ''level the playing field'' for all applicants.

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In assessment and testing, the idea is to modify the situation *without* changing the construct being measured. In this context, the taxonomy of visible versus invisible disabilities proposed by Santuzzi et al. is instructional. Most accommodations to the testing process aimed at visible disabilities are very straightforward and noninvasive: for example, creation of test materials with large font type, allowing an interpreter for a hearing-impaired candidate, or letting a candidate use a specialized mouse for data entry. These accommodations do not alter (or minimally alter) the construct of the test being administered and are easily administered. Consider, however, modifications commonly requested for an invisible disability, for example, dyslexia. The most commonly requested accommodation, in my experience, is a request for additional time to take the assessment. For many assessments, this is a reasonable accommodation and does not change (much) the nature of the assessment. For other assessments, changing the time requirements may fundamentally alter the assessment. For example, measures of perceptual speed and accuracy are scored as the number correct in a fixed period of time. The nature of the assessment is such that, given enough time, a person would normally get every item correct. Altering the timing of such a test is a *modification* to the test, not an accommodation, and should be approached with much care and caution.

In testing and assessment, accommodations typically involve one of four areas: modification to the equipment involved (e.g., allowing hardware or software aimed at overcoming a specific

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disability), location/situation (e.g., giving the test/assessment individually, or in a quiet room), assistance (e.g., allowing for a reader or an interpreter), and timing (altering the time requirements for finishing the assessment). There are many resources available to practitioners involved in this process, for example, the Job Accommodations Network (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011) offers many suggestions for accommodation during testing, and many large scale testing organizations have published their own guidelines.

It is important to note that there is no requirement to modify the testing situation in a way that changes the construct being measured. The purpose of accommodation in testing is to make sure that the disabled applicant has a fair opportunity to demonstrate his/her performance on the construct being measured.

The Impact of Disclosure in Testing and Assessment

Santuzzi et al.'s discussion of disclosure was illuminating as it pertains to employment testing. The testing situation contains many of the same social–psychological influences as the employment setting yet also has some important differences.

First, like the employment situation, we are required to offer accommodation to those who need it prior to any assessment. Similarly, without disclosure, no accommodation is required to the testing situation. Although it would seem that there is less stigma to self-identification in the testing process (some reasons are discussed later), there is anecdotal evidence that many people fail to disclose. How do we know that? First, the number of accommodation requests appears to be quite low. In my own experience with thousands of applicants on a yearly basis, only a handful formally request accommodation—far fewer than incidence rates would suggest. Second, the number of people who request accommodation *after* taking an assessment is fairly high. This could be illustrative of individuals who did not know that they would need an accommodation or it could be that the stigma of self-identification delayed responding until the magnitude of the need for accommodation was shown by taking the assessment.

In this regard, employment testing accommodation may have some very real advantages over the job accommodation process. First, testing accommodations are typically invisible (or should be) to the hiring manager. Second, most individuals with disabilities have had prior experience with assessment accommodations through their educational process. Many are able to offer concrete, acceptable suggestions for accommodation to the testing professionals. Third, if done correctly, the accommodation does not show up in the test results. Results are shared, along with those of other candidates, on an equal basis. Finally, with the advent of technologically sophisticated assessments, the solicitation and implementation of testing accommodations is increasingly discreet. Many testing accommodations can be made without the awareness of other applicants, and individualized assessment is always an option. Admittedly, this discreetness and anonymity of the assessment accommodation may not always be clear to the applicant, and practitioners should take the advice offered by Santuzzi et al. and be diligent in minimizing any hidden stigma around testing accommodation. Testing professionals should make it absolutely clear to job candidates that testing accommodations are independent of any accommodations requested on the job and will be dealt with separately. Any disclosure of test accommodations should be done on a ''need to know'' basis only, and full disclosure should be made to the job candidate.

I offer the following suggestions to facilitate making the accommodation process more transparent and possibly mitigate some of the stigma associated with testing accommodations:

- Ensure that test administrators are fully trained regarding Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) issues in testing.

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Consider including elements of training that explicitly address the issue of stigma and how to address it with testing candidates.

- Consider expedited processes for standard accommodations, those that don't potentially change the nature of what is being tested (Thurlow & Wiener, 2000). Especially with the growing use of computerized assessments, accommodations such as larger font or print size should be relatively easy to implement.
- Emphasize the confidential nature of testing accommodation in all correspondence with job candidates and again before any testing session. Consider offering one-on-one consultation with candidates who wish to explore and/or discuss accommodations prior to testing.
- Communicate with other HR professionals within your organization to ensure that testing accommodations remain confidential and are not considered in any hiring decision. As testing professionals, stay informed about the research and practice related to test accommodations. Much of the research in testing accommodations comes from the field of school and/or educational psychology. It is important to be aware of research findings: for example, research has shown that poorly or misidentified accommodations can actually lower test scores (Elliott, Kratochwill & McKevitt, 2001; Schulte, Elliott & Kratochwill, 2001).

Testing Accommodation and the Law

There are also some unique aspects of testing and assessment that have come under increased scrutiny in the legal area (Black, 1994). Increasingly, this has disproportionally impacted testing as it relates to invisible disabilities. More specifically, the ADA (1991) prohibits the use of medical tests in preemployment assessment of ability. Employment tests have been claimed to be illegal preemployment medical inquiries, especially preemployment personality tests (see *Karraker v. Rent-A-Center*, 2005 for an example). In addition, even testing vendors have been brought into the fray. In a case originally aimed at an employer (Kroger), a hearing-impaired applicant who was subjected to a preemployment test that referred to ''listening'' and ''communicating'' was involved in a court case that led to the EEOC filing charges against the test vendor (EEOC v. Kronos, 2011). As practitioners, one must be extremely diligent about testing practice, including test content. Certainly, using personality tests with a medical background and/or basis is risky (e.g., using the MMPI for normal personality assessment), and can be easily avoided by using more job-relevant personality assessments. As the Office of Personnel Management (2013) states:

> In general, personality tests that are designed to measure work-related traits in normal adult populations are permissible. The personality factors assessed most frequently in work situations include Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Openness to Experience. As with any assessment tool used to make an employment decision, personality tests must meet the technical standards established in the *Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures*.

On the other hand, awareness of what specific item content is would appear to be critical in supporting the use of certain assessments. For example, removing items (if possible) referring to ''listening'' might be a reasonable accommodation for a hearing-impaired candidate.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Santuzzi et al. bring to light an important topic to both practitioners and researchers: challenges related to individuals with invisible disabilities. The purpose of this commentary is to expand the discussion into an area that was missing from their review: the testing and assessment of

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individuals with disabilities and the unique issues associated with invisible disabilities. In agreement with Santuzzi et al., there is much yet to be learned in this area. For assessment professionals, the practice of assessing individuals with disabilities is as much art as science. Increased attention to those invisible disabilities has the potential to greatly improve our testing and assessment practices. Collaboration between researchers and practitioners is a must, and I look forward to seeing more on this topic.

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