

Working in the dark— what contributes to and supports the employment of people who go blind in midlife?

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Certificate of original authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

This study investigated and analysed the conditions that can assist individuals who lose vision in midlife regain or retain employment post blindness. Australia Bureau of Statistics figures reveal that in 2012 the overall employment rate of disabled individuals was approximately 54%, compared with 94% for non-disabled individuals. This figures mirror international rates. Vision Australia estimates that individuals who are blind or who have low vision and want to work have an employment rate below 42%.

Through qualitative research methods employing case study methodologies, and using semi-structured interviews the study revealed commonalities among individuals who lost their vision midlife and were employed. Participants' ages ranged from 30 to 64. The participants came from five states in Australia. The theoretical framework of social assumptions, along with the lack of awareness of disabled individuals and in particular blind individuals, was investigated. Through the ethnographical lens of the author from sudden vision loss to the re-establishment of himself provides a context of the emotional and personal aspects of midlife vision loss.

The major findings were the identification of three factors that participants described as impacting on their return to employment post blindness. These were the presence of multiple support networks, the availability of relevant vocational and non-vocational education and the need to deal with the lack of community awareness of the abilities of individuals who are blind.

Participants suggested that individuals who lose vision in midlife generally have no understanding of blindness and the changes it will require them to make in their lives. Vision loss typically requires individuals to reinvent themselves and actively seek to participate in new communities that were unknown to them before they lost their vision.

Participants agreed that midlife vision loss creates unexpected hurdles for those who want to work. Analysis of their responses indicated the need for support to help the individual to reassess their career and develop an action plan, formal or informal, along with the need to gain new skills to increase their employability in their new career direction. Participants' narratives also showed that individuals have to learn ways to manage social stereotypes about disabled people, particularly the blind,

including the need to re-educate the people they encounter in seeking and carrying out employment.

The study concludes by presenting recommendations and strategies to increase the employment rates of individuals who lose vision in midlife.

Keywords: midlife blindness, employment, disability, blindness,

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