Journeys Through Rough Country: An Ethnographic Study of Blind Adults Successfully Employed in American Corporations

Kirk Adams
Antioch University - PhD Program in Leadership and Change

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Journeys Through Rough Country:
An Ethnographic Study of Blind Adults
Successfully Employed in American Corporations

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the PhD in Leadership and Change Program of Antioch University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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This dissertation has been approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Ph.D. in Leadership and Change, Graduate School of Leadership and Change, Antioch University.

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Dedication

To my lovely bride and best friend, Roslyn Annette Adams.

Because of deep love, we are courageous.

Lao-Tzu, Tao Te Ching (6th century BCE)
Abstract

Blind and visually impaired people in the United States face a dire employment situation within professional careers and corporate employment. The purpose of this research study was to gain insights into the phenomenon of employment of blind people through analyzing the lived experience of successfully employed blind adults through ethnographic interviews. Previous research has shown that seven out of ten blind adults are not in the workforce, that a large percentage of those who are employed consider themselves underemployed, and that these numbers have not improved over time. Missing from previous research were insights into the conditions leading to successful and meaningful employment for blind adults. My top research questions were: what experiences and relationships were most significant in the lives of successfully employed blind adults in U.S. corporations, and what the most significant factors were, from employers’ perspectives, leading to these successes. Based on semi-structured interviews of 11 blind adults who self-identified as successfully and meaningfully employed in corporate America, I found successfully employed blind adults have largely forged their own paths, with family support, valuable knowledge, skills, and abilities, and a strong sense of agency playing crucial roles. Corporate inclusion of blind employees is in its infancy. The implications for social change revolve around changing societal perceptions of the capabilities of blind people, transforming corporate cultures to ones of integration rather than differentiation, and building family, school, community, and service provider mechanisms to instill a strong sense of agency in young blind people. My recommendations to others are to focus on a leveraging difference framework of diversity and inclusion, in which every individual is valued for their unique characteristics, and make sure that blind people are positioned to be part of this societal transformation.
This dissertation is available in open access at AURA: Antioch University Repository and Archive, http://aura.antioch.edu/, and OhioLINK ETD Center, https://etd.ohiolink.edu/.

*Keywords:* Blind, Visually Impaired, BVI, Blind Employment, Unemployment, Corporations, Disabilities, PWD, Leveraging Differences, Diversity, Ethnography, Success, Compensation, Agency, Identity Formation, Accommodations, Accessibility, Inclusivity
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................... i

Dedication ...................................................................................................................................... ii

Abstract ......................................................................................................................................... iii

List of Tables ................................................................................................................................ xi

Preface............................................................................................................................................ 1

Chapter I: Introduction ................................................................................................................... 2

  Problem Statement ..................................................................................................................... 2

  Research Purpose and Outcome Possibilities ............................................................................. 4

  Situating the Researcher ............................................................................................................ 7

  Epistemological Considerations ............................................................................................... 9

  Research Theme and Rationale ............................................................................................... 11

  Research Questions ................................................................................................................ 12

  Research Methodology .......................................................................................................... 14

  Ethical Considerations ............................................................................................................ 15

  Justification of the Study ........................................................................................................ 15

  Summary of Chapters ............................................................................................................ 18

Chapter II: Review of Literature .................................................................................................. 20

  Realities of Blind Employment ............................................................................................... 20

    Employment of Working Age Blind Adults: The Numbers ................................................... 21

    Experiences of Employment ................................................................................................. 23

  Different Models and Interpretations of Disability ................................................................. 24

    Disability Models .................................................................................................................. 24

    Identity Formation ............................................................................................................... 27

  Improving Employment for People With Disabilities ............................................................. 33
From a Traditional Supply-Side Solution to a Demand-Side Model

The Potential of a New Demand-Side Focus

Realities of Corporate Culture

Definition of Corporate Culture

Employer and Employee Attitudes and Perceptions

Ambivalence About Accommodations in Hiring and Management

Social Barriers and Categories of Discrimination

Developing a Disability Inclusion Culture

What Does an Inclusive Culture Look Like?

How to Achieve an Ideal Inclusive Culture

Virtue as a Catalyst for Change

Promising Practices

Summary of Chapter

Chapter III: Methodology

Rationale for a Qualitative Methodology

Strengths of Qualitative Research

Limitations of Qualitative Research

Choice of My Research Method

Research Design

Role of the Researcher

Use of the Pilot Study

Participants

Ethical Considerations

Data Collection Procedure

Analysis of Data
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Openness to Hiring BVI People</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disappointment</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Work Experiences</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in the Workplace</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee Factors</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surprises Discovered During My Research</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directions for Future Research</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary and Conclusions of Chapter</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in My Perceptions</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter VI: Implications for Leadership and Change</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Dissertation Journey, Integrating Practice and Research</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Growth and Change</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Lies Ahead</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Advice to Parents of Blind Children: What I Have Learned</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Trailblazer's Guide to Employment Success</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A Afterword</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B Acronyms</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C Scenarios to Consider</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D The American Foundation for the Blind, Moving Ahead</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E Dissertation Defense</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables

Table 3.1 Participants’ Demographics ................................................................. 93
Table 3.2 Participants’ Visual Impairment ............................................................ 94
Table 4.1 The Meaning of Successful Employment ............................................. 121
Table 4.2 Helpful Experiences Before Employment ........................................... 127
Table 4.3 Helpful Experiences During Employment .......................................... 132
Table 4.4 Key Individuals Who Helped Prior to Employment ............................ 135
Table 4.5 Key Individuals Who Helped During Employment ............................. 140
Table 4.6 Reasons for Being Hired ................................................................. 146
Table 4.7 Helpful Workplace Changes ............................................................ 151
Table 4.8 Workplace Changes Due to Interactions with BVI People .................. 158
Table 4.9 Employers’ Benefits From Hiring BVI People ................................. 164
Table 4.10 Critical Factors for Successful Employment of BVI People From Individual’s Point of View ............................................................ 169
Table 4.11 Critical Factors for Successful Employment of BVI People From Companies' Points of View .......................................................... 174
Preface

Let's start with a fictional thought experiment: please imagine yourself as head of a large corporation. You receive this email from Dee, a trusted advisor. How would you respond?

Subject: Promising Practices in Innovative Hiring of the Blind

As we discussed last month, I have been scanning the organization for promising practices we can leverage to improve on our company’s success. While there are many people doing great things throughout the company, the most impressive innovations I have seen are in Lynn’s department.

Lynn has been making deliberate efforts to recruit, hire and include blind and visually impaired (BVI) people in her teams, like Andi, Chris and JC. While Lynn has gone far beyond our current diversity and inclusion policies, she told me she has taken the time to make these efforts because she found research showing the incredible benefits these unique employees can bring.

Apparently, the BVI community is filled with a very large and virtually untapped source of highly trained, motivated, and creative people who are invisible as potential employees to other companies. While you may be skeptical at first, the methods for including BVI people within various work environments have made it possible to not only maximize inclusivity, but to also reap resulting benefits like never before.

Lynn described some of the many benefits she’s seen, including:

- More creative problem solving across the challenges her team faces, drawing from the broader range of perspectives they now have,
- Improved quality and more accessible designs of their products, services, webpages and other communications,
- Higher levels of morale, teamwork, inclusivity and productivity, and
- Lower turnover, with none so far of the BVI employees she’s hired.

The opportunities we have to benefit from this remarkable pool of candidates is impressive, and could be implemented across all levels of the company. I had not understood this potential before. Direct recruiting for diversity.

I am confident others in our leadership team will be interested in giving Lynn’s methods a try. If you can also see the possibilities, could you please forward this on for discussion as soon as possible? Research report attached.

Thank you for looking this over.
Chapter I: Introduction

The chief handicap of the blind is not blindness, but the attitude of seeing people towards them. – Helen Keller in a speech for the American Foundation for the Blind, Washington, DC, 1925

What if sighted people could better see the true potential of their blind and visually impaired peers and colleagues? Almost all employers, including those in large U.S. corporations, lack awareness and understanding of the valuable contributions blind and visually impaired (BVI) people can bring to the workplace (Blanck & Schartz, 2005). While members of BVI communities are very capable of being valuable employees across industries, we continue to face daunting misconceptions and barriers to successfully finding any employment.

Research in other countries has shown even greater barriers than in the United States to employment for their BVI communities (Wong, 2004). Meanwhile, in the United States workforce, participation rates for blind people are half that of the general population, and many of those who are employed report underemployment (Sheffield, 2017).

With this study I have sought to better understand and articulate what it takes for people with visual impairments to find successful and meaningful employment, and why employers should not just include BVI people in their workforce, but also how they can benefit from doing so.

Problem Statement

Blind and visually impaired people throughout the world are still having extreme difficulty becoming successfully and meaningfully employed (Wong, 2004). An estimated 253 million people worldwide have some kind of visual impairment, according to the World Health Organization (Bourne et al., 2017). Within the United States population of approximately 325 million people, it has been estimated that more than 25.5 million people (about 10% of the adult population) live with some form of vision loss, and more than 7 million of those (about 2%) are
legally blind as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), ranging from total blindness to a significant amount of usable vision (Census Bureau, 2016; Sheffield, 2017).

Only 1.5 million BVI in the United States have jobs, with less than one million employed full-time. In fact, more than one million people with visual disabilities are living below the poverty line (Census Bureau, 2016; Sheffield, 2017). The majority of BVI in America who are employed work in jobs within a very narrow band of occupations, mostly low paid entry level or clerical work, with few prospects for upward mobility (Sheffield, 2017).

Of those employed, more than 30% reported feeling underemployed in a 1997 study (Kirchner, Johnson, & Harkins, 1997). In another study, fewer than 30% of the blind respondents reported having had any paid work experience before age 23, compared to 65% of the sighted participants (Wolffe & Sacks, 1997). Not surprisingly then and more recently, home ownership within the BVI communities has been less than 10% as common as home ownership within the sighted population (Wolffe & Spungin, 2002).

All these numbers have not changed appreciably over time, indicating a very large systemic problem. This problem is not just one of mechanics, of needing to better prepare blind people for employment or working with employers to create more accessible workplaces. Instead, the problem is part of the fabric of our society, and of our corporate cultures. The problems are bonded at a molecular level within the deepest parts of the human psyche.

Losing one's vision is a pervasive fear in our society, thus complicating efforts to address the barriers faced by blind people. In a recent study by the Wilmer Eye Institute at Johns Hopkins, researchers found that people fear blindness more than any other medical condition (Scott, Bressler, Ffolkes, Wittenborn, & Jorkasky, 2016). Nearly 50% of sighted respondents to an online survey “rated losing vision as the worst possible health outcome. Respondents ranked
losing vision as equal to or worse than losing hearing, memory, speech, or a limb” (Scott et al., 2016, p. 1113). Assumptions of how incapacitating vision loss can be pervasive.

So, attaining momentum in the mission to increase successful blind employment appears to be very difficult. Most of our corporate cultures are ones of differentiation, discussed in Chapter II, valuing a narrow range of characteristics, outside of which most blind people fall (Spataro, 2005). This has made forging a path forward extremely challenging.

**Research Purpose and Outcome Possibilities**

The purpose of my research was to increase understanding about the issues surrounding successful and meaningful employment of blind people in U.S. corporations. Meaningful work not only provides means for obtaining basic necessities, food, shelter, and clothing, further, it in large part defines us (Barclay, Markel, & Yugo, 2012). Work allows a person to form an identity based on agency, skill, contribution, and community. Conversely, not being given an opportunity to work can lead to identity formation as “less than,” and to feelings of worthlessness, frustration, and isolation (Augestad, 2017).

How do places look when including successfully employed blind people? What do blind employees say about working in a place where they feel seen, heard, and valued? How do employers create these spaces? Is there something different about the employment strategies to achieve this?

My participants were blind people who could shed light on these and related questions. In my research, semi-structured interviews and iterative analysis have provided a rich depth of information, adding to knowledge regarding employment of the blind. I hope this research and dissertation will be a valuable and reinforcing element of increased blind employment, lowering
of barriers, enhanced work environments, greater effectiveness of blind people in adding value, leading to employment and success of additional blind individuals.

The literature reveals that dynamics of disability employment occur in the intersection of government, people with disabilities, and employers (Blanck & Schartz, 2005). Although I have personally attended dozens of conferences in the blindness field, in my experience there are few forums in which substantive interaction of these three groups occurs.

Before imagining a scenario in which meaningful interactions can occur in groups, I believe a fourth group needs to be added: designers and builders of working and living environments, including architects, furniture designers, disability technologists, and related professions. The literature I reviewed does not take into account the incredible impact of technology on blind employment because use of this technology is such a recent phenomenon. Now reinforced both by the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) and the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), this technological aspect needs to be seriously considered as we move forward (AFB, 2018; Jernigan Institute, 2018). Both AFB and NFB provide services to aid in defining and obtaining assistive technology.

Another area that needs more focus is that of gaining support from top management for disability inclusion (Hernandez et al., 2008). One would think that if there were some people with disabilities in top management, buy-in would come more naturally and readily. One possible path is for those interested in blind employment to devote resources to developing blind leaders, who, over time, can reach key decision-making positions. One main purpose of the AFB conference is aligned with this development of employed BVI into leaders.

A paradox, presenting a barrier to blind employment centers on specialized Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies for the blind. Blindness is a low-incidence population group
compared to other disability categories. Specialized services are necessary for successful support of blind individuals. In the past, most states had separate VR agencies for the blind and for other disability groups. Now, due to budget considerations, many states have consolidated their VR agencies (Cavenaugh, 2010). In the blindness field, however, it is an assumption that separate blindness agencies are more effective in supporting blind employment, however I was unable to find empirical evidence to support this. Employers I have met clearly state a preference for working with a one-stop organization that covers all disabilities. The National Center on Workforce and Disability/Adult (NCWD/A) was a national training provider for the One-Stop system, in the U.S. Department of Labor, through the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) from 2002–2007. ODEP provides training, technical assistance, policy analysis, and information to improve access for all in the workforce development system (ODEP, 2018).

In this situation, given the low incidence of blindness within the disabled group, it is assumed within our field that sighted people with other disabilities are more likely to be placed by a one-stop agency, although I did not find any empirical evidence to support this.

When looking at employment through the lens of the structural model of disability, it is obvious the environments of work have been created based on norms of ableness to best suit people without disabilities. This applies not only to the physical environment, but to the psychosocial, although this last element receives very scant attention. This may occur because the psychosocial issues around blind employment seem so difficult to address (Augestad, 2017; Naraine & Lindsay, 2011). The physical and social barriers which may exist can be broken down using universal design (Barclay et al., 2012). Universal design creates an accessible environment which can be easily understood and used by all people, regardless of disability, size, or age.
The paradigm of universal design is not for a limited group of people, but should be a fundamental principle of good design.

Working with the assumption that the fit between a person and their work environment is necessary for successful employment, one sees the fit for blind people in our able-oriented work environments to be extremely problematic. The ability to communicate nonverbally and the distance and otherness that not doing so may create may be the least of the dynamics deserving concern.

Blind people who need assistance and support in gaining and retaining employment are the least likely to receive that support (Dial, Chan, Mezger, & Parke, 1991). An additional disability, such as deafness or a developmental disability, not only adds to the practical complexity of creating a good person and environment fit, but also exacerbates the psychosocial aspects of otherness discussed in Chapter V (Dial, Chan, Mezger, & Parke, 1991). Malakpa (1994) found that only 15% of these individuals were employed or actively receiving job training. The non-fit becomes a great chasm with no apparent way across.

Even I, as a blind person, often feel an otherness when interacting with another blind person who has a second significant disability. If I have these feelings, given my background, professional training, and work experience, I can only imagine what is felt by nondisabled people in mainstream workplaces.

**Situating the Researcher**

The topic of employment issues for blind people is of interest to me for several reasons. I have been one of the few blind leaders, as CEO from January 2008 to April 2016 of an organization whose mission is to employ people who are blind, the Seattle Lighthouse for the
Blind. I now lead the nation’s few research and advocacy organization in the blindness field, as President of AFB.

When I was five years old both of my retinas detached. This was prior to the advent of laser surgery, so I was immediately operated on in an attempt to tack the retinas back down with sutures. This attempt failed. I lost all of my vision within a few weeks. For the next seven years I underwent a series of painful and ineffective surgeries. The goal of these operations was to stabilize any remaining remnants of the retina and to remove scar tissues that acted as a barrier to light reaching the retina. Upon reflection as an adult, there was so little vision to be gained through these surgeries, a little light perception perhaps, that the attempts in retrospect seem entirely futile. My surgeries were conducted at the University of Oregon Medical School hospital in Portland. I remember sitting as a small child in a chair with my head restrained and harshly bright lights shining in my eyes while a parade of medical students took their turn examining me and receiving instruction around retinal detachment. I felt completely medicalized, as if I was not a human with real feelings. This is undoubtedly part of my motivation to promote some of the other models of disability that will be summarized later in this dissertation.

Perhaps these factors helped in my collection of deep and valid information from my participants, because the participants could identify with my situation. Instead of any conflict due to large differences in experience, participants cooperated, and were interested in the results of the study helping other blind adults. On the other hand, these same factors did create some visceral reactions within myself as I heard their stories, or shared commiseration, which could bias my interpretation of the data, but in the interviews this seemed to aid rather than hamper gathering of new salient information from the participants.
Epistemological Considerations

My dissertation work was conducted in the context of existing research around diversity and inclusion, disability studies, and blind employment, discussed in Chapter II. Past research of blind employment, such as Capella-McDonnell (2008), is primarily quantitative in nature, for instance, surveys of human resources hiring managers (Fong et al., 2010). Also, I found little in my review of past research which focused on employers, or the demand side. The few quantitative studies of employers of blind people I did find provided little understanding of which factors contributed to successful employment. Although we can learn from these studies that employers have a number of basic ungrounded fears about hiring people who are blind, their needs as employers are not discussed, nor how they might be engaged in creating the necessary fit between blind employee and work environment (Fong et al., 2010; Luecking, 2008).

Much of the earlier research identified factors from longitudinal studies that related to indicators of successful employment: early work experience, higher levels of educational attainment, strong technology skills, and high levels of usable vision correlate positively with employment (Capella-McDonnell, 2008; Houtenville, 2003; Moore & Cavanaugh, 2003).

In reading these quantitative studies I was reminded of an example professor Jon Wergin gave at the Antioch University Yellow Springs residency of the Leadership and Change Program. He described a study conducted by Pearson in 2009, in which school children who ate a healthy, hot breakfast each morning were more likely to perform well academically. The conclusion: feed all of the children breakfast and academic performance would improve. However, there was not a cause and effect between eating breakfast and doing well in school. Instead, eating breakfast was a marker of a stable, two parent home, comfortable income levels, stable housing, and the like. These were the factors that supported high academic achievement.
By the same token, early work experience has often been cited as a prerequisite for successful blind employment in adulthood (Capella-McDonnell, 2008; Houtenville, 2003; Moore & Cavanaugh, 2003). However, research shows that early work experience arranged by VR or school systems has not been a strong predictor of future employment success (McDonnell & O’Mally, 2012; Trainor, Carter, Swedeen, & Pickett, 2011). Early work experience may be a significant indicator that a youth has a supportive family and school community, intrinsic motivation, high capabilities, and lots of usable vision.

More recently research has examined the dual customer or business relations model, which considers both the disabled person and the employer as customers (Luecking, 2008) has researched the demand side. National Research and Training Center (NRTC) on Blindness and Low Vision at Mississippi State University also has published on its website (https://www.blind.msstate.edu/) research about employers’ needs, based on a series of focus groups (Crudden & McBroom, 1999), and about employers’ responses to requests for accommodation.

My research was conducted and is presented in a leveraging difference framework. This model, developed by Martin Davidson and Heather Wishik (Davidson, 2011), is the next evolutionary step in diversity and inclusion thinking. The leveraging difference model goes beyond models based on managing diversity, the framework used by most forward thinking institutions, to a paradigm where difference is a truly valuable resource for accomplishing vision, mission, and operational goals.

Although very few companies are actually approaching the full realization of leveraging difference, this appears to be the model which will most closely align with my interest in facilitating truly successful blind employment in U.S. corporations. Successful blind
employment depends upon an effective fit between the individual blind person and the work environment, including both physical and psychosocial factors (Davidson, 2011). A corporate culture of leveraging difference, which seems the most effective path to achieve desired fit between person and working environment, comes about only through leadership and change (Davidson, 2011).

Two other important paradigms appear to me to be prerequisites for a leveraging difference framework to exist. One is that of the learning organization, in which institutions learn how to adapt to their environments (Senge, 2006). The other is the paradigm of a virtuous organization, which ties operational excellence to concepts such as inclusion. Development of both these paradigms requires truly effective leadership (Barclay et al., 2012; Senge, 2006).

**Research Theme and Rationale**

When I began working on my methodology, my working research question was: What are the supply- and demand-side factors that lead to successful employment for blind adults in large corporations? I saw this question was inadequate to achieve the deep understanding I sought. Focusing on supply and demand factors would have led me to a qualitative survey, resulting in a list of factors related to preparation and training of blind individuals, and a list of factors addressing accommodations made by employers. Given my desire to move beyond merely listing factors, I revised my original research question to focus on thoroughly describing how successful blind employment occurs and how the dynamics, context, and interactions experienced by blind people lead to successful blind employment.
Research Questions

My phenomenological research was based on two primary questions:

RQ 1: How do blind individuals find successful and fulfilling employment in large U.S. corporations?

RQ 2: Why and how do employers facilitate workplace conditions that make it possible for blind individuals to enjoy successful and fulfilling employment?

These research questions were important because their exploration could shed light on how some blind people have achieved successful employment in the most integrated, mainstream, respected settings, working for major American corporations. I chose to focus on large corporations because, in my opinion, they represent the most desirable employment settings for people who are blind, giving the best chance to work under the same set of dynamics as their sighted peers. Most blind people who are employed work for nonprofits or government agencies that provide employment for social reasons rather than business reasons (Blanck & Schartz, 2005; Robert & Harlan, 2006).

My research questions were considered in the context of historical and existing research findings and models. Of particular relevance are the models of disability in which our society continues to place disabled people. The most traditional paradigm in the United States is the medical model, in which disabled people are considered to be broken, and if unable to be fixed by a doctor, then less than whole and permanently damaged (Hayashi & Okuhira, 2008; Yamaki & Yamazaki, 2004). This model, however, has been pushed aside by most people in the United States, and the structural model favored (Brown, Hamner, Foley, & Woodring, 2009). The structural model of disability is based on lack of fit between a person’s physical or mental impairment and an environment which has been structured by an abled majority.
Along these same lines, two paradigms of disability employment are in flux. The traditional, still most common model is a supply-side one. In this framework, education and vocational rehabilitation systems seek to train and equip a disabled person to be eligible to fill a job and then an appeal is made to an employer to consider hiring this person. Scant attention has been paid to the workplace or the built and social environments (Robert & Harlan, 2006).

In the newly emerging demand-side model, also known as the dual customer approach, a structural view is uppermost. In this dynamic an employer has an organizational, operational need, and seeks to fill needed positions in cooperation with the vocational rehabilitation systems. The employer and VR agency work together to create a person and environment fit that matched the disabled person’s capabilities and needs while fulfilling the employer’s operational requirements (Ward, Moon, & Baker, 2009). This is discussed in more depth in Chapter II.

The Lighthouse for the Blind in Seattle was born of the medical model in 1918, when society did not believe blind people could contribute at the same levels as, let alone better than, sighted people, and therefore mainstream, integrated employment was not a consideration (Rochester, 2004). These assumptions led to the creation of the Javits-Wagner-O’Day (JWOD) Act in 1938 saying that blind people were by definition not employable. (AbilityOne, 2018). Although while I was head, to my best knowledge, we created optimal person-environmental fits within our organization, Lighthouse for the Blind is not an integrated, mainstream work setting. A major reason I chose to focus on corporate America is that there is clear direction among our major institutions dealing with disability toward elimination of specialized, facilities-based employment settings (Tirmizi, 2017).

Unfortunately, society is not yet ready to hire people with disabilities on a large scale. I am hoping my research, in at least some small part, will pave the way for significant increase in
blind employment, especially in light of the fact that organizations such as the Seattle Lighthouse are under increasing pressure to shut their doors.

**Research Methodology**

The depth of information I sought to investigate the phenomenon of successfully employed blind adults in the United States required qualitative methodology based on the participants’ own experiences and viewpoints, as used in the disability formations approach (Brown et al., 2009).

I began recruiting for research participants on February, 6, 2017. My process began by considering blind people I knew in my social networks who I believed met my criteria: people who were employed in corporate America and whom I thought would self-identify as successfully and meaningfully employed. I was interested in large corporations, with 1000 or more employees. In the initial screening, by phone, I determined whether or not the person met my criteria, and if that person was interested in participating. The pool for potential candidates was small, so when I had eleven participants, and small chance of obtaining others, I ended the recruitment process with a hope more participants would be identified during the interview process.

The interview questions were constructed for the semi-structured interviews in order to discover the individual journeys each participant had experienced in becoming successfully employed. During the voice recorded interviews, I also noted the nuances of each interview. The recorded interviews were then transcribed by a reputable company, and analysis began.

As I listened to the original interviews and later the recordings, and reviewed the transcriptions, I identified major themes emerging, presented in Chapter IV. The iterative
analysis process refined these themes, tracked their frequency and the various contexts. From this analysis of results, I noted their implications, presented in Chapter V.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations of this methodology revolve around the fact that blindness is a low incidence disability, and the number of employed blind people in professional, technical and managerial career positions inside American corporations is quite small. Although interviewees should be able to remain anonymous, it may be difficult to hide their identities from those knowledgeable in their respective fields who might read this manuscript. I worked to minimize identifying details in their individual profiles and quotes. I am also asking participants prior to publication to review and request changes to their profiles and the quotes I have used from their interviews, to ensure their comfort with the level of identifiable information.

The highest risk for participants was emotional in recalling experiences. Candidates for the study were informed of this possibility before they agreed to participate. In the initial phone and personal interviews, I screened out potentially vulnerable people by asking about their willingness to discuss their employment journey frankly. A potential offset of this risk was the catharsis achieved by telling their stories, and knowing this could help others. Another offset may have been the possible joy of sharing what has worked, why and how. The rights and welfare of the participants were carefully protected at all times.

**Justification of the Study**

Looking at the realities of blind employment, I found that blind people who are employed do not enjoy full integration into their workplaces, mainly due to a lack of social support (Shaw, Gold, & Wolffe, 2007). Most blind people are not employed, according to the 2010 Survey of Americans with Disabilities (Brault, 2012). Mean household incomes for blind men stand second
lowest among disability groups. Blind women and women with intellectual disabilities share the lowest mean household income level. A significant percentage of clients receiving vocational rehabilitation services, with employment the intended result, do not find jobs (Capella-McDonnell, 2008). The percentage of blind people who are successfully self-employed also falls short of the general population and other disability groups (Kitching, 2014). All of these realities are even more dire for blind people living with an additional significant disability (Malakpa, 1994).

For many disabled people in the workplace, three types of discriminatory behavior exist: marginalization, fictionalization, and harassment (Robert & Harlan, 2006). For the BVI, add three more types of barriers imposed by the nondisabled in the workplace: social, interpersonal, and communications, usually permitted and sustained through organizational tolerance and encouragement (Barclay et al., 2012).

A corporate culture most hospitable to blind employment, one which has an ethos of integration, is rare (Spataro, 2005). We need to be working to prepare more fertile ground. We need to be helping develop learning organizations that operate in a framework of virtue, which see inclusion as essential to their heart and soul and mission. We need to foster a climate in which organizations will intentionally seek to achieve large scale transformational change toward inclusion.

The organization I led, the Lighthouse for the Blind, is a nonintegrated setting with a majority of our employees being blind. To the best of my knowledge, the Lighthouse has been able to establish the world’s best accommodations for blind people in the area of precision machining work. This organization is a leader in using assistive technology and providing specialized training and supports for people who are blind.
Because the Lighthouse is contractually required to maintain a workforce that is made up primarily of blind people, the characteristic of blindness is sought after, desirable, and clearly part of its competitive advantage. Under the JWOD Act, they are able to procure government and military contracts, which requires 75% of direct labor to be performed by people who are blind. The problems and barriers which exist in most other organizations—marginalization, stigmatization, the need to mask disabilities, fear of asking for accommodations—do not exist in this organization.

Lighthouse for the Blind has turned blind employment on its head. I have seen firsthand the expenses involved in recruiting, hiring, training, retaining, and supporting both blind and sighted employees. I believe that if thorough analysis were done, it would reveal that employing lots of blind people is more cost effective in the long run than employing lots of sighted people. At Seattle Lighthouse blind employees have demonstrated low absenteeism, longevity of employment, low turnover, loyalty, and enthusiasm.

There are fewer than 60 such nonprofit social enterprises in the country, employing about 4,000 blind people, a tiny fraction of those needing jobs (AbilityOne, 2018; Sheffield, 2017). However, this model is successful for those who are employed in these nonprofits. In 2014, more than 550 such nonprofit social enterprises employed people with visual impairment other disabilities, mainly developmental ones (AbilityOne, 2018). Although these social enterprises are succeeding to a degree mainstream employers do not, they are under attack. A philosophy that mainstream employment is the only acceptable employment outcome has resulted in resources being directed away from nonintegrated employment settings (Office of Special Education & Rehabilitation Services, 2017).
Although integration seems like an ideal goal from some people’s perspectives, it may not be the work of choice for many people with disabilities. These and related questions have been addressed as well by the participants.

My research may, in some small way, help prepare the ground while helping to develop heartier seeds with a greater chance of germinating and thriving. If corporate cultures see accelerated evolution toward integration and inclusion, if our institutions do a better job of matching blind people with those corporations’ true needs and providing supports, and if blind people are healthier, more whole and more flexible, then perhaps we can plant some seeds that have a chance.

Summary of Chapters

The following chapter, a review of literature pertinent to my research, presents the realities of blind employment, the statistics and the experiences. I define the different models and interpretations of disability, including how identity is formed. The focus of this paper, how to improve employment for blind adults in large U.S. corporations, is founded on studies about improving employment for the disabled. I review literature comparing the traditional supply-side solution to a demand-side model, discussing the potential of the demand-side focus. Next I present the realities of corporate culture, including attitudes and perceptions concerning disability, social barriers, and categories of discrimination against disability. I continue with discussion of how to develop a disability inclusive culture, ending with a few examples of promising practices achieving this.

Chapter III begins with my rationale for choosing phenomenology of a specific demographic group as my research method, followed by the research design I used, the context for my study, and how my pilot study factored into the research design. I then discuss my data
collection procedures, factors which might have altered the data, and how I protected the participants from harm. Next, I discuss my process of analysis of the interview transcriptions, followed by ethical considerations. The chapter ends with a discussion of the credibility and trustworthiness measures used in this study.

The biographical information of the participants, important to understanding the phenomenon of successfully employed blind adults, is presented as part of the research findings in Chapter IV. On the basis of a thematic analysis, a number of trends emerged which characterized the experience of blind employees in supportive workplaces. These are illustrated with quotes from the participants during the interviews.

Chapter V describes my interpretations of the findings, with relevant references to studies mentioned in the literature review in Chapter II. I also discuss my experiences during the entire study, my own biases before the study and during the research, and my discovery of the importance of self-efficacy in this phenomenon. In addition I present what may be limitations of the study and where additional study is needed.

Chapter VI concludes with a unique take on the key points and conclusions of the study, with considerations for the many stakeholders in blind employment, implications for social change and recommendations for action.
Chapter II: Review of Literature

This chapter summarizes the literature relevant to developing a theoretical frame for the research. The focus is primarily on the United States while including some data from Canada. As the research participants live in the United States, research focused on the United States is most applicable. Also, education and rehabilitation systems in the United States are sufficiently unique that findings from other countries with significantly different systems are not necessarily applicable.

First I investigated the realities of blind employment, including both statistics and experiences. A review of different models and interpretations of disability follows, discussing the medical model, minority model, structural model, and identity formation, making the distinction between disability and impairment. Next I explored ways corporations consider hiring people with disabilities, further referred to as PWD, comparing demand-side and supply-side strategies. In the discussion of the realities in corporate culture, I present findings about the employer and employees’ attitudes and perceptions of PWD, the ambivalence which exists about making accommodations, and the social barriers and categories of discrimination.

The primary focus of this project was to help corporations develop a disability inclusion culture, which I discuss next: what an inclusive culture looks like, and how to achieve it. I end the chapter reviewing catalysts and motivators for change, ending with a presentation of current promising practices.

Realities of Blind Employment

Before examining the theoretical underpinnings of disability workplace inclusion, I will set the stage with some brief descriptions of the employment realities encountered by blind
people. In reviewing articles focused on inclusion of people with disabilities (PWD) in the workplace, I found very limited research specifically addressing blind people.

**Employment of Working Age Blind Adults: The Numbers**

Exclusion from employment is one of the largest barriers blind people face in their attempts to earn a living and to use their talents to the benefit of society. In a study comparing the economic status of blind people to other groups, Houtenville (2003) found that among his sample populations, 88.8% of working age nondisabled men reported working in the two weeks previous to the study, while only 44.4% of working age blind men reported employment during that time period. The only disability groups reporting lower employment levels than those who are blind were people living with paraplegia, hemiplegia, quadriplegia, or intellectual disability. Profoundly deaf men were 1.5 times more likely to be employed than were blind men. In addition the study revealed that employment rates for blind women were equivalent to women reporting cerebral palsy, paraplegia, hemiplegia, quadriplegia, or intellectual disability. Employment rates for women remain lower than for men in all disability categories (Houtenville, 2003). Employment rates for blind people in the United States fall far short of that experienced by nondisabled citizens. A 2014 U.S. Census American Community Survey found there was a level of only 40.4% employment for working-age adults (aged 21–64 years) reporting significant vision loss (Erickson, Lee, & von Schrader, 2016). Various earlier studies confirm as well that the dismal employment opportunities for blind people are a structural problem.

Turning to a population of blind people with a particular additional disability, Capella-McDonnall (2008) found in another study that older adults with combined vision and hearing loss experienced higher unemployment rates than their peers with blindness as their only
disabling condition. Among blind adults aged 55–70 years, 25% were working, while 35% who were not working indicated they would like to be.

One can easily imagine the impacts of unemployment and underemployment on the economic status of blind people. Houtenville (2003) found that people who are blind in both eyes have lower mean household incomes and receive higher levels of Social Security Disability Insurance than do people who are deaf in both ears. The group of blind people who are most likely to be employed would be those who have received vocational placement services from VR agencies. Blind women and mentally retarded women shared the lowest levels of mean household income (Houtenville, 2003).

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in 2016 a total of 151.4 million people were employed. Of those employed, 5.3 million (3.5%) were classified as having a disability. Of employed people with disabilities, more than 560,000 (10.6%) were considered self-employed (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). An earlier study (Moore & Cavanaugh, 2003) explored employment rates of people who are blind with a focus on self-employment. Although significant rehabilitation resources are dedicated to helping blind people achieve self-employment outcomes, only about 6% of employed blind people are self-employed, compared with twice that (12%) in the sighted self-employed Americans (Moore & Cavanaugh, 2003). One of the major self-employment pathways for blind people has been becoming a vendor in a federal facility under the Randolph Sheppard program, but this number dropped in the period from 1994 to 2001, according to Moore and Cavanaugh’s research (2003).

A significant number of people who are blind and receiving VR services ultimately end their relationship with service providers in a homemaker closure. Until recently, the Rehabilitation Service Administration’s (RSA) statutes, a case closure as homemaker was an
acceptable VR outcome (Office of Special Education & Rehabilitation Services, 2017). To begin with, more blind people than those in other disability groups chose homemaker as their initial vocational goal. According to research by Michele Capella-McDonnell (2008), in 1992 only 5.8% of VR clients with other disabilities had their cases categorized as homemaker, and closed; in contrast, 45.2% of blind consumers received this status. By 2004, these levels dropped to 1.2% and 28.8% respectively. This represents a 75% decline in homemaker closures for other disability groups but only a 38% drop for blind VR clients. When examined by age group, we see the percentage of homemaker closures for blind people increased with age as well as the gap compared to other disability groups increasing.

**Experiences of Employment**

The lived experience of not being able to find employment as a blind person has only been scantily documented. However, one article (Naraine & Lindsay, 2011) captured the experience in a way that aligns with my real-world experience and observations as a blind employee and employer.

Naraine and Lindsay (2011) conducted a study of 13 blind and low-vision employed Canadians. Although this sample size is small, and the article does not appear to be part of a larger body of similar research, I believe it offers valuable insights. The 13 blind and low-vision participants reported that they did not enjoy full integration into their various workplaces mainly due to lack of social support. They also observed that social barriers were not acknowledged as workplace barriers, leading to their social exclusion (Naraine & Lindsay, 2011). In particular, research participants highlighted interpersonal communication challenges as barriers to gaining and retaining employment. In their experience, failure to communicate nonverbally, through gesture, facial expression, and posture, was seen as an inability to interact socially. This
perception led to an assumption that blind people cannot fit in with the social structures of the workplace. With an increasing emphasis by employers on fit as an important hiring criteria, this assumption appears as a clear barrier to employment success for people who are blind (Naraine & Lindsay, 2011).

Some of the specific interpersonal communication challenges identified by the blind participants in the Naraine and Lindsay study include: not recognizing coworkers, inability to independently obtain food and drink in work-related settings, challenges handling a guide dog and simultaneously eating, and needing to ask colleagues for assistance in informal settings (Naraine & Lindsay, 2011). So far I have made reference to disability as if there would be a common understanding of what it means. This is neither the case in common sense thinking, nor in the area of research.

**Different Models and Interpretations of Disability**

An understanding of the various models pertaining to disability is essential to understanding the dynamics of blind employment. According to Brown et al. (2009), disability theorists devote significant amounts of time and energy attempting to define disability. The theoretical roots of various proffered definitions rest in three disability models: medical, minority, and structural (Brown et al., 2009).

**Disability Models**

Other cultures than the United States view disability in different ways than here. For example, in Japan, visually impaired youngsters predominantly follow a vocational track rather than a post-secondary track despite the high esteem Japanese have for higher education (Wong, 2004). The typical vocation they went into was *riryoka* (acupuncture and massage) because it
depended more on body sense than on visual acuity. In Japan the ultimate goal for rehabilitation and education for disabled people is not employment, but independent living (Wong, 2004).

**U.S. medical model.** In the United States the primary paradigm for disabled individuals is the medical model. In this model, the disabled person is merely a “normal” person who has been broken, and needs to be fixed by a medical professional. Being broken (disabled) is a personal tragedy. Those who cannot be fixed are often considered permanently deficient and therefore dependent (Yamaki & Yamazaki, 2004). This model has been used by American society to justify segregation and discrimination, assuming deficient members of society cannot be expected to function in the same ways as non-deficient ones (Hayashi & Okuhira, 2008).

The medical model, grounded in natural sciences, views disability as a result of a biologically generated or genetic condition, and is based on a diagnosis from a medical professional. This means that the disability is a medical condition that can be prevented or remedied through treatment or rehabilitation. The disability and the impairment are considered as synonymous. Although the medical model has its roots in 19th-century social science, and is considered anachronistic by many disability theorists and researchers, there appears to be a renewed focus on this model of society (Haegele & Hodge, 2016).

**Minority model.** The minority model of disability sprang from the Civil Rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s, which gave birth to specific disability rights movements in the 1970s. In this model, disability appears as a political identity, and people are considered either disabled or nondisabled. Using the minority model, one sees discrimination and prejudice as the barriers to full inclusion of PWD. The minority model has particular relevance and efficacy in arenas of public discourse and public policy. Focus on the minority model has led to advances in equal access to education, housing, public spaces, and employment for PWD. This
model allowed PWD and their allies to focus not only on what was lacking but also on what could be accomplished through collective action. The minority model has allowed the development of disability pride (Brown et al., 2009).

**Structural model, and the disability formations approach.** The structural model is closely related to the minority model, and emerges as the paradigm most relevant to my work. Unlike the other two models discussed above, the structural model does not look at disability as a characteristic possessed by an individual. Instead, this model examines social and environmental forces that lead to a person being labeled as having a disability. In other words, the interaction of an individual’s physical condition with their social and environmental context creates disability. For example, paralysis of the legs is a disability if the context and environment require walking. Paralysis of the legs is not a disability if circumstances do not require walking (Brown et al., 2009).

Although Brown et al. (2009) recognized the structural model as the most useful and relevant of the three most commonly referenced paradigms, the authors suggest going beyond these models to a disability formations approach, which differs from the others in four key areas:

1. As in the structural model, disability is located outside of the body, and is defined from social relationships. Restrictions on people with impairments are seen as socially imposed. Some impairments do cause restrictions in activity, but only socially imposed restrictions constitute disability.

2. Understanding social situations is essential to understanding disability. The disability formations model grounds understanding of disability in the social context wherein social interactions take place. Looking at disability through this model, one sees PWD accepting and rejecting various elements of the three
common models, and often understanding their disability in ways that conflict with academic concepts. Disability formation does not seek a universal definition of disability, but emphasizes the importance of situations for understanding meanings.

(3) Key to this perspective, notions of disability common to large scale quantitative research are rejected. Meanings of disability are not considered universal, and cannot be applied without understanding the individual’s situational meaning in context. Disability formations is a process and social-relational approach, emphasizing situations, and avoiding decontextualized situations such as those found in quantitative surveys (Brown et al., 2009). This is a particularly significant distinction for small-scale qualitative research such as my study.

(4) The social constructivist approach is dynamic. This approach is empirically grounded in actual interactions between the nondisabled and PWD. This process emphasis can be liberating for PWD, because it points to socio-environmental causes of disability rather than individual characteristics (Bampi, Guilhem, & Alves, 2010; Brown et al., 2009; Levitt, 2017).

Identity Formation

The medical model, as outlined above, sees disability as a functional impairment, while the minority model focuses on lack of equal rights for nondisabled and disabled people. Meanwhile, the structural model is framed in terms of environmental factors. Although these three models have become fairly well established as frameworks within disability studies, there exists a clear lack of empirical research about how people come to define themselves as disabled. Brown and Hamner’s research is particularly applicable to my work as they sought to understand
how disability definitions and identities are constructed by individuals as they seek employment. Brown and Hamner found that interactions with employers and employment agencies were major factors in an individual’s identity formation. Disability identity formation is an interactive process. This disability identity formation is analogous to processes found in “doing gender” and “racial formations” paradigms (Brown et al., 2009, p. 6).

Conducting focus groups with 58 people who self-identified as disabled and were employed or in a job search, Brown et al. (2009) found that the roots of most disability definitions arise from interactions. Individuals use aspects of all three models to explain their positionality in the workforce. For instance, the medical model is often used by people to justify their inability to work. Disability identities are constantly negotiated through interactions with employers and employment agencies. Disability is therefore not viewed by individuals as a personal attribute, but as a process variable emerging in specific context (Brown et al., 2009).

In the United States, a person’s work is paramount in identity construction. Work is one of the most important factors in determining how we label, interact with, and talk to one another. Urban ethnographers have pointed out how inner-city residents emphasize the importance of finding “decent” work (Brown et al., 2009, p. 5). In the disability community, I can draw an analogy to the emphasis on obtaining mainstream, integrated employment as opposed to work designed specifically for PWD or in institutional settings specifically designed to support disabled employees. The organization I led for eight years is considered a non-integrated, and therefore non-mainstream, employment setting. So, I have a particular sensitivity to this issue.

During a job search or periods of employment, people form their disability identity in a number of ways, incorporating elements from the three major disability models. For instance, a
person may seek medical confirmation of their impairment, request accommodations in their work environment, and seek equal employment protections under the law (Brown et al., 2009).

Many of the focus group participants in Brown et al.’s (2009) study equate their impairment with their disability, while also framing interactions with employers and employment agencies in terms of the medical and minority models. In discussing disability identity formation with participants, Brown, with others (Brown et al., 2009), discovered that many participants had not considered themselves disabled until labeled so by an employment resource such as a state VR agency. Another significant finding indicates that disabled people who were not employed rely more heavily on the medical model, justifying their unemployment status, than did PWD who were employed (Brown et al., 2009).

Although the medical model emerged as an element in most participants’ identity formation, very few explained their disability solely in medical terms. Most participants also touched on the minority model, describing discrimination they had experienced as based on the medical condition they possessed. These descriptions of discrimination were often stated in terms of “us” and “them.” Participants used the minority model to describe political status, the experience of being discriminated against because of a medical condition, which often deepened an individual’s identification as a disabled person (Brown et al., 2009). Meanwhile, the structural model was also woven throughout individuals’ identity formation experiences, as many participants said their inability to find work was because of social and environmental factors that limited their ability to work.

Other factors in their psychosocial development can influence BVI people’s ability to find fulfilling and successful work. In her systematic review of 17 articles published between 1998 and 2016 relating to mood disorders among children and young adults with visual
impairments, Augestad (2017) found that young blind people have more emotional problems than their sighted peers. These mental problems include depression, anxiety, and high levels of fear. Young blind girls experience more depression and anxiety than do young blind boys.

In a qualitative study involving focus groups of blind children, aged 9 to 13 years, Visagie, Loxton, Mallard, & Silverman (2017), found that anxiety is the most common psychological problem experienced by their participants. Although anxiety is one of the most common forms of psychological distress felt by young people in general, blind children are at greater risk of experiencing problematic levels of anxiety compared to their sighted peers (Visagie et al., 2017).

Blind children who participated in this study experienced anxiety around three main concerns: physical limitations, socio-evaluative concerns, and injury and pain-related concerns, such as running into hard objects (Visagie et al., 2017). The children reported anxiety due to physical limitations relating to the inability to play certain games or take part in certain activities because of their blindness, as well as not being able to follow the action on television programs. In addition, focus group participants reported anxiety resulting from asking for explanations from sighted people and being ignored. These blind children also reported high levels of anxiety and frustration in socio-evaluative situations including: teasing, being questioned incessantly about their disability, and concerns about how their blindness impacted their physical appearance to others. The participants also reported high levels of social anxiety due to negative comments and name-calling by sighted children (Visagie et al., 2017).

Crudden, Cmar, and McDonnell (2017) found particular instances of increased stress experienced by blind people in relation to transportation, such as navigating unfamiliar bus routes, walking city streets without sidewalks, and walking in unfamiliar places.
Greater severity of visual impairment relates to higher levels of anxiety, fear, and loneliness (Augestad, 2017). Reasons for higher levels of mental problems include limited mobility, loneliness, fewer opportunities to gain social skills, and greater levels of dependence on others for assistance. Blind children also find it harder to predict another’s behavior because they cannot gauge emotions through facial expression. Another reason young blind people seem to have difficulty with mood and mental health is their lack of participation in leisure-time activities (Augestad, 2017; Crudden, Cmar, & McDonnall, 2017).

Many PWD hold multiple disability identities at the same time (Brown et al., 2009). Identification as a disabled or nondisabled person does not depend on a single model. Sometimes a disability identity serves a very positive purpose. Being labeled as a person with a disability may allow an unemployed person to escape being labeled as lazy or a drug addict. On the flip side, people identifying themselves as disabled, but not qualifying for this label by an employment agency such as VR have difficulty in explaining their inability to work. There are also some material benefits available, such as the transfer payments made to disabled people through Social Security Disability Insurance (Brown et al., 2009).

The most commonly accepted disability concept in the United States, as embodied in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), holds that disability is a characteristic of an individual, in which a person’s impairment interferes with involvement in social roles, especially that of a worker. Impairment is a functionally limiting set of physical or mental properties. The presence of impairment is necessary but not sufficient to cause a disability. Disabilities exist only in relation to specified social roles and norms. So, impairment refers to an individual characteristic, disability to a social construct (Ward, Moon, & Baker, 2012).
Societal beliefs about ability and capacity influence social construction of disability (Gewurtza & Kirsha, 2009), and therefore the opportunities disabled people have. Physical impairment is not the greatest challenge facing a person with a disability (Robert & Harlan, 2006). Instead, disability, like race and gender, may be a societally ascribed and a major barrier to integration (Robert & Harlan, 2006). Because disability has historically been considered an inherent, rather than an ascribed characteristic, sociology has not linked disability and discrimination theoretically. Assimilating the experiences of PWD into the sociological literature on discrimination has been fragmentary (Robert & Harlan, 2006). Understanding these mechanisms allows for a more effective analysis of policies like the Americans with Disabilities Act, and allows for development of prescriptions for policy revision to more effectively achieve desired outcomes such as inclusion.

The distinction between impairment and disability lies at the heart of the social model of disability. Impairments are institutional facts, ontologically subjective, and observer-relevant. Disabilities are institutionally created activity limitations. “There is no monolithic operationalization of disability, because this concept is an institutionally created fact, emerging in the socio-historic context of a particular set of social norms and values” (Ward et al., 2012, p. 38).

In terms of work, the judgment of whether or not a person is disabled relative to a particular job or workplace begins with determining whether or not the person possesses impairment. If the person does not have impairment, they cannot be considered disabled. Also, excluding a person from work locations or activities because of social norms or values does not necessarily mean they are disabled (Ward et al., 2009). In other words, if a person is able to do a
job, but is not permitted to do so because of perceptions of their ability stemming from their impairment, then that person is disabled through social construction.

**Improving Employment for People With Disabilities**

The ultimate determination of the success of disability employment lies in the intersection of three stakeholder groups: employers, government, and PWD (Blanck & Schartz, 2005). In surveying 132 HR staff and line managers, Fong et al. (2010) found that PWD ranked in either the neutral or agree category in comparing productivity and reliability with nondisabled co-workers. These same survey respondents rated themselves as neutral on their knowledge of the ADA, and their companies as neutral in efforts to include PWD in diversity efforts. These employers saw disability hiring efforts directly related to a company’s culture of diversity. Inclusion of PWD in specific employment processes depended upon organizational focus on PWD’s in overall diversity efforts (Fong et al., 2010). I interpret this to mean that unless a company had a culture of inclusion, and formal diversity efforts that intentionally included PWD, disability employment was relatively less successful, and low employment rates for PWD can be attributed at least in part to employer attitudes. It will be interesting to see how these attitudes will change based on the 2014 Office of Contract Compliance and EEOC forms requiring all federal contract employers to disclose how they source for job candidates with disabilities. One of the most promising shifts towards improvement in employment of disabled people is progressing from the supply-side approach (needs of the blind and ways to fix them to fit the workplace), to a demand-side model (focusing on translating employer needs to match what blind employees can offer).
From a Traditional Supply-Side Solution to a Demand-Side Model

For several decades, Western governments have focused resources on making PWD employable, and far less time, energy, and funding on creating accommodating work environments. In the United States, the federal government largely funds state VR programs, which have focused on the supply-side of disabled employment, preparing PWD to be employable (Fong et al., 2010). VR then sought to match PWD with open positions, based on the concept that PWD are an untapped resource which can meet the employers’ needs (Luecking, 2008). This traditional supply-side model is becoming even less effective as the modern work environment changes. People with disabilities are less likely to find a job in the expanding areas of the labor market requiring flexible hours, longer hours, multi-skills, multi-tasking, and ever greater productivity. Many PWD are reluctant to enter into these areas because of the high risk. Once hired, PWD are likely to have a poor work experience. This is shown by the low retention numbers after the first year of work (Hall & Wilton, 2011).

The Potential of a New Demand-side Focus

There is a recent movement in VR focusing on demand-side employment models to help PWD gain and keep employment (Fong et al., 2010). The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), part of the Department of Labor, says that these demand-side models must focus on preparing disabled VR clients for jobs that employers need to fill. To effectively use demand-side models, VR staff need to identify high demand jobs, then act as HR consultants to help employers modify jobs and learn how to support PWD who can fill high-demand positions. By focusing on high demand occupations and employer needs, these demand-side models have the potential to dramatically increase disabled employment (Fong et al., 2010).
Demand-side models work under the assumption that an employer with a hard-to-fill position would be receptive to hiring a qualified person with a disability if they could receive active support and training from a demand-side employment specialist. In a large study of employers conducted by the ODEP, the most common responses showed that employers need more accurate and practical information to dispel negative perceptions about hiring PWD (Fong et al., 2010).

In these models VR, staff identify high demand jobs, and seek to meet employer operational needs for filling these jobs. Success of the demand-side model requires disability hiring champions within organizations. VR agencies work with these champions to create an inclusive, accessible environment. In this model the employer’s primary concern is not disability, but meeting an operational need. Eliminating physical barriers is not sufficient. The VR job developer must understand organizational culture, and how the disabled person experiences it.

Employer attitudes and traditional VR methods of training and placing clients are two main factors determining low disabled employment rates (Antonelli, Steverson, & O’Mally, 2018; McDonnell, 2018). McDonnell found in her 2018 study of employer hiring decisions that employer attitude is a significant factor influencing hiring decisions of people who are a blind. She found a 10 point higher score on the attitude scale related to 2.61 higher odds for a blind person being hired by that employer. Conversely, the lower the attitude score concerning feelings about blind people, the lower the odds of a job offer being made (McDonnell, 2018).

Antonelli et al. (2018) found that blind college students actively seeking employment experienced low rates of job interview opportunities compared to the number of job applications submitted, applying for between 30 and 60 jobs before being hired. The average length of time in the job search before being hired was seven months. These students identified the top three
barriers to successful employment as employer discrimination and negative attitudes, job market competition, and transportation issues.

Overcoming stereotypes held by employers was a major barrier for employment of these students. The difficulty was getting employers to realize that despite their visual impairment, they were capable of doing the job (Antonelli et al., 2018). Vocational rehabilitation counselors also cited employer attitudes as a major barrier to successful placement of their clients in jobs (McDonnell, Zhou, & Crudden, 2013). Coffey, Coufopolous, and Kinghorn (2014), in their mixed methods research into employment barriers faced by visually impaired women, also found the most frequently reported barrier were the negative attitudes held by the potential employers.

Vocational rehabilitation typically focuses on the supply-side, preparing disabled clients to be employable. Understanding employers’ needs has not been part of the traditional VR approach. Instead, employers have been encouraged to hire PWD for charitable reasons. What has been overlooked is the VR system’s opportunity to influence employer operations, which creates demand for disability employment services. Nevertheless, the leading barrier to disabled employment is the type and severity of the disability and the lack of fit with an employment environment created by and for nondisabled people.

Fong et al. (2010) and Strindlund (2018) found that the top concerns expressed by employers center on the ability of PWD to meet production and safety standards. Secondly, employers do not have adequate information about how to hire and retain PWD. Thirdly, employers need assistance in identifying appropriate workplace accommodations and supports.

**Demand-side employment strategies.** Demand-side employment strategies include jobs at all levels of complexity. The focus is on preparing PWD for jobs that employers need to fill,
then supporting the employer with appropriate VR interventions. The two most important factors supporting inclusion of PWD in hiring are the employer’s level of knowledge of the ADA, and inclusion of PWD in a company’s formal diversity plan (Fong et al., 2010). Walgreens is often held up as an example of intentional inclusion of PWD in hiring. Emmett, a former VR counselor, was hired to be Walgreens’ initial Disability Program Manager in 2005 and 2006. As such, Emmett brought a unique perspective to the understanding of the demand-side strategies. In a brief article, Emmett (2008) listed lessons learned that could be of practical use to those VR counselors wanting to understand demand-side employment strategies:

1. Respect the corporate culture.
2. Learn the employer’s operations thoroughly.
3. Proactively pursue an 80 to 20 ratio, listening to talking.
4. Change the social service mental model to a business mental model.
5. Do not overpromise.
6. Don’t undervalue the service you bring as a VR specialist.
7. Educate the employers about the resources the VR system can offer, and show how proactively utilizing these resources makes good business sense.
8. Building trust is essential.
9. Teach employers the importance of providing social and communications skills training and supports to consumers with disabilities.
10. Show employers how VR strategies are universally beneficial; universal design benefits nondisabled employees too.

Focus groups show that employers rely on rehabilitation agencies to identify qualified disabled applicants and to provide supports after hiring occurs. Internship programs for high
school and college students with disabilities were highlighted as particularly important. Employers want ongoing communication with the VR agency after the hire. At the same time, employers want VR agencies to focus on job fit, providing truly qualified applicants for particular positions, a mindset of providing quality applicants rather than a large quantity. The demand-side model also requires internal champions of disability hiring within organizations. These champions should be members of the general workforce as well as influential leaders. Support for disability hiring by top management was called out as essential to the success of disability hiring initiatives (Hernandez et al., 2008).

Because employers who do not have familiarity with disability issues may harbor negative perceptions, and employers generally lack this familiarity, building positive experiences with disabled people is crucial to the success of demand-side strategies. Mentoring of managers with little experience with disabled people by those with significant experience could prove fruitful. Additionally, by putting career development into place for current employees with disabilities a company would send positive, reinforcing messages about disability employment both internally and externally (Hernandez et al., 2008).

What has been largely overlooked by VR practitioners is their ability to influence an employer’s operations in order to create a demand for disability employment services. The newly emerging demand-side models of disability employment focus on providing disability employment services directly to employers, helping them create an environment that is accessible for PWD, allowing success in meeting labor needs through disability hiring (Luecking, 2008). Attention to the demand-side is becoming more prevalent in the general workforce development field, taking a dual approach and viewing both the job seeker and the
employer as customers. From a disability employment standpoint, these new models replace a charity framing with one of mutual benefit.

Employers consistently say they are unaware of the availability of PWD to hire. This shows that the VR system has not marketed itself effectively. One structural reason for this ineffectiveness is that the VR system operates in silos, typified by the various agencies and specialists representing specific disability groups. The VR system has proven ineffective in communicating to employers how disability employment services can help them maximize the hiring of PWD in order to meet their hiring needs (Luecking, 2008).

Employers are more positive about people with intellectual disabilities if ongoing supports from a VR agency are provided. With proper supports available to them, employers are willing to go far beyond mere compliance with the ADA and to become proactive in hiring (Luecking, 2008). In one study, 75% of disabled youth involved in a summer work experience program were offered further employment, even though the employer was not required to offer employment past the internship period. Once a person with a disability is on the job, the employer sees their contribution countering their disability (Luecking, 2008).

With job customization and other demand-side job development services, employers are willing to hire PWD if doing so can meet a particular operational need. This sometimes requires job customization through assigning a specific, alternative task to a person with a disability. For instance, a person with a developmental disability could be assigned the task of delivering documents from one department to another, allowing co-workers to remain at their work stations, thereby boosting their productivity (Luecking, 2008).
Although customized jobs with effective supports open doors to disability employment, employers remain frustrated and confused by disability employment services (Luecking, 2008). In focus groups employers expressed these feelings with three types of comments:

1. Resentment of multiple organizations soliciting them for job opportunities for their clients.
2. Perception that disability employment agencies are unaware of business practices.
3. Lack of participation of disability employment specialists in business community organizations such as chambers of commerce or trade associations.

Although employers generally express frustration with the VR system, those who have had positive experiences employing PWD often point out the importance of VR agency support. Two very different sets of answers were given when job developers and employers are asked the same question, “What are the factors leading to successful disability employment?” Job developers talked about the importance of employer attitudes toward PWD. Employers, however, talked about the competence of job developers and the importance of PWD contributing to operational success (Luecking, 2008). A set of essays written by employers of PWD highlighted two success factors: First, partnering with organizations that have experience with disabilities. Second, the positive contributions of disabled employees to meet operational needs (Luecking, 2008).

There is a scarcity of research information available addressing issues of employers of the blind, therefore Luecking’s 2008 work stands out in its focus and conclusions, although salient and powerful. More research needs to be done, both quantitatively and qualitatively, about this topic.
Part of the environment critical to employing PWD is the area of job development. Job developers need to partner with the people who have the jobs to fill, the employers. According to Luecking (2008), Gilbride and Stensrud (1999) wrote a seminal work on a demand-side approach to disability employment. Their framework entailed creating demand for job seekers with disabilities through targeted services for employers. A demand-side employment model does not focus on trying to convince employers to hire people from specific demographic categories, but rather focuses on an employer’s specific operational needs and how specific individuals can address those needs. Like all good marketing the first step is to identify what the customer needs.

Next, VR agencies fill that need with job development services. Job developers need to know what an employer’s operational needs are, what exactly needs to get done within a company. In this way, the job developer can uncover opportunities for candidates who do not have the requisite skills or experience for standard jobs, as in our document delivery example above (Luecking, 2008).

A job developer can do an informational interview to learn about operational needs, rather than the traditional pitching of disability hiring to an employer. In this paradigm the job developer is working as an organizational development (OD) consultant. Organizational development is a business and human resource management field focused on continuous improvement, continual examination, and revision of internal processes to optimize organizational performance (Luecking, 2008). The internal processes addressed by OD can include job design, hiring, managing employees, employee role clarification, and work flow. One part of OD is continuous improvement of how work gets done and who does it. The job developer as OD consultant can influence job and work-flow design and employee selection to bring PWD into the organization in order to maximize internal processes. The job developer in
an OD consultant role, identifies areas in which operations can be improved, offers alternative ways to address this opportunity, and then matches PWD who have the skills necessary to meet the need, while also addressing the employer’s needs for cost savings, profit maximization, or increased effectiveness (Luecking, 2008).

The job developer’s process of task identification reveals a hidden job market. This means helping employers discover workforce needs that they were not aware of. This task identification process is useful in job customization. Job customization includes creating a profile of tasks that a job seeker might perform well, cataloging personal traits relevant to job search, listing possible accommodations and supports, developing a list of potential employers where job seeker skills might be of use, and negotiating with an employer to have tasks assigned that meet the disabled person’s profile (Luecking, 2008).

The final step in job customization, and an essential one, is design and implementation of supports for the disabled person in the workplace. Job tasks are restructured or carved from other jobs. For instance, a job can be created in a department store entailing folding of clothes from dressing rooms for return to the floor, allowing salespeople to spend more time with customers (Luecking, 2008). Luecking’s work appears to be focused on people with significant developmental disabilities; however, the same concepts can be applied to people who are blind. In my experience the job carving or job customization aspects involving blind people center on understanding which job tasks require sight. These tasks can be carved out of that job and assigned elsewhere. When working with blind individuals with additional significant disabilities such as autism or brain injury the nuances of job customization become even more important.

In the final step of negotiating with employers for task assignment the job developer must show the employer where hiring a person with a disability can meet a specific need. The job task
identification process, which leads to job customization, is integral to this step. After negotiation concludes, ongoing support after hiring is crucial for success. For instance, a customized job often does not have pre-existing performance measures. The job developer can work with the employer to establish appropriate performance expectations for the newly created job, and help set up workflow processes so that these standards can be met. From the employer’s standpoint this can be seen as service after the sale (Luecking, 2008).

A VR agency seeking to place disabled clients in employment through a job development initiative must have a customer service mindset. This customer service focus requires understanding employer’s needs, soliciting feedback, and making adjustments to the service being provided. If the person with a disability is not meeting a true customer need, then their employment is based on charity. This is antithetical to principles of demand-side job development and the disabled job seeker’s self-determination and competence. Interviews with employers clearly show that effective job development services can increase job opportunities for PWD (Luecking, 2008).

It is not necessary that a person with a disability meet standard job description requirements, but methodology must be in place allowing the disabled employee to meet a real need. This holds true even if the disabled employee needs extensive accommodations and supports. Job development using enhanced service methodologies allows VR agencies to engage employers in a more effective way than merely selling them on the charitable act of hiring the handicapped. Through job development VR staff and the employer work in partnership.

**Realities of Corporate Culture**

Corporate culture has a great impact on how PWD are treated in the workplace. This includes influencing things such as opportunities for mentoring, advancement, and task
assignment. Psychosocial characteristics of the workplace are essential factors in shaping a disabled person’s experiences at work (Visagie et al., 2017). An intangible culture that values acceptance and understanding is necessary for successful disabled employment, and such values produce day-to-day programs, processes, and behaviors that constitute a favorable environment. Perceptions of inclusion and acceptance impact the way a person with a disability is integrated into day-to-day workplace activities (Gewurtza & Kirsha, 2009). Implementing job development strategies that address the corporate culture can thus contribute to the creation of greater demand-side employment.

A culture of rugged individualism disadvantages PWD. On the other hand, a culture of integration would allow for successful disability employment. Unfortunately, the realities of corporate cultures generally fall well short of the ideal culture of integration. In typical corporate cultures disabled people experience stigmatization. In most corporate cultures PWD are viewed in a traditional way, and are not viewed as contributors to the organization.

**Definition of Corporate Culture**

As we have seen, corporate culture lies at the center of blind employment dynamics. But what is corporate culture? According to Gewurtza and Kirsha (2009), culture is the shared values, beliefs, and expectations among members of an organization. Culture is an informal system of control, shaping much of what occurs within an organization. Culture includes dictates, norms, rules of behavior, and expectations of members. Culture also prescribes the ways of integrating new members who are different from the norm into an organization (Gewurtza & Kirsha, 2009).

One can look at a corporation’s culture, or shared values, to identify what differences are consequential among coworkers within that organization. Culture shapes much of what goes on
in an organization, what people say, how they behave, and what they pay attention to. Culture influences how people respond to different situations, how they integrate new members, and how they exclude people who do not fit in (Spataro, 2005). Culture often functions as an informal control system, with elements which are taken for granted, unspoken, and unconscious, and which can be more potent than explicit ones (Spataro, 2005).

The strength and tenacity of culture comes in part from its anxiety-reducing function. Upon learning to hold common assumptions the resulting ingrained ways of perceiving, thinking, feeling, and behaving provide meaning and stability. Shared learning brings comfort and lessens the anxiety that occurs when the group is unable to understand or predict events happening around them (Schein, 1990). Socialization of new members entering the group serves to perpetuate and replicate culture. However, new members will bring their own views, and therefore also play a part in creating the organization’s culture (Schein, 1990; Schur, Krusez, & Blanck, 2005).

Sandra Spataro distinguishes between three types of organizational culture, in order of frequency: culture of differentiation, culture of unity, and culture of integration (Spataro, 2005). The culture of differentiation is characterized by highly salient, individual differences that have a large impact on both group and individual interactions. In this culture positive or negative values are placed on specific characteristics. These negatively or positively valued characteristics can include ability or disability. An example of a dynamic within the culture of differentiation can be seen in an organization that values male gender and education. In this instance, a male with a professional degree would have power and status simply because they possess the valued characteristics. Those with the most highly valued characteristics within the culture would enjoy more respect and influence and therefore would be able to perform more effectively than others.
in the organization (Spataro, 2005). Paradoxically, the tendency to select on the basis of a limited number of characteristics also has a homogenizing impact, what Essed (1991, 2008) has called ‘cultural cloning’. The emphasis in this culture is on fit, wherein those who best fit within the defined preferred characteristics have more informal power and status. This fit with the ideal also leads to greater personal satisfaction for the individual. Conversely, not fitting leads to dissatisfaction in this type of culture (Spataro, 2005). Profiles of influential people in a culture of differentiation are viewed as ideal, because of an association with success and leadership. Because organizational values dictate the processes by which members make evaluations, values also determine the significance and impact of possessing certain characteristics.

When one characteristic, such as gender or education, is privileged over another, the knowledge of who has or does not have that characteristic carries a lot of weight. In the culture of differentiation, merely possessing or not possessing a characteristic is not what matters. Rather, the nature and content of the characteristic under question, and what impact that has on informal power and status is the important dynamic to understand.

Additionally, expectations about performance are built around valued characteristics and therefore shape interactions between members. A group is more likely to accept the influence of a person with the culture of differentiation’s most highly valued characteristics (Spataro, 2005). In this culture responses to policies like the ADA can emphasize the disability characteristic as being undesirable, exacerbating the power gap between PWD and those with the most desired characteristics. Because of this reality those without highly valued characteristics are expected not to be able to perform as well as others within organizations, and they have to work harder to defy the challenges working against them (Spataro, 2005). Note that the effect of what is called differentiation is in fact homogenization—exclusion of those who do not fit the selected criteria.
The second type of organizational culture is one of unity. Based on super ordinate identities, shared bonds between demographically different people, this culture operates under the concept that all members are on the same team. The premise here is to suppress differences that might make social interactions complicated or challenging. This is accomplished by uniting employees under a common identity (Spataro, 2005).

The more people within an organization focus on collectivism, the less noticeable are individual differences. In this type of culture, a common group boundary is more salient than any individual characteristic like a disability. In a culture of unity, as opposed to one of differentiation, employees communicate and interact more and experience less conflict. Loyalty and commitment to the organization are high (Spataro, 2005). For individuals to thrive in a unity culture, each one must establish an identity as part of the group, striving toward a common goal. Differences that might create a perception of misalignment with the group are suppressed, leaving the employee with a disability no opportunity to leverage their difference as a contributing strength.

The third kind of culture, the one most promising for diversity and inclusion of PWD, is one of valuing and seeking out differences between coworkers in order to achieve and maintain peak performance. This environment encourages innovating new products, enhancing group decision making, promoting creativity, and enriching the overall work experience for everyone (Davidson, 2011). A high value is placed upon continuous quality improvement by incorporating different perspectives into work processes (Spataro, 2005).

The realities of corporate culture appear to fall far short of the culture of integration based on leveraging difference, discussed in detail later in the section on how to achieve an ideal
inclusive culture. The typical, traditional approaches to inclusion of PWD instead focus on compliance with regulations rather than on a values focus.

**Employer and Employee Attitudes and Perceptions**

Employer perceptions are largely formed with little objective information. The knowledge skills and abilities generally sought by employers include job knowledge and production skills, socialization and emotional coping skills, motivation and satisfaction, trainability, dependability. Although comparisons between PWD and those without are incomplete, there are a few formal studies showing very little difference between the two groups in these areas. People with disabilities do compare favorably with the general population in academic achievement to the point of high school diplomas and some college. There is a lower percentage of PWD with college degrees and higher academic achievement (Blanck & Schartz, 2005).

The top employer-related barrier to disability employment appears to be discomfort with disabled people and unfamiliarity with disability issues. Employers said that most PWD in their organizations were in entry level jobs, and were not considered part of the pool for career development (Hernandez et al., 2008).

The relatively small number of employers having experience with disabled employees found that realities did not mirror perceptions. Cost of accommodations were seen by this group as low. Benefits to the employer include low absenteeism, long tenure, reliability, and hard work (Hernandez et al., 2008). Having disabled people in the workforce, employers found, improved coworker attitudes toward diverse groups. Customers also received inclusive, community-minded messages about a company through inclusion of disabled people in their workforce (Hernandez et al., 2008). In a qualitative study involving three focus groups of employers of
disabled individuals, Hernandez et al. (2008) found an overarching concern that costs of employing PWD would outweigh benefits. Employers feared that costs would accrue through expensive accommodations, decreased productivity, and increased supervisor time. These fears are not borne out by empirical data. A Sears Roebuck study of 436 accommodations provided to their disabled employees between 1978 and 1996 showed little or no additional costs. The Job Accommodation Network released a study that showed for every $1 spent in accommodations by employers they received $40 in benefit. Meanwhile, DuPont, since 1958 the corporation with the most comprehensive documenting of disability employment and impacts, finds that the productivity of PWD is equivalent to that of their nondisabled employees (Hernandez et al., 2008).

Challenges to successful employment of PWD abound, including negative reactions of coworkers. Negative co-worker reactions fall into three categories of fear:

1. Negative effects on work outcomes: Increased workload and hampering of team performance affecting rewards.
2. Negative effects on personal outcomes: Fear of contagion, resentment of accommodations considered as special treatment.
3. Negative interpersonal outcomes: Feelings of awkwardness, discomfort, guilt, and ambivalence.

These negative views by coworkers may lead to avoidance and exclusion of PWD from formal and informal work groups (Blanck & Schartz, 2005).

Focusing on accessibility, I next turn to a deeper examination of U.S. corporate culture. After looking at corporate culture, I review literature concerning routines within corporations, based on ableness, which lead to institutionalized discriminatory practices. Organizations also
develop defensive routines that serve as barriers to inclusion. In the face of realities of corporate culture, disabled people must make some hard decisions about whether or not to disclose their disability and whether or not to request accommodations. When PWD intersect with corporate culture disruption, disbelief, and resistance occur.

**Ambivalence about Accommodations in Hiring and Management**

People with disabilities often find themselves in a difficult position when requesting accommodations, which sometimes leads to PWD actively hiding their disabilities (Gewurtza & Kirsha, 2009). Revealing disability can create discrimination and being viewed as less competent, able, or reliable. This need for maneuvering lessens the likelihood of successful, satisfying employment (Gewurtza & Kirsha, 2009). An important nuance of this: people with invisible disabilities receive less understanding and support in organizations than do individuals whose disabilities are readily apparent. If employed, PWD may find their organization uses intimidation to discourage accommodations requests. Those PWD denied accommodations rarely appeal, fearing job loss, demeaning work assignments, or being labeled a problem employee (Gewurtza & Kirsha, 2009).

Requests for accommodations do relate directly to negative views by employers (Blanck & Schartz, 2005). I found this true when I was CEO of the Lighthouse for the Blind in Seattle: Individual hiring managers were predisposed to hire blind people whose accommodation needs were less expensive. When we centralized our accommodation budget so separate departments did not bear the cost, we had a positive effect on our hiring practices of people with more severe disabilities and expensive accommodation needs.

Traditionally, corporations considered hiring PWD as a charitable act (Barclay et al., 2012; Davidson, 2011). This quickly leads, however, to a view of PWD as damaged goods and
second-class citizens, unable to make appropriate decisions or perform job duties in efficient, cost effective ways. In addition to discriminatory routines, organizations develop defensive routines that justify behaviors. These defensive routines are actions, policies, and norms of behavior that prevent organizations from feeling embarrassment or threat as a result of their discrimination (Barclay et al., 2012).

Organizational managers often use workplace safety concerns to justify discrimination. They challenge the existence or nature of disabilities and how disabling conditions should be handled. Organizations can cite their own corporate policies as part of their defensive routines, pointing to a solid anti-discrimination policy as proof that a discriminatory incident is an anomaly. Anti-discrimination policies that come to resemble rules create an impression that discrimination cannot happen within an organization (Barclay et al., 2012). Along these lines, companies are more interested in disabilities in terms of factors like absence management and prevention of Labor and Industry claims than as an issue of inclusion (Fong et al., 2010).

If flexibility and the opportunity to modify job duties run counter to an organization’s culture, then PWD have difficulties in obtaining the accommodations that they need. Work on demand is found to be valued by employers, and this aspect of work culture poses barriers to PWD (Gewurtza & Kirsha, 2009). Social accommodations are often required by PWD for success; however, if able employees see an accommodation such as flexible work hours as being useful to them as well, employers typically resist, with the excuse that if the accommodation is made, able employees will ask for similar considerations, causing disruption in the workplace. Integration of PWD can be seen by employers as a threat to predictability and employer control over the workplace (Gewurtza & Kirsha, 2009).
Typically, able employees see an accommodation for a PWD as elevating the disabled person above the non-disabled coworkers, an expense not in proportion to the disabled person’s contribution to the organization. Employees with special skills who would be hard to replace are more likely to receive social accommodations. Studies clearly show that employees with higher status are more successful in negotiating accommodations. Those with lower job status find accommodations more difficult to arrange (Gewurtza & Kirsha, 2009). Regardless of job status, the onset of a disability halts or stalls advancement in organizations. Also, those with higher status are more likely to accept promotions and take on challenging jobs. Meanwhile, lower status workers with disabilities tend not to accept promotions and accept jobs below their capability level in order to insure they can meet day-to-day work requirements and have a better chance of balancing their work and non-work responsibilities (Gewurtza & Kirsha, 2009).

**Social Barriers and Categories of Discrimination**

The lack of social acceptance of blind people in the workplace is based on attitudes and emotions of the nondisabled. Most organizations fail to recognize the social barriers created by these feelings. Even though more organizations now pay attention to both diversity and inclusion in some way, skills for and expectations or norms about social inclusion are usually not part of training, feedback or other talent development and performance management systems, so are often ignored by employers. While some organizations do suggest skills and norms for team inclusion, norms for effective social inclusion of PWD including blind people has only been explored by a handful of large organizations that have employee resource groups focused on disability (Naraine & Lindsay, 2011).

Blind people face three types of barriers imposed by the nondisabled in the workplace’s social arenas: social, interpersonal, and communications. These barriers, based on deeply
embedded socially constructed misconceptions, seem intractable. Sighted people experience discomfort communicating with blind people because eye contact and facial expressions (able norms) are not used. Blind people are therefore stigmatized as socially incompetent or not fitting in because they have challenges establishing rapport and connections through normatively able types of nonverbal communication. This stigmatization hinders the success of blind employees because it prevents development of the informal social networks that are essential in the workplace.

Social network formation is further hindered because sighted people perceive blindness as an abnormality that carries negative social images. At the same time, relying on others, as blind people must do in the workplace to some extent, fosters perceptions of helplessness and incompetence (Naraine & Lindsay, 2011). The three types of discriminatory behavior identified by Robert and Harlan (2006)—marginalization, fictionalization, and harassment, are supported by the typical cultures of large, bureaucratic organizations.

Marginalization, fictionalization, and harassment are often intertwined. Marginalization consists of various types of social isolation, including being ignored, being excluded from daily work life routines, and being stared at. Marginalization leads to feelings of rejection and devaluation; to a sense of being an outsider in the workplace. Marginalization and stigma go hand in hand. People with disabilities who have been marginalized are forced to develop stigma management strategies. The reflected appraisal of others—that is, the knowledge that co-workers are uncomfortable being around PWD—heightens the disabled person’s feelings of being stigmatized (Robert & Harlan, 2006).

The numerous Arizona state employees with disabilities interviewed by Robert and Harlan characterized interactions with coworkers and supervisors as stilted. Nondisabled
employees are seen as acting anxious or nervous around PWD. When stilted interactions become routine, PWD feel uneasy. The uneasiness and discomfort felt by nondisabled people is transferred to the disabled individuals who in turn become uneasy in a vicious cycle. Interviewees reported occasional feelings of being truly known that occurred over time, but these instances are rare (Robert & Harlan, 2006).

In some cases, disabled employees experience isolation due to the built environment or poor planning (Robert & Harlan, 2006). For instance, coworkers may routinely gather for informal conversations at an inaccessible location. People with disabilities feel that this type of isolation could be ameliorated if managers made changes to the built environment or engaged in better planning; these sentiments, however, are rarely communicated to decision-makers. Marginalization through social isolation also often comes through staring. People with visible disabilities say staring is a common experience in the workplace (Robert & Harlan, 2006).

Marginalization occurs through exclusion, avoidance, stilted interactions, and staring. In general, employees with disabilities feel that they are outsiders. Even those reporting generally cordial or friendly relationships with coworkers typically reported difficulties with at least one or two colleagues, and inevitable instances of social isolation. Usually prolonged experiences of marginalization result in disabled workers abandoning attempts at becoming an integrated part of their workplace (Robert & Harlan, 2006).

Turning now to fictionalization, half of the PWD in Robert and Harlan’s (2006) study reported the experience of being assigned a fictional identity or false characterization by coworkers, or supervisors, or both. These characterizations are dissonant with their own identity, their own view of themselves. Fictionalization is the characterization of a person based on little personal knowledge or familiarity with that individual (Robert & Harlan, 2006).
A fictionalized status goes beyond reflected appraisal in impact because it tends to create a generally accepted, stigmatized master status for the person with a disability, which is then held by coworkers, supervisors, and decision-makers with power over the workplace. Through imputation of this master status to a disabled person, discriminatory behaviors are justified (Robert & Harlan, 2006). A cycle of discrimination develops when the negative, stigmatizing impacts of being disabled in the workplace pairs with fictionalization. People with disabilities come to expect fictionalization as part of the reality of work (Robert & Harlan, 2006).

Two distinct fictionalizations emerged through participant interviews: the incompetent and the helpless (Robert & Harlan, 2006). The most common and most damaging is the incompetent, in which it is assumed that a disabled person cannot perform the same or similar job as a nondisabled individual at the same level. Expectations are then lowered, setting the stage for differential treatment. Fictionalization of incompetence is particularly powerful when a disabled person is in a customized, noncompetitive job. That is, a job that was tailor-made to fit their capabilities. People with disabilities in customized jobs often become the target of resentment and hatred by their coworkers as they are viewed as receiving special treatment, a free ride, or an easier road (Robert & Harlan, 2006). People with rare, or less understood disabilities, are more likely to be considered as incompetent. Robert and Harlan listed blindness as one of these rare and less understood disabilities along with cerebral palsy, epilepsy, and learning disabilities.

Another fictionalization assumption is that disability of any kind goes hand in hand with diminished cognitive capabilities. That is, a physical disability such as blindness means that the blind person also has a cognitive disability. If there is something wrong with your body, then there is something wrong with your mind (Robert & Harlan, 2006).
The second fictionalization, the helpless, leads to the assumption that the disabled person needs help and parental style oversight: the disabled person needs nurturing or guidance that a nondisabled worker would not need. People with disabilities experience this fictionalization with feelings that they are considered inferior, childlike, and unqualified to make independent decisions, or that they are lacking in judgment or reasoning power. People with disabilities often experience mothering behaviors by colleagues in the workplace. In the context of a fictionalization of helplessness, acts that might be considered as caring or considerate by mainstream people are often seen by stigmatized disabled people as discriminatory and stigmatizing (Robert & Harlan, 2006).

Robert and Harlan (2006) theorize that the lack of disability consciousness on the part of nondisabled peers may lead PWD to interpret offers of help or caring with scorn, suspicion, or anger. Behaviors that often accompany the helplessness fictionalization include doing a disabled person’s work for them, correcting errors without their knowledge, and not allowing them to perform certain functions that are in their area of job responsibility. Projecting the identity of helplessness onto disabled people in the workplace is very common. This projection leads to a focus on what the person cannot do, rather than on what they can do (Robert & Harlan, 2006).

For PWD, the major areas of identity impacted are independence, work, appearance, and sexuality. All three of these areas are heavily influenced by the negative attitudes and reflected appraisals of others. Impacts are particularly significant when the reflected appraisals focus on differentiating characteristics between mainstream affiliated and marginalized people. The cultural myth of dependency of disabled people and the assumed need for care that goes with it are elements of the oppression of PWD in the workplace (Robert & Harlan, 2006).
Meanwhile, harassment, both subtle and blatant, is a common experience for disabled workers. The mechanisms of harassment include joking, kidding, needling, name-calling, mimicry, innuendo, rumor spreading, rudeness, sabotage, inappropriate questions, and insensitive remarks. Most PWD surveyed by Robert and Harlan (2006) felt that their work environment was hostile in some way and reported experiencing harassment.

Even the mildest forms of harassment, joking for instance, send a signal that nondisabled coworkers are not interested in forming a meaningful peer-level relationship. Along these lines, nondisabled employees frequently ask disabled colleagues personal questions that would be considered highly inappropriate if experienced by a mainstream individual (Robert & Harlan, 2006). When a person requests accommodations and receives them, harassing behavior is often sparked. Sometimes this is because a colleague is asked to provide an accommodation for a disabled colleague that should be provided by the organization in a more thoughtful, comprehensive way. In one instance, instead of installing automated door opening technology, a nondisabled person was assigned to open the door to a work area when a colleague in a wheelchair needed to enter or exit.

Harassment is an interpersonal mechanism of discrimination that requires PWD to develop resistance and accommodation strategies (Robert & Harlan, 2006). These interpersonal mechanisms of discrimination are permitted to occur and are sustained through the organizational context. The organizational mechanisms supporting and complementing the interpersonal ones are tolerance and encouragement (Robert & Harlan, 2006). Tolerance and encouragement of discriminatory behaviors manifests in the rules, policies, procedures, practices, decisions, and reward and resource allocation systems that are parts of the structure of large bureaucratic organizations. Individual acts of discrimination therefore become established
patterns of discrimination that lead to job segregation, low promotion rates, denial of reasonable accommodations, and hostile work environments for employees with disabilities (Robert & Harlan, 2006).

Looking at particular types of organizations, one sees that governmental agencies and nonprofits were early adopters of policies protecting the rights of disabled employees; however, merely adopting a policy does not mean discriminatory acts are not occurring. In fact, a strongly stated anti-discrimination policy can lead to legitimization of discriminatory acts as members of an organization point to the formal policy while not living up to it (Robert & Harlan, 2006). Discrimination is most prevalent in technically complex and bureaucratic organizations where oversight of legal mandates such as the ADA is not usually a priority (Robert & Harlan, 2006).

Organizational neutrality where disability employment is concerned does not exist. Organizations either tolerate or discourage discrimination. The interpersonal mechanisms of discrimination, if supported by organizational tolerance and encouragement, become routine patterns. In a Cornell study by Bruyere (2003), 22% of private employers said that attitudes and stereotypes were barriers to inclusion of PWD in the workplace, 32% said that changing supervisor and coworker attitudes was difficult, while 17% said that creating more flexible work hours and changing performance management systems was difficult. This means that employers see barriers in the form of attitudes as more difficult to change than processes. These percentages are most likely understated because a social desirability bias in surveys means people are reluctant to admit prejudices (Schur et al., 2005).

Workplace relationships are very important to the success of disabled people in the workplace. Of paramount importance are relationships with immediate supervisors and coworkers. Having a boss with a good understanding of a person’s disability creates a culture of
trust and acceptance rather than discomfort and distance. At the same time, being in a workplace with someone else living with the same disability helps disabled people feel comfortable and accepted. Mentoring of managers with little experience with disabled people by those who do have experience would be fruitful. Also, putting career development processes in place for current employees with disabilities would send positive, reinforcing messages both internally and externally (Hernandez et al., 2008).

There are three strategies that can be used to eliminate socially constructed disability in the workplace. The first is to incrementally or systematically modify the human-created environment in which people seek and do work. Secondly, directly ameliorate the impacts of impairment on the individual through accommodations such as assistive technology. Thirdly, simultaneously employ the first two strategies in order to achieve a better person and environment fit (Ward et al., 2009).

**Developing a Disability Inclusion Culture**

An ideal inclusive culture has tolerance for ambiguity, acceptance of a wide range of work styles and behaviors and encourages diversity in thoughts, practices, and actions. The challenge in changing culture lies in altering the informal set of shared mental models, rather than the formal set of beliefs and values espoused by management (Holvino, Ferdman, & Merrill-Sands, 2004).

**What Does an Inclusive Culture Look Like?**

The people working in an organization which is inclusive link member contributions to organizational operations at every level (Holvino et al., 2004; Thomas & Ely, 1996, 2001). Inclusive organizations operate in an environment of learning with free exchange of ideas and a spirit of flexibility, promote an open environment, inviting and recognizing creativity and
innovation (Schur et al., 2005). They can admit weaknesses and mistakes, enjoy heterogeneity at all levels, and empower each individual. Equal opportunity is available for every member and differences, and the value of those differences, are recognized (Holvido et al., 2004).

Differences within an inclusive organization are internalized, leading to learning and growth from them (Holvido et al., 2004). The diversity of members shapes strategy, activities, business systems, core values, and cultural norms of success. The ultimate goal of an inclusive organization is to have diversity become part of the fabric of the organization, to be its culture, so that working toward inclusion is connected directly to the work of the organization and its members. At top management, there would be visible support of diversity, including use of rewards systems to reinforce inclusion of PWD. Diversity is the work of everyone in an inclusive organization, not just managers and leaders (Davidson, 2011; Schur, Kursez, & Blanck, 2005). Ideally, disability issues would be integrated into the workplace along with consideration of all of the other characteristics that make each employee unique (Gewurtza & Kirsha, 2009).

Flexibility and autonomy within job requirements leads to greater success for PWD. This type of culture allows people to modify their jobs as needed, and also to obtain necessary accommodations. This would benefit all employees, whether or not impaired. When flexibility is part of the workplace culture, accommodations happen more naturally and informally. If, on the other hand, flexibility and modified duties run counter to an organization’s culture, PWD will have difficulties obtaining the accommodations that they need (Gewurtza & Kirsha, 2009). Multiple studies show that workplaces that are sensitive to differences and needs of each employee are better able to integrate PWD. Additionally, employers themselves say that disability champions within organizations are essential for successful inclusion of disabled people in the workplace (Gewurtza & Kirsha, 2009).
Employers participating in a focus group identified specific benefits to hiring PWD. These benefits include low absenteeism, long tenure, reliability, and hard work. Inclusion of PWD in the workplace helped coworkers develop positive attitudes toward diverse groups, as well as sending inclusive and community-minded messages to customers (Hernandez et al., 2008).

In their survey of 132 HR staff and line managers, Fong et al. (2010) found that the integration environment was directly associated with companies’ disability hiring. The level of proactive behavior in hiring disabled people depended upon the organization’s overall culture of diversity, and the explicit inclusion of PWD in official diversity efforts. In addition to inclusion of PWD, the other most significant factor in successful disability hiring is an organization’s knowledge of the ADA. I am inferring that this means a company whose environment is aligned in a manner that is supportive of the intent and tenets of the ADA.

**How to Achieve an Ideal Inclusive Culture**

A diversity effort can start at any level of an organization, but engagement from top management is necessary for success. An organization must achieve both conceptual and behavioral changes at all levels. Disability employment should be incorporated into policies, programs, and practices (Fong et al., 2001). If isolated interventions are implemented in a fragmented effort, moves toward a diverse, inclusive culture will not be successful (Katz & Miller, 2010). Successful inclusion environments for PWD, such as The Lighthouse for the Blind, in Seattle, may best be created in settings outside of the mainstream (Hall & Wilton, 2011).

When top management learns and understands the positive linkage between hiring PWD and their business objectives, more successful inclusive cultures will develop (Lengnick-Hall,
Gaunt, & Kulkami, 2008). At present, efforts focused on managing diversity commonly addresses identity groups based on race, age, or gender. Change programs which are founded on discovery of which types of diversity identities are most important in the situation have a better chance of success (Spataro, 2005). An organization can examine its shared cultural values to identify what differences are consequential among coworkers for that particular organization, then better understand whether or not drawing attention to a disability will have negative or positive impacts for the person with the disability (Spataro, 2005).

The transformation needs to occur at three levels during conceptualization and actualization: structural, cultural, and behavioral. These levels are synergistic and build upon one another. The challenge of the change effort is to have the right mix of interventions across these levels in order to maximize effectiveness of the effort (Fong et al., 2001). Most organizations focus at the structural level to the exclusion of the other two, making changes to formal systems such as policies regarding recruitment, advancement, and retention. Structural changes alone, like instituting rigid hiring quotas, can hurt diversity efforts (Fong et al., 2001).

Several major approaches to organizational change exist: organizational development, collaborative inquiry, leveraging difference, and the learning and effectiveness paradigm.

**Organizational development.** This mode of change, usually driven by top management, is organization-wide, planned, and long-term. The model developed by Holvino et al. (2004), Multicultural Organizational Development is an example. Success, however, is difficult to attain if the organization is unable to revise the process as it learns from implementation of interventions. This model is based on cultural change which alters basic beliefs and assumptions in an organization’s identity. Using this model, an organization can progress through six stages from monoculture to multicultural:
Exclusionary stage: The active and exclusive bases for its culture are values and norms of one group.

Passive club: The culture is informally based on values and norms of one group, but admits others who are similar.

Positive action stage: Although the organization actively tries to bring in people with differences, the informal systems of privilege of the dominant group make it difficult for people with differences to fully contribute.

Redefining stage: The organization continues to bring in people with differences, and tries to remove the barriers to full inclusion.

Inclusive and diverse stage: The organization seeks out and values all differences, putting systems and supports in place so members of every group can contribute and succeed.

Pluralism: Formal and informal integration exists with absence of prejudice and discrimination, low levels of intergroup conflict, and similar levels of identification from all groups. This inclusion would include access to information, participation in work groups, and influence on decisions (Holvino et al., 2004).

Collaborative inquiry. The collaborative inquiry (CI) process is more fluid. There are three different ways to approach CI: action research, appreciative inquiry, and future search conferences. In CI, an organization approaches the diversity situation without preconceived models, and then generates new strategies and frameworks as needed (Holvino et al., 2004). Because CI is conducted in intentional cycles of inquiry, analysis, and implementation, it is more likely that change will be viewed as a continual, never-ending process, and part of the organizational culture. In this way, organizational CI brings the expertise, experience, and
consideration of both internal and external stakeholders into the process, engaging the whole system. This generates energy and commitment, develops internal change agents, and encourages organizational dialogues that can lead to identification and examination of the deep cultural norms and how those norms relate to diversity efforts (Holvino et al., 2004). CI usually meets with less resistance because it is not top down, and directly involves those who will be impacted by changes.

CI does have its limitations. It may be difficult to obtain support from top leadership for the process because outcomes are not clearly defined at the outset. The participatory nature of the process may generate an unwieldy number of agenda items and create unrealistic expectations about the speed and magnitude of the change. CI is an unbounded process, and thus requires constant negotiations among participants. Many organizations do not have the capacity to manage these negotiations successfully. If using outside consultants, it is often difficult to find a resource that has or can develop the deep understanding of the organizational culture that is required for success (Holvino et al., 2004).

CI approaches are also difficult for organizations where the majority of colleagues are not attuned to any need for changes for small groups of people with diverse identities. The CI approach can also be frustrating for minorities because of its relentless focus on the positive, which may silence needed story telling about the past and present experiences of minority employees (Holvino et al., 2004).

The methodology for achieving higher performance through an inclusion and leveraging diversity breakthrough is based on the premise that all people are valuable and can add value to the organization (Katz & Miller, 2010). Katz and Miller see the most successful change initiatives occurring when participants in the change identify the organization’s need for new
practices, behaviors, and competencies. Participants then design strategies to address the needs they have identified. The return on investment from this participant-driven breakthrough comes from creating more value by drawing upon a broader spectrum of talent, and delivering more value to a broader spectrum of customers (Katz & Miller, 2010).

**Leveraging differences.** This approach, based on Davidson’s (2011) framework, gauges inclusion by the degree to which members feel they are part of critical processes. Katz and Miller (2010) suggest four key elements of a successful change initiative:

1. **Leverage:** find the most effective leverage points to focus on, building on strengths rather than attacking resistance.
2. **Linkage:** link all of the efforts together so the sum can be greater than its parts; avoid isolated, duplicated, or counterproductive activities.
3. **Leadership:** develop leadership at all levels; equip leaders with the knowledge and skills they need to be effective.
4. **Learning:** change is a process of continuous learning, making mistakes is part of the process.

Additionally, there are four phases to a successful change strategy: building a platform of change, creating momentum, making the breakthrough a way of life, and leveraging learning to challenge the new status quo. These phases are not linear or sequential. The phases develop simultaneously, reinforcing one another and creating synergy (Katz & Miller, 2010).

Whatever method of changing to an inclusive culture is used, the starting point is a cultural audit which identifies the underlying organizational practices and beliefs, and analyzes the impact. Following this, Holvino et al. (2004) suggested the introduction of small experiments designed to change everyday behaviors identified as micro-inequities. The areas where these
experiments may occur are personal involvement of top leadership, recruitment of diverse staff at all levels, internal advocacy groups, collection and use of statistics, inclusion of diversity behaviors in performance reviews and promotion decisions, inclusion of diversity in leadership development and succession planning, diversity training, support networks and internal employee resource groups, work-family policies, and career development and advancement (Holvino et al., 2004, citing Morrison, 1992).

The leveraging difference model is particularly applicable to my research because it explicitly focuses on corporate employment and how to transform corporate cultures. The purpose of the transformation described in the model is to go beyond diversity and inclusion to dynamics wherein employers are intentionally creating collaborative environments. The leveraging difference framework dovetails perfectly with literature describing the possible efficacy of a transition from supply-side vocational rehabilitation models to demand-side models. The framework also supports, and yet builds upon, the social constructivist and identity formation models of disability. The leveraging difference framework provides a roadmap of how a corporation can put theory into practice, benefiting the organization as a whole and actually privileging previously marginalized employee communities.

**The learning and effectiveness paradigm.** When an organization’s leaders adopt a broader understanding of diversity, they become aware of the varied perspectives and approaches PWD bring to the organization’s work. The connection between diversity and the way work is approached is called the learning and effectiveness paradigm (Thomas & Ely, 1996, 2001).

For a learning and effectiveness approach to be successful, eight preconditions, in whole or large part, need to be present:
(1) Leadership must understand that a diverse workforce will present different perspectives and approaches, and they must truly value variety of opinion and insights.

(2) Leaders must recognize the learning opportunities, and the challenges, that these expressions of different perspectives bring to an organization.

(3) The organizational culture must demand high performance from all members.

(4) The organizational culture must drive personal development.

(5) The culture must support openness.

(6) The culture must lead to employees feeling valued.

(7) The organization’s mission must be widely understood and be well articulated.


In organizations where a significant number of these conditions exist, leaders, managers, and in their turn employees, take four kinds of actions in order to instill the new learning and effectiveness paradigm:

(1) They make the mental connection between identity group differences and the way work gets done.

(2) They create a safe space for open discussion.

(3) They actively work against manifestations of dominance and subordination in their organization.

(4) They insure that trust within their organization remains intact.

The learning and effectiveness paradigm is still in an emerging stage in the small number of organizations that are seeking to develop it. A shift to this paradigm requires a high level
commitment to learning: learning about the environment, the structure and the functions of an organization. Leadership must also place higher weight on generating change than preserving what is familiar (Thomas & Ely, 1996, 2001).

Whatever approach is used to transform to an inclusive culture, there are 13 tactics that if applied in concert can create better chances of a successful process:

(1) Define diversity in dimensions beyond race and gender.
(2) Develop a clear vision and plan, provide the resources needed, and communicate it widely.
(3) Align diversity initiatives to the core work and strategies of the organization.
(4) Engage many people, and instill a broad sense of ownership.
(5) Clearly identify leaders of the initiative and obtain real support from top management.
(6) Pay attention to internal and external factors that may support or hinder efforts through ongoing environmental scanning.
(7) Build strategies based on solid analysis of real diversity issues in the organization.
(8) Provide freedom to experiment.
(9) Convey importance of engaging in a systemic and dynamic process rather than a quick fix.
(10) Encourage an open climate that allows for expression.
(11) Assign accountability at all levels.
(12) Insure competence of consultants and other resources.
(13) Recognize and celebrate small wins (Holvino et al., 2004).
Adopting any transformational approach toward an inclusive, effective organizational culture requires catalysts and motivators for change. One catalyst is organizational virtue (Barclay et al., 2012).

**Virtue as a Catalyst for Change**

Virtue in organizations relates to each individual, while virtue through organizations relates to organizational processes and culture. Organizational virtue helps create a culture of meaning, resilience, and harmony of relationships. Current research on virtue theory links virtuous behavior, organizational leadership, and organizational performance (Barclay et al., 2012).

Researchers are exploring the role that virtue plays in elements of performance, innovation, employee turnover, quality, and profitability. Virtue, also called ethics, provides a learning process through which an individual is motivated to act with the social community (Barclay et al., 2012). This means that the learning organization culture, which is necessary for the transformational change that would lead to an inclusive environment, can be based on principles higher and more dynamic than business performance. However, business performance may be held within the virtue framework. Virtues include integrity, courage, and compassion. Like the concept of inclusiveness, an organization’s culture and processes can promote or hinder virtue (Barclay et al., 2012).

Virtue theorists claim there are personal characteristics that transcend situations. Virtue also helps organizations and individuals establish a good fit with one another. A virtue framework can guide an organization in the types of people it seeks to bring in, and can guide individuals in choosing which organizations they would care to join. Both organizations and individuals seek compatible values. In this regard, who ends up in which organization is due at
least in part because of the search for compatible values, virtues, and ethics. Research can shed light on inclusion of PWD in the workplace (Barclay et al., 2012).

One study cited by Barclay et al. (2012) established a five-factor scale for the analysis of virtue in organizations based on the structures of forgiveness, trust, integrity, optimism, and compassion. Using this scale, researchers found that organizational virtuousness relates directly to quality, employee retention, innovation, and customer satisfaction (Barclay et al., 2012). Other researchers found that key elements of organizational virtue relate to human impact, moral goodness, and social betterment. The virtue-performance relationship is based on virtue’s ability to amplify and buffer. Amplification means that virtuous acts generate more virtuous acts. Buffering means that virtue protects an organization from the negative impacts of trauma (Barclay et al., 2012).

Adding a virtue component to transformational change efforts can inspire individuals and their organization to focus beyond shareholder value to performance that benefits both employer and employees in ways other than those related to the bottom line. This means that virtue can have a place in strategic management in which organizations proactively plan activities to meet goals and objectives. Organizations can align virtuousness with practices to their advantage, improving compliance with external requirements, and becoming known among all stakeholders for excellence (Barclay et al., 2012).

Organizations can use virtue and ethics to determine what kind of entity they want to be. By adopting a future focus, organizations afford themselves the opportunity to align virtuousness with strategy (Barclay et al., 2012). A virtue-based approach to inclusion of PWD is based on two questions: What kind of organization do we want to be? How do we attract and retain people who will support this vision? Barclay et al. (2012) cite the 1996 Stone and Colella model which
provides three factors to explore treatment of PWD in organizations: (a) personal traits of the employees with disabilities and those without; (b) environmental factors such as legislation; and (c) organizational factors such as reward systems, job functions, and policies. Using this model, organizations can apply virtue theory to the task of changing beliefs about and behaviors toward PWD (Barclay et al., 2012).

An organization that promotes and practices virtue will have moved beyond dynamics such as the stigmatization of disabled employees, to an inclusive environment and culture embracing all people, including those with disabilities. Current research, however, has not included PWD in the study of virtue theory. Theorists agree that virtue comes from higher order thinking, such as an individual’s consideration of their personal values regardless of situation, or an organization’s focus on a higher order goal as core to its overall value on par with shareholder value. Echoing findings cited elsewhere in this dissertation concerning corporate culture’s impact on inclusion, we see that an organization’s structure is not inherently virtuous or unvirtuous. Even so, an organization’s structure can support virtuousness, for example, in the case of work groups with autonomy and participatory decision-making (Barclay et al., 2012).

Organizations which practice social responsibility just to improve their image, and therefore improve bottom-line results, are not practicing virtue. A virtuous organization would engage instead in socially responsible practices as a core facet of their mission. A virtuous organization would have a culture supportive of inclusion of PWD in meaningful work (Barclay et al., 2012). In a virtuous organization, core competencies in the form of ethics, the common good in the form of mission, and the environment in the form of the dynamic economy are all linked and interrelated. Virtue theory allows for sensitivity and appreciation of circumstances, the seizing of opportunities that are not allowed for in a traditional bottom-line model. Virtuous
behavior recognizes other people’s rights. Such an organization would be more inclusive of PWD. In a reinforcing loop, inclusion of more PWD would allow more connections within the organization to virtuous behaviors, and alignment of strategy and practices with virtues. A virtuous environment increases social capital, which leads to the sharing of more and better information, stronger relationships, and a more efficient exchange of valued resources within the organization (Barclay et al., 2012).

Using a value construct, an organization would focus discussion of disability inclusion around proactively finding solutions by employing social capital to create opportunities for disabled people to be successful in the workplace. This is counter to the traditional way of viewing PWD in terms of costs of accommodations, isolation, or inequitable treatment. A virtuous organization bases its culture on integrity, ethics, and principles. If individuals in an organization buy into the basic virtue tenets they are more likely to accept and support employment of PWD rather than to stigmatize them. Virtuous organizations foster trust and the ability of people to work together to make sense of situations. People in a virtuous organization would not assume that a person with a disability is incompetent, but would trust their organization’s selection processes, and would treat the disabled person with compassion as a valued contributor (Barclay et al., 2012).

Making accommodations in earlier models resulted in expensive, isolating, and unattractive modifications to the workplace. Virtue theory on the other hand is consistent with universal design, and vice versa, in addition to support from other factors, such as organizational effectiveness and business success approaches. Universal design breaks down physical and social barriers between PWD and the nondisabled (Barclay et al., 2012).
Barriers like inaccessible employment application processes would be eliminated in a virtuous organization because common HR practices would be changed under a framework of universal design. Organizations using a virtue theory framework would make sure their selection processes were discrimination free in a manner that has the potential to positively influence hiring decisions under the discrimination and fairness paradigm applicable to all organizations. At the same time, an organization using a virtue theory framework would focus on effectively evaluating employee performance, and exploring if the person needed additional accommodations or training to address any performance issues. This is opposed to a traditional model where PWD are often seen as part of an out-group, with performance problems attributed to their disabilities.

**Promising Practices**

Legal compliance is a motivator for change for a few large corporations. At a minimum, new requirements will require that the many large firms who are federal contractors must conduct more active recruitment and demonstrate increases in hiring of the disabled.

When Katherine McCary (2005) wrote the article, “The Disability Twist in Diversity: Best Practices for Integrating,” she was Vice President at SunTrust Bank and President of the U.S. Business Leadership network (USBLN). She cited a few research studies to set a framework for her article, pointing out that PWD represent a large untapped market and labor pool. She then pointed out what she identified as best practices exhibited by several USBLN member organizations. As can be seen in the summary below, these practices are for the most part uncoordinated, fragmentary initiatives rather than part of a large-scale transformational change effort.
The first organization McCary referenced was her own: SunTrust Banks, Inc. McCary briefly described a SunTrust program called Put Ability to Work that recruits PWD into temporary positions with the bank. The program has led to permanent employment for “many of these individuals” (McCary, 2005, p. 5). Building upon success of this program, the bank subsequently launched an effort called the Accessing Community Talent program. The program seeks to educate managers about marketing opportunities for customers with disabilities. The program also created a central accommodations fund for employees and customers.

SunTrust’s Disability Resource Center provides information to SunTrust personnel about: recruiting and interviewing PWD, disability etiquette, interacting with disabled customers, disability resources, and accommodations. Sun Trust also supports, in some fashion, several national disability employment initiatives.

Motorola is the lead organization in the Arizona Business Leadership network, the state chapter of USBLN (McCary, 2005). With Motorola Foundation funding, the ASBLN has hosted educational forums on disability awareness, assistive technology, returning to work with a disability, and specific disability group issues. A Motorola representative was a member of the board of directors of AFB and chaired an employment committee.

I served on the AFB program committee with the Motorola representative, and can report firsthand that AFB employment initiatives were very limited in scope and produced few tangible outcomes. The AFB has closed the San Francisco employment center since this article was written. Again, this underlines my impression that the employment efforts cited in this article are scattershot, limited, and not transformational in nature.

Motorola is a sponsor of an organization called Career Opportunities for Students with Disabilities and their annual conference. I have interacted with this organization on several
occasions, and can verify that they help facilitate internships for disabled students in a variety of settings.

McCary then discussed a small, nonprofit organization in Oklahoma, Oklahoma One-Call, which successfully employed 10 blind people in a contact center. Although this is the only organization mentioned in the article specifically focused on blind employment, my focus is on large, for-profit companies, and so the Oklahoma One-Call case is not particularly relevant to my research. Other organizations presented in the article, such as Cincinnati Children’s Hospital, developed successful programs primarily focused on people with developmental disabilities.

The profiled organization coming closest to a comprehensive disability inclusion effort is Booz Allen Hamilton. Diversity is explicitly stated as one of the company’s core values, and is incorporated into performance reviews, career planning, training and development, and rewards programs. Diversity competencies have been designed to help the organization leverage cultural differences and multiple perspectives. People with disabilities have a strong presence throughout the company’s diverse population.

An employee-based Disability Forum gives PWD a platform to provide education and awareness opportunities, to help develop policy, and assist the firm in making changes increasing accessibility. In 2001, Booz Allen Hamilton created the Emerging Leaders Program, offering paid summer internships to students with disabilities, providing work experience and leadership development opportunities. Booz Allen partners with other businesses nationwide to offer employment opportunities to Emerging Leaders participants. Here McCrary mentioned that SunTrust is one of these corporate partners. The company goes beyond internal change efforts. As part of their practice, Booz Allen incorporates the leveraging of disability employment and marketing opportunities in work with their consulting clients.
McCrary ended her article by giving some advice on how an organization might get started in disability employment. She recommended: education and awareness to help overcome misconceptions about employees with disabilities; framing disability as part of diversity in a clear business case; targeting specific high turnover or hard to fill positions; partnering with community organizations, including VR, to recruit qualified applicants; partnering with staffing firms such as Manpower Inc.; and, finally, joining a local chapter of the USBLN.

The most prominent example of intentional disability employment inclusion comes from Walgreens. The company opened a distribution center in Anderson, South Carolina in 2007, with a plan to employ 255 PWD fully 30% of the center’s 850 staff.

The company focused on employing and supporting young disabled people with cognitive impairments such as attention deficit disorder, and learning disabilities. Walgreens partnered with various rehabilitation agencies including the South Carolina Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, the South Carolina Commission for the Blind and the Veterans Administration. Walgreens and their partners concentrated efforts on employing youth who were involved in the school to work transition process. The internal Walgreens champion for this effort was Randy Lewis, Vice President of distribution and logistics, who has an autistic son. “The disabled don’t walk through our doors. They’re invisible to most employers,” Lewis said. “A lot of them have given up trying to get a job because they don’t have access” (as cited in Emmett, 2008, p. 2).

Walgreens designed their distribution center with disability inclusion in mind, incorporating equipment designed specifically to make jobs more accessible to PWD. According to Lewis, “The logical conclusion is that automation will enable a group of people who might not otherwise have an opportunity to work” (as cited in Emmett, 2008, p. 4).
Walgreens provided customized training, teaching their disabled employees to check in merchandise, unpack and categorize items, and pick orders for delivery to a specific store. Walgreens has since expanded on this initial effort to employ people with significant disabilities in many of their retail stores. Walgreens’ intentional inclusion of PWD in development of their Anderson distribution center serves as a platform for systemic change in industry. With the plant designed from the beginning with accommodations in place, and metrics defined and monitored to assess impacts of disability inclusion, this project gave both Walgreens management and leaders at other companies tangible evidence of the positive impacts of inclusion on business results.

**Summary of Chapter**

In this literature review, I have examined a set of theories with which to formulate my dissertation research questions and guide the direction of my research on the conditions of blind employment in the United States and how the employer and corporate environment might best undergo change, reviewing the realities of blind employment since the 1990s, hiring practices, definitions and perceptions of disability and the theories that support them across several disciplines. I then considered the potential for new demand-side employment, examining the factors that pose barriers for change and the elements that might function as catalysts for change. In all of these discussions I took care to consider the range of stakeholders: employers, non-disabled employees, and disabled employees, as well as the context and the culture in which the phenomenon I propose to examine are situated. I then considered what paths might be taken to achieve more inclusive hiring practices with the outcome being more established and widespread diversity in the workplace, concluding in particular that virtue theory might be a particularly promising area to explore in developing my dissertation research.
I presented a review of research on promising practices, and, finally, concluded with a brief reflection on my thinking about blind employment, which thus far has more questions than answers. But these questions are in a higher, more strategic sphere than the questions I started out with. All of the research presented here has been used to develop my research questions in general, and outline my interview protocols and questions in particular. In the following chapter I present my methodology in detail.
Chapter III: Methodology

My choice of methodology presented in this chapter was based on what I considered the best way to answer my primary research questions:

RQ 1: How do blind individuals find successful and fulfilling employment in large U.S. corporations?

RQ 2: Why and how do U.S. corporate employers facilitate workplace conditions that make it possible for blind individuals to enjoy successful and fulfilling employment?

When seeking answers to these primary questions, I intended to learn answers to concrete questions like:

(1) Who and what do blind participants identify as the key people, factors, and experiences that have been part of their careers and successful employment?

(2) What are the potential benefits these participants believe they bring to corporations who make hiring and supporting blind employees possible?

(3) What are the most critical factors that make successful corporate employment possible for members of the blind community?

These questions arose from the purpose of my research—to increase understanding about the issues surrounding successful employment of blind people in large U.S. corporations.

This chapter begins with a rationale for my research method, which used phenomenology of a specific social identity group. In light of my research questions, I contrasted quantitative and qualitative methodology, determining the strengths and weaknesses of both, and then present my reasons for having chosen phenomenology as the most appropriate qualitative research method for investigating my research questions.
My research design is presented next, discussing my primary and secondary research questions, the context for my study, and how my pilot study factored into the research design. I then discuss my data collection procedures, including what type of data collection instrument was used, my timeline, and how I selected and recruited participants. I describe how my past and present roles and relationships with the participants may have affected the data collection, and what I did to protect these individuals from harm from their participation.

Next, I discuss my process of analysis of the interview transcriptions, followed by ethical considerations. The chapter ends with a discussion of the credibility and trustworthiness measures I used in this study.

**Rationale for a Qualitative Methodology**

A preponderance of studies concerning employment of the disabled, including the blind, has relied on quantitative research, correlating various databases and drawing broad conclusions about predictive success factors Crudden, Sansing, & Butler (2005). I find myself excited and inspired when I come across the rare qualitative or mixed-methods article that relates the actual words of blind individuals.

In my exploration of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies I found both are systematic ways of investigating phenomena. Throughout my careers, both in banking and public finance and in the nonprofit sector, I have had regular exposure to the results of quantitative research. I am familiar with the basic forms in which this research is reported and some of the basic methods of data collection and analysis. At the same time, in my personal life, I am drawn to examinations of the human condition through fiction, poetry, music, and art. I thus felt an immediate affinity for the qualitative research methods I was increasingly exposed to as an Antioch PhD student. In the context of my study of mixed-methods research, I skimmed through
the statistical analysis, looking for the small snippets of actual language from participants’
answers to open-ended questions, quotes from focus group participants, and excerpts from
transcribed interviews. This direct input from individuals into the research tends to resonate more
deeply with me than the supporting data. The best way for me to acquire in-depth information
from my participants regarding their experience as successfully employed blind adults was
qualitative inquiry. Qualitative research provides, instead of data presented as hard facts, thick,
rich, nuanced, at times even ambivalent and multi-interpretable descriptions.

In my interviews of employed blind individuals, I hoped to capture some of the qualities I
found compelling in another context, namely as represented by Csordas, Dole, Tran, Strickland,
and Storck (2010) in their ethnographic interviews of Navajo people regarding illness.

The contrasts they made between Navajo and Anglo culture presented dynamics which
may be similar to blind and sighted cultures. My determination that qualitative research was
most suitable for pursuing my research interests was solidified in part by the results of this
research study.

Harlan and Robert’s (1998) qualitative study of disabled employees of the Arizona state
government showed how a qualitative methodology is particularly valuable for generating
knowledge from a marginalized group. Rubin and Rubin (2012) discussed how qualitative
research allows one to seek explanations for puzzling situations, such as the unacceptably low
30% workforce participation rate for blind adults in America.

Some qualitative researchers may reject positivism, where anything such as introspection
or emotions are irrelevant because of being immeasurable. Instead they assert the superiority of
constructivism, idealism, relativism, humanism, and hermeneutics. They posit that multiple
constructed realities exist, and that generalizations that are not tied to a specific context or time
are not only impossible, but are undesirable as well (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This is in part because research is integrally tied to values. Without considering the variations of the research context with respect to such factors as values, one cannot achieve a clear understanding of the causes and effects influencing the study’s subject matter. Furthermore, proponents of qualitative methodologies contend that explanations of reality are best derived by moving from the specific to the general (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

This means that plausible explanations of phenomena are arrived at through induction. Induction is particularly useful in exploratory research, where little knowledge is available as yet about the research phenomenon. This is certainly the case with respect to understanding the factors that can make the workplace a positive environment for visually challenged workers and professionals. Knowledge gained by examining particular phenomena, when accumulated, can be applied to a larger set of phenomena with some confidence (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The observer involved in these inductive processes cannot be separated from the observed because the subjective observer is the definer of the particular constructed reality in which they are operating. In keeping with the paradigm of multiple constructed realities, researchers primarily employing qualitative methods use rich, thick descriptive language in attempting to articulate their worldview (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Johnson and Onwuegbuzie pointed out a number of characteristics that describe traditional qualitative research, including induction, discovery, exploration, generating theory or hypothesis, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection, and qualitative analysis. Additionally, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) stressed that the purpose of qualitative research is to reach understanding, not to provide explanations. Most importantly, the process of reaching understanding results in the construction of meaning (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).
Qualitative research is a reciprocally complex approach to understanding multifaceted situations. This methodology allows the use of a wide range of creative research methods to deeply investigate the contexts surrounding complex human activities. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) cited studies seeking to understand the very complex processes of teaching and learning as an example of the particular merits of the scope and approach of qualitative research. In these interactions the teacher is also learning throughout the process, while the learner is teaching the instructor as well. There exists complex give and take, changing dynamics, growth and change for both the nominal teacher and learner.

In describing the orientation of qualitative researchers toward their participants Westmarland (2001) pointed out that their concerns were more focused on establishing validity rather than objectivity or reliability. Qualitative researchers are more interested in truth as revealed through in-person interviews that allow for emotional closeness and deeper feelings between the observer and those observed than quantitative studies. Feminist researchers in particular conduct these interviews in ways that take care not to further reinforce the social marginalization of their participants (Westmarland, 2001).

**Strengths of Qualitative Research**

Looking at the strengths of qualitative research, one sees that research data is based on participants’ own categories of meaning (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Qualitative research is useful for studying limited cases in depth. It can describe very complex phenomena, and can provide important information on an individual case. A qualitative researcher can present a personal description and understanding of a specific social group from the viewpoint of an experienced insider. This method also allows the researcher to conduct comparisons and analysis between cases. In addition, using this paradigm enables the researcher to describe phenomena in
detail as situated in local context, and in turn describe that context as it relates to the phenomena (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Qualitative methodology allows for the study and understanding of the meaning of a dynamic process as it unfolds (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Qualitative research also permits the researcher to generate a tentative yet plausible explanatory theory through induction, and to examine how participants understand constructs such as theory. Data in qualitative research is collected in relatively more naturalistic settings than quantitative research. This allows the researcher to be responsive to specific situations and stakeholder needs (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) highlighted the importance of the qualitative researcher’s opportunities to be responsive to changes that occur during the study, and the ability to develop the focus of the study accordingly. Couching data in the words and categories of the research participants facilitates understanding of how and why phenomena occur. Finally, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) argued that qualitative research is a powerful way to determine the cause of a particular event, and that the researcher can use a particular case to vividly illustrate a phenomenon for their reader. Westmarland (2001) stated that this methodology is particularly useful in going deeper into a topic and therefore can be useful in affecting significant change.

**Limitations of Qualitative Research**

Most researchers are to some degree relativists interested in a variety of opinions. Qualitative researchers may face obstacles to performing solid research if this relativism is not strong, that is, if they place too much value on one perspective, their own (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Along these lines, researchers must be careful not to frame various
viewpoints as multiple realities. Johnson suggested that if qualitative researchers feel the need to use the term “reality,” they might consider using “subjective reality” for more clarity (p. 20). Additionally, Johnson argued that qualitative researchers sometimes fail to provide an adequate rationale for the way in which they interpret data.

The limitations of qualitative research in Johnson’s view included the fact that findings may not be generalizable, or may be specific to a very limited number of people. Qualitative research does not readily lead to predictions, and is less useful in testing theories or hypotheses. Qualitative research also generally requires more time for data collection and analysis than quantitative research, and typically carries less weight with institutional decision makers.

This being said, I enthusiastically embraced the processes of qualitative research. I hope this dissertation deepens understanding of the phenomena of employment of blind people, supplementing existing descriptive quantitative analysis with more nuanced comprehension of a very complex set of dynamics. Only with deeper understanding can we hope to effect systemic change in this area. My research can point the way for applied use of quantitative methods as part of a reinforcing loop of continued exploration.

**Choice of My Research Method**

In my pilot study I used a modified case study, with a focus on one individual’s experience of successful employment, but I wished to broaden this research and find possible common themes among the experiences of, and with, successful blind employees in large U.S. corporations, so a case study of a single individual would not have been suitable. My research was about a phenomenon, the successful and fulfilling employment of blind adults, beyond myself and my pilot study participant. For my pilot study, I narrowed my focus to a deeper exploration of ethnography and life history along the lines of the semi-structured interview
format of Csordas et al. (2010). A specific ethnographic method for gathering life history is narrative biography, a form of biographical research. This is a narrative developed over time, involving several participants, but only one narrator, the researcher. Because the narrator was present throughout the process, the research was also autobiographical.

The Csordas et al. (2010) study, conducted as part of the Navajo Healing Project, discussed the benefits of using a semi-structured interview, which can lead to understanding of how a particular person or problem relates to a broader set of social relationships. Semi-structured interviews are more reflexive in nature than a structured questionnaire style method, and thus allow participants to delve into their cultural situatedness and the plurality of cultures in which they exist (Csordas et al., 2010). The organization around significant life events can give a clearer sense of the duration of the experience. This type of interview positions the speaker within an unfolding story, a narrative framework in which symptoms are related to life events (Csordas et al., 2010). This study showed that a similar dynamic developed when interviewing blind people about their employment journey—themes emerged around many significant life events. My assumption was that a blind person on an employment journey will have experienced major life transitions in ways that differ from the mainstream population.

Csordas et al. (2010) also found that self or identity statements occur more frequently in a semi-structured interview than in a structured clinical interview. These identity statements in a semi-structured interview are used inductively by the researcher to build a complete picture of the person’s experience, and position the speaker in a broad field of linguistic and cultural elements. In contrast, the identity statements in a structured clinical interview tend to position the speaker dichotomously as a Navajo or an Anglo. These statements of identity, mostly made in the present tense, are part of multiple narratives and interviewee interpretations (Csordas et al.,
The semi-structured interview also gave participants a greater sense of catharsis and relief than the structured clinical interview, perhaps because the deeper experience between researcher and participant allowed for greater rapport. The depth and richness of meaning of semi-structured interviews in phenomenological research was suitable for answering my research purpose and research questions as the participants were more likely to describe a wider range of possible causes of their success in employment, not settling for one simplistic explanation. The multiplicity of sighted, blind, disabled, nondisabled, totally blind, and low vision cultures may be highly analogous to those experienced by Navajo participants of this study.

Narrative inquiry and analysis relates events and actions to one another by configuring them as plot elements in a story (Stroobants, 2005). The result of narrative analysis is a retrospective explanation linking past events together to account for how an outcome may have come about. The rationale for my choice of phenomenology as the framework for my research design, using narrative inquiry and analysis, lay in part to my interest in meanings more than facts regarding employment of the blind. In order to draw out meaning, the process of narrative inquiry and analysis links past events in a narrative format to provide possible explanations of outcomes.

**Research Design**

One of the first elements of my research design was to understand my role as researcher, and what strengths and limitations I brought to the research. Another of the first elements was refining my purpose, and my research questions, so that I ensured my methodology matched. I used an iterative data collection process of semi-structured interviews, analysis, and follow-up. Incorporating what I have learned from my pilot case study, the questions I asked reflected the
themes which emerged, and the themes pertinent to my primary and secondary research questions.

Then the actual processes of participant selection, interviews, and continual analysis followed, maintaining validity and confidence in the data collected, as well as being aware of bias possibilities and ethical considerations. As I analyzed the data, I developed a composite description of the emerging themes, and verified this with the participants.

**Role of the Researcher**

As research designer, collector of data, and analyst, I was the only person involved in the research. The research questions emerged as a result of my own experiences as an employer of the blind, and as a person who is blind.

**Pertinent experience.** As mentioned earlier, I lost my sight at age five. Because I have experienced job search, unsuccessful employment, and successful employment as a blind person, my own life experience has had a meaningful impact on my research.

Lighthouse for the Blind, the organization I led as CEO from January 2008 to May 2016, is a nonintegrated setting with a majority of employees being blind. This organization has been able to pioneer some of the world’s best accommodations for blind people in the area of precision machining work, and is a leader in emerging assistive technology and providing specialized training and supports for people who are blind.

While at the Lighthouse, I was a teacher and a learner, mentor and mentee, coach and recipient of coaching, and realized how much I have learned through these interactions. As I prepared for this research, those experiences helped me conceptualize how a semi-structured interview, as a guided conversation, could be enlightening for both interviewer and interviewee, giving both the opportunities to think about and articulate life experiences in new ways.
In May of 2016 I became President and Chief Executive Officer of AFB, a private nonprofit organization created in 1921 to use research and data in identifying and addressing the most pressing issues facing Americans who are blind.

The American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) has a long history in addressing blind employment. In 1938 AFB was instrumental in the passage of the Wagner-O’Day Act, and subsequently formed National Industries for the Blind. AFB has been a powerful influence on legislation and federal funding concerning employment of people who are blind.

As a result of the strategic planning process I led from June 2016 to June 2017, AFB has identified employment of blind adults as one of our three strategic focus areas. We are currently involved in several national level initiatives intended to increase employment opportunities for blind Americans.

In my role as CEO I have been in dialogue with many stakeholders interested in blind employment issues—employers, vocational rehabilitation leaders, federal agencies like Labor and Education, leaders of nonprofit agencies, and leaders in the organized blindness groups. I plan to expand these conversations.

**Relationship bias possibilities.** Some of the issues which arise in narrative inquiry are similar to those in oral history, wherein it is important to understand what group the interviewee represents and what group the interviewer is speaking from. McMahan and Rogers (1994; as cited in Smith, 1994) described the oral history interview as a situation of potential conflict in which both parties cooperate through conversations and social strategies to arrive at a place, where for the sake of the interview, they agree to disagree. The narrative interview is also an exercise in intersubjectivity, wherein both parties’ worldviews are altered through equal and active reciprocity. This equal and active process allows each party to the interview to appropriate
the other’s text. This concept was also very exciting, as it promised that my worldview would change through the research process, bringing me to a deeper understanding of dynamics of successful blind employment.

Every life story written about a person is also a self-statement by the author, a bit of autobiography of the researcher, a statement carrying an individual imprint. As L. M. Smith (1994) explains, “The personal enters into any intellectual construction” (p. 14). This presence of the researcher in the subject’s life story would include political and ideological elements.

One area of potential bias, where interviewee and interviewer are from different groups with little or no overlap, was erased due to my own story of becoming a successfully employed blind person, which I shared briefly with participants when appropriate. In addition, the participants and I were very interested in having the results of this research help other blind adults, which lowered the risks of this bias.

During my process of conducting the interviews, reviewing, and analyzing them, I had some deep feelings of connection. My most authentically moving work experiences have been interacting with other blind people, hearing stories of struggle and strength. But these conversations have rarely had the depth I was able to reach in my dissertation interviews. Because I was able to relate directly to some of my participants’ experiences, and held some of the same emotionally charged memories, I experienced some fairly strong, visceral reactions in myself. In Chapter V, I speak of the impact and growth this research brought me.

**Use of the Pilot Study**

In the last step of my pilot study process I wrote a document describing my own judgments, conclusions, reflections, and insights. I presented my analysis of each major phase, including the preparation, implementation, and summation of the study results. The prominent
themes I found in the pilot study interview with one participant included: pride, importance of the National Federation of the Blind, role models, identification as a blind person, independence, advocacy, flexibility, confidence, and corporate culture. These insights were the basis for the methodology used in this new research.

Participants

I began recruiting for research participants in early 2017. My process was very straightforward, and began with merely thinking about the blind people I knew who I believed met my criteria: people who were employed in corporate America and whom I thought would self-identify as successfully and meaningfully employed. I reached out to four individuals I felt very comfortable with, asking them if they would be interested in participating.

One individual felt very uncomfortable with the thought of discussing their employer and declined to participate. After obtaining an indication of interest from three people, I immediately sent them a consent form for their consideration. I also spent some time describing my research and the types of participants I was seeking, and asked for suggestions. In this way, I created a list of additional potential research participants within a few days.

I endeavored to reach each of these referred potential participants by phone. After a brief conversation, or in a few cases, an exchange of voice mails, I typically sent a recruitment email. In one case, the participant felt such strong interest they asked for the consent form to be sent at the conclusion of our conversation.

After reaching out through my networks in the community of people who are blind and low vision, I found myself with four participants all working for the same technology company. This appears to be a direct result of this company’s concerted efforts, with clear, directive support from the CEO, to increase inclusion of people with disabilities in every department. The
firm has dramatically increased the numbers of people with disabilities, focusing on accessibility, but has also shown notable success in hiring people with disabilities throughout the company in roles not related directly to product accessibility.

Through a snowball method, in which the researcher learns of other potential participants from possible participants, I contacted 15 potential participants in total. Fourteen expressed not only willingness, but eagerness, to participate. One declined, as mentioned above, citing reluctance to speak about their employer due to not experiencing a satisfactory employment situation, therefore not meeting my criteria. I was unable to schedule interviews on a timely basis with two individuals because of a variety of scheduling conflicts. Eleven participants, therefore, were included as they self-identified as being meaningfully and successfully employed in a large American corporation. Each of the possible participants I spoke with saw my research as a proactive, positive effort to increase understanding of the dynamics surrounding successful employment for people who are blind, and were eager to be part of an activity that might help ease the way for other people who are blind.

Examining the biographical details of the participant group, I was satisfied with the diversity of characteristics represented, as seen in Table 3.1. Participants included: individuals who were born blind, and those who became blind as teenagers or young adults; people who were totally blind and those with some usable vision; people working in positions related to accessibility and individuals whose jobs were not related to their blindness; and a good representation of both males and females.
Table 3.1

*Participants’ Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>Type of Corporation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Retired 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Other 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt;60</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 3.2, visual impairment of the participants ranged from low vision with ability to read print using a magnification device to total blindness. Only one person was born fully sighted; she lost sight in her late teens. Another lost her sight in her early twenties. Six had experienced degenerative visual conditions, five of which led to total blindness.

The participants used different aids for reading print. Three people used magnifiers, including computer screen magnification. Seven others used speech output screen reading software. Only two used Braille. Some used a combination of aids to help with movement, dogs and canes.
Table 3.2

Participants’ Visual Impairment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of impairment</th>
<th>Onset</th>
<th>Print reading ability</th>
<th>Type of aids used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low vision</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Birth 9</td>
<td>None 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degenerative</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16-25 2</td>
<td>With magnifier 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total loss</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>No answer 1</td>
<td>Dog 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using individual processes with each of my participants, I scheduled for the first mutually convenient times. I had originally hoped that many of these interviews could be conducted in person. As I matched participant location and availability with my extensive work travel schedule, reality soon set in, and I realized it would take well over a year to accomplish this type of interview. Telephone interviews with most participants then became the most practical course.

Interviews were conducted during the work day, weekends, and evenings. All of my interviews were recorded using the rev.com telephone app. After recording, the audio file was sent to rev.com, using the app. A Microsoft Word document of the interview transcripts was emailed back to me, usually within 12 hours.

The quality of the transcripts varied for several reasons. One particular interview, conducted with a participant who was using a cell phone rather than a land-line, had frequent, albeit brief, indecipherable sections. Another problem occurred: The Rev.com transcribers, not knowing the vocabulary specific to blindness, sometimes misinterpreted words. For example, the
word “assistive” was transcribed as “excessive,” and the computer magnification software program ZoomText was transcribed as SoonText. In nearly all of those cases I was able to recall the participants’ original word usage.

The recruitment of participants was truly a pleasure for me. Among the first four whom I already knew, we all shared common knowledge and experience concerning the employment barriers faced by people who are blind. We all understand the numbers, as well as that the workforce participation rates for blind people are less than half that of the general population, and all of the attendant socioeconomic ramifications. We all had personally experienced barriers based on societal and employer perceptions and knew many blind people who had also experienced distressing employment challenges. Each person was eager to hear about my research and to understand the characteristics of the participants I sought. Each took immediate action in thinking about possible participants, and connecting me with them.

During the interviews I felt jolts of recognition, kinship, and empathy as participants described experiences which mirrored my own and those of other participants. As my data accumulated through successive interviews, I felt growing excitement watching clear thematic streams begin to develop and flow.

There was a definite sense of camaraderie between me and each of my participants, a shared sense that we were involved in advocacy on behalf of our blind and low vision brothers and sisters. We acknowledged together that the employment successes of this study’s participants exemplified exceptions rather than the rule.

Although I had planned for and requested 90 minutes for each interview, most were somewhat shorter: they ranged between 45 and 70 minutes. I believe this was because my
participants had already given great thought to their employment journeys, and had articulated their experiences to others in the past, in various settings.

Reading biographical information available on their company websites, LinkedIn, and other sources, I found slightly different versions of many sections of their narratives. This dynamic also resonated with me as I have told and re-told stories about my personal journey to various audiences over the years.

My research was focused on this group of participants because I believe leadership in large recognizable American corporations could facilitate significant employment growth for people who are blind. This would be more likely to occur if leaders could see examples and perspectives from these types of participants.

**Ethical Considerations**

As a reflective researcher, I strove to maintain a deeply ethical commitment to my participants, acknowledging their importance, without using any type of exploitation. As they reflected and told their stories, the participants were creating and reinforcing meaning in their biographical strategies (Grele, 1994). Using life stories for research is not a linear, controllable, or predictable process. Instead, the process is surprising and capricious, requiring redirection and changing approaches throughout in order to maintain ethical treatment of the participants.

The highest risk considered for the participants was emotional risk. Many blind people have suffered trauma, discrimination, frustration, and stigmatization. A very small percentage of blind adults have experienced a successful employment journey. Those who have become successfully employed have often endured an arduous trek. During the interviews there were times of silence, tears, and catharsis for both of us. When discomfort arose, I gave each participant every opportunity to take a break, declare certain topics off-limits, or ask that certain
information be considered off-the-record. All participants understood throughout they could withdraw from participation at any time.

I have also worked hard to ensure their anonymity in choosing what not to include, minimizing the uniquely identifiably information in their individual profiles and by avoiding reference to their pseudonyms when quotes may contain comments they might not want to be associated with.

**Data Collection Procedure**

Data collection occurred in the course of about four months during the first half of 2017. Topical phenomenological research such as this required that I take on a more active role in the interview than if I were doing cultural research (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), so I was an active listener and guided the interview. This type of responsive interview requires awareness that learning is not just gathering information about a particular topic, but also about discovering what is important to the people being studied.

Throughout the interview process I paid close attention to the compatibility of my interview style and my participant’s preferred communication style. I made every effort to tailor my style in order to make the participant feel comfortable and to gather life-history data in the most effective way I could. I also captured my own insights, judgments, and reflections throughout the process by writing frequent memos.

I analyzed each initial interview as soon as possible after completion. As the initial interviews progressed I was also able to analyze them as a group. Rather than develop questions for subsequent interviews, I realized the initial interviews provided sufficient information.

**Interview questions.** The following were my interview questions, sequenced to adequately cover the research questions and to allow for a natural flow to the conversation. I
shared these questions with prospective participants beforehand to allow them to consider their answers before we spoke, which helped in the depth of data collected in the interviews. These initial questions were also used as prompts for subsequent probing and exploring.

To learn answers to the question, how do blind individuals become successful professionals and valued employees, I asked:

1. You identify yourself as successfully employed. Could you describe what “successfully employed” means to you?
2. What do you think of as the most important experiences in your life leading up to your successful employment?
3. Since becoming employed, what are the most important experiences you have had which you believe have contributed to your success?
4. What workplace-related policies, programs, or practices have affected your employment success and how?
5. Can you describe the various teams or groups you have belonged to, inside or outside of work environments, and how being a member of those groups has affected you and your career?
6. How have mentors or other key individuals made a difference in your career?
7. What aspects of the physical environment and technological tools in your workplaces have been the most relevant to your employment challenges and successes?

To find answers to the question, how do workplaces become appreciative of the benefits of enabling blind individuals to be successful contributors to the organization, I also asked:
Can you give me examples of ways in which your unique blindness skills and perspectives have been beneficial to your work and employers?

What do you believe are the most critical factors that make successful corporate employment possible for members of the blind community?

**Roles of the interviewer and interviewee.** Telling a life story requires great physical and psychological effort, but can be transformational (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). When the interviewee, or narrator, is sharing life experiences honestly and fully, he or she will take time and expend energy to focus on past experiences, and to put them in some sort of order as a life story. This may require the narrator to speak for extended periods of time. There is a tendency for the narrator, consciously or unintentionally, to create a positive depiction of themselves in the telling of their story. The narrator comes into the process with expectations about their role, and the participants are aware of what will be asked (Kaźmierska, 2004). In co-creating a life story the researcher also has expectations: hoping the narrator will tell a story that is useful for the research, and that the story was created within the framework of the researcher’s chosen methodological processes.

Rubin and Rubin (2012) use the term “conversational partner” for the interviewee. Each partner has a role in shaping the interview, in guiding the direction the research takes. The interviewee is a very active participant sharing in the process and the joy of discovery. The interviewee often guides the conversation in unexpected directions, along paths of his or her own choosing. Use of the term conversational partner also emphasizes the uniqueness of each interviewee and their distinct knowledge. The different ways I added clarifying questions and probes for each interviewee was based on each person’s knowledge and the topics that make the interviewee most comfortable (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).
Analysis of Data

The text of the interviews was analyzed following a detailed narrative analysis procedure. I examined the interviews for structure and sequence of units that made up the narratives, the placing, and the build-up of commentaries within the narratives (Kaźmierska, 2004).

The next stage involved analytical abstraction, finding generalities shared by other narratives. This led to identification of themes common to the multiple narratives. I also noted the physical and psychological efforts required on the part of each person telling their life story.

As part of the analysis process I kept in mind the concepts in life positioning analysis (LPA), based on position exchange theory. This method involves analyzing a person’s life through examination of the distinct and complementary social positions they have occupied. Based on the work of Anthony Herbert Mead, as referenced by Martin (2013), LPA is consistent with the theory of personhood development through participating in social interactions with other individuals and with objects. LPA allows for a social and psychological analysis of lives and life narratives. The framework in which LPA operates, developed by Martin and Gillespie, is called position exchange theory (PET; Martin, 2013) and focuses on the importance of moving between different positions within social, cultural, and psychological space and time. Such movements allow the individual to develop agency and other capabilities as self-consciousness emerges, evolves, and develops. These movements occur through social interactions with others (Martin, 2013). PET stresses the importance of institutional positioning of significant individuals in a person’s life in concrete, real, physical settings and contexts with a focus on concrete social practices and behaviors.

This stage of analysis depends on the interpretive judgment of the researcher conducting the analysis of a life. Looking at changing positions within the social, cultural, and physical
environments, one can understand an individual as both the subject and object of life experience. An insight from Anthony Herbert Mead, cited by Martin, says that the basic way self-consciousness develops is through a social process described as “The individual’s becoming an object to himself by taking the attitudes (perspectives) of other individuals toward himself within an organized setting of social relationships” (Martin, 2013, p. 6).

PET assumes that a person’s social life consists primarily of distinct and complementary social positions. An ordinary conversation for instance, occurs across the social positions of talker and listener. These positions do not remain fixed during the conversation. Social positions, like talker and listener, are defined by particular actions, which are guided by social norms and practices. Social interactions across positions do not only concern particular individuals, but also involve social conventions. For example, the purchase of an item in the marketplace obligates the buyer to pay, and the seller to deliver goods. In the PET framework, the essential dynamic of intersubjectivity consists of coordination and integration of different perspectives and their relations (Martin, 2013).

LPA is a unique way to look at life narratives because it focuses on particular actions with particular individuals within the social context (Martin, 2013). The researcher applies LPA to their subject in five phases:

1. Identification of significant individuals and generalized, broader groups that the focal person being studied has interacted with.

2. An analysis of positions and perspectives the focal person has experienced during different phases of their lifetime. This means understanding the positions they have occupied and exchanged with particular individuals and generalized groups.
(3) Thematic analysis of the positions and perspectives experienced through the different life phases.

(4) Analysis of the integration the focal person has experienced as the positions and experiences have defined their life, with an emphasis on intersubjectivity and identification.

(5) Creation of a positioning summary. In this phase the researcher attempts to depict the focal person’s experience within their various positions and perspectives (Martin, 2013).

During the above phases of analysis I moved from descriptive interpretation to explanatory interpretation. This framework allowed me to look at how these successfully employed blind adults coordinated their lives within this world.

Finally, I identified distinctive features of each individual text being analyzed, applying my own unique perspectives and frames of reference. This is a dynamic wherein my unique perspective as a former blind job seeker, an unsuccessfully as well as successfully employed blind adult, and an employer of blind adults came into play. I have a set of truly unique perspectives and frames of reference that I have encountered nowhere else in the blind employment research field.

I analyzed interviews immediately as they occurred in order to glean suggestions for further questions. During the entire process of data collection and analysis I maintained a project journal, with memos, including text of questions asked of participants. As I defined emergent categories of data during the interview process, I used a constant comparative method to identify pre-existing and new concepts. Four lenses which I used in my analysis:
(1) Context—Prevailing conditions in society at a given time.

(2) Narrative form—The shape that the constructed life story traced, which can appear as many alternate forms.

(3) Narrator-interpreter relationship—Taking into account all of the interrelationships of the people involved in living, narrating, writing, critiquing, and making meaning of the life being written about.

(4) Truths—The multiple ways a life story reveals and reflects an individual’s experience and social landscape.

My memos, maintained in a project journal, helped me in organizing themes, as well as crafting clarifying questions and probes during the semi-structured interviews. These memos helped me tie pieces of data together, suggest new patterns, alternate hypotheses, and helped me better understand cross case comparisons.

**Methods Used to Ensure Credibility and Trustworthiness**

I used several methods to ensure validity, credibility and trustworthiness of the research. First, after completing all interviews I reviewed the narrative in each interview transcript, and compared it with the digital recording and my memory of what I had heard, checking for accuracy and capture of subtleties and nuance. A second practice I used, mentioned earlier, was maintaining a project journal.

I also tracked the explicit text of the questions I asked participants. In this way, I helped establish the appropriateness of each response, and the context of the participants’ answers. I felt strongly that I wanted to present their viewpoints as authentically and powerfully as possible.
Summary of Chapter

The methodology I used, in summary, was phenomenological exploration through semi-structured interviews of eleven purposefully selected participants who discussed their experiences with blindness and successful employment. The steps I took in narrative analysis were:

1. Recruitment of participants
2. Data gathering
3. Transcription
4. Analysis of data
5. Specification of emergent categories
6. Composite description of themes
7. Verification of data
8. Revision of narratives
9. Dissemination

The following chapter presents each participant’s story of employment, and the nine major themes which emerged, and how this information related to my research questions.
Chapter IV: Research Findings

The eleven interviews provided a wealth of information about the participants and their experiences in becoming successfully employed. In this chapter, I present first the participants’ biographical information, then the themes which emerged, illustrated by the participants’ pertinent words.

Eight categories of data emerged:

(1) The participants’ definition of what being successfully employed meant to them.

(2) The early life and employment experiences which helped them become successful.

(3) Key individuals who helped.

(4) The factors which motivated their employers to hire and accommodate them.

(5) The accommodations and changes in inclusivity in the workplace which helped.

(6) The changes within the company which occurred due interaction with blind or visually impaired people.

(7) The ways employers could benefit from the accommodation and inclusion of blind employees.

(8) The most critical factors in making successful employment possible.

Within these categories of data, I found nine major themes, discussed in Chapter V.

The Participants

Understanding the biographical narratives of blind people who are or who have been successfully employed in fulfilling positions is important for several reasons: (1) to help employers understand the elements which they can adopt in order to receive the benefit of hiring blind people; and (2) to assist blind people in their development so they may enjoy the benefit of
fulfilling, well-paid work. Each of the eleven participants of this study provided data regarding
the phenomenon of successful and fulfilling employment of blind people in large U.S.
corporations. Their narratives are authentic, as seen in their biographical descriptions below,
using pseudonyms.

Individual Career Profiles

Participant 1. Saville was born with a severe visual impairment. Even so she has worked
for a long time at her corporation. She focuses now on creating and implementing her company’s
diversity and inclusion practices and policies. Her natural curiosity and intelligence were
nurtured by an extremely supportive family that held high expectations of her in every aspect of
life.

Her parents fought hard to have Saville educated in mainstream, integrated schools, when
the norm was sequestering visually impaired children in segregated residential schools. Her
family supported her in exploring alternative techniques and worked with her to discover
solutions to challenges. They nurtured her musical talent and supported her in singing with
organized choral groups starting at an early age. Saville continues to participate in very high
level choral music.

While studying ancient languages in college, Saville’s first career goal was teaching.
However, she did not find the schools and colleges she approached receptive to hiring a person
with a visual disability. Saville had very minimal, and mostly negative, interactions with the
vocational rehabilitation system. She does continue to use a guide dog for independent travel.

After a very frustrating job search, Saville concluded that another avenue must be
explored. After earning a degree in an unrelated field, she was hired by her current company to
manage work in a completely different area. When first hired, her work was paper-based, and she
was able to perform her job functions with simple magnification devices. When her work environment began to transition into the digital age, the need for more sophisticated accommodations arose. A special task force was set up to analyze and design accommodations so Saville could continue her contributions as a valued employee.

This led her onto a new career path in the areas of equal employment opportunity, affirmative action, disability accommodations, and diversity and inclusion. Saville is now an acknowledged national leader in this area, representing her employer at external conferences, and sitting on various national bodies related to disability employment and inclusion.

**Participant 2.** Emily was born with a degenerative eye condition which has led to severe visual impairment, with only a bit of usable vision remaining. As a child she learned her family values of justice, equity, and advocacy, which they lived. Emily’s older sister served as a role model for her, entering science, technology, engineering or mathematics (STEM) careers when barriers for women were more severe than they are today.

Emily also has neurologic mobility challenges in addition to her visual impairment, beginning at an early age. She did not receive appropriate supports or accommodations in her early school years and dropped out of high school because of the lack of support from the school system. Entering community college after taking equivalency exams, she was connected with services and blindness skills training. She feels that the orientation and mobility training she received, and the resulting ability to travel independently, were particularly important in helping her move forward in pursuing her goals. She also met other students with disabilities during her college years, establishing lasting relationships that stand her in good stead to this day.

Emily’s first career goal was to teach children in public schools. Prospective employers were not receptive to hiring a visually impaired teacher, so Emily accepted positions teaching
children with disabilities in private schools, at half the pay rate she would have received in a public school setting. She did, however, experience exposure to some early assistive technology that she used in her classroom, and came to realize the transformational potential of technology for people with disabilities. After graduate school studies in special education, she obtained employment teaching special needs students in a public school district. She also lectured and taught technology to university students who were training to become special education teachers.

Deciding to devote herself full-time to making technology more accessible, Emily decided to join the technology industry, working on accessibility and disability employment policy work. Since then, Emily has developed a national network of allies, both inside and outside of her company, and is a driving force at a national level in shaping public policy and institutional practice around inclusion of people who are aging, or living with disabilities. She sits on numerous committees and boards, has published influential articles, and has earned many well-deserved accolades and awards.

Participant 3. Savannah, having been born with congenital glaucoma, did not hold high expectations for herself, and doubted she could achieve the traditional milestones of adulthood such as marriage and employment. She was resistant to identifying herself as a blind person or using symbolic tools of independence such as the long white cane.

As her visual ability degraded, Savannah utilized vocational rehabilitation services for support during college, and received governmental transfer payments based on her disability to cover living expenses. She realized that, if she wanted to meet her personal goals and live her desired lifestyle, she would need to obtain employment in a job that gave opportunity for substantial income. After taking computer classes and learning transcription, she took an entry
level job with an insurance brokerage firm. Knowing this was just her entry into the work world, she began exploring the pursuit of a specific career in business.

When Savannah began applying for jobs, she interviewed with many prospective employers, but they were not open to considering hiring a visually impaired person in the role she sought. After hearing “no” myriad times, and persisting in networking and interviewing, she was given an opportunity to work in the office of someone in her field who agreed to give her a chance. Savannah applied herself assiduously to this career path, working hard for long hours, studying, earning certifications, and joining professional associations. Because of her success and ability to generate revenue for her employer, she has been able to move into increasingly desirable positions and firms.

Savannah has a career spanning over thirty years, and has garnered numerous awards and recognitions as a standout in her field. At the same time, she is very involved in philanthropy and community service, serving on and leading various boards and committees focused on empowering young women and increasing inclusion of people with disabilities. In addition, Savannah works informally as a role model and mentor with many individuals new to the experience of vision loss.

Participant 4. While pursuing an undergraduate STEM degree, Clara suddenly lost her central vision, and found herself needing to adapt to life as a blind person. Determined to remain independent and continue pursuing her education, Clara was very proactive in finding solutions to new challenges. The disabled student services office at her college was very helpful in providing hardware, screen magnification software, and training. She also met a visually impaired grad student who offered advice and informal training on alternative techniques and
technology. Soon, Clara had become part of an informal support network of blind people at her college.

With several other female computer science majors, Clara also formed a group to support other women pursuing computer careers. Through this group she began networking with other women in computer fields, both students at other schools and professionals in the field. Through networking, a graduate student in her computer sciences department referred her for a job at a major technology company. Clara was hired before graduation, and began working as a group leader immediately after completing her degree. Clara has been at this company for over four years. Although her job is not specifically focused on accessibility issues, her presence in her department is part of this technology company’s strategy to weave inclusion and accessibility throughout the fabric of the company by hiring people with disabilities into every department and working group.

**Participant 5.** Michelle, who was born blind, has worked for over twenty years in the technology industry. Her parents and family held the same high expectations for her and her sighted siblings: that they would attend college and enjoy professional careers. Michelle attended integrated, mainstream schools, and early on took responsibility for self-advocacy and insuring she had the accessible materials, technology and training she needed for success.

In addition to singing in a choir, Michelle approached her high school swim and track coaches, expressed her interest in participating and explained how she could successfully train and compete as a blind person. In high school, Michelle showed talent as a strong writer. Pursuing development of this talent, she went to college to earn an English Communications degree. At this time, she became very aware of the challenges blind people faced in gaining
meaningful employment. She established clear goals of obtaining successful employment in corporate America using her talent for clear communications.

Through thorough and robust networking Michelle landed a job in a public relations firm. After a dozen years working for the PR firm, she designed a plan that would lead her to working for a technology corporation, one of her major clients.

Leveraging her strong relationships and solid reputation as a valuable contributor, Michelle was offered the position she sought. She carried her childhood philosophy of self-sufficiency and creative problem solving into her work life and is a valued member of her marketing team.

**Participant 6.** Although Joe’s parents were supportive and willing to do whatever they could to help him succeed in school, because he was born with a degenerative visual condition, they had limited expectations of what he would be able to accomplish as an adult. Joe was removed from his first kindergarten classroom because the teacher was unwilling to provide adequate support and felt a visually impaired child did not belong in the mainstream classroom.

Exposed to technology at an early age, Joe embraced all the tools that were available to him and integrated technology into the ways he approached problem solving and interacting with his environment. Joe settled on technology as a career path, and earned a graduate degree in computer science. Upon leaving graduate school, he experienced the common barriers to employment faced by people who are blind or visually impaired. After job hunting for a year, he settled for an opportunity to work as a contractor for a major computer components manufacturer. Looking back, Joe sees that he was severely underemployed, and falling far short of reaching his actual earning potential.
During this time, Joe experienced an accelerated vision loss, and began to utilize speech output and Braille more heavily. He also began using a guide dog, and continues to relish the independence in travel which has resulted.

When Joe began looking for employment more appropriate to his interests and qualifications, he encountered many barriers. However, persistence did pay off, and he is currently working at a position of leadership with a focus on user experience and accessibility at a technology corporation. He plans to continue expanding his capabilities and areas of responsibility. He ultimately intends to become a general manager in his specific field, focusing on advocating and shaping accessibility from that broader vantage point.

**Participant 7.** Anthony grew up in generational poverty in a very rural state, as a legally blind child, albeit with a high degree of usable vision. Attending a residential school for the blind for one year, he was educated for the most part in mainstream, integrated settings. However, his association with the school for the blind did put him in touch with other young blind people across his state, and gave him opportunities to participate in goal-ball and wrestling during middle school.

After graduating from high school, Anthony went to work at minimum wage, taking home just over forty dollars for an eight hour work day. Assessing his situation, and looking at higher paying jobs in his community, Anthony realized that many career paths, especially those in the trades, would not be available to him as a legally blind person who could not drive vehicles or operate many types of machinery. He then determined that in order to embark on a career path leading to higher income he needed to attend college.

After enrolling, Anthony took a basic computer programming class in order to fulfill an undergraduate STEM requirement. He found the class interesting and enjoyable, so he signed up
for the next course in the series. The instructor of this course handed out a few articles, showing that computer programming jobs ranked in the top three for average starting annual salary, at over $80,000. Anthony concluded that computer programming was the career path he would pursue.

After graduating, Anthony began job hunting. Some years earlier, he had adopted the practice of not disclosing his visual impairment during job application processes because he found that doing so created immediate barriers to employment. He was hired by a large technology company purely on his ability to code and his excellent performance on tests during the hiring process. Anthony admitted that at first he completed his work more slowly than nondisabled peers, but prides himself on coming to creative solutions and use of alternate tools and techniques to get on par with sighted colleagues within a few weeks.

Anthony quickly found a community of blind and low vision colleagues at the technology company, and now enjoys networking for collaborative problem solving, and advocating for accessibility as part of this community. Through this network Anthony has recently been introduced to overnight backpacking which he greatly enjoys. Anthony enthusiastically appreciates what he sees as a tenfold increase of focus and resources devoted to accessibility in the four years he has been at this technology company.

**Participant 8.** Lee lived with progressive vision loss which led to total blindness in his childhood. His parents and grandfather held high expectations of academic and career success for him and his sister. Upon earning an MBA with an accounting focus, Lee began applying for jobs at what were then called the Big Eight.

As his classmates, including some he had tutored, landed jobs with Fortune 100 companies, Lee was being denied opportunities because of his visual impairment. He recalled
one hiring manager pulling him aside, and telling him that the firm had hired their first female accountant the year before, and although he had advocated with upper management, they were not ready to hire a blind accountant. He wanted Lee to realize that no major accounting firm was likely to hire him and that he should pursue a different line of work. The only job offer Lee received was as an entry level accounts payable clerk, a position for which he was obviously very overqualified.

Lee had been raised with an attitude of self-sufficiency, resilience, adaptability, competitiveness and fair play. He decided to make his own way, and to go into business for himself. After spending three months learning from family friends, he opened two small businesses with a childhood classmate. The businesses flourished for a time, and provided Lee with a comfortable income for a single person in their twenties. However, Lee’s vision continued to deteriorate, and running his business became more challenging. The arrival of a well-known national competitor impacted sales and Lee decided to make another change.

At this point he contacted his local vocational rehabilitation office for support. He was referred to a technology training program for people with disabilities at a local community college. Lee was the first blind person in the tech training course which had been running for a number of years. Before screen reading software was created, Lee did his coursework with 10-X magnification, reading materials at a painstakingly slow speed. A business advisory council helped shape and support the program. Every two months or so students would be put through thorough written and oral exams by council members. Only about half of Lee’s cohort completed the challenging program. Upon completion each student was guaranteed a 90 day unpaid internship with one of the company’s represented on the council.
Although Lee’s company of first choice was not prepared to support a blind intern, one of the council members, who had previously hired a disabled program graduate, enthusiastically offered Lee an internship. This opportunity led Lee to a 30 year career at a large manufacturing corporation. Hired at an entry level position, Lee saw his areas of responsibility increasing through the years as his vision decreased. He began using a long white cane fairly late in life, but appreciates the independence that good orientation and mobility skills now provide. At the time of his retirement Lee was managing multiple regional and global projects, supervising 25 employees and dozens of contractors.

Although he continued to rely on human readers throughout his work career, Lee has recently embraced assistive technology, and has become an adept user of the Freedom Scientific's Job Access With Speech (JAWS) screen reading program. Lee sits on a number of advisory councils and governing boards of organizations focused on increasing inclusion of people who are blind and low vision.

Participant 9. Born with a degenerative eye condition which accelerated to total blindness during high school, Tristan’s natural curiosity and family support have led him along a unique path to his current role advising a division of a multinational company. Tristan’s parents were immigrants; his father worked diligently to start and grow a contracting business. Tristan’s parents instilled in him their values of hard work and self-sufficiency as well as the importance of education.

Tristan built upon his mechanical inclinations and gifts and earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in computer science. Attending a job fair during the height of the dotcom era, Tristan was given an opportunity to work for a tech startup, where he was part of a research and development team.
He next earned a professional degree, citing the particular frustrations of taking the certifying final exam as a blind person with inadequate accommodations. After this he worked in this profession for several companies. He found this profession more compatible with his desire to work closer with people than with machines. However, he began thinking about pursuing employment within a tech company as a way to achieve a better work life balance. On a whim he skimmed the web site for his present company and saw an opening for his skill set. Up to this time, Tristan maintained a practice of not disclosing his blindness during the job application process. In this case, however, he decided to disclose his disability, and frame it in a way that would work to his advantage. With his application Tristan enclosed a newspaper article detailing his participation in a well-known American sporting event. This framing strategy was indeed effective. His interviewer later told him that reading the article created a belief that Tristan could succeed at anything he set his mind to, and he would be a valuable addition to the company.

Tristan had limited and mostly negative experiences with disability support organizations like vocational rehabilitation and disabled student services offices. He did not form relationships with disability organizations or disabled individuals until fairly recently. Joining the board of a national organization focused on creating internship, career development and employment opportunities for young people with disabilities, Tristan has found an inspiring and supportive community of other highly successful disabled people. In addition, he has become a leader in shaping and growing a disability resource group within his company. Tristan said he is only interested in accomplishing “big things,” and is currently contemplating his next adventure.

**Participant 10.** Ron, sighted at birth, grew up the youngest of six brothers. His parents were competitive athletes and raised all of their sons to follow suit. Ron said the family was instilled with values of self-reliance, self-determination, competitiveness, and fair play.
As a young adult, he noticed some gaps in his peripheral vision while participating in a sport with friends. He saw a doctor and had surgery, which left him totally blind. Ron immediately set about learning how to live independently as a blind person, and attended a local vocational rehabilitation center, where he received excellent orientation and mobility training. He credited his ability to travel independently, using a long white cane and later a guide dog, with putting him in the position to seize opportunities which later came his way. Even so, the vocational rehab provided no computer training, and very little support for vocational training or employment.

Putting his very independent travel skills to good use, Ron re-enrolled in college. Although only a few semesters shy of completing his engineering degree, Ron was advised by the disabled student services office to abandon this career path because of his blindness, so he switched to business administration.

After graduation, Ron realized that solid technology skills, particularly the newly emerging assistive technologies for blind people, were essential to any future career success in a world which was rapidly becoming computerized. He found that other blind people were much better sources of information and training than the vocational rehabilitation system.

Ron then decided to enroll in a professional school. Coincidentally his state hired a blind professional into a leading position, and sought a consultant to make the workplace and courtroom accessible. Ron was tapped to do work. He quickly realized that he had found his vocation. Leaving his professional school, Ron spent the next four years working on various accessibility projects throughout his state. He next found an opportunity as part of the access technology consulting practice of a national nonprofit.
After honing his skills even further, and forming relationships with the leading tech companies across the country as a consultant, Ron was given an opportunity to join the accessibility team at a large telecommunications company, one of his former consulting clients. Ron has continued to devote himself to his personal mission of making the world more accessible for people who are blind, through his daily work, volunteer advocacy, public speaking, and active participation as part of the small but influential community of blind technology professionals.

**Participant 11.** Born blind, the youngest of four brothers, Henry learned early the value of collaborative problem solving. His parents held the same high expectations for all of their sons and were strong advocates for Henry’s inclusion in the community. He was the first blind child mainstreamed in his small suburban town’s public schools. Henry’s parents were strong advocates, identifying and knocking down barriers to inclusion by working with the school district and state services for the blind. Along the way they taught Henry how to self-advocate, build alliances, and arrive at collaborative and creative solutions to challenging problems.

Near the very beginning of his job search after graduation with a communications degree, someone in Henry’s network referred him to a local public radio station that provided a radio reading service for the blind and print disabled. He soon found employment in a supportive environment, working alongside colleagues committed to information accessibility. Next, through networking with a radio reading service volunteer, Henry found an opportunity to realize his dream of working in commercial radio, and worked with enthusiastic coworkers to bring accessibility and assistive technology into the radio station.
Meanwhile, the legal department of an international corporation was looking for a consultant to help them comply with newly passed Internet accessibility regulations. Henry was brought in as a consultant and then asked to join the team.

After ten years there, he was referred through his network to another large corporation who was looking to create their first VP of accessibility position. Henry was selected from among a number of applicants and was charged with crafting and implementing strategies to insure accessibility of all their products and services for all customers with disabilities.

Although largely motivated by compliance concerns at first, Henry now sees that accessibility is considered as part of the company’s overall strategic commitment to innovation. Henry continues to advance the cause of disability inclusion, networking, inside and outside of the workplace, sitting on various boards and committees, and serving as an advisor, both formally and informally, to decision-makers and influencers across the country.

**The Data Categories**

Nine categories of data emerged in the interviews. In the following sections I discuss each category, its subcategories, accompanied with extracts from the rich narratives of the participants. During the organization of the data, I captured the frequency of certain responses in order to analyze the importance of certain concepts. More detailed analysis, interpretations, and implications of the findings are presented in Chapter V. Because of the exploratory nature of this research I wanted to create ample space for detail, nuance, subtlety, and variety of voice and experience. My hope is that the thick presentation of the data below captures and honors the full richness of the data.
The Meaning of Successful Employment in Large Corporations

Earning more than a livable wage stands out as a key element for those defining what successful and meaningful employment means for the participants individually—enough income to enjoy flexibility in spending decisions. At the same time, participants saw flexibility in choice of work assignments as important, the autonomy and independence to self-direct how time in the workplace was allocated. Participants also valued opportunities to spend time in work activities which stand out as enjoyable, intellectually challenging, and interesting, as seen in Table 4.1 below.

Spending time at work engaged in activities that are personally desirable, emerged as another key element to successful and meaningful employment. Additionally, this self-chosen allocation of work time resulted in outcomes with significant impact, making a positive difference in the world. At the same time, the sequence of positions should represent steps along a pathway to increasing responsibility, and contain elements of others depending on the work for their own success. Even if current work assignments do not represent an ideal situation, a clear path to achieve ultimate employment goals should be apparent.

Other key elements defining successful employment include: steady employment, certainty that the job is secure; opportunities for continued education and training; being empowered and supported for success; a feeling of being heard and having ideas respected; positive relationships with colleagues; and a proactive and forward thinking corporate culture where being blind is seen as an asset.
Table 4.1

The Meaning of Successful Employment in Large Corporations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Compensation is sufficient to provide flexibility in spending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Work which is what I want to do, is fun, intellectually challenging, interesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Having independence, autonomy, and flexibility in projects to work on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Increasing responsibility, more people depending on me, and leads to desired employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Being empowered to do the work, with continued education and training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Results have a positive impact, make a difference in the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Steady employment, a niche</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The company has prestige</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The company considers my blindness an asset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>People at work pay attention to my ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Good working relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Proactive, forward thinking work environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ability to provide public service, give back to the community, be a mentor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The employer occupying a position of prestige in the marketplace also factors into a sense of successful and meaningful employment. Finally, some of the participants value a work situation that allows the blind person to give back to their community by providing public service or serving as a mentor.

Overall compensation and benefits tied to employment in corporate America features prominently in participant definitions of successful employment. For example, Michelle said, “When I graduated from high school … and went to college it was at that point at which I learned just how challenging it can be for people who are blind to find meaningful work. And
that’s when I made a very solid commitment that I was going to be as successful as I possibly could, and that would be in corporate America.

Tristan added, “One of my key values is family, and being able to provide for my family and be a breadwinner. [My current employment] is certainly the right place. I am rewarded fairly well for what I do, so that satisfied that piece of it . . . we’re fairly secure in [my wife’s] ability to leave her daytime job and stay home and be a mom. That’s very satisfying to me and another kind of measure of success.”

Others agreed. “I work for a company that has a really good benefits program and a good salary,” Clara commented. Emily said that, for her, “Successfully employed in part means making enough money to support your family. I think that’s the most critical thing because no matter what you do, if you can’t support your family it’s very hard to feel successful.”

Speaking of earning in excess of a livable wage, Ron said, “That’s one of my major goals. Why I went to college was to get a better job . . . being able to find the compensation that I can support my family and do the things that I want to do.” Joe added, “Successfully employed and meaningful work for me really comes down to a few things [such as being] self-sufficient financially. Meaning I can live independently, pay my own bills, take care of my base needs, and meet some level of financial independence. Now that’s the basic: . . . I’m not just making ends meet. I’m able to have a higher quality of life than I grew up with. . . . I have the highest quality of life I’ve been able to attain yet in my life. . . . Being able to go out with friends and being able to have some amount of financial free will to make purchases. . . . Do activities that could be out of the realm of possibilities for someone who’s just barely employed.”

Although substantial reimbursement and good benefits are important, flexibility in choice of how work time is spent emerged as an important characteristic of meaningful employment.
For example, Clara said, “There’s a certain amount of autonomy with my job. . . . I can choose what I work on day to day as long as it’s within the range of the area that I own.”

Work must also be enjoyable, intellectually challenging, and interesting, work that is personally desirable for the blind individual. “Fulfilling means to me that there’s intellectually challenging and stimulating work to do,” Clara added. Henry agreed: “I would say the other characteristics around that would be where there’s work that you’re very interested in and you find compelling or at least the nature of the business you find compelling.” Joe shared that idea, “It’s doing work I’m genuinely happy with. I feel like I’m doing good things.”

Additionally, work outcomes must result in some sort of significant way. “To do something that I think makes the world a better place,” said Emily. “Even if it’s a small part of the world, and so to at the end of the day feel that you’ve done some good rather than just made money . . . making the world better in some way or other, more fair, more accessible.”

Ron offered, “[Where I work is] the center of the world in [my] biz, just phenomenal!” Meanwhile, Joe said, “At the end of the day when all is said and done, I feel like I’ve accomplished something, that I’ve contributed something to the company and the work.”

Research participants also placed high value on work with pathways to increasing levels of responsibility. “Yes, I would consider it very fulfilling work,” said one person. “I started out as an entry level computer programmer. Then throughout my career, went through multiple steps of promotion . . . so had a large amount of responsibility.” Another person added, “That’s not to say this is my ideal job or my dream job . . . but it’s on the right path.”

An element of this sense of responsibility is the feeling that others in the organization depend on their blind colleague for their own success. Henry said, “Successfully employed would mean that I’m in a position where people are depending on me to move a strategy
forward, and so obviously they’ve gotten beyond the blindness stereotypes . . . and put me in that [leadership] role.”

Opportunities for continued education and training, in a setting of steady, certain employment, also featured in defining successful employment. Savannah said, “Successful employment and meaningful work means to me I get to continually be educated.” Another person commented, “I’m just greatly entertained by seeing, and getting to be a part of this ongoing story of innovation: and learning new things. . . . I know for me personally the kind of work I need to do is work that challenges me and where I get to learn. . . . Successfully employed to me [means] . . . being able to have a job in a related field, holding them for a decent period of time . . . that you’re regularly employed and you’re not jumping around. You’re finding a niche.”

Participants also recognized that being empowered and supported is essential for their successful employment. Henry commented, “I think the fact that [my project] is successful is [because] they’re empowering me to do the work, but they also care about the work. It’s not just some lip service thing that they’re doing.”

Participants also want a feeling of being heard and having ideas respected, as well as having positive relationships with colleagues. Clara said, “Successful employment to me means that I have a good working relationship with my manager and the people I work with.”

“I would say you try to as best you can connect with those types of individuals,” said Henry, “because those are the folks that are going to think outside the box. And where that’s needed, that can help you.” Lee remembered, “And work with a team, and that was always a lot of fun. To get very close to your fellow employees and contractors as you worked towards a common goal. That was very fulfilling psychologically.”
Along these lines, participants valued working in a proactive and forward-thinking corporate culture, where being blind is seen as an asset, was an important aspect of fulfilling employment. “I’ve always lucked out and have worked in companies where people by the nature of the business were very forward thinking and proactive,” Henry shared. “I think the employer and the people representing that employer have to be open-minded as well. I would say that that’s what I mean by successfully employed.”

Working for a prestigious corporation also added to a sense of successful employment. Michelle stated, “For me successful employment is working at [a well-known company] because that was always my goal. To do something in the corporate world and the technology world.” Tristan said, “I think it’s probably not too much of a stretch for most people to say that when you get a job at [my company], that’s what everyone wants to do, so in one measure, you can say that that’s been a success.”

Respondents also saw the capacity to give back to the community as an indicator of employment success. Michelle said, “It enables me to have a lot of independence and to help other people.”

Many factors in their lives led to being employed in what they considered successful and fulfilling positions, such as their varied experiences growing up, learning to interact in a sighted world, becoming technologically fluent, as well as key people who were mentors and coaches.

Experiences Leading to Successful and Fulfilling Corporate Employment

Reflecting upon early life experiences that contributed to eventual successful employment, participants often mentioned parents, extended family, early education, and developing a sense of agency. The first part of this section addresses helpful experiences early in life, before employment, and the second part, helpful experiences during employment.
Early experiences contributing to success. High expectations for achievement of developmentally appropriate life were cited as essential, whether these were from family members, teachers, or from within the person (Table 4.2). As participants aged, a network of friends during high school and college became important. Participation in athletics, either individual or team sports, emerged as a strong theme amongst many of the blind people I interviewed. Belonging to teams or other organized groups also received frequent mention. Many interviewees emphasized mastery of both technology and blindness skills as essential cornerstones of employment success.

Another very common theme that emerged through my interviews was the significance of a singular transformational experience that occurred in the teen or young adult years. At the same time, several participants credited assuming responsibility for their own destiny at an early age as crucial.

Additionally, several participants emphasized the importance of a wide breadth of experiences, which led to development as a well-rounded, flexible and adaptable person. Part of this range of experience included becoming involved in the community through volunteering. Breadth of exposure leading to serendipity, being in the right place at the right time, was acknowledged as a contributing factor in some cases.
Table 4.2

Helpful Experiences Before Employment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>f</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Participation in sports, teams, and groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>A transformational experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Upbringing, parents, family, and early schooling</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Learning how to use computers and accessibility technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Becoming well-rounded, flexible, able to adapt, problem-solve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Friends in high school and college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>High expectations within family</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Learning to be self-responsible early in life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Learning, through VR or other blind assistance center, how to cope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Being in the right place at the right time</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Getting involved in the community, volunteering</td>
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Four participants cited their parents, extended family, and early educational experiences as key factors in their journey to successful employment. Lee said, “I had . . . two wonderful parents and a great sister.” Two participants explicitly described the high expectations held for them in these contexts. Emily commented, “I think having the expectation that you would be employed, and employed in ways that could support a family, was extremely helpful. I never considered the option of staying home with my parents and not working…that ability to adapt and the expectation of adaptation rather than giving up was one of the most important things that I got from my parents growing up.”

Lee added, “They had a lot of expectations for me. I came from a family with high expectations, which I think helped a lot. Obviously in school to always make good grades, perform well at that level. . . . We had family games—when it came to bridge or ping pong or
any of those kind of things. . . you were supposed to be honest and fair but try your best and never quit. . . I’ll never forget, I took a summer enrichment program in the seventh grade where you had to ride across town and go to summer school. . . So me and my buddies signed up for this. Well after about four days they all quit because, you know, hell, it wasn’t that much fun at all. . . . My Dad . . . said ‘Nope. You signed up and you gave your word that you were going to do it, you’re going to follow through and do it.’ . . . I’ve never forgotten that because when you give your word, and [then] you follow through—how well that has treated me throughout my career. That if I told somebody I was going to do something I didn’t beg off. I followed through, I got it done. How much that kind of skill . . . or characteristic . . . really, really helps in business. . . . My wife kind of laughs at me—she said, ‘Well Lee, you think you’re normal,’ and I said ‘Oh no. My family has always raised me to be much better than normal.’”

Three participants gave credit to having a network of friends during high school and college as important. Lee said, “A good nucleus of friends that are still my friends today. They included me . . . they were all sighted so without my vision, with my vision loss. . . . We didn’t play handball with a handball, we’d play handball with a volleyball, because I could see a volleyball. We used a red, white and blue basketball in junior high because I could still see the red, white and blue as opposed to the brown ball. Just different things like that, so I always felt I had a good support group around me.”

A majority of participants, six, attributed participation in athletics as an essential ingredient in their career success. Three of these interviewees specifically cited team sports. Michelle said, “I believe that having people around us was important. So in school I was on the track team, and I was on the swim team.”
“I used to do freestyle biking,” Tristan remembered, “Stand on your handlebars and all that kind of stuff . . . in junior high . . . I had very little vision.”

Clara added, “I did lots of sports growing up . . . learning team work . . . swim racing, water polo, soccer, volleyball. I got involved with the triathlon club at my school. Through that I made friends that were into hiking, and running and swimming . . . . I did a bunch of those sorts of things.”

Meanwhile, one woman contributed, “I became a world class downhill skier. I became a very accomplished rock climber. . . . As a competitor, probably my first ever time that came out of me.”

Lee added, “I played Little League through nine, ten, eleven, years old, then it got to where if they hit the ball in the sky I couldn’t find it anywhere. That ended that. . . . In high school I played football, I was on the football team. I was second team . . . played through my senior year and hung in there. It taught me a lot, just going out and playing. I was low vision. . . . Probably about 200 in my best eye.”

Five participants described transformational experiences that empowered them to pursue their employment path. Many of these were associated with high level participation in sports, as described above. Savannah recalled, “When I was a teenager I felt like I really didn’t like being blind. . . . I was very resistant to using canes. . . . I just memorized the routes I needed to know. . . . Where I was going to college, they put up a big construction site, which was in my path that was memorized, so I ran into a barricade and then when I went around, I fell down a set of stairs. So that’s what led me to go to the orientation center for the blind. . . . That changed things for me.”
Three participants described the importance of belonging to another type of cooperative group. Saville explained, “I’ve been in some kind of organized group for singing since I was six.”

Michelle said, “That’s always been good experience in terms of singing in choirs, it helps you in terms of . . . getting in front of people and expressing.”

Clara said, “Other things that I did well in college that helped me to get my current job was to be involved in extracurricular activities. . . . I started a group at my school with a couple of friends. We started a group for women in computer science. . . . We got involved with the greater women in computer science field outside of our school, at other schools and in industry. I think that really helped.”

Four participants highlighted mastery of technology skills, while two commented on acquisition of blindness skills and training. Ron said, “[after becoming blind as a young adult], I went through rehab. I got really, really, good cane training. The cane travel training was phenomenal. I got a type-and-speak from advice from a person from AFB. That was another thing—I got better advice from other blind people than I often did from a rehab system. I knew I had to get into computers. . . . We talked to people from AFB and NFB about computers. . . . I spent twelve, fifteen, twenty hours a day trying to figure out not only my Type and Speak but JAWS on the computer, and scanners by Arkenstone . . . . I just knew that that stuff was going to be the path to get me back to independence.”

Joe added, “I really found technology to be a tool and integrated it into my way of thinking from a very early age. That theme of technology integrated into my way of solution identification for myself . . . in school in my interactions, in the community. Just over and over.”
Two participants felt that learning to assume responsibility at an early age featured in preparing them for employment success. Michelle said she realized early on that it was, “Me responsible for insuring I had what I needed to be successful in class. And that I wasn’t relying on other people to get things on time, but I was the one who was ultimately responsible, and I think that was a critical, critical aspect of this.”

A wide breadth of experiences, leading to becoming a well-rounded individual, was discussed by four participants. Michelle said, “Through college I worked in the computer lab, I wrote articles for the newspaper. Just having fun and being young.” Tristan remembered, “My parents were really open to me trying many different things, not putting any barriers or limits in place and just let me enjoy being a child . . . . People who are blind oftentimes aren’t encouraged to pursue many different things . . . are also not very encouraged to pursue their life’s passion. My parents are a key element of that, where they allowed me to explore what I wanted to explore and didn’t say ‘No, you can’t do that,’ or ‘That’s too dangerous.’”

“At the orientation center for the blind I met a lot of very successful blind people,” Savannah related. “I realized that there were other people, blind people, that were successful in truly awesome careers. I went crazy for activities.” Meanwhile, Henry said, “I got to do a lot of different things, a little bit of marketing, product management, non-profit grant management.”

One participant talked about involvement in the community through volunteering. “I guess putting myself out there,” said Ron. “You just don’t get lucky by staying home and hoping things happen. I was always out doing things. I was on campus all over the place. . . . I was volunteering at the center where students got help with math and English.” He added that being involved in the community led to being in the right place at the right time “many times just out of the blue.”
As participants thought about early employment experiences that helped shape their journey, and their current successful situations, several themes dovetailed with early, pre-employment narratives (Table 4.3). These included deepening of computer and technology skills in a workplace setting, learning through a wide range of experience, including negative ones, and being self-directed in acquiring necessary knowledge and work skills. Other comments encompassed becoming well-oriented to the physical layout of the work space, honing orientation and mobility skills, developing flexibility and the ability to adapt, being in the right place at the right time, developing a support network in the workplace, developing good communication skills, having an effective manager, and learning to work with many different kinds of people.

Table 4.3

*Helpful Experiences During Employment*

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<th>Characteristic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Learning how to use computers and accessibility technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Doing lots of different things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Learning from bad experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Developing my own way, learning what I needed to</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Learning my way around the organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Orientation and mobility instruction</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Being in the right place at the right time</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Connection with people who can help at work</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Learning good communication skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Having a very good manager</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Learning to work with many types of people</td>
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</table>
Three interviewees emphasized the importance of learning through a wide range of experience, including negative ones. Savannah said, “I did learn that if one person told me ‘no,’ that never really meant ‘no’ is the answer. I learned to just call up another person and to get to somebody to tell me ‘yes.’ . . . The experience of being told ‘no,’ and being told I couldn’t do things that I knew I could, led me to the skill of persistence—don’t take ‘no’ for an answer.”

Referencing early employment in teaching disabled children, Emily said, “I also started working on technology when I was in that capacity and realized that if we don’t change access to technologies, no matter how well we prepare kids, they would face barriers as they moved on. I transitioned over to trying to make technology more accessible.”

Recalling an early experience of running a small business, Lee said, “I learned a lot there of just how to deal with customers, how to manage people, how to do a payroll. How to make sure you have enough inventory. A lot of the basic practical application. Business skills that I learned in college, now applying them with a practical business application.”

Emily added, “I did a little stint in marketing and I found that I am terrible at marketing, and I really should never be in that field. Sometimes finding out what your limitations are, or what you enjoy or don’t enjoy, really helps I think, in the long run in making decisions on where your career goes.”

One participant talked about being self-directed in acquiring necessary knowledge and skills for employment success. Lee said, “One of our CFO’s . . . used to say that ‘You have to kind of develop your own career and put new tools in your backpack as you go along.’”

Another participant pointed out that being well oriented to the physical layout of the workspace is essential. Ron said, “The first ten months at least, I didn’t know left from right. I just learned the (my company) campus itself. We have seven buildings across I don’t know how
many square miles and roads. Eight lane roads and not good crossings. I had to learn my way around.” Ron also emphasized the importance of sharpening proper orientation and mobility skills to be able to navigate the workplace independently. “I investigated some formal training. . . . That helped me out phenomenally.”

Meanwhile, four participants discussed developing flexibility and adaptability as crucial. Henry said, “The learning environment here . . . how to work in this very different, very dynamic, very fragmented culture that we have, and try to be the glue that connects all the dots together.”

Emily described alternative ways of networking as an important aspect of her job. “[There’s] the cocktail party general situation, where you’re in a big room and there’s a ton of people . . . that [kind of] networking is not going to work for me. It’s difficult because I don’t know who’s there. . . . So I need to set up other opportunities. I will make a point of being early on conference calls, so I can chat with people a little bit because it’s a little bit more comfortable. I will make a point to say, ‘Do you have time to grab lunch?’ Because those are the relationships, and that’s networking that does work for me.”

One participant acknowledged some level of serendipity as a success factor, being in the right place at the right time. Another participant placed value on developing a support network within the workplace. Tristan said, “So that’s one piece of it. Finding people who have really exemplified the philosophy that I have. . . . Finding those people has really inspired me.”

One participant credits developing good communication skills, “My presentation and communication and cajoling skills are probably as important,” said Ron.

Having an effective manager featured in one participant’s comments. Joe said, “It’s really been having honestly a very good manager who’s been very transparent in his communication
with me. . . . He’s really worked with me to insure the work that he is finding me is in my realm of enjoyment and what I want to develop in terms of an employee and for my career.”

Finally, one participant discussed the importance of learning to work with many different kinds of people as an essential success ingredient.

**Key Individuals Who Helped**

The findings indicate there were key individuals who helped prior to, as well as during, employment. First I discuss key individuals influencing participants’ lives prior to employment as important contributors to their journeys into successful career paths. Eight interviewees cited importance of family (Table 4.4). Four participants talked about relationships with friends, three cited teachers and professors, while four discussed interactions with vision rehabilitation professionals.

Table 4.4

*Key Individuals Who Helped Prior to Employment*

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<th>Individual(s)</th>
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<td>Family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision and mobility teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers and professors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
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<tr>
<td>School accessibility center</td>
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<tr>
<td>Special programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Counselor at school</td>
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</table>

One participant placed great emphasis on a relationship with a school counselor, and two interviewees highlighted support from a disabled student services office. Other specialized
disability programs received mention from two participants. Three participants mentioned individuals falling into none of the categories above, while three interviewees reflected upon the importance of relationship with self.

In reflecting upon key individuals who positively influenced employment success, most participants highlighted family. Saville said, “It was always my parents. They were like, ‘All right. If this isn’t going to work, let’s try something else.’ My mother was probably the most amazing. She, before there were a lot of recorded books, even when I was in high school and college, she would get the book list at the end of a term . . . and record all my books. She would sit up at night. I would get recordings that said, ‘It’s four in the morning and I couldn’t sleep, so here’s another chapter.’”

Another person remembered, “I would say, being the youngest of four brothers, it probably had something to do with that. And [my parents’] kind of self-realization that we could work with this blindness thing, and that there would be no reason, other than what other people put up in terms of barriers, why I couldn’t be as successful as their other three boys. To do that when there were barriers, they had to work to knock them down.”

Emily reported, “My sister, [a scientist], being in a nontraditional field. . . . She faced a situation where she was not given tenure even though her colleague who had achieved less previously had been. . . . She did sue. She fought it. She’s five years older. She was old enough to be a role model.”

Similarly, Ron recalled one sibling as a role model. “Certainly family was huge. I was the youngest of six brothers, so very highly competitive. My brother . . . was in an accident. He had a traumatic brain injury. Very bad. We didn’t expect him to make it through the night. . . . Then he was in a coma for three months. Doctors said, ‘Look, there’s no chance. No chance.’ . . . He’s
retired now. He’s raised his family. He did every single thing he was not able to do. I watched that for many, many years. And when I lost my sight my path was so much easier than his. Having that role model. Just seeing him do that, and the struggles.”

Lee added, “I’m going to throw my grandfather in there too. . . . He always felt that he wanted me as his grandson to get a good education. And he was always very supportive of me financially, helping pay for my college. . . . I think you always kind of need somebody in your corner there, that’s willing to give you that nudge.”

Four participants highlighted friends as important to their employment journeys. Lee continued, “My best friend. . . . he’s about five foot tall and has major rheumatoid arthritis, but he’s worked really hard throughout his career. We’ve always been folks trying to prove everybody wrong. That they’re underestimating you. We’ve always supported each other and been our best cheerleaders for each other.”

Additionally, three participants discussed the role of teachers and professors. Clara said, “I was working with a professor doing research projects with her. Through her I met her grad students, and one of them referred me for my current position. She’s still very good at getting all of her students [good positions], regardless of disability, she’s really good at networking and introducing people to each other.”

Meanwhile, Emily recalled a high school teacher who provided extraordinary support, “The classes that I had upstairs, and I was having difficulty walking because of the (additional physical disability), were just dropped. I had one teacher who had an upstairs classroom and she came down during her break and taught me. She did part teaching and part counseling I think. She was just a great person. It was kind of a tough time. . . . I think I got as much from her just treating me like a human being.”
Emily also discussed her Braille teacher’s role in connecting her with other blind people. “I was 16. . . . She said, “You’ve got to go to a [blind consumer group] convention. . . . It was really not the organization as much as it was having people my own age and the expectation of doing something. . . . It was really that peer group and support net that I still have today.”

Four participants related the significance of their relationships with vision rehabilitation professionals. Henry recalled, “I walked in there with a pretty big head, ‘I’ve been born blind. . . . I have my act together.’ And having the O and M [orientation and mobility] instructor take me out into the streets just outside of Boston and basically say, ‘Prove that you have your act together.’ Realized very quickly that I grew up in a very sheltered environment, and that there was a whole lot more to learn.”

Emily also credited an orientation and mobility trainer having significant positive influence. “I think that the bounce back attitude and problem solving attitude being reinforced. . . . The other piece that he did, which was extraordinarily helpful . . . was to get me among young blind people.”

In addition, she emphasized the important role a college counselor played in connecting her with a network of blind peers. “There was a counselor on site who was very good at getting people together in clubs. We had a study room.”

Two participants received essential support from disabled student services offices. Clara said, “The center for students with disabilities . . . was great! They got me connected with somebody that could teach me how to use ZoomText. . . . They got me a laptop and a scanner. . . . They also helped me figure out how am I going to take tests, all the logistics of figuring out how am I going to be an effective student or learn effectively with the vision loss.”
Additionally, two participants discussed their participation in specialized training programs designed for people with disabilities. Savannah said, “Really the significant change was going to OCB [Orientation Center for the Blind] and seeing successful blind people that just figured out ways.”

Three participants focused comments on individuals falling into none of the categories above. Clara said, “My boyfriend at the time [of onset of sight loss], he was incredible at making sure that I had what I needed in terms of every day, making sure we had groceries and stuff like that. And kept me involved in social gatherings. I think I would have otherwise just stayed home all the time by myself. That was helpful.”

Clara also discussed connecting with a blind graduate student at her university, “I went and chatted with him. . . . I was like, ‘Hey you’re blind. I don’t know any blind people. I’m blind. Cool.’”

Ron recalled, “And the whole town, small town, rallied around me. They got me back on my feet. . . . About three months after I’d lost my sight, Fourth of July picnic in the neighborhood. I felt a little self-conscious the first time I got out in public like that. . . . I was almost embarrassed to go out. I went out there and had a blast. We had a lot of fun. . . . That was huge. The small town, my friends, my family rallying around.”

Three participants emphasized the importance of self, as opposed to external relationships. One person said, “I think I’ve always been a self-starter. I don’t think that there’s been an individual in those earlier years that has really inspired me at all. I, like I said, to my own detriment, may just not have had those resources.”

Along these same lines, participants identified key individuals in their current work situations as central to their employment success (Table 4.5). Two participants referenced their
organization’s members overall, while five interviewees pointed to senior management specifically. Six participants discussed the significance of their immediate supervisor, while one talked about a specific work team and team leader.

Turning to discussion of group membership, one participant highlighted a professional organization, while three focused on diversity or accessibility employee resource groups. Four participants talked about the importance of peers, coworkers, or colleagues in the workplace. Other mentors and a business partner both received a single mention. Additionally, two participants emphasized the importance of self-reliance as opposed to relationships with other individuals.

Table 4.5

*Key Individuals Who Helped During Employment*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual(s)</th>
<th>Count</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boss or manager</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior management</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coworkers and colleagues</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility or diversity group within company</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company itself</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team leader, or team itself</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional group</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other mentors</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business partner</td>
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When thinking about the importance of individuals in their current workplaces, two participants discussed the significance of their organizations’ inclusivity stance overall. Anthony
said, “Generally the attitude of the company [is] ‘Hey, this employee is adding value somewhere. Don’t interfere with that.’ ‘You can send like [an email]. ‘Hey, I need a good piece of software for doing X, or I’m having trouble with Y.’ And people will email you back and say, ‘Here’s what I did.’ And then more than that, a lot of people on that list have gone and met in person and have lunch together or whatever. . . . The company is concerned with the accessibility of the products. There’s a lot of activity as people get to know each other and become friends and share information through working on products together, or testing each other’s’ accessibility product. Things like that.”

Meanwhile, five participants emphasized contributions to their success made by senior management. Speaking of a senior manager in another area of the company, Tristan said, “That’s an individual who is completely unconnected to my work situation, but she’s a champion for me. She helps. She inspires. She builds me up, which is something I really never had before.”

Henry added, “Our whole senior management here is very supportive. From our Chairman and CEO on down through the ranks. . . . I don’t know how many colleagues at other companies have had the opportunity to sit in a Fortune 50 company’s board meeting to talk about accessibility. . . . Diversity and inclusion: they’re not only looking at it from an employment perspective. Diversity is a multi-threaded strategy.”

Meanwhile, Savannah said, “I always reach out to senior management. Not the people right above me, not the management of my office. Senior management. . . . When I need something they listen, and they try to help me.”

Ron continued, “And to be perfectly honest [my CEO, of a major Internet company] has been a huge advocate of accessibility, and just a very employee friendly person. Just a couple
nods from her every once in a while that shows we’re working in the right direction definitely helps.”

Lee said, “The woman that ended up being my manager was on the Business Advisory Council [for a specialized technology training program for people with disabilities]. They got me an unpaid internship and then I did that for 90 days. . . . [She] offered me an entry level job. She had to go to the CFO and sign a personal letter that she would take on the risk of hiring a blind person.”

Turning to their own work groups or departments, six participants credited immediate supervisors with significant contributions to their career success. Michelle said of her first manager at her current workplace, “We were able to have very clear, honest discussions about, ‘Okay, what’s this job? Will we be impacted at all?’ And he served as an advocate.”

Emily said, “I had one person . . . when it came time to transfer up to a position, [who] really advocated for me. It was an interesting situation because the person who was hiring me was one of the first African-American officers in the company. He didn’t want to hire me because he couldn’t see how I could do the job. The person who was my current employer, my current boss, went to him the said, ‘You know, when you started your job, I’m sure that there were people who said, “I don’t know how an African-American man can supervise people who are white.”’ That was enough to get me hired into the new position.”

Discussing his first manager at his current workplace, Lee recalled, “She gave me that opportunity to get started and really fought for me to be an employee. And I was the second person she had brought in from the high tech training for the disabled.” Lee then spoke about a second direct supervisor, “He saw me as somebody that had both the finance and business background, but also with some leadership skills. What he did was start putting me in a position
One participant focused attention on a work team and team leader. Ron said, “Definitely my team members. [One guy] gave me the O and M ideas around campus.” Ron continued, “Our director. So, being a hero in our world. Just being able to work with him. His focus on greatness has been very inspiring.”

Three participants highlighted the role of disability related employee resource groups. Tristan said, “The other person that is a part of this at work is a woman who’s a head of the Disability Employee Resource Group. . . . Doesn’t have a disability, but like I said, gets it and really champions disabilities for people. . . . We’ve got a very, very large employee resource group focused on disability that she’s kind of grown from the ground up in the last five or six years. . . . I know that she advocates by helping the company as a whole develop more awareness and research and programs around the disability space.”

Henry commented, “We have a Corporate Diversity and Inclusion Team. They oversee . . . employee interest groups.” Speaking of one of these groups focused on disability, Henry continued, “Yes. I’m a co-executive sponsor of it, along with a guy in our community investments group who also has a physical disability.”

Meanwhile, four participants talked about peers, coworkers, or colleagues in their workplace. Anthony said, “There’s a pretty active visually impaired community. And that’s been pretty great to meet other people and talk to them, and I guess that’s added a lot of personal value for me because there’s constantly teams and people working on projects reaching out to that community to ask for help in doing accessibility work.”
Clara said, “There’s a friend that I met when I first started working here. He was not on my direct team. . . . We don’t work together but he supports me . . . the first time I used the printer he showed me what button to press. He was one of those people I wasn’t embarrassed to ask those questions to, that’s been super helpful to have a person like [that]. He would stop by my office to see how I was doing and check in. He would often just poke his head in like, ‘Hey, is everything okay? How you doing?’

Emily pointed out, “I have a core group of people at my company who work on accessibility and understand disability. Many of them are people who do not have disabilities or any background in it, but who have worked with people with disabilities or worked with me in particular over the years.”

Ron said, “There are several engineers that have really bought in quickly. Those people that have really bought into accessibility, they have been advocates for me and put me in the right place at [my company].”

Participants also talked about colleagues who served in mentoring roles. Saville said, “When I first started at the company I found a mentor purely by accident. I think she liked my guide dog. We became very good friends. She was a little bit leery of what my skills might be, but she introduced me to a lot of people just because of who she was. . . . I’ve not ever really been in a formal mentoring program. I just seem to pick up the right people at the right time.”

Michelle also discussed the significance of mentors in her current workplace. “People who have been managers and mentors. I’ve always been on the more informal mentoring. I’ve always found it more useful to find people whom I respected and trusted and valued their opinions to form relationships with. I found that to be more effective than just signing up and being chosen randomly by somebody.”
One participant placed heavy emphasis on her relationship with a business partner. Savannah said, “I have a business partner . . . for thirty years. And we’re equal partners. She needed me as much as I needed her. It wasn’t that she was doing me a favor. . . . We realized that we both had very different skills and strengths and weaknesses and that we’d be great business partners. We’re like family.”

Finally, two participants returned to thoughts of the importance of self-reliance, as opposed to relationships with others. Savannah said, “It’s much more about my personality than it is about other people.”

**Factors Motivating Employers to Hire and Accommodate BVI People**

When participants were asked to consider their employers' viewpoints, they felt clear that employer motivations were based primarily on the participant’s own personal characteristics (Table 4.6). Eight participants cited the unique experiences and abilities they could bring as contributions to their employer. Two participants felt that their employer saw value in their contributions in helping the company understand the needs of blind customers.

Three participants cited their strong creative problem solving skills as attractive to their employer, while two participants highlighted their demonstrated self-management and resourcefulness skills. Another participant spoke of the bridge possible between blind experience and technology. One participant emphasized the strong communications skills brought by the blind, while another talked about the virtual nature of the workplace, being able to perform job duties remotely, by phone or computer as important. Finally, one participant talked about the fact that they did not ask for any special accommodations as a condition of employment.
Table 4.6

*Reasons for Being Hired*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Personal characteristics:</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>My unique experience and abilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>My problem-solving abilities</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>My new perspective and understanding of blind customers</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
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</tr>
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<td>My ability to bridge experience and technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>My communication skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The position can be filled remotely, by phone or computer</td>
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<tr>
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<td>I didn’t ask for any accommodations</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Communications &amp; Video Accessibility Act compliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act or ADA compliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>International Diversity Council compliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Within the company:</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Hiring person was part of inclusion team</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>General diversity campaign</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Value within company of what blind people can provide</td>
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</table>

Turning to external forces that helped shape their company’s decision to offer employment, two participants mentioned need for their employer to comply with the Communications and Video Accessibility Act (CVAA), while one referenced compliance with Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act and the American Disabilities Act.
Looking at their organization’s internal dynamics, two participants mentioned their company’s overall diversity and inclusion campaigns. Two participants talked about the importance of an internal disability inclusion and accessibility champion in driving the hiring decision, while another discussed a general understanding of the value blind people can bring to meeting a company’s operational needs.

Eight participants felt that their own unique experiences and abilities were the primary factors that led to their current employer extending a job offer. Henry said, “I think they were first and foremost looking for someone that had worked in a kind of similar environment: Internet, or media or technology or video or mobile or web. . . . I think those are the two things, kind of the expertise and the background, and trying to move accessibility forward in the Internet.”

Michelle added, “It was less about being blind, and more about being a really solid writer. . . . It was kind of before people started thinking diversity. It was more ‘Hey, this is a good employee. There might be some things she’ll do differently, but she’ll mostly take care of that.’” Anthony related, “I don’t think they knew [I was blind]. Basically they hired me because I could fulfill what they needed in the position. . . . Largely if you can come in and do the code, then usually they’re pretty happy about that.” Clara said, “I think it’s because I have the skills to the jobs that they were looking for.”

One participant highlighted strong communications skills as attractive to their employer. Clara said, “For the most part my job is to communicate with people and make sure we’re all on the same page. You don’t have to have eyesight to do that.”

Two participants highlighted the understanding of the needs of blind customers that they can provide to their companies. Clara said, “I think being blind gave me a perspective that’s just
a little bit different than your average college grad candidate. . . . One of the biggest things that people are talking about is listening to customers and understanding customers’ perspective and what their needs are. When you’re designing software, being able to think about how different people use software is important. I bring that to the table. When you’re in a design meeting or something, even if I don’t say it out loud, just the fact that I’m in the room, people will remember that accessibility is an important thing that they need to think about. . . . Having diversity is important for this role.”

Another participant talked about their unique ability to bridge the lived experience of blindness with technology as a way to bring value to their workplace. Emily said, “I could bridge the practical experience with the technology. I may not be a physicist, but I understood assistive technology and how to apply it, what the limitations were and what the behavioral aspects were in terms of the workplace.”

Three participants emphasized their strong, creative problem solving skills as a valuable personal asset. Tristan said, “I believe having a disability makes you a uniquely qualified candidate in a way that other people cannot really appreciate. . . . I’ve come to realize is that there’s a unique gifting that disability creates in a person. One of the key things, and there’s many definite advantages to having a disability, one of them is about problem solving. Problem solving is such an important skill in all corporations today, no matter what level you’re at. People who have a disability are problem solving every minute of every day, so they get really, really good at it. Not only do they get good at actually solving the problem, but they get good at thinking of ways to solve it that no one has ever thought of before.”
Two participants pointed to their self-management and resourcefulness skills. Saville said, “That was, I think, the best lesson I learned from that first position. You will be responsible. You will manage your work. I think they saw that in me.”

One participant credited the virtual nature of the workplace as an important success factor. Emily related, “The other thing that helped for me is the fact that so much of our work is done remotely. I will often work with people for weeks or months where they don’t realize I have a disability.”

Another participant felt that not asking for any special accommodations helped pave the way for her current successful employment situation. “The accommodations, I didn’t ask for any. . . . I brought assistive technology with me and over the years they paid for it. But I had it with me because I knew how to use it and was used to it . . . . If you can’t figure out what your accommodations are and how to get them, you don’t have any business working in corporate to be honest, or anywhere.”

Two participants cited their company’s need to comply with CVAA, as important factors motivating their employers. Henry said, “I think initially, the legal department was motivated because they saw the CVAA. Saw that we fell squarely in the middle of all things relative to that law. Legal started to raise [awareness of accessibility issues] and then our product and technology chiefs . . . and then once we created it, or were in the process of creating it, they asked, ‘How do we turn this around and really use accessibility as a component of innovation?’ . . . . I think Legal drove it and then they started to see good branding, good PR, innovation, and that kind built this momentum even further.”
Another person added, “I would say it’s the stick, not the carrot, that initialized the work here. It was ‘We need to comply with the CVAA, and we need to do it quickly.’ . . . There was a panic: ‘We’ve got to get this done or we’re in trouble.’”

Similarly, one participant brought up Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act and ADA compliance. She said, “There were some regulatory things happening where they thought having some insight would be helpful. . . . I think a lot of companies I see now, it’s because of regulations such as 501 or ADA related things.”

Two participants felt their employment opportunity materialized at least in part because of their companies overall diversity and inclusion campaigns. Savannah said, “My firm is very focused on the International Diversity Council and they’re very focused on diversity today in America, it looks good, it’s sad to say . . . to have a diverse population as well as diversity among potential clients.”

Another woman added, “Well, the first time the reason they were doing it was a general diversity campaign. . . . While they included people with disabilities on other general groups, it became pretty clear that the needs of the disabled communities were not going to be met when you’re talking only about things like low-income service or something like that, that there needed to be more.”

Two participants focused attention on the roles of internal disability inclusion and accessibility champions. Lee said, “It was really a champion that saw people out there, outside of her normal comfort zone. People with disabilities that could do a good job. So I think a lot of times that’s what it takes. It takes a champion. Somebody who is willing to take that risk.”

Finally, one participant felt her specific experience as a blind person was a valuable asset she brought to her workplace. Emily said, “I think initially they created the position because they
saw the value I gave to the company, that in the position I’m in now, that I gave to the company as a member of a task force. They knew they needed expertise. I was part of a task force for the company trying to understand disability related issues.”

**Accommodations and Changes in Inclusivity That Helped**

During the time of employment in their current workplaces, participants have seen changes in the corporate culture and individual behaviors that have increased their feelings of being included, valued, and engaged in fulfilling work (Table 4.7).

Table 4.7

*Helpful Workplace Changes*

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<td>Formation of employee resource groups</td>
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<td>General awareness of accessibility issues</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Peer to peer support: social engagement; allies; partnering</td>
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<td>Accessibility tools and technology improvement</td>
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<td>Importance of accessibility within products grew</td>
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<td>No perceived change</td>
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Three participants talked about formation of disability focused employee resource
groups, while two participants have observed a general increase in levels of awareness of
accessibility issue throughout their companies. Two participants highlighted emergence of direct
peer-to-peer support. One participant described greater levels of overall social engagement,
developing relationships with workplace allies, more encouragement of workplace partnering,
increased opportunities for taking on more challenging work, and higher levels of informal
inclusion.

One participant talked about being solidly integrated into their work team, and
developing a relationship with a mentor who was also a champion of disability inclusion.
Another participant described the process of becoming established as a valued member of the
organization, and the notable improvement of internal accessibility tools and technology in their
workplace.

A participant related that her coworkers listened to and valued her suggestions, and that
they proactively asked what could be done to maximize her ability to contribute. Two
participants pointed to their company’s clearly articulated corporate values of respect and active
mutual support.

One participant observed that sighted employees have become advocates for their blind
colleagues, that her company increasingly encourages all employees to volunteer to serve the
broader community, and that there are proactive efforts to broaden disability inclusion on work
teams through partnering with other companies.

Another participant discussed the creation of an annual companywide disability summit,
while another participant cites a focused emphasis by her employer to make their products more
accessible. Finally, four participants expressed disappointment in the low levels of change they have seen in their workplaces.

Reflecting upon manifestations of these cultural and behavioral changes, three participants discussed formation of disability focused employee resource groups. Saville said, “One of the things, I think, is the rise in the importance of what we call . . . they’re referred to in various titles: employee resource groups, business groups, affinity groups. We have several in the company, one of them being for people with disabilities. It started out as a group that reviewed products and services for accessibility, and to a certain extent it still has that function. External market and for internal use . . . these groups cross-pollinate. . . . I know a lot of people now in the LGBT community, some of whom are living with AIDS, which becomes a disability, which then we can talk about and everybody learns something and everybody’s more accepting.”

Two participants highlighted general increases in levels of awareness of accessibility issues throughout their companies. One said, “Once we got away from diversity meaning EEO and complaint handling, and really managed diversity for what it is, I think that has changed the culture. . . . It’s very obvious that that’s where the company wants it to go, so that’s supported. . . . There’s great support from the top down, there’s great interest in action from the bottom up, and sometimes it gets stuck in the middle, but we work very hard at that.” Henry related to that. “I think certainly the commitment to diversity and disability etiquette training and other things that are available to people probably made it easier. . . . There are diversity requirements for VP level and above and I think that’s gonna push down to director level and above.”

Two participants talked about development of direct peer-to-peer support as evidence of change. Emily highlighted emergence of effective, informal support between coworkers. “This
worked for me. This didn’t work for me. This is how I managed.” Clara said, speaking of internal mailing lists, “That community has really grown. . . . There’s actually been a couple more mailing lists . . . that have started. There’s one for visually impaired women. There’s another one only for visually impaired people. On the main one there’s a lot of other people who are just interested in accessibility and so it’s nice to have our own separate one where when something comes up you can reach out to the folks on that list. That’s been helpful.”

One participant saw increased emergence of nondisabled workplace allies as a significant change. Emily said, “You have to have the allies . . . in the workplace so people are aware to open the door and to know what to say to provide support or know that it’s a responsibility to do so.” Emily has also observed more encouragement of workplace partnering, and increased opportunities for taking on more challenging work. She commented, “I think first, just given the opportunity to have challenges and to work on challenging things. That has helped me a lot, so just even opening the door and saying, ‘Come in, join the team!’ which sounds really basic, but it’s how a lot of people are excluded.”

One participant lauded the way they were integrated into their work team, and the development of a relationship with an informal mentor who was also a champion of disability inclusion as indicators of culture and behavior change. Lee said, “What John did was to pull me into the group, and make me part of the group. And that was so huge, so then people got to know me as a person and not just a blind guy. . . . They just kind of accepted me and that is so huge to get included as part of the team.”

Two participants pointed to notable improvements of internal accessibility tools and technology. Michelle said, “It’s been nice to see that in the past couple of years. . . . They actually decided that they needed to have a strong group focused on accessibility and one of the
results of, obviously, industry groups complaining, the blindness organizations coming forth and saying, ‘This is not accessible, let’s be honest,’ made it so now there’s definitely more focus on ‘We have to make our software usable for everybody. Or work on making it usable for everybody.’” Michelle continued, “Then more awareness was generated, amongst our engineering teams especially, who had never thought about, ‘Oh, you can’t actually use it?’ or, ‘You as a blind user want to have the same good experience as every other user?’ So we’ve been getting awareness and we’re making some traction on improving accessibility. It’s both [internal and external]. They go together, because internally you have to use our software to work here. . . . Some of the people’s jobs rely on it being accessible, and that spreads out externally to the hundreds of millions of people who also need to use our software for them to be successfully employed.”

Anthony added, “They have definitely always put money and feature work into accessibility [into their products], and in the last two to three years they’ve gone to like times ten on that. I don’t know how much of that makes it to the public, but the amount of quest for people to test accessibility, the amount of money and people’s time that have been diverted to accessibility features has drastically gone up since I joined the company, and being someone with a disability, that feels really good. It’s nice to see accessibility often come up as like a first. Someone promotes a feature or an idea, and one of the first questions that’s brought up now is how do we make that feature accessible.”

One participant highlighted being proactively asked what could be done to maximize her ability to contribute. Emily said, “I think being asked, ‘What can we do to help you do your job better?’ Not like I’m not doing a good job but, ‘What can maximize your ability to contribute? Provide you with those tools?’”
Two participants talked about articulation of corporate values of respect and active mutual support. Emily said, “I think having that environment of trying to be a good company and treat people well with respect, and there’s a big push in our company to treat fellow employees like you would your neighbors or your family, I think just having that really civil environment helps.”

One woman noted that sighted employees often become advocates for their blind colleagues, as workplace culture has evolved. “They’re great advocates. I had a former [sighted] intern who went to work for the Governor. They were looking at bringing in an intern who was blind and they said ‘no.’ [My former intern] was irate. She’s just like, ‘This is ridiculous!’ and so I see them going on to be great advocates. . . . I see that over and over again regardless of disability, that people become more aware and then they go around just like, ‘I can’t believe this is happening!’ . . . It’s kind of a win-win. The company wins because they get their employees who are happy and can do their job. People feel empowered to make changes [although they] don’t necessarily face these barriers on a daily basis but realize they can play a productive role, and the environment in general improves.”

Emily added that her employer encouraged all employees to volunteer to serve the broader community. She continued, “Another piece of the work that we do is really promote social engagement in volunteer positions, situations where they’re not coming into the community telling them what they need to do, whatever the community is, whether it’s disability or other, but are going in and saying, ‘What do you need? How can I help you get to the goal you want to?’ It becomes again, a partnering experience. The volunteering feeds back into the workplace as far as inclusion.”
Emily also saw proactive efforts to broaden disability inclusion on work teams through partnering with other companies. “The tie of being a colleague with a disability. I think that’s the most effective thing,” she said. “Sometimes it means partnering with other companies to have people with disabilities who are part of a team, or exposure to organizations like AFB or NFB.” Another participant pointed to creation of an annual companywide disability summit.

Finally, four participants expressed disappointment in the low levels of change they have seen in their workplaces. One man said, “I’ll be honest [not feeling valued and engaged] is something that I struggle with. I think that the focus has not been, at least from my experience, on solving problems that I face. . . . It has not been a ‘me versus them’ mentality exactly, but a ‘you’ve got to do this on your own.’ I experienced a lot of roadblocks along the way, particularly in the area of work tools that I’ve needed. It has made me feel more alienated than I’ve ever felt.”

A woman added, “I would say I’ve never felt included, or, really none of that stuff. . . . I’ve won this award, which is a super prestigious award for women, singlehandedly. . . . It’s a singlehanded process, and it’s never changed about educating people. The light never goes on unless I singlehandedly go educate them.”

**Changes Within the Corporation Due to Interaction With BVI People**

Participants were asked to make observations about the changes in attitudes and behaviors exhibited by key individuals in their workplaces because of what they learned about blindness and employment of blind people. In particular, conversation focused on changes brought about specifically through interactions with the participant (Table 4.8).

Two participants emphasized that they encountered a pre-existing positive mindset towards diversity and inclusion. Five participants observed increased openness to hiring people
who are blind, while two participants saw this openness evolve into proactive advocacy on behalf of inclusion of blind people. Two participants saw this openness manifest in changed perspectives that led to more elements of designing environments for accessibility.

Meanwhile, two participants talked about increased confidence in the capability of blind people to be valuable contributors in the workplace. Two participants saw formation of a more collegial, accepting environment, while one participant observed higher levels of respect for blind people develop.

Table 4.8

*Workplace Changes Due to Interaction With BVI People*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>3 Formation of employee resource groups</td>
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<td>2 General awareness of accessibility issues</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Peer-to-peer support: social engagement; allies; partnering</td>
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<td>1 Opportunities for taking on challenges</td>
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<td>1 Accessibility tools and technology improvement</td>
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<td>4 No perceived change</td>
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Several participants talked about increased levels of comfort felt by individuals who interacted with them as blind people: two mentioned that colleagues became less frightened of blind people, one mentioned the capacity for sighted people to laugh with blind coworkers, while seeing blind people as people.

One participant felt that their colleagues achieved a higher sense of personal fulfillment due to their acceptance of and advocacy on behalf of blind people. Finally, one participant reported seeing no appreciable change in workplace attitudes and behaviors.

Five participants had witnessed increased openness to hiring blind people. Henry commented, “I think they would probably feel that I’ve assimilated fairly painlessly into an environment. I think they would be open to giving it another shot, or expanding the workforce with people who are blind.” Lee continued the thought, “Well, I really hope that they would now not hesitate to hire somebody with a disability, especially blindness. If they saw somebody they felt was capable and had the abilities. I hope that out of this, that stereotype has changed for them, of thinking of limitations with blind people.”

Savannah said, “Yeah, I think they’ve just learned that disabled people can do a lot. . . . I hope that my managers and my senior management [are] more likely to hire disabled people because of me.” One man said, “I don’t know how much I’ve impacted them. They were pretty on fire already at the time when I met them.” A woman commented, “Well, I do think it goes back to people’s original mindset. I don’t know if [my long time business partner] knows any blind people, but she wouldn’t be willing to work with me if she didn’t have the original mindset.”

Two participants said their colleagues have become more proactive advocates for people with disabilities. “I think that familiarity is a big part and I think the other part is that they are
empowered to make changes in their company and in their communities,” said Emily. “I knew a person who was a ham operator and said, ‘We could be putting this out in Braille!’ That was his quote. Or their churches. It’s like they go back to their churches and say, ‘Why don’t we have a ramp? This is ridiculous! I know it’s not required by law, but . . .’”

Two participants observed changes in how their companies set about designing for accessibility. Anthony related, “I work with a lot of artists and designers and something I hear from them a lot is they show me something and I’m like, I can’t see this at all, or I can’t use it or whatever, and they’re like, ‘Oh man! I didn’t even think of that.’ And as time has gone on, they’ve started to design or work in a way like . . . one of our artists started doing contrast testing for the colors he was picking and stuff, and I think he just intuitively started building this notion of like, ‘Yeah, I should think more about not just if it was good for me, but are there like metrics or ways that we can where, building my work, I will inherently design for a broader set of people.’”

Two participants discussed increased confidence in the capabilities of blind people. Savannah said, “I think though, that over time, it’s been thirty years now, [they have] really embraced the mindset that blind people can do anything they want, or disabled people if they put their mind to it.” Two participants had seen a more collegial, accepting environment develop over time. Michelle, who is totally blind, shared, “I remember them thinking it was fine that I was picking out the images, and making slides for executive presentations. They think it’s fine that I help edit videos. And they just think of me as every other employee, which is ultimately what you want to have happen.”

Another participant highlighted increased levels of respect from colleagues. “[People are] just working with me in more of a positive, collegial way,” one man commented, “versus the
‘I’m up here and you’re this blind guy down there that I have to assist or somehow figure out how to work with.’ . . . We’re part of the user experience research and accessibility team. So we have 15 or 20 PhD level researchers that do our user experience testing and all that. In the beginning, all was a curiosity. ‘Oh my gosh! How is this guy even gonna do anything we do? How are we gonna dumb things down for him?’ But over that ten month time that I was trying to figure things out, as I again established myself as not only competent but excellent in certain ways, when I established my credibility, they began to give me a lot more respect. . . . Certainly over the years, my showing that I was not only good but willing to do these 18 hour days that are sometimes required. . . . The ability to establish myself makes them more willing to do what’s necessary on their side and treat me as an equal not as a ‘Oh my, what have we got here with this blind guy?”

Additionally, two participants observed a decrease in levels of fear exhibited by colleagues. Saville said, “I think I’ve noticed that people, first of all they’re more relaxed around people with disabilities. I guess we can be a pretty scary lot some times. At least with me, they’re much more relaxed.” Another woman added, “I think that from working with me they know that blindness is not a scary thing. It’s just something that’s different, and that it’s okay to ask what to do and it’s okay to acknowledge that there are real barriers.” Emily continued, emphasizing the importance of blind and sighted coworkers being able to laugh together, “I think in my case I bring a sense of humor, so being able to laugh at themselves and laugh at me is good.” Emily also noted the increased capacity for sighted coworkers to see blind people as people. “Most importantly, that I’m a whole person, that being blind is one aspect, being a parent’s another aspect, being married is an aspect. Being biracial is an aspect.”
One participant observed sighted colleagues enjoying a deeper sense of personal fulfillment stemming from their involvement with accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities. Tristan said, “Making an impact and a difference in people’s lives is much more fulfilling for most people. I think that’s why they do what they do. . . . A lot of the advocacy and the other things that we do are outside of our core job, so you just don’t get rewarded for it in the corporate setting, in the corporate way. You just have to do it because you love to do what you do and you love to make an impact.”

Another participant had seen no appreciable change in attitudes or behaviors on an organization wide basis. “I’m not sure if it has changed,” she said. “It’s hard to tell. . . . I’ve heard people that aren’t on my team, people I’m not as close with, they’ll be like, ‘Oh, I’m so impressed that you can do your job.’ Somebody told me that one time. ‘I’m so impressed that you’re able to find your way on your computer with ZoomText.’”

Ways Employers Can Benefit From These Changes

Imagining themselves in their employers’ shoes, participants discussed ways they felt employers can benefit from efforts to accommodate and include blind employees in their companies (Table 4.9). Three participants focused on the generally high levels of knowledge, skills, and abilities blind people can bring to the workplace. Another participant talked about strong communications and listening skills. Three participants highlighted exceptional levels of commitment and loyalty demonstrated by employees with disabilities. Three participants shared thoughts about how inclusion of people with disabilities enhances positive impacts of overall diversity efforts: adding new perspectives, experiences, and creativity.

One participant felt that disability inclusion motivated companies to invest more in people overall. Meanwhile, three participants pointed out that inclusion of people who are blind
in the workforce improves the quality of products and services made available to disabled customers. One participant noted that inclusion of blind employees helps an employer establish a position as part of the larger community, while two participants specifically talked about how inclusion of blind people can help increase market share. This corroborates the findings of Cook and Glass (2014).

Three participants focused attention on how this inclusion can help a company in increasing levels of compassion in developing their corporate cultures. One participant specifically mentioned potential increases in a company’s motivation, morale and activity overall. Another participant suggested that inclusion of blind employees can result in fellow employees learning more about people with disabilities, and therefore becoming better advocates for their colleagues. Finally, one participant addressed bottom line considerations by describing a very positive cost-benefit ratio associated with inclusion of blind people in the workforce.

Continuing to think about blind employment from the employers’ perspectives, participants identified ways companies can benefit from efforts to accommodate and include blind employees. Three participants pointed to high levels of knowledge, skills, and abilities blind employees can bring to the workplace. Lee said, “It allows you to tap into really, really smart people that can really help your company if you give them a chance. . . . Any population has people with different abilities and skill-sets. You exclude [racial] minorities, you exclude disabilities, you exclude women, you’re going to exclude a lot of really talented people that could help your company.”
Table 4.9

*Employers’ Benefits from Hiring BVI People*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$f$</th>
<th>Benefit</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Diverse experience and skills, including good communication and listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>High loyalty and commitment to the company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>New perspectives and creative problem solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Improvement of company’s products and sales to blind and other disabled customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Growth of company culture, and lessons in compassion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Increase of market-share</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Motivation for company to invest in people and help them invest in themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Inclusion in the larger community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Increase in company’s motivation, morale, and overall interconnection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Help for company personnel to learn how to value, interact with, and advocate for disabled people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Better cost-benefit ratio for company as a whole</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Emily added, “I think they get to have people who are highly qualified engaged in their companies that might inadvertantly be excluded. . . . I think you have to retain people who are very good who are losing vision associated with aging. I think you can retain people for a longer period of time who have a lot of experience, who can no longer read standard print or can no longer drive. Having those processes in place and being able to communicate them means you can hold on to these folks and use their skill-sets for a much longer time.”

One participant specifically cited strong communications and listening skills. Tristan said, describing skills that blind people tend to develop through their daily, lived experience, “Listening skills is another. Being able to express themselves in a way, because primarily we use voice. We use speech.”
Meanwhile, three participants discussed the value employers can gain through exceptional levels of commitment and loyalty. “Well, first thing comes to mind, and we’ve proven this over and over, is our loyalty,” said Ron. “Once we have a job, we stick around. I think that there was a study on this a few years ago that showed that turnover is lower among employees with disabilities. I think that’s one thing that they can benefit from. The turnover [of some sighted professionals] is expensive, it’s very expensive.”

Henry continued, “I would say, and I think studies prove it out, people with disabilities are gonna be perhaps more loyal, because they know somebody’s gone the extra mile to accommodate, and once they get the accommodation or we get the accommodation, we’re probably less likely to jump from one company to the next. . . . I think that loyalty and retention are probably some of the two immediate returns on investment that they get.”

Savannah added, “My experience is the disabled people who apply for a job, they really want it. They’re highly motivated, they’re willing to take a risk to even show up and apply for a job. They are going to do everything they can to not let you down. The disabled people I see are extremely productive, and super committed, and will work really hard not to let anybody down.”

Three participants saw companies that are inclusive of blind employees usually enjoying positive impacts that enhance their overall diversity efforts. One woman commented, “If they’re a federal contractor, [hiring blind people] added to their numbers in terms of [being] an equal opportunity employer.”

Three participants talked about inclusion resulting in improvements to the quality of products and services. Anthony said, “You should just do it because it gives you a better product. That in general, the diversity of viewpoints just tends to make things better. . . . Rather than work around the designed product to adapt it for a disabled person, design it from the very beginning
so it works for both. It’s almost always going to make it better for the 90% of people who don’t need adaptation.”

Clara added, “One of the benefits that we’re seeing is [projects which meet] government standards. . . . In terms of the bottom line, it makes sense. There are policies out there that require them to make [a product] that works for everyone.”

Another woman pointed out, “It helps the company develop products and services that are easier to use for people who are older, that can become part of activities of daily living that make it much easier to age and play, or less stressful or less taxing. I think they benefit from looking at technology or processes in a different way because people are both addressing it maybe from a more conceptual viewpoint or from using different skill-sets. . . . It makes you look at things differently and I think it makes you serve your customers better because blind people are customers.” Saville said, “If they utilize their current employees wisely, just like our original employee resource group started out . . . a product or service becomes a lot more usable.”

One participant explained that accommodating blind employees helps companies establish positions as a valued part of the larger community. Lee said, “I think it does show inclusion and diversity. And, that you’re really part of the bigger community.”

Two participants discussed increased market share. Michelle said, “It makes products better, it makes marketing better . . . if you’re a company trying to sell products to the broad population of people, your employees should match the types of people who you’re trying to serve.” Saville continued the thought, “A larger market share. If they have people who have any type of disability, blindness included, and they’re trying to sell products and services. . . . I’m also more likely if I know it, to do business with a company that hires people like me.”
Three participants discussed increased levels of compassion within companies striving to develop an inclusive corporate culture. Tristan said, “If a company does inclusion right and they do help others learn to empathize with people who are different than them, the organization as a whole will benefit and grow. If people were to understand each other’s stories, they not only would build stronger relationships within the company because people are able to understand what we go through. . . . Psychological safety is one thing that [our company] has been known to have identified as making successful teams. Championing and celebrating disability is one significant way to do that.”

Clara related to that, “I think one of the things I feel really good about coming to my job every day is that most people don’t know anybody who’s blind or visually impaired. Before I was blind I didn’t know anybody blind. . . . In terms of company culture it shows . . . it’s just like having a more diverse community. Now if one of my co-workers wife or whatever loses their eye sight, then they have somebody that they know that they can talk to. That’s happened. I’ve had people reach out to me, not necessarily on my team, but within the company, being like, ‘Hey, I’m losing my eye sight. What should I do?’ or, ‘My daughter’s losing her eye sight,’ or whoever. Just to be able to have that, you know, somebody who’s working and it’s cool to be able to be there for other people who are going through that.”

One participant added, “It breaks down all kind of barriers for everybody and kind of brings [people] up short a little to think, ‘Okay. Maybe all of my preconceived ideas need to be looked at a little bit more.’”

Another participant felt that inclusion of blind people increased motivation, morale, and activity in the workplace overall. Savannah said, “I think if employers included blind and disabled people . . . they would increase their current activity.” Discussing reasonable
accommodations, she continued, “The cost for equipment is a great investment because it is good for morale, it is good for the whole company and the team players to see other disabled people.”

One woman talked specifically about the cost-benefit ratio associated with companies providing reasonable accommodations. Michelle pointed out, “I think that the cost of accommodations are . . . the cost of those are negated from the value you get from the employees. And in many respects, when you look at the big picture . . . to spend 100 dollars on a screen reader is pretty insignificant when you think about people who spend thousands of dollars for mothers to go out on maternity leave, or fathers to go out on family leave.”

The Most Critical Factors for Successful Employment

In the first part of this section I discuss critical personal factors participants believed necessary for making it possible to be successfully employed as a blind or visually impaired person in a large corporation (Table 4.10). In the second part of the section I present the factors from the corporate point of view—what the corporation needs to have in place to help BVI have successful employment (Table 4.11).

First, focusing on factors related to blind individuals: one participant mentioned self-responsibility and independence, mobility training, technical expertise, and ability to quickly learn and use accessibility tools. Two participants pointed to self-confidence, two participants to excellent people skills, and two participants to networking abilities. Meanwhile, two participants talked about self-advocacy, and one participant high importance of being proactive. One participant discussed the ability to make fun of one’s self, and accepting responsibility for making others feel comfortable with blindness.
### Critical Characteristics for Successful Employment of BVI People: From Individual Participants’ Points of View

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent people skills and networking ability</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability, openness to growth and learning, and flexibility</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-responsibility, independence, self-confidence</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training in mobility, accessibility tools</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-advocacy, and proactive stance</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-motivation, and ability to find and do what you love</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to ask for and accept help, or to talk about any problem</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenacity</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical expertise</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to make fun of self</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease in making others comfortable with your disability</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to collaborate and be a productive team-member</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One participant emphasized the importance of self-motivation, while another participant discussed importance of the blind employee pursuing work that they love. A participant highlighted adaptability and openness to growth and learning, one participant discussed the ability to accept and learn from failure, while another participant pointed to the importance of flexibility. One participant talked about the willingness to ask for and accept help, while another participant discussed the importance of being open to discussion of challenges. Finally, one participant talked about the ability to collaborate, while two participants emphasized the importance of tenacity.
Delving into the critical factors that make successful corporate employment possible for members of the blind community, participants made the following observations concerning characteristics related to blind individuals. One participant noted the importance of self-responsibility and independence, focusing on ability to travel independently. One man said, “Certainly mobility training. Again, could be number one too. You gotta get out the door. . . . I wanted to be the best mobility guy in the world. I wanted to go all over the place on my own. I got a guide dog, Wolf. He had over a million miles.” He also made the case for exemplary technical expertise “Tech just puts you on the playing field,” Ron continued, “You have to be a tech expert. You can’t just be an average user. I think we have a bit of a higher bar in the tech world and in our tech abilities to be good employees because it’s the way we’re gonna get things done, and you have to be fast and efficient. It’s highly competitive out here and my ability to read with a screen reader set at 100% or 90% is one advantage I have over my sighted colleagues. . . . Anywhere we can get an advantage in tech is one of those ways where we can get an advantage over our sighted colleagues. Tech is huge, huge, huge. It’s not gonna get you to the CEO job. It’s just gonna get you in the door. It’s not the magic button, but is just like the high school degree was 100 years ago, and a college degree was 40 years ago, and a Master’s degree is now. It’s just that base bottom line thing.”

Two participants pointed to self-confidence as a trait essential for success. One man said, “Certainly, employers are looking for confident workers. That’s one of the first things we look at, is people who know that they’re the best.” Tristan added, “Kind of related to freedom, is that in-grown ethos almost, if you will, that nothing is impossible. Not limiting one’s self to the kinds of work that they can take on, even if it seems impossible.”
Two participants emphasized excellent people skills. Lee said, “First, I think you have to have really, I think, really, really, really good people skills. . . . The norm is people are not going to be blind. They maybe haven’t ever interacted with a blind person. They have a lot of misperceptions of the abilities of blind people. I think the first thing you have to be, is you have to have really good people skills.”

Meanwhile, Tristan shared, “Communication skills. Being able to communicate not only what your needs, which I’m actually not that great at, but also, being able to be friendly. I mean, you and I both know that doing awesome work isn’t the thing that oftentimes advances you in your career. It’s part of it, and maybe just the table stakes, but it’s not the thing. That’s an area we don’t teach in college, we don’t teach in high school. We don’t teach people how to be friendly and confident and all those kinds of things. Very important skill, in my view.”

In addition, two participants highlighted networking abilities. Ron said, “A network. That’s such a cliché, but it goes along without saying too, getting out there and doing things.” Clara continued, “For me, what’s helped me be successful is to talk to people. I think that’s also been a hard thing for me to do as a blind person. It’s hard to know who’s in the office or finding people’s offices can be really tough, and going up and introducing yourself to people can be really hard because you don’t know where they are. It’s been hard, but there’s ways to get around it. You can schedule coffee with somebody and make them come to you, or meet them in the cafeteria or whatever. There [are] ways around it. Networking has been a difficult thing for me, but it’s also been the most important thing for me as well, in making sure that I’m successful.”

One participant focused attention on the need for blind employees to be proactive. Michelle said, “I go back to people who are blind. They need to be able to be proactive
employees, problem solvers. They need to be able to address and negate any concerns that employers, or managers, or coworkers have to their blindness. They need to be able to talk about it. They need to be able to work around things. You know, I know that as a blind person it’s my job to make sure that people aren’t impacted negatively because I can’t see. . . . As a person who can’t see, it’s part of my responsibility that no one I work with, or for, are thinking ‘Oh, Michelle can’t do this because she can’t see.’ or, ‘Michelle’s not going to do a good job because she can’t see.’ That can’t be a factor. If I’m going to mess up something it’s not going to be because I can’t see, it’s going to be because I made a mistake.”

One participant recommended, “You have to be able to make fun of yourself.” He continued, “It’s your job to make your work colleagues comfortable with your vision, or your lack of vision, your blindness. . . . They’re not blind. They’re not supposed to discriminate. They’re supposed to include you and all that but in our world you can only mandate so much of that. People have to include you in their networks, include you in their work circles. . . . You have to have a good time with yourself and a good time with people. You have to put people at ease.”

Another participant discussed the importance of blind people pursuing work that they love. Tristan said, “Finding the thing that you love to do, because it’s easy to do something and potentially be good at it, but for long-term sustainability, you have to love what you do. Part of the reason for that is that on any given day, when you wake up, you may not feel like doing what you’re doing. If you already are ambivalent about it, I think you run the great risk of trying to jump ship or not being able to get through that period. If you love what you do and it just jives with you, then I think you have much greater long-term sustainability for what you do. You’ll pour your heart into it, and you’ll do a much better job, I think, as well.”
Meanwhile, one participant talked about the importance of adaptability and openness to growth and learning. Lee said, “Sometimes I think, as blind people, we want to be very fiercely independent and [believe] we can do it all ourselves. Nobody does it all themselves. And so I think you have to kind of be willing to grow and learn and challenge yourself and educate yourself.” One participant also suggested blind people accept and learn from failure. Ron shared, “Just put your head down and bull forward and go. Don’t worry about the consequence. Don’t worry about being embarrassed here and there. Don’t worry about tripping and falling in the physical way and in the symbolic way of stumbling as you go. My failures in life, I could write a book, I could write ten books on the failures in life. . . . Those are painful, painful things when I think back, but those are also the things that got me right here. Fail fast is one of the terms we have here—get your failures out of the way. Start building. Get this nonsense out of the way so we can pave the way to succeed. Just get out there, do things and don’t sweat the failures . . . so fail fast. Don’t stress the fails. Put your head down. Don’t worry and just go. You’re gonna fail. You’re gonna stub your toe. Get out there and go!”

Another participant highlighted flexibility. Saville said, “For the employee I think it’s willing to be flexible, to try stuff. Again, it isn’t always going to work.” Lee emphasized, “You have to be willing to be able to reach out and take help from others, too. That’s the way a work culture works. In most cases you’re in a team setting where you need to work and collaborate with your colleagues.”

Two participants discussed the value of tenacity. Tristan said, “I think tenacity is the key one. It’s very easy to give up, get frustrated, get discouraged.” Lee added, “And then I think you have to be tenacious. You have to figure out a way to make it work. It may not be the way it
works for everybody else. It may not be the traditional way it works . . . but you have to make it work in your particular setting. You have to be tenacious to get to the answer.”

Turning to success factors related to employers, six participants focused attention on the necessity for companies to provide reasonable accommodations and accessible productivity tools needed for the job at hand (Table 4.11). Three participants specifically talked about the importance of the accessibility of internal digital resources, while one participant made the distinction between accessibility and usability of these resources.

Table 4.11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provision of “standard” accommodations and tools so employee can be productive</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education of upper management regarding disability</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility of internally used services and products, including software</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change to more positive attitudes about what blind people can do, with increased acceptance of diversity, and broadened inclusion</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assurance of usability of internally used services and products</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provision of methods for getting help with inaccessible parts of work</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement of “buddy” program for people to help each other</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness and compliance, including measurement and reporting, of disability laws and regulations</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in abilities, skills, and experience of blind people</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability etiquette training</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement of accepting and inclusive culture</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patience with learning curve per disabled individual</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to look at people as individuals without prejudgment</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More aggressive recruitment of blind employees</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alertness to unintentional barriers of accessibility</td>
<td>1</td>
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</table>
Along these same lines, one participant pointed to importance of establishing processes of obtaining assistance with addressing inaccessible workplace elements. Additionally, one participant suggested the value of a workplace “buddy” system.

Another participant highlighted the importance of employer awareness of and compliance with disability related laws and regulations, and the value of establishing and reporting on disability inclusion metrics.

Two participants pointed to the importance of educating upper management regarding disability, while another participant highlighted importance of a company’s belief in the capabilities of blind employees. In addition, one participant cited importance of disability related etiquette training in the workplace, one participant pointed to cultivation of an accepting and inclusive corporate culture, while one participant counseled that employers should practice patience with regard to the learning curve of disabled employees.

Another participant recommended that employers intentionally provide opportunities for increasing levels of responsibility, and to also strive to change workplace attitudes about capabilities of blind people. One participant felt it important that employers consciously look at blind people as individuals without prejudging, and show a willingness to take risks in order to increase diversity. Finally, one participant advocated for more aggressive recruitment of blind applicants, while another participant encouraged employers to proactively seek to identify and eliminate unintentional barriers to inclusion of people with disabilities.

When discussing the success factors related to employers, six participants highlighted reasonable accommodations and accessible productivity tools. One participant commented, “At a minimum, this is just table stakes, is access to information and tools. What I mean, access to information and tools in a way that promotes productivity. What I mean by that, is having the
software tools, first of all, being fully accessible and usable in a way that makes someone with a
disability able to be completely productive. . . . So not doing a first release and then waiting eight
months later to work on accessibility that kind of thing. . . . Whenever you open a new
application or you launch a new tool, all that needs to be thought about at the same time.”

Another added, “I think employers need to make accommodations…. The money it costs
for JAWS or a big monitor or things like this, they saw as really just the standard tools.” JAWS
has been one of the most commonly used screen reading software programs for visually impaired
people.

A woman said, “Logistically, an important thing for a company to do is to make sure that
the blind person has the software [or] any other assistive devices that they require in order to be
successful. . . . One of the challenges with that is that they always want us on the latest and
greatest version. . . . That doesn’t necessarily work well with [assistive technology]. It’s also like
I get shamed if I’m using an earlier version [that works well with assistive technology].” Another
woman added, “Both the company and the Rehab Department [VR agency] should provide
equipment. If the department of rehab would be willing, and not only when you’re 19, when
you’re 45. If you want to change careers or you want something else.”

Along similar lines, three participants focused attention on accessibility of a company’s
internal digital resources. One man said, “What employers need to do, they definitely have to
consider the accessibility of their internal products and services. When I come across an expense
to file, it’s completely inaccessible. What’s the first thing from purchasing people or our finance
people, is, ‘How many blind people are [working here]? Do we really need to worry about
making this accessible?’ I said, ‘Well, there will never be anybody here who’s blind if we don’t
have our stuff accessible.’ I think there’s a lot that companies need to do to make their internal systems accessible.”

Tristan added, “Understand the requirements for accessible products and services. That’s part of the overall delivery of being able to make something accessible, but there’s also a component to it, which is ask and be open to hearing what people have to say about what it takes to make things accessible [for] everyone or none. It’s the sentiment that products and services should be maximally accessible for everybody. Achieve productivity parity. . . . Proactively prioritize the creation and maintenance of accessibility solutions. That goes to the fact that, a lot of times, you could build a system that’s accessible, but if it’s not maintained, it’s not going to be good for anybody.”

Another participant made a distinction between accessibility and usability of internal resources. He pointed out, “It’s really easy to develop a tool . . . that is accessible. Usability is a whole different story. You can make a tool accessible and possible to use, but unless I am going to be able to use it in an efficient way, I won’t be able to reach the potential that I can reach, and be successful in the job that you hired me to do.”

One participant highlighted the importance of processes blind employees can use in obtaining assistance with inaccessible workplace tools. She said, “They need to develop internal processes to make sure that what they’re using, especially on the technology side, adheres to accessibility guidelines and make sure the purchases [of technology] do as well.”

Another woman said, “You don’t need everybody in your firm to love you. You need like two people to love you. It’d kind of be cool if there was a buddy program, or something you can go to that isn’t just HR. They’re not just doing it because they have to and it’s the law. They’re trying to make you feel comfortable and welcome, but that’d be kind of cool.”
Meanwhile, Emily said, “I think they need to take responsibility to educate themselves and to apply the laws that are out there. I think that they need to communicate actively with the community. I don’t think the issue is that blind people aren’t prepared, I think the issue is the company’s not prepared. The onus is on them to become more prepared and to do a better job and to include people in the decision making so they can do a better job.” Emily continued with thoughts on reporting on disability inclusion metrics, “I think companies need to be aware of the laws. I think companies need to count what they’re doing, measure what they’re doing. . . . They can’t just put a program in place. They’ve got to measure the effectiveness or efficacy of the program.”

Two participants highlighted education of upper management regarding disability. One participant said, “I think the most successful factors that would make employment, corporate employment possible or successful for disabled people, is educating their senior management.” In addition, she discussed the value of etiquette training. “I’m a mix on that,” she continued. “I think yes, that would be very helpful. What I’m mixed on is, when it still sets us aside, it makes us stand out, or seem special. . . . The truth is we are, we are different. If you do . . . initial training or sensitivity awareness, [it should be] proper etiquette training. Then if only 10% of the people embrace that, then an employee would feel much more welcome.”

In the same vein, one participant focused on the importance of an accepting and inclusive corporate culture. He said, “Establish a culture of inclusion. . . . Creating a work environment that is welcoming to people with disabilities. So, the welcoming piece is welcoming from all sorts of angles. Celebrating disabilities. Those two are actually different. Because you can be welcoming but not really . . . you can be open to it, but not really say, ‘Hey, these people are really cool because of this disability.’”
Another participant urged employers to show patience with their blind employees’ learning curves. He said, “I think the number one thing companies have to bring to the table is a willingness to spend a little more money up front, that a lot of times a visually impaired person or a blind person, they probably are going to have a harder time getting onto something new. And if they do it the same, they probably won’t be able to follow the same process as everyone else, but after the learning curve, they will find a rhythm, a system, a method that works for them, and they will become just as productive as anyone else. . . . Companies skip over a lot of good employees because they’re worried about someone being slower, and it’s like yeah, but a good employee is a huge value no matter what. Three years into that person’s employment, two extra weeks it takes to create a system or get their own way of doing things down, that cost disappears over the course of three years of good employment, right?”

One participant noted the importance of opportunities for increasing responsibility. “The other thing an employer has to do is give you an opportunity, I think. An opportunity to take on some responsibilities, an opportunity to succeed.” Another believed, in addition, companies must strive to change workplace attitudes about blind people’s capabilities. She said, “The other thing is just trying to change your attitude about [blind people being able to] do things? . . . I do mostly think it’s mindset of the people hiring them.”

A woman asked that employers look at blind people as individuals without prejudging. She said that employers should be, “Providing the accommodations, listening to the employee, not saying, ‘This worked for [this guy], so it’s going to work for you,’ being willing to get rid of what’s called the halo effect. ‘I can’t have another one of those because the first one didn’t work.’ Being able to take the overall groupings out of human resources and look at people
individually. We don’t always have time to do that in the business environment and I think it’s a little bit sad.”

She added that employers need to take risks in order to increase diversity. “For the employer it’s being willing to take the chance there may not be an exact fit in the job.” She continued, “If the individual has 90% of what you’re looking for, then let’s try it and see if we can manage that other 10%.”

Additionally, one man advocated more aggressive recruitment of blind job applicants. “I think more aggressive recruiting. Employers absolutely need to get over that fear they have of all of us.” Finally, a participant discussed the importance of employers striving to eliminate unintentional barriers. “They need to engage people who are blind or have other disabilities or from other communities in their decision-making to understand where there’s maybe unintentional barriers.”

Summary of Chapter

For each major category which emerged, the participants provided a depth of comments, with no inhibition talking about the situations which were helpful or barriers to being successfully employed, as a blind person. Their biographical narratives provide a wide range of perspectives, from sight impaired to fully blind from birth, the variety of early experiences and employment which helped shape their success in employment, as well as the range of people who were key individuals for their development and success.

The most frequent definition of successful employment was that it had to provide significant compensation, with enough to spend flexibly, and work which was something they wanted to do. Most of the participants mentioned their involvement in organized groups and sports. As far as helpful training and experience, about a third emphasized the importance of
learning early how to use technology and accessibility tools, learning to do many different things, and having a strong sense of agency.

Key individuals who helped prior to employment included family members, friends, as well as vision and mobility coaches for most of the participants. Three found self-reliability most important. During employment the most helpful people were typically managers and senior management. The most helpful individual characteristic for getting hired into a successful position was a combination of unique experience and abilities developed due to the person’s blindness. Four out of the eleven participants cited their excellence in people skills and networking ability as a critical factor in being successful.

Six of the participants found their companies already open to hiring disabled people. All participants said that it was essential for their success to have their companies provide standard accommodations and tools so that each person could be as productive as possible.

In Chapter V, I interpret the findings, presenting the nine emergent themes. I also describe my personal journey through the dissertation process, what lies ahead, and recommendations for future research. In Chapter VI, I conclude with specific stories to illustrate the meaning of these results and recommendations for action.
Chapter V: Interpretation of the Research Findings

Looking at the findings presented in Chapter IV, I saw nine clear and instructive themes emerge. These factors emerged as key not only because the largest number of participants brought them up, they also brought out the most animation and enthusiasm in participant’s voices. Interviewees spent more time talking about these nine areas than others, which typically received mentions rather than elaboration.

Emergent Themes

Although many factors relating to employment of blind people emerged that deserve attention, particular focus on the nine strongest themes may provide leverage points that can lead to creating significant increases in future blind employment. The nine themes I found when analyzing the interviews were:

(1) Monetary compensation
(2) Achieving a sense of agency
(3) Acquiring high value knowledge, skills and abilities
(4) Support from family
(5) Participation as part of a team or group when young
(6) Supported and valued by immediate supervisor
(7) Employer accommodations and accessibility
(8) Inclusivity as a core value of senior management
(9) Disappointment

First, and strongest, monetary compensation was clearly the primary way participants defined their successful and meaningful employment. To reach this point in their careers, participants described the different experiences that had led each of them to a strong sense of
personal agency, and the knowledge, skills and abilities they developed to get where they are now. Many reported the importance of having had family support, and early opportunities they had to be part of teams and groups. In the workplace, many participants talked about the importance of their relationships with immediate supervisors, how accommodations and accessibility challenges were handled, and the usability of work tools. Many also, when speaking from the standpoint of employers, described the importance of inclusivity as a core value of senior management, along with openness to hiring BVI people. Several also described their experiences with disappointment along with the perseverance and tenacity it took for them to move forward in spite of the challenges.

**Monetary Compensation**

All eleven participants said that monetary compensation was a key factor in viewing their position as successful.

Joe said, “I’m not just making ends meet. . . . Being able to go out with friends and being able to have some amount of financial free will to make purchases, do activities that could be out of the realm for someone who’s just barely employed.”

Although participants noted many factors contributing to their feelings of being successfully and meaningfully employed—interesting work that makes a difference, respect from colleagues, opportunities for professional growth—the bottom line remains the ability to earn a more than livable wage.

When thinking about creating pathways to successful employment for greater numbers of people who are blind, stakeholders should keep this in mind. Which industries offer career paths into higher wage jobs? What knowledge, skills, and abilities must blind people acquire to qualify for entry into and upward mobility along these career paths?
On the surface, desire for higher wages may seem obvious. But, one must keep in mind that being blind carries extra expenses. Blind people often must purchase additional equipment and technology for independent living and leisure. Blind people must often hire sighted people to provide supports like driving and reading inaccessible print materials. Blind people sometimes live with related medical conditions that require expensive medications, treatments, surgeries and hospitalizations. Completing academic degrees or training courses may take longer, requiring additional tuition payments. So, when looking at successful employment for people who are blind, cash is king.

Remarkable for its absence is discussion of the importance of compensation in the existing research literature. This lack of attention to salary highlights the predominant focus by stakeholders on the supply-side model, described in Chapter II, in which government and nonprofit vocational rehabilitation agencies measure success by counting job placements, rather than evaluating quality of the work experience. State vocational rehabilitation agencies typically count and report on closures: instances in which consumers have become employed. Very little attention has been paid to salary levels, benefits, and career advancement opportunities. The importance of compensation in the work lives of people who are blind could prove fertile ground for further research. Human resource and organizational behavior theory may help explain and lead to additional findings.

Agency

All eleven participants described how being successfully employed had helped provide a sense of agency, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. Without this, the position would not be worthwhile despite high monetary compensation.
Savannah told me, “I fell down a set of stairs. So that’s what led me to go to the orientation center for the blind . . . that changed things for me.”

Asking participants to think about experiences in their early lives that laid the groundwork for successful employment, I was struck by a number of stories I began labeling as transformational experiences. However, as I dug deeper, and reread my interview transcripts and memos, I came to realize that although there were indeed some remarkable stories of transformational experience, these were really markers of participants’ achieving a sense of agency. Tristan talked about learning to do freestyle bicycle stunts as a blind teen, but he also talked about learning to use tools for woodworking, and early experiences with computer programming. Saville talked about jumping horses as a young blind girl, and also talked about the importance of attending summer camp each year with sighted children, and of singing in choirs from an early age.

Henry talked about attending specialized training courses over two summers while in high school, and coming to the realization his blindness skills were not as advanced as they needed to be. Savannah, in her comments above, talked about a trigger event, falling down a flight of stairs, that led her to an orientation and training center for the blind, which led her to a variety of experiences: rock climbing, downhill skiing, that helped her develop a sense of agency.

Every participant discussed, in one way or another, developing the belief that they have control over their destinies, that their decisions mattered, and that they could shape their own reality. This development of a sense of agency took many different forms. This may be the most important insight gleaned from my dissertation work. All stakeholders interested in preparing
blind people for successful and meaningful employment should be thinking about how to create opportunities for blind people to develop this sense of agency.

Like compensation, the existing research into blind employment issues, summarized in Chapter II, does not emphasize the importance of the development of agency revealed in my participant interviews. Although lack of attention to this crucial factor is distressing on the one hand, on the other there may be opportunities for significantly improving employment outcomes for people who are blind by focusing stakeholder resources and attention on creating greater levels of agency in young visually impaired individuals.

**Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities**

Eight participants considered part of being successfully employed was due to their knowledge, skills, and abilities. Anthony told me, “I don’t think they knew [I was blind]. . . . If you can come in and do the code, then usually they’re pretty happy about that.”

When asked why they thought employers were motivated to hire them initially, the first response from a large majority of participants was prompt and specific: the ability to do the job. This is a heartening response: to know there are a number of major corporations who are viewing blind people as potential valuable contributors to their operations, rather than as special cases to be hired for charitable reasons.

Looking back at the importance of compensation in the definition of meaningful and successful work, one can urge blind people and their families, educational institutions, and vocational rehabilitation agencies to focus on acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for obtaining employment in occupations providing opportunity to earn greater than a livable wage. At the same time, efforts should be made to widen the circle of employers who
understand that with the proper training, tools, and techniques, blind people can bring the knowledge, skills and abilities required in the 21st century workplace.

The research literature discussing the new demand-side model of vocational rehabilitation services, summarized in Chapter II, supports my interview participants’ focus on valuing their knowledge, skills, and abilities as primary motivation for their employer’s job offers.

Employers are willing to hire PWD if doing so can meet a particular operational need (Luecking, 2008). Participants clearly stated that their employers hired them primarily for the knowledge, skills, and abilities they brought to their workplace.

As discussed in Chapter II, the research by Fong et al. (2001) uncovered the new emphasis by VR on demand-side employment models to help PWD gain and keep employment. The participants in my research study reinforced this concept and movement to prepare PWD for jobs that employers need to fill. Part of this process should include VR identification of these positions, and act as liaison to modify the positions so that PWD can fill them. This also supports research by Luecking (2008).

Family

Eight participates indicated that family support was essential to their successful employment. Henry said that family helped him gain “Self-realization that we could work with this blindness thing, and that there would be no reason, other than what other people put up in terms of barriers, why I couldn’t be as successful as their other three boys.”

In reflecting upon the most important relationships prior to entering the world of work, family shone through as far and away the most significant. Those participants who talked about family highlighted characteristics they had gained because of their family relationships: (1) high expectations of themselves arising from the high expectations held of them; (2) sense of
responsibility and accountability; (3) advocacy skills; and (4) valuable contributions to their
sense of agency. Implications for future research and actions by interested stakeholders fall into
two broad categories. For those children living within a robust family structure, more attention
should be paid to educating the family about their pivotal role, and the actions they should take
regarding high expectations, advocacy, requiring contributions to the family through chores, and
allowing the freedom to experiment, fail, succeed, and thus develop a sense of agency.
Stakeholders should also think about how to create these conditions in the lives of those blind
children who are not living within an effective family structure. Both categories provide fruitful
ground for future research and identification of evidence based promising practices.

My participant interviews revealed family, and particularly high expectations held by
family, to be extremely impactful in their employment journey and success. The literature I
reviewed, summarized in Chapter II, does not emphasize this importance to the same degree. The
data I gathered in my interviews highlight the importance of further research in this area.

Teams and Groups:

Six participants described being part of a team or group as having helped them become
successful in corporate employment. Clara said, “I did lots of sports growing up . . . learning
team work.” And Michelle added, “Singing in choirs, it helps you in terms of . . . getting in front
of people and expressing.”

As reported by Visagie et al. (2017), blind children in their focus groups experienced
high anxiety and frustration when their blindness prevented them from taking part in certain
games and activities. My interview participants found ways to participate on teams or in groups
with sighted peers, mainly due their own initiative and tenacity. Participants did not mention
high levels of anxiety around these issues, but rather focused on the positive impacts they derived from these activities.

According to Augestad (2017), social support, friendship, and independent mobility are essential for good mental health of all children. My interview participants, through a variety of circumstances, enjoyed social supports and friendship, and gained the ability for independent mobility, thus ameliorating the possible depression and anxiety issues faced by many young blind people.

Over half of my interviewees spent considerable time speaking about their participation as part of an organized team or group. Participants referenced lessons learned such as teamwork, communication skills, discipline, and accountability.

Participation in teams or groups appears to be both causal and correlational. Although participants gained valuable experience in skills through participation in groups, this participation also indicates presence of other important success factors. Interviewees talked about being proactive, self-advocates, demanding the right to be included in a group. Participants also mentioned familial support for their participation. Both advocacy skills and family support systems support successful employment.

As described in Robert and Harlan’s 2006 research (discussed in Chapter II), individuals with physical impairments face barriers to societal integration in ways similar to the barriers to race and gender equity, recognition, and social integration (Robert & Harlan, 2006). Participants found involvement in teams and groups afforded unique opportunities for overcoming this barrier, by being integrated into groups including nondisabled peers.
**Immediate Supervisor**

When describing the key relationships in the workplace supporting their current successful employment, six participants mentioned their immediate supervisors. Lee said, “[He] really saw me as somebody who had some capabilities where other people had seen me as somebody who had a disability.” A majority of participants pointed to direct supervisors. The implications of this focus by interviewees manifest in two ways. Blind employees have a better chance of success if their immediate supervisor has a positive, supportive, problem solving attitude and values their direct reports’ contributions. So, when seeking an employment opportunity, blind job seekers should pay particular attention to who their direct supervisor will be. At the same time, employers wishing to leverage differences by inclusion of blind and low vision staff should select and develop supervisors to be successful in their roles of creating successful employment situations for people who are blind.

Participant interviews pointed out the importance of the relationship between a blind employee and their immediate supervisor, supporting the evidence reported in Chapter II which stressed the importance of workplace relationships with immediate supervisors and coworkers (Hernandez et al., 2008).

**Employer Provision of Accommodations and Accessibility**

Employers should provide reasonable accommodations and accessible tools, according to six participants. For example Tristan said, “Having the software tools, first of all, being fully accessible and usable in a way that makes someone with a disability able to be completely productive.”

Quite simply, participants clearly articulated that successful employment is not possible if the work environment is not accessible. In a computer based world, blind people must be able to
efficiently use the tools required to deliver on their direct work accountabilities. At the same time, the digital environment in the workplace, time sheets, employee benefits information, internal chat rooms, bulletins, cafeteria menus and the like, must be accessible for a blind person to feel they are in a successful and meaningful work situation.

For those senior leaders who have made a commitment to greater inclusion of people who are blind in their organizations, making their digital environments accessible and usable should be the first priority. Hiring a blind person to do a job that requires use of a tool that is not accessible is akin to hiring a person in a wheelchair to work on the 100th floor of an office building with no elevator.

Interview participants emphasized the importance of accessibility and accommodations, provided by employers, as necessary factors in successful employment, supporting the research discussed in Chapter II which emphasized the importance of this creation of a good fit between the blind person and the work environment (Barclay et al., 2012; Ward et al., 2009).

**Senior Management**

The data acquired from my study aligned with the literature reviewed in Chapter II that found more successful development of inclusive cultures when top management teams understood the positive correlation between hiring PWD and their business objectives (Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt, & Kulkami, 2008). Five participants agreed with the importance of senior management support.

For example, Henry said, “Our whole senior management team here is very supportive. . . . Diversity and inclusion: they’re not only looking at it from an employment perspective. Diversity is a multi-threaded strategy.”
Four other participants spoke very strongly about the importance of senior management in their successful employment. It is clear in the narratives of these participants that support of inclusion from the top of the organization chart is essential for creating an environment allowing successful employment of people who are blind.

The clearest signal received from these observations directs blind job seekers and those supporting them to intentionally target employment with companies demonstrating direct, active support of inclusion at the CEO level.

Past research (Fong et al., 2001) showed that successful disability employment at an enterprise level depends on commitments from a company’s leadership. This diversity effort could begin at any level, but needed to be fully supported from the top, and incorporated at all behavioral and conceptual levels. This concept was fully supported by my participants’ comments.

**Openness to Hiring BVI People**

Asked about changes in workplace processes and practices resulting from what their organization has learned through interactions with blind employees, particularly themselves, five participants believed there was increased openness to hiring additional blind employees within their corporations, and this has aided in their successful employment. Again this is a heartening signal that change is underway at some of America’s major corporations. That initial experiences of employing blind people can be built upon, leading to increased opportunities for others to follow.

Participants felt that their employers would be more receptive to hiring additional blind people because of positive experience and increased awareness. Their observations echoed research showing VR systems as an important resource in the increase of employers’ education
and positive inclusivity actions (Emmett, 2008; Fong et al., 2001; Hernandez et al., 2008; Luecking, 2008).

**Disappointment**

In fact, the most significant response, although not a majority theme, that emerged from the question about changes in feelings of engagement is one of disappointment, voiced by four participants. Tristan said, “I experience a lot of roadblocks along the way, particularly in the area of work tools that I’ve needed. It has made me feel more alienated than I’ve ever felt.”

This may indicate that the pace of change is slower than desired by participants, or that their own successful employment is episodic rather than part of an intentional transformational effort by their employer. Increases in a sense of being valued on the part of blind employees could prove an important marker that employers could track as they continue their inclusion efforts.

In addition to pointing out a lack of change in their workplace, participants expressed a great degree of disappointment in their workplace experiences. Some of the disappointing workplace elements described by my study’s interview participants echoed research summarized by Harlan and Robert (1998) which discovered that BVD felt their work environment was hostile in some way. Their participants reported experiencing harassment and feeling like outsiders, as did some of my participants.

**Early Work Experiences**

The interview topics that generated numerous, energized responses are of course deserving of our primary attention. However, I think it is also very instructive to note a few topics that did not elicit significant levels of response. This occurred when participants were asked about experiences early in their work life that helped support their current success.
When discussing early work experiences, there was a wide range of responses, with only two participants mentioning a few different factors. I reached two conclusions after rereading interview transcripts and my memos. First, the corporations in which my participants worked early in their careers did not have mechanisms in place specifically designed to support new employees having disabilities. Secondly, my participants possessed a level of tenacity and perseverance that allowed them to forge ahead without a clearly defined path. And finally, and perhaps obviously, one needs to get started somewhere, and the mere fact of becoming employed and having workplace experiences, no matter what they are, prepares one for growth and development as a professional.

Again, my review of literature relating to employment of people who are blind, summarized in Chapter II, revealed a lack of data about the role that early work experiences play in career success of blind adults. My participant interviews also showed no clear thematic focus on early work experience. This indicates to me that there are not clearly defined avenues leading to early work experience that young blind people and their families can follow. Furthermore, participants in my interviews created their own successful career paths through tenacity, despite not having access to meaningful early work experiences. The role of early work experiences in having successful careers deserves further research.

Changes in the Workplace

When participants were asked to reflect upon changes that had occurred in the workplace that increased their feelings of inclusion, engagement, and being valued (Table 4.7), no major theme emerged, although three people mentioned the formation of employee resource groups as helpful. This seems to indicate that their workplaces are in the early stages of developing into a
proactively inclusive, leveraging difference culture. Future research could revisit this question over time, to understand how these workplaces have begun this journey.

My interview participants had not observed significant positive changes in their workplaces. In particular, participants pointed out a lack of progress in eliminating socially constructed barriers.

The research of Naraine and Lindsay (2011), summarized in Chapter II, regarding barriers to social network formation was also supported by my participants’ responses. The lack of social acceptance of blind people in the workplace is based on attitudes and emotions of the nondisabled. Even though more organizations now pay attention to both diversity and inclusion in some way, skills for and expectations or norms about social inclusion are usually not part of training, feedback or other talent development and performance management systems, so are often ignored by employers. While some organizations do suggest skills and norms for team inclusion, norms for effective social inclusion of PWD including blind people has only been explored by a handful of large organizations that have employee resource groups focused on disability (Naraine & Lindsay, 2011).

The participants also provided support for the finding that these persistent, social barriers faced by blind and low-vision employees in the workplace were usually not acknowledged by non-BVI coworkers, leading to social exclusion (Naraine & Lindsay, 2011). According to the participants in my study, BVI still face the leading barrier to disabled employment based on the type and severity of the disability and the lack of fit with an employment environment created by and for nondisabled people. In line with Fong et al. findings (2001), my participants agreed that the top concern employers centered on was the BVI person’s ability to meet production and safety standards. The second concern participants in my study voiced was that employers did not
have sufficient information about hiring and retaining PWD, as also seen by Fong et al. (2001). The employers also needed more education and assistance identifying workplace accommodations and supports for BVI.

**Employee Factors**

Interestingly, no major theme emerged when participants were asked to generalize from their own experience, and comment on the key workplace factors they felt were essential for successful employment from a blind individual’s perspective. Each participant contributed thoughts, and identified a large number of factors, but, with the exception of having excellent people skills and networking ability, mentioned by four participants, no factor was mentioned by more than three participants. My conclusion is that each individual carved out a unique successful employment situation, and that success was primarily based on the factors discussed above: family support, sense of agency, and applicable knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Interestingly, again no clear themes emerged when I asked interview participants to discuss the personal characteristics that led to employment success (Table 4.6). Each individual had created a unique path. At the same time, the literature summarized in Chapter II offers no clear description of personal characteristics associated with employment success for people who are blind. This is an area that calls for further, focused research.

**Surprises Discovered During My Research**

Although I have been deeply immersed in various aspects of blind employment for the forty years since I had my own first work experience during high school, my research still offered up some surprises. First, my interview participants, for the most part, did not gain their successful employment through any sort of institutionally designed pathways, such as school-to-work transition programs, vocational rehabilitation training and placement, or corporate
internship programs. A lot of financial and human resources are devoted to the educational and vocational rehabilitation systems as engines of successful employment for people with disabilities. However, my participants largely forged their own paths without support from these institutional systems.

I conclude that the non-relevance of these programs supports the thinking that a transition from a supply-side VR focus to a demand-side focus can enhance employment outcomes for people who are blind. The VR system has been operating under an assumption: creating early work experiences, preparing PWD consumers for interview processes, and preparing high quality résumés, will lead to PWD employment.

This proves not to be the case. Resources should be diverted to better understanding employers' operational needs, equipping BVI to meet those specific needs, and facilitating creation of accessible, inclusive work environments allowing employers to utilize talents of blind people.

The next surprise was the importance of a sense of agency that participants developed during their youth. This clearly stood out as an essential theme. However, our institutions do not appear to be focusing resources on creating this sense of agency, but rather on more tactical areas such as basic skills training, resume writing, and mock interviews. It seems that the focus is on mechanics rather than on mindset. More care should be given to cultivating a strong, positive mindset within young blind people. These efforts might include mindfulness training, techniques of positive psychology as reflected in the work of Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014), conquering shame as discussed by Brené Brown in TED talks and her books (2012), growth mindset as reflected in Carol Dweck’s work (2006, 2012), and experiences designed to instill confidence and a sense of agency.
Finally, I have learned that the barriers of corporate culture, lack of accessibility and accommodations, and dearth of understanding and awareness of blind people’s capabilities on the part of employers is more deep-seated, pervasive, and pernicious than I had imagined. In *Beyond Race and Gender* (1991), R. Roosevelt Thomas clearly articulates that structural forms of oppression and domination are based on many identities: socioeconomic status, educational attainment, regional accents, and even allegiances to particular sports teams. However, the book does not include disability in this analysis. As outlined by Robert and Harlan (2006), and Essed (1991), social scientists have heretofore not viewed disability as an ascribed characteristic, and thus disability has not received appropriate consideration in the literature of structural oppression to date. Perhaps this is why I found myself surprised by the evidence of such deep-seated stereotypes, discrimination and misperception on the part of employers.

My participants have truly been trailblazers and have relied on their own tenacity and creativity, and the fortunate appearance of individual champions in their workplaces, rather than on intentional inclusion efforts at an enterprise level.

These surprises point out some misconceptions that I held previous to undertaking my research. First, that successfully employed blind adults could generally credit institutional supports such as school-to-work transition programs and vocational rehabilitation training and placement services as key elements in their success. Upon reflection about my own employment journey however, I did not receive significant supports from institutions, forging my own path much as my interview participants did. I now believe I felt that I was the exception, and now I realize I may be part of a larger pattern wherein institutional supports do not play significant roles. This may be particularly true for high-level professionals. Perhaps institutional support plays more of a factor in different types of job categories.
Secondly, I assumed that workplaces were farther along the path towards creating inclusive and accessible environments and cultures. This may stem from my own experience leading the Lighthouse for the Blind, which focused on inclusion of people who are blind. In addition, my major exposure to corporate employers over the past fifteen years has been to members of USBLN during their annual conferences. These are corporations that have made formal commitments to inclusion of people with disabilities. Representatives of these employers at the USBLN conferences tend to be diversity and inclusion leaders. Many CEO’s and other top executives make strong statements about inclusion, so the impression I received as a conference attendee has been one of great strides forward being taken. However, my interview participants, most of who are employed by USBLN members, paint a different picture of reality in the trenches.

I believe this gap between official statements and actual practice indicates that efforts to transform corporate cultures are in the early stages. Strong diversity and inclusion statements by companies’ leadership are seen as essential to successful transformation efforts, but they are only one piece of the puzzle. Efforts must cascade through each organization, become operationalized in policies and practices and become part of “the way we do things around here.” This takes time and sustained effort. However, aspirational statements are key. The fact that many U.S. corporations are saying the right things is encouraging. Future research on how corporations can accelerate and solidify these change efforts should prove fruitful.

Finally, I underestimated the importance of a blind person’s sense of agency, of their mindset around creating their own reality. Although I knew from my own personal experience that tenacity, perseverance, and creative problem solving are important, I don’t believe I fully
understood that for blind people, an extraordinarily strong psyche and self-confidence are required for successful employment outcomes to occur in large corporations.

Because extraordinary qualities are currently required for blind people to achieve employment success, and because it is unrealistic and unfair to expect the majority of blind people to be extraordinary, we must turn attention to eliminating barriers. Structural barriers to employment exist which currently require these extraordinary qualities: inaccessible technology, lack of role models, employee perceptions and misperceptions, and VR focus on the supply-side. By eliminating or reducing these barriers we will allow a broader cross-section of the blind community to achieve employment success.

**Directions for Future Research**

This dissertation journey has been enlightening and fulfilling. Not surprisingly, the process has provided more questions than answers. I trust this work will in some small way move the dialogue forward, and help create more inclusion of people who are blind in the workplace. In light of my understanding that much attention must be focused on structures and systems, I share thoughts about some potentially fruitful areas for future research, by me and by others.

Corporate culture: How does inclusion of people who are blind and low vision enhance overall cultural transformational efforts, particularly in corporations, and how do BVI people and their sighted peers benefit from this participatory work?

Vocational rehabilitation: How do the significant resources of the vocational rehabilitation system come to bear within a new demand-side model, wherein blind people are viewed as valuable, unique contributors to their employers’ organizational success?
Families, schools and communities: How do the social institutions in which blind children and youth live their lives provide opportunities for development of a strong sense of agency and high self-expectations?

If progress can be made in these three areas we will see a world of no limits for people who are blind.

**Summary and Conclusions of Chapter**

In this chapter I have delineated the nine themes that emerged from the analysis and implications of the data from the interviews:

1. Monetary compensation
2. Achieving a sense of agency,
3. Acquiring high value knowledge, skills and abilities
4. Support from family
5. Participation as part of a team or group when young,
6. Supported and valued by immediate supervisor
7. Employer accommodations and accessibility
8. Inclusivity as a core value of senior management
9. Disappointment

The participants’ responses strengthened and provided more information and depth to what had been uncovered in previous research, as described in Chapter II. The research itself supplemented and increased what I knew and had assumed when I began leading AFB’s restructuring.

What was surprising, however, was that my participants did not become successful in their employment due to any institutionally designed pathways. An extremely significant
discovery was that the importance of sense of agency established in my participants’ youth was very high. The importance of role support during formative years is clear.

Critical to the ongoing movement to assist BVI in attaining successful employment, in their own terms, are the numerous barriers still in place within corporate culture, the lack of accessibility and accommodations, and tremendous absence of understanding and awareness of what BVI can bring to the corporation.

Changes in My Perceptions

In the process of walking the path of my dissertation journey, I have experienced changes in my perceptions and attitudes. Primarily, I have come to clearly understand that the most significant barriers to employment for people who are blind are rooted in deep-seated structures. This means that truly changing the employment landscape for blind people requires transforming relevant structures: changing the predominant corporate cultures of differentiation to that of integration, turning around society’s beliefs about blindness, shifting the vocational rehabilitation’s focus from the supply-side to the demand-side, and raising levels of expectations of blind children by parents and educational institutions.

The identity formation model is the most useful theoretical framework in making these transformational changes. This model provides a way to view and analyze barriers faced by blind people as imposed by the way society is structured, rather than attributing the barrier to a characteristic inherent in the blind person. This is where attention and focus must lie in order to change the landscape.

At the same time, the leveraging difference model is extremely useful as it specifically focuses on the corporate environment and employment, providing a positive, forward-looking roadmap for change.
Although I knew intuitively that new approaches were necessary to create real change in this area, I now understand with certainty that we must get at the roots of the employment barriers and intentionally go about large-scale transformational change through deliberate processes.

Only in this way, will blind people enjoy equal opportunities to flourish in the world of work, and my interview participants will no longer stand out as remarkable exceptions.

In the next and final chapter I illustrate my conclusions and present recommendations for action.
Chapter VI: Implications for Leadership and Change

Examining the experiences of this study’s participants provided reinforcement of my beliefs concerning successful corporate employment of BVI, and accented the critical factors to be considered in leadership and change. Also important, this research has added new insights for me.

My Dissertation Journey, Integrating Practice and Research

When I began work on my dissertation proposal in 2015, I lived in Seattle, was CEO of the Lighthouse for the Blind, and served on the Board of Trustees for AFB. Two years earlier in 2014, Carl Augusto, who had become CEO for AFB in 1991, informed the board that he intended to retire in the spring of 2016. In preparation for a CEO transition, AFB hired a consulting firm, Wellspring, to assist us in understanding possibilities for AFB’s future. Wellspring conducted an environmental scan and interviewed numerous leaders in the blindness field, including myself in my role as Seattle Lighthouse CEO.

Wellspring’s conclusion in short was that AFB, in order to achieve an optimal future, should strive to position itself as the pre-eminent thought leader in the blindness field. With this in mind, the board of trustees empaneled a search committee, which chose a search firm to help identify the next CEO.

With advance knowledge of this upcoming process, I had consulted with my wife and a few close associates, and decided to put my name forward as a CEO candidate. I resigned from the AFB board and submitted my application. After a rigorous nationwide search, the search committee offered me the position in January of 2016. Within a few months I became President of AFB and moved myself and family to New York City.
The foremost responsibility for me as the new CEO was to lead a strategic planning process designed to maximize AFB’s positive impacts on the lives of blind Americans. After moving from Seattle into corporate housing in Hell’s Kitchen, New York City, and then to a tiny apartment in Brooklyn, I began the work of aligning AFB with the future state of pre-eminent thought leadership. In June of 2016 I worked with our board chair to create a strategic planning advisory committee of the board of trustees. We identified and hired a strategic planning consultant in July, and created the strategic planning roadmap in August. After gathering data from internal stakeholders in September and October, our board of trustees gathered to review and synthesize the input from AFB staff and trustees. A very robust, and authentic gathering of input from external stakeholders followed in December 2016, and January and February 2017. Over sixty thought leaders in the areas of blindness, other disabilities, education, healthcare, technology, and advocacy were interviewed. It was during this external stakeholder phase that I began identifying interview participants for my dissertation work.

On March 1, 2017, the AFB board of trustees reviewed the external stakeholder data, and three possible models for AFB’s future as a thought leader. The following day, 50 attendees of our annual leadership conference spent three hours receiving a top-level overview of internal and external stakeholder input, and reviewing the three models. Fortunately for our process, both our board of trustees and conference attendees clearly supported the same model: systems change through creation and transfer of knowledge.

This model identified three key focus areas: education of blind children, employment of blind adults, and supports for elders experiencing visual impairment. AFB would strive to influence public policy and institutional practice in these three areas in order to eliminate institutional barriers to inclusion and create a world of no limits for people who are blind. This
would be done by creating deep understanding in these three realms, and transferring the knowledge to decision-makers and influencers by building relationships with key organizations, institutions and individuals.

Between March and June 2017 senior staff and the strategic planning advisory committee met to refine concepts and language. It was during this phase that I began interviewing my participants. The board of trustees adopted the strategic plan in June 2017, and I concluded my interviews shortly thereafter.

In the same month, my wife and I moved from New York to Arlington, Virginia, as AFB headquarters relocated from Manhattan, having been based there since our founding in 1921, to the Washington, DC area. This move was driven by our new systems change model, and the mapping of our most important key relationships, the largest percentage of which were physically located in the Metro DC area.

These two processes, completion of the AFB strategic planning process and finishing my interviews of successfully employed blind adults, melded together in a powerful synchronicity. As AFB’s senior staff discussed the concepts of barriers to employment and opportunities for AFB to work with various stakeholders to improve employment outcomes for blind adults, I was also speaking to individuals about their lived experience in this space. I was hearing firsthand about the challenges and frustrations, the joys, triumphs, and successes. My organizational planning was animated and informed by my academic research: one sphere of activity gave me energy and insights for the other.

As I began reading my interview transcripts, writing memos, identifying themes, and capturing insights, AFB’s senior leadership team and I were taking the newly adopted strategic framework, focus areas, and objectives and creating an implementation plan. In the employment
arena this has led us to create several new initiatives: a blind leader development program, designed over the long-term to place more blind people in leadership and decision-making roles across sectors, and an employment summits initiative, where we will convene stakeholders interested in improving employment outcomes for people who are blind in facilitated dialogue across the country over a number of years. These summits will allow us to gather data about each stakeholder group: employers, vocational rehabilitation, nonprofit training and placement programs, and the blindness community. At the same time, we will facilitate dialogues that will help stakeholders come to agreements and commit to accountabilities that will create greater career opportunities for people who are blind, thus helping each stakeholder group achieve its own employment related objectives.

The design of the blind leader and employment summits initiatives has occurred as I have been drafting the final chapters of my dissertation. Summarizing and describing the lived experiences of my interview participants has given real life and meaning to the program design work. The importance that my interview participants placed on relationships with supervisors and senior management injects true excitement into the prospect of placing more blind people into these leadership positions. The importance of proper accommodations and workplace accessibility, possession of the correct set of knowledge, skills, and abilities, and essential nature of personal agency for employment success that participants highlighted give me tremendous hope that our employment summits can really move the needle in employment outcomes by increasing the understanding and coordination of the various stakeholder groups who share interest in creating more workplace inclusion for people who are blind.
Personal Growth and Change

The parallel activities of leading AFB’s strategic planning and plan implementation processes while conducting my research and writing my dissertation, have led to significant personal growth and change. The AFB planning process is the second I have led, the first, at the Lighthouse in Seattle was based on Jim Collins’s book, *Good to Great* (2001). The AFB process was based on the Drucker Institute book, *The Five Most Important Questions You Will Ever Ask About Your Organization* (Drucker et al., 2008).

These guides were chosen with brisk implementation in mind. Both books outlined steps to be taken in transforming an organization; each suited the organization I was leading for different reasons. *Good to Great* researched companies that had significantly outperformed competitors, identified common themes leading to success, and gave guidance on how to implement change. For instance, defining a Big Hairy Audacious Goal to focus on, providing humble, consistent, focused “level 5 leadership.”

The Lighthouse for the Blind is primarily a manufacturing organization, and many of the companies studied *Good to Great* were at least in some ways similar. When I arrived at AFB, which is primarily a research and policy organization, *Good to Great* seemed less of a fit. The Drucker Institute (2008) book approached transformational change in a much different way, providing a framework that was very applicable to AFB: defining mission, stakeholders, what these stakeholders valued, and how to deliver those values.

The latter process, focusing on thought leadership and systems change, dovetails in powerful ways with my doctoral research. I am internalizing the understanding that doing more of the same, with greater intensity and more resources will not solve the problems of employment for people who are blind. Instead, my sacred duty to the people I serve is to think
strategically, to gain deeper understanding, to engage stakeholders and nourish relationships. As a lifelong “doer,” the thought of stepping back, setting aside the to-do list, and spending the bulk of my time thinking, planning, and communicating is a bit scary. I love to check items off of my daily task list. There is security in sense of accomplishment in this mode. However, I have come to understand that the best use of my knowledge, skills, and abilities lies in the realm of influencing systems. I am excited to learn more about how others are accomplishing significant systemic change. At the time of this writing, I am reading *Forces for Good* (Crutchfield & Grant, 2007), which profiles twelve U.S. nonprofits that have achieved large-scale systemic change by engaging and mobilizing government, business, nonprofit, and individuals. I look forward to becoming an effective systems entrepreneur.

I intend to bring to bear all that I have learned thus far about employment of people who are blind. In particular, I have had a very unique experience as one of the few blind CEO’s leading an AbilityOne (2018) producing agency, the Lighthouse for the Blind in Seattle. In this model, the majority of employees were blind, making this a nonintegrated setting, a model contrary to current vocational rehabilitation Department of Education policy.

However, there were many lessons learned in my time in that role which can help inform my future work. For instance: the essential nature of all work systems being accessible; the importance of centralizing accommodations budgets; the need for intentional inclusion in social aspects of the workplace; the need for remedial training to ameliorate gaps in education and training; the resilience, creativity, courage and skills of blind employees; and the intense satisfaction that arises from putting all of the right pieces in place leading to successful employment outcomes.
What Lies Ahead

As the President and CEO of AFB I have truly unique opportunities to become an effective systems entrepreneur and an instrument for real change in the lives of people who are blind. My greatest opportunities lie in creating and maintaining space for implementation of AFB’s strategic plan. This includes transforming the focus and composition of the board of trustees, establishing a clear knowledge creation agenda focused on education of blind children, employment of blind adults, and support for elders experiencing visual impairment.

Our focus on education of blind children and employment of blind adults meshes directly with my dissertation research. Blind children who receive strong blindness skills training have greater chances of successful adult employment. The school-to-work transition ages are crucial in the process.

My dissertation research focused primarily on people entering the workplace as a blind or visually impaired person. These findings will inform AFB’s policy and action research for years to come. The fact remains, however, that the majority of blind people are over 65, and that most became visually impaired as part of the aging process. Even so, with careers lasting longer and people staying in the workforce longer, changing careers later in life, research exploring employment of older blind individuals seems a natural extension of my dissertation work.

We recently created a public policy and research institute, and will be creating a national level advisory board to help make sure we are aligned with our community’s needs. The Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness, the foremost peer reviewed journal in the blindness field, which we have published since 1907, is now part of this institute. We have a huge opportunity to increase JVIB’S impact, and will begin partnering with Sage Publishers in January of 2019. I am
hopeful that some parts of my dissertation work may pass muster with the peer review process and appear in JVIB.

We are in the beginning stages of designing an ongoing blind leader development initiative, geared towards helping blind people achieve formal leadership roles across sectors. As my participants pointed out, decision makers in the workplace who had exposure to blind colleagues are more likely to be inclusive of additional blind people. Our working theory in blind leader development is that by facilitating placement of more blind people in leadership roles we can accelerate and amplify this inclusion through exposure. Perhaps most exciting of all is our annual AFB Leadership Conference, which allows us to bring thought leaders and decision-makers from across sectors into a space for dialogue and creation of action plans in alignment with our strategic focus areas.

Personally, I plan to join the National Speakers Association upon completion of my dissertation to hone my abilities to influence through public speaking. I also am thinking about enhancing development of deep, meaningful relationships with organizations by creating residency situations, in which other senior AFB leaders and myself can embed ourselves within partner organizations for a period of time, while bringing leaders from these partners into residency within AFB.

Although not part of my dissertation research, I would like to learn more about the rationale that preserves historically black colleges and universities, tribal colleges, and Hispanic-serving institutions. I think there would be a strong analogy found there that could provide guidance to nonintegrated employers. The question should be how to maintain and grow employment opportunities in specialized settings while also growing employment opportunities for people with disabilities in mainstream employment.
My Advice to Parents of Blind Children: What I Have Learned

It is easy for me to imagine an AFB Leadership Conference in my future where, after one of our keynote session, I am approached by a couple and have a conversation like this:

“Mr. Adams,” the young wife said. “Thank you for including us in this conference. My husband and I have a little boy, just turning two. He is totally blind. We have signed up for services from the state, and we are trying to learn everything we can about how to give him what he needs, and we think things are going pretty well, all things considered.”

“But,” the husband continued, “We are very concerned about what happens later. What about college? What about a job? A career? We just heard the amazing things your keynote speaker said about her life as a blind person, and so we have more hope than we did when we walked into the conference this morning.”

“Could you possibly talk with us, and give us your thoughts on what we should be doing?” the wife asked.

“Of course,” I said, “I would love to. Are you here for the whole conference? How about breakfast tomorrow morning at 7:00?”

Over breakfast the next morning, I learn a little bit more about the family: the blind toddler, the sighted older brother and sister; the grief and panic experienced at the initial diagnosis; the attempts to come to terms with the situation and move forward with raising their youngest child to be happy and healthy.

I started out by letting them know their young, blind son was a lucky boy indeed. He was born into a stable family, with two loving parents who had the emotional resilience, resources and desire to do what was best for him.
“Your goal is to raise your blind child as you are raising your sighted children: to give them the support and opportunities to develop in an age appropriate way, and achieve the milestones of human development.

“This may look a bit different for your blind child, but then you know it looks different for each of your first two children as well. Everyone has different aptitudes, interests, and characteristics. For instance, when your sighted children began walking, and then running, they began exploring and getting into anything and everything in the house. You should make sure your blind child has the same experience.

“He will learn to use a long, white cane as a tool for independent travel. You have seen lots of blind people traveling throughout this conference hotel, gracefully and independently.

“So, you must make sure your blind child has a cane in his hand, that he is out on the playground just like your other children when they were four and five years old—playing, scraping his knees, arguing with other kids in the sandbox about who had which toy first.

“When your blind child is in middle school, and other kids are meeting at the mall to go to a movie, you need to make sure he is right there with them—taking the bus, or Uber, or a taxi, with his cane in his hand.

“You will need to pay particular attention to literacy. I am sure your sighted children knew their letters by the time they reached kindergarten. They were surrounded by print from the time they were born—alphabet blocks, the writing on the cereal box on the breakfast table, signs and billboards along the roadside, the Sunday paper on the coffee table. You will have to be very proactive in creating a Braille-rich environment so your blind child is surrounded by the code he will use to read and write.
“We know that alternative skills of blindness are essential for blind people to become successful, satisfied adults.

“There is a concept called the expanded core curriculum that you will need to embrace. It says the blind kid needs to learn everything the sighted kids do in school, plus nine additional elements that will equip them to grow and develop into adulthood. These elements include Braille, independent travel, use of assistive technology, self-advocacy and career exploration.

“Let’s talk about the career piece a bit,” I continued. “The cold, hard fact is that 70% of blind adults are not working. That is about double the percentage of the general population that is not in the workforce. This number has remained at that same level for decades. Sensing their alarm, I went on to give some reassurance. This does not mean that your son can’t enjoy a fabulous career in whatever field he chooses. There are successful blind engineers, professors, auto mechanics, aerospace machinists, lawyers, CFOs, CEOs, entrepreneurs, restaurant owners, artists. You name it.

“In fact, I just completed a dissertation for a PhD in Leadership and Change, which involved me interviewing eleven blind adults who are successfully employed in corporate America, and I am happy to share with you some important insights I gained from talking with these folks.”

“That would be great!” they exclaimed in stereo. “Jinx!” the wife said to her husband.

“The blind adults I interviewed for my dissertation emphasized the fact that their families held high expectations of them: equivalent to their sighted siblings. This means simple things like chores. If your children are expected to contribute to the family in this way, this must include your blind child. You may need to develop some alternative techniques in order for him
to do chores, but that is also a learning lab for the creative problem solving he will engage in all his life.

“Several participants mentioned that they made conscious decisions that they would live independently as adults, and not stay at home with their families. This indicates that this is, to some degree, considered a viable option for blind people. This notion of staying dependent on you should not cross your son’s mind. You should raise him with clear expectations that he will grow into an independent, self-sufficient adult just like his brother and sister.

“Your job will become increasingly challenging as your son reaches the teen years. This is the time when sighted kids break away from their families in various degrees, begin to individuate, spread their wings, chart their own courses.

“In my interviews I came to realize that this process of individuation may be the most crucial factor in successful future employment. Nearly all of my participants can point to an event, or set of experiences that let them feel in their bones that they could be an independent person with the agency to determine their own future.

“So, you must take care to make sure your blind child has the opportunities for these experiences, which can take many forms—participation in outdoor adventure like rafting or hiking; being a member of a sports team or choir; attending a summer camp or residential blindness skills training program. The main point is that your son must have the lived experience of flying free in some fashion at the same age that sighted kids are having these crucial, formative experiences. Actual early paid work experience did not feature prominently in my interviews, but experiences of independence, involvement, and engagement with others featured as essential.
“I must reiterate here the importance of blindness skills, which he should be learning all along. He must be able to travel independently to the same degree as his sighted peers; he must be able to read and write in Braille. He must be a true master of assistive and mainstream technology. The workplace of the future will require people to feel that using technology is as natural as breathing. I have two and three year old sighted nieces and nephews who know how to navigate an iPad or iPhone. Our blind kiddos need accessible devices in their hands at the same ages sighted kids do.

“At age fourteen your child will be eligible for services from VR agencies funded by the Department of Education. These agencies’ main focus is supporting people with disabilities, including blindness, to gain employment. They can provide significant resources. I would recommend your son sign up for VR services and take full advantage of what they have to offer.

“I will say, however, that none of the blind adults I interviewed gave more than minimal credit for their success to the VR system. So, please do not count on these services to help your child accomplish his employment goals.

“So,” I said, “this all sounds like pretty tough sledding I am sure. But, here is some exciting news. There are employers out there who will be clamoring for your son’s attention, who will be seeking him out and recruiting him to become part of their organization. If you and he do all of the things you need to do, and he is ready to enter the world of work with excellent blindness skills, mastery of technology, an ingrained feeling of confidence and sense of agency, and a wide range of lived experiences, he will be able to write his own ticket.”

“How so?” asked the wife, with excitement and hope in her voice.

“Well,” I continued, “there are a small but growing number of companies out there who understand that including people with a wide spectrum of knowledge, skills, abilities,
characteristics and experiences in their organizations gives them a competitive advantage and can help them achieve their goals and realize their vision of the future.

“Employers say their greatest challenge is finding, attracting, and retaining talent. They are looking for people who can contribute to their success in the current and future workplace. People who are creative problem solvers, people who know how to work collaboratively in teams, people who know how to listen and know how to communicate clearly. They are looking for people who can bring unique perspectives and ways of viewing the world. These are all strengths your son will be developing as he lives and grows as a blind person.”

“How will we know which companies are running this way?” the husband asked.

“Well, during my interviews a number of clear indicators became apparent. You want to look at companies who have a clear, strategic commitment to diversity and inclusion, and that disability is specifically named in their inclusion efforts. A book I read while preparing to do my interviews, The End of Diversity as We Know It: Why Diversity Efforts Fail and How Leveraging Difference Can Succeed (2011) by Martin Davidson, does a nice job of laying out the type of framework these exemplary companies may be striving to create.

“A good place to start is looking at the membership of the Disability-In. These are companies that have made formal commitments to inclusion of people with disabilities. Disability-In offers their members a self-assessment tool, the Disability Equality Index, and they publish the results. Take a look at the Disability-In website and the list of companies who have scored 100 on the Disability Employment Initiative (DEI).

“You will want to find companies with clear statements about disability inclusion from top leadership, the CEO and board of directors. You will want to see that the company has an internal employee resource group devoted to accessibility and disability issues.
“When you find these companies, then you can find out if they have a track record of hiring people with disabilities, people who are blind in particular, and if there is evidence that these folks have received support for their professional development and been given opportunities for advancement within the organization.

“Right now, if you look hard, you will find a small number of companies who can show these indicators of disability inclusion. By the time your son is ready to entertain job offers, there will be many more, because leveraging difference makes business sense.”

“Wow!” the wife said. “This is really incredible. To think that our son will have such great opportunities. I bet the people you interviewed for your dissertation were amazing!”

“Well,” I said, “they each have their own amazing story. Four or five of them are here at the conference. Would you like to meet some of them so you can hear their stories firsthand?”

“That would be absolutely terrific,” the husband said.

“Okay, let me settle the check and let's go meet some cool blind people,” I said.

**Trailblazers Guide to Employment Success**

A few weeks after the imagined leadership conference above I was asked to be a guest on a podcast focused on blindness related issues. Our topic was employment, and the pernicious unemployment number of 70% of blind adults not having the opportunity to participate in the workforce.

After laying out some of the research findings from our AFB public policy and research institute, I was asked: “If you could wave a magic wand and wish for one change that would move the needle on blind employment, what would you wish for?”

“Based on everything I've learned so far, I wish America’s business leaders would proactively include people who are blind in their companies. That CEOs of America’s
corporations would embrace diversity, inclusion and leveraging difference as core business strategies. To have them understand that, by bringing people with the widest variety of experiences and perspectives into their organizations, they can deliver greater value to their customers, employees, shareholders and the broader community. And, that one way to accelerate this type of change in their organizations would be to include people who are blind in their thinking: this highly educated, highly motivated, talented, uniquely skilled and severely under-tapped pool of talent.

“Everyone involved and interested in increasing employment opportunities for blind people can do their parts. Families can hold high expectations, schools can effectively teach the expanded core curriculum. Young blind people can be given opportunities to develop independence and confidence. The VR system can focus more efforts on understanding and meeting employers’ operational needs.

"But, if employers are not intentionally identifying and eliminating barriers to inclusion, are not intentionally creating inclusivity in their companies, we will not see the types of large scale transformation needed. Failure to do so continues to squander the incredible human resources within the BVI communities.

“Rather than pushing blind people down an employment path with no defined successful destination, we can instead pull blind people along the path into jobs that are meaningful and important to employers and to society.”
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Appendix A: Afterword
Appendix A

Afterword

After you read Dee's memo (see Preface), you skim the dissertation report to learn more. You remember having recently seen an impeccably dressed young woman, striding confidently across the corporate campus, masterfully working with a golden retriever guide dog. You remember wondering if she was an employee, a vendor, a customer, or a contractor.

After reading Dee's memo again you send her and Lynn an email, asking to schedule a visit to Lynn's department to learn more and meet the remarkable BVI employees you hadn't previously known about. Lynn responds immediately, inviting you to join her team for lunch the next day.

The following day, as you approach the building which houses Lynn's department, you notice a small sign, in print and Braille, near a section of lawn next to the entrance: "Guide Dog Relief Area."

As you enter the building and walk down the main corridor, you see a man walking in front of you, talking on the phone. When you see him reach out to touch a sign on the wall, you then notice the long white cane in the man's hand and realize he is blind. He deftly reaches down directly to the door knob for Lynn's department and confidently strides in.

As you walk in, you are greeted by Lynn's administrative assistant, Andi, who is wearing glasses but has her eyes closed. She reaches out to shake hand with unerring precision, welcome you to the department, and takes you to Lynn's office.

You talk with Lynn for a few minutes about Dee's memo and the research report. She is happy to have your interest and answers all your questions candidly. She explains that Andi is
using a special set of glasses with a video camera connected to a sighted trained agent who can provide visual information as needed.

Then Lynn gives you a tour of the department, introducing you to the team, and letting them show you the other various tools they each use to do their work even when they cannot see it.

Some use refreshable Braille displays and speech synthesizers simultaneously. Some only use speech output, while others use screen magnification, both with and without speech.

You see several white canes leaning in the corners of cubicles, a few guide dogs quietly resting, and stacks of Braille documents on a few desks. You overhear someone listening to a message come in on their phone, at a speech rate you find incomprehensible.

Prior to this experience, you may have had hardly any concepts of the types of tools, technologies and blindness skills that blind and visually impaired employees are now able to use at work.

Gathering for lunch in the conference room, you see sighted, blind, and low vision colleagues navigating the buffet line, in a spirit of cooperation and camaraderie. You notice JC, who you've been introduced to, getting some assistance from a colleague in loading his plate, laughing as he listens to the choices of food available.

During a lively lunch conversation you learn of some of the creative ways this team had made adaptations and accommodations so each person could contribute their talents fully to their shared work. They've also had a chance to read the research report you've seen, and talk about their own journeys with blindness and employment. Lynn also comments on how many ways she sees new levels of creative problem solving, perseverance and resiliency every day. You are impressed.
You begin to better understand how intentional inclusion into the workforce of people who are blind could enhance company-wide efforts to leveraging difference: how people who are blind, through their lived experience can bring a unique set of tools and perspectives to the fore.

You want to learn more to understand how to build upon this departments' progress. JC recommends you speak directly with the author of the research report you've just seen, Dr. Kirk Adams, current president of the American Foundation for the Blind. JC describes how passionate Kirk is passionate about helping employers discover the possibilities of intentional recruiting and hiring from within the BVI communities. He gives you Kirk's email address, kirkadams000@gmail.com then encourages you to reach out.

After lunch, you decide to send Kirk an email. He replies immediately. You set up a time to talk.

Author's note to readers: do, please, email me anytime at kirkadams000@gmail.com. I would be very happy to talk with you about this research and possibilities!
Appendix B: Acronyms
Appendix B

Acronyms

ADA The Americans With Disabilities (1990)
AFB American Foundation for the Blind
BVI Blind and Visually Impaired
CI Collaborative Inquiry
CVAA Communications and Video Accessibility Act
DEI Disability Employment Initiative
JAWS Job Access With Speech screen reader
JWOD Javits-Wagner-O’Day Act (1938)
LPA Life Positioning Analysis
NFB National Federation of the Blind
NRTC National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision at Mississippi State University
OD Organizational Development
ODEP Office of Disability Employment Policy (within U.S. Department of Labor)
OSERS Office of Special Education & Rehabilitative Services (within U.S. Department of Education)
PET Position Exchange Theory
PWD People With Disabilities
RSA Rehabilitation Services Administration (within U.S. Department of Education)
STEM Sciences, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
USBLN U.S. Business Leadership Network
VR Vocational Rehabilitation
Appendix C: Scenarios to Consider
Appendix C

Scenarios to Consider

You have a vision for the future of your company—to be the best, to deliver products and services that address people’s problems and fulfill their needs in innovative, delightful ways. To run a business that maximizes resources, operates in a sustainable way that contributes to the healing of our planet and strengthens our communities. That changes the world.

You plan, organize, and monitor and measure outcomes. You create a business model and attend to finances and budgets, put structures and systems in place, and communicate your vision to internal and external stakeholders. Sometimes you stay awake at night, thinking about people. How to attract the talent you need, how to retain those talented individuals, and create pathways for them to develop in ways that meet their own personal goals while helping your company achieve that grand vision.

You are competing with lots of other brilliant, driven leaders, all vying for the services of the best and the brightest.

You hear about a concept, leveraging difference, which can give you a leg up on your competition. It involves creating an environment that would allow you to bring in the best and the brightest, and not just those meeting the traditional definitions. This concept seems to promise that people with new perspectives, unique knowledge, skills and abilities are available whom your competitors are not aware of or are trying to hire. Leveraging difference will allow you to bring people into your organization that will truly set your company apart, and harness the depth and breadth of human ingenuity, intelligence and passion, and help you take your company to new heights.
When thinking about how to move forward you recall one of your directors who has recently hired a number of people with vision problems into several work groups. There must be a reason why she has hired more than one person who uses a cane or guide dog.

You decide to investigate.

You schedule some time to talk with the department head about her experiences bringing people with visual impairments into her work group. This is what you learn: She had a roommate in college who was blind. Her roommate was extremely organized. She had experience in planning that most of her peers did not: she would work with the disabled students services office a semester ahead, to make sure she could obtain textbooks in an accessible format. She also had experience in managing people. She interviewed, hired, and sometimes fired, sighted students to read materials she could not obtain in Braille or in recorded format. She arranged for an orientation and mobility instructor to help her learn her way around campus before classes started.

She knew how to build and work with flexible teams. She had learned through experience how to articulate what she needed in order to succeed and worked with professors, counselors, support staff, hired readers and others in the school community. She also gave back, serving as a mentor to a blind high school student in the community.

She had her shit together.

So, when seeking to fill an internal communications position, your department head remembered the unique skill set her college roommate had developed, started thinking about trying to find qualified blind applicants to include in her candidate pool. A quick search of the web led her to the state VR agency.
Reaching out, she was put in touch with a VR counselor. After gratefully acknowledging the rarity of being proactively contacted by an employer, the VR counselor was able to provide her with resumes of several applicants meeting the requirements of the job posting.

After interviewing a number of both blind and sighted applicants, she extended a job offer to a young blind man who not only had a communications degree and high academic honors, but had trained and competed as a Paralympian, and volunteered extensively in strengthening a national association of blind athletes. After some initial challenges with technology and accessibility of the company’s internal productivity tools, this young man was soon off and running, meeting and exceeding expectations.

So, your department head continued, she got in the habit of sending all her new job postings to the VR counselor. She didn’t always receive resumes for each open position, but over time, several other excellent matches materialized.

So, she now had a handful of blind and low vision employees in various roles.

She went on to talk about some of the positive impacts she had observed to date.

Her blind employees matched or exceeded productivity of sighted colleagues. So far their absenteeism rates had been lower, and none had yet left the company. Several innovative solutions and design suggestions came from blind employees who have some unique approaches to solving problems and a particular sensitivity to usability by a broad spectrum of people. Fewer projects were kicked back for rework due to accessibility compliance issues to teams that included blind members.

She had also noticed a different level of discourse in her department: more thought given to initial design, and better questions about end user experiences. Interestingly, her department had received a number of comments from older customers expressing appreciation for some of
the unique design features of their products which made them easier to use. Being proactive in seeking blind and low vision applicants has helped create an environment more inclusive of a broader range of people. “We have the most diverse department in the company,” she said proudly.

“Morale is up. Productivity is up. Sales are up. And so are profits,” she concluded.

Another story. Your baby is born. His older brother and sister are so excited that you will be bringing home a new baby brother. After a few weeks, though, you sense something isn’t quite right. He doesn’t turn his face towards you when you talk or sing to him. He doesn’t focus on the brightly colored Dancing Animals mobile above his crib like the other kids did.

You take him to the doctor. You learn his optic nerves did not develop typically. Your baby boy is blind, and will always be blind.

You feel like you might pass out as waves of fear, anxiety, guilt, and panic wash over you.

Images flash in your mind. A tattered, dirty, old blind man who begged for spare change outside the bus station in your hometown. The young, deaf and blind Savannah Keller, raging like an animal in the movie, *The Miracle Worker*. Mary, Laura’s sister in the Little House books: not able to go to school, but sitting and waiting by the fire for her sister to come home and tell her about what she had learned.

*It will be okay. It will be okay,* you say to yourself. *We can all take care of him. He can live with us, and when we get too old, he can live with his brother or sister.*

You cry and cry.
You are a senior in college. Your requirements for your major are wrapped. You will be graduating in the spring, wearing your magna cum laude sash and your Phi Beta Kappa key.

Everyone is talking about either grad school or job hunting. You have decided you have had enough school for now. Time to put all of that hard work and academic accomplishment to good use, pulling down some dough!

You begin applying for jobs.

Your resume looks great! A 4.0 GPA in your major field, volunteer activities, student government, accolades and awards. You are excited when you get your first telephone interview.

When the fact that you are blind comes out as you talk to the HR recruiter, the conversation takes a decidedly negative turn. She isn’t clear on how you could do the job you are applying for if you can’t see.

You explain about blindness skills, assistive technology, Braille, and the long white cane.

She wants to know if you will need help finding the bathroom.

The second, third, and fourth interviews go much the same.

Classmates, even the slackers and hard partiers, are getting jobs and bandying about names of famous companies that will soon be writing their paychecks.

You continue to interview.

Finally, long after graduation and a return home to your parents’ basement, you are given a job offer.

It isn’t a job you are terribly interested in, and the salary is nothing to write home about, but hey, it is a foot in the door.

The challenges begin immediately. The payroll and timesheet system you are supposed to use to check in and out of work isn’t accessible. Your manager assigns another new employee to
assist you at the beginning and end of each day. You can tell your coworker isn’t exactly thrilled
with this arrangement.

The software you use to do the bulk of your work isn’t exactly inaccessible, but it’s hard
to use with your screen reading software, and requires lots of work-arounds.

You aren’t able to do the same amount of work in an eight hour day as your coworkers.

You start finishing your work after clocking out.

On weekends some of the guys go golfing with the boss. Some of them get promotions
after only a few months with the firm. You are never invited.

You are miserable.

You quit.

You sign up for Social Security Disability Insurance. You get about $1600 a month.

You move back home.

You live in your parents’ basement for a long, long time.

It doesn't have to be this way.
Appendix D: The American Foundation for the Blind, Moving Ahead
Appendix D

The American Foundation for the Blind, Moving Ahead

As AFB focuses on transformational change, transformation of our organization into a learning organization (Senge, 2006), and a force of change in the institutions and societal attitudes that present barriers to the self-actualization of people who are blind, (Coffey, Coufopoulos, & Kingsom, 2014; Crutchfield & Grant, 2007) we are transitioning a number of direct service programs to other organizations where they can be part of a core mission.

As we engage in dialogue about what we mean by systems change and systems entrepreneurship, we are keenly aware that we must be very intentional in staying connected to the lived experiences of people who are blind. One way to do this is through our extensive social media networks.

I personally have spent a great deal of time and effort in cultivating relationships via Facebook. Facebook is a very accessible social media platform for people who are blind using screen reading technology. In April 2018 AFB honored Facebook with a Savannah Keller Achievement award for their accessibility efforts the eve of our annual leadership conference.

I have thousands of connections with blind people and parents of blind children on Facebook, and belong to dozens of groups focused on various aspects of blindness. My daily review of Facebook, and ongoing addition of friends, commenting, and sharing AFB posts helps me keep my finger on the pulse of blind people’s interactions with their environment. My glimpses into these lived experiences, many of which echo my own, also motivate me to lead AFB in the most effective way I can, in order to eliminate barriers, mitigate threats, and create opportunities for my blind brothers and sisters.
Reading comments like these, posted in May of 2018, fills me with strength, energy, motivation, and passion. Some times with laughter at the human comedy. Some times with tears of empathy, sympathy, frustration, or anger. Some paraphrased comments which moved me:

- After going blind in 2015, I lost all of my friends, because I went from being a “seeing” person to a person who requires assistance.

- I am a twenty year old woman diagnosed with Rod Cone dystrophy at age 8. After losing my sight completely at age eighteen, I experienced severe anxiety and depression.

- My five year old son has just been diagnosed with a degenerative retinal condition and will become totally blind. I am “terrified” for him.

- My third grade son’s classmates refused to let him play basketball with them yesterday. One boy threw the ball, hit my son in the head and laughed.

- I was late for my first day of work at a new job because three Uber drivers cancelled my ride when they saw I had a guide dog.

- I need advice on how to change sighted people’s perceptions of blind people: recently a new acquaintance called me a liar when I said I put on my own makeup.

- I am a professional cartoonist. I am losing my sight, and need advice on what skills I need to learn, and what are the best resources to help me prepare for blindness, and transition to a career as a novelist. I can’t find any information and don’t know where to start.
Please contact your Senators and advocate against introduction of a companion bill to HR-620, which has already passed in the House. This bill would severely erode disabled people’s rights to equal access under the ADA.
Appendix E: Dissertation Defense
Appendix E

Dissertation Defense

PowerPoint Slide Content and Talking Points
[Created with the help of Drs. Melissa Ganus and Susannah Smith]:

Slide 1 - Opening slide
Image: person in the woods climbing through the brambles.
Text on slide: Journeys through rough country: an ethnographic study of blind adults successfully employed in American corporations
by Kirk Adams
Dissertation Defense
November 10, 2018

Slide 2 - Title: Acknowledgements
Images: Headshot pictures of Philomena, Heather and Aqeel
Text on slide: Acknowledgements
presented with gratitude to dissertation chair Philomena Essed PhD
committee members Heather Wishik and Aqeel Tirmizi PhD

Slide 3 - Title: Additional Acknowledgements
Image: a large smooth stone with the word Gratitude engraved into it
Text on slide: Additional Acknowledgements
my Study Participants
my Editors
my Team inside AFB
all the Support Staff at Antioch
all my other friends & family

Slide 4 - Title: Most Importantly
Image: Kirk and Roslyn Adams at AFB Conference during formal night, posing together, holding hands and smiling
Text on slide: Most Importantly
The Amazing Roslyn Adams
My courageous partner in life, who has been patient and supported me throughout this incredible and arduous journey.
I could not have done this without her.
Slide 5 - Title: Opening Story
Image only: close up of man from back, facing his laptop, reading what is on screen

Slide 5 TALKING POINTS:
Tell the story of the Preface memo you want the sample CEO to receive.

Slide 6 - Title: My Back Story & Motivations
Images only: 2 pics, side by side. The first is a boy in bed with both eyes covered in bandages. The second looks like a candid picture of a group of doctors doing rounds, suitably blurry on the left side nearest the picture of the boy.

Slide 6 TALKING POINTS:
Tell the story of your childhood and being medicalized and how that influenced your motivation to serve others in the blind community. Also describe why the issue of employment became your passion.

Slide 7 - Title: Statement of the Problem
Image only: Illustration showing the backs of several people looking at big Help Wanted newspaper ad section, with the word Unemployment in large letters above their heads.

Slide 7 TALKING POINTS
Describe the unemployment and underemployment of members of the blind community and then why you have chosen to focus your research on this problem.

Slide 8 - Title: Previous Research
Image only: a large Braille booklet with a man's hands reading the lower part of the page

Slide 8 TALKING POINTS
Briefly describe what you went through in your preliminary research to understand what research had been done before. Bonus if you Reference any recent research you've added to Literature Review since 2016.

Slide 9 - Title: Research Questions
Image: Illustration of a 3D question mark with 3D stick figure sitting in middle in a thoughtful pose
Text: Research Questions
RQ 1: How do blind individuals find successful and fulfilling employment?
RQ 2: Why and how do employers make it possible for blind individuals to enjoy successful and fulfilling employment?
Slide 10 - Title: Methodology
Image: You talking on the phone and smiling
Text: Methodology
Snowball recruiting of 11 participants
Semi-structured interviews by phone
Recorded & transcribed

Slide 10 TALKING POINTS
Tell the story of how you recruited and then interviewed your study participants

Slide 11 - Title: Study Participant Demographics
Image: Illustration showing 8 circles with simplistic shapes representing people of different ages, genders, skin tones, hair styles
Text: Study Participant Demographics
Gender: 5 female / 6 male
Age: all over 25 years old, seven over 40 years, and four under 40 years old
Employment Status: 1 retired, 8 long term employees, and 2 newly hired

Slide 12 - Title: Participant Types of Visual Impairments
Upper Image: 5 circles side by side, showing 5 views of same picture, with different visual impairments projected as a layer
Lower Image: directly below each is the name and description of 5 types of visual impairments
Text in lower image reads:
Macular degeneration - loss of central vision, common in older people
Diabetic retinopathy - caused by diabetes, causes eye spots
Glaucoma - has no symptoms until serious vision loss, caused by complex anatomical features
Cataracts - clouding of internal lens, common in older people
Total blindness - all useful vision is lost

Slide 12 TALKING POINTS
Most people do not know about the different types of visual impairments, so this is a quick illustration. Describe what "Usable vision" and "legally blind" mean
Slide 13 - Title: Participant Communication Tools
Images: a 4 picture collage showing headphones, screen magnification, Braille display & Aira
Image details: 1. a blind East Indian woman smiles toward camera while wearing big yellow headphones sitting at a computer, with 2 sighted men working at computers down the row from her
2. a black man looking at a highly magnified text on a screen
3. a purple Alva Braille output display at the base of a laptop with a hand feeling the left edge
4. a closeup of a white woman outside with a white cane, wearing Aira glasses with her eyes closed, apparently listening ]]

Slide 13 TALKING POINTS
Describe the types of tools used by completely blind and low vision for reading and writing: text to speech, speech to text, magnification devices, braille keyboards and displays, Aira glasses

Slide 14 - Title: Participant Mobility Tools
Images: 2 pictures side-by-side showing white canes and guide dog
[[image details: 1. A group of people walking toward camera, with two men in front with white canes talking with each other as they walk, and 2. Haben Girma with her guide dog standing in Times Square ]]

Slide 14 TALKING POINTS
Walking without aid, White Canes, Guide Dogs, Sighted guides

Slide 15 - Title: Data Analysis & Results
Images: 2 screen clips to represent tables from your manuscript’s chapter 4 - neither large enough to really read in this format
[[image details: 1. A picture of Table 4.1 from manuscript “The Meaning of Successful Employment” with list that starts f=11 "Compensation is sufficient to provide flexibility in spending" overlapping picture of Table 4.9 from manuscript re: “Employers’ Benefits from Hiring BVI People”]]

Slide 15 TALKING POINTS
Tell the story of how you did your data analysis, reviewing the transcripts, listening and re-listening to the audio files, and how you came to identify the themes.
Slide 16 - Title: Limitations
Image: illustration of plain white jigsaw puzzle with several pieces missing, showing a blue background

Slide 16 TALKING POINTS
What are the limitations of the study? Include
Not enough participants for generalizable results
Did not include perspectives from hiring managers and employers
Researcher and participant are inherently biased
But - their lived experiences have value and these findings bring new dimensions of understanding to the research on blind employment

Slide 17 - Title: Emergent Themes
Images: collage of 9 images to represent the 9 themes. Each image here has its own slide below.
Here's a brief description of all 9 images on the first slide:
#1 - Monetary Compensation = money being given to someone
#2 - Agency = blind woman steering at helm of sailboat
#3 - Acquiring Knowledge etc = blind girl with headphones at school computer
#4 - Family Support = silhouette of family walking with one kid riding Dad’s shoulders
#5 - Participation in Groups = 2 tandem bike teams with blind riders in back, all grinning
#6 - Supported & Valued by Boss = silhouette of 3 people on mountain top, helping each other get to the summit
#7 - Employer Accommodations & Accessibility = blind man in office with highly magnified screen
#8 - Inclusivity as Core Value of Senior Management = Obama leaning over to type into keyboard while facing Haben who is reading the Braille output at her finger tips
#9 - Disappointment = man in office clothes, looking dejected with forehead against office door, with uninterested people sitting in row of chairs waiting their turn

Slide 17 TALKING POINTS: list the 9 themes
Success for this study's participants includes monetary compensation, self agency, acquired knowledge and skills, family support, participation in teams or groups when young, feeling supported and valued by boss, having necessary accommodations and accessibility, experiencing inclusivity as a value coming from top leadership, and facing disappointments as needed,
In the next 9 slides you can go into more detail about each one. Or if time is running tight, you can stay on this slide, talk through the 9, and then skip the singles that follow.
Slide 18 - Title: Monetary Compensation
Image: closeup on hand of man in suit passing a spread of 6 one hundred dollar bills to an outstretched hand receiving the money in the foreground

Slide 18 TALKING POINTS
Monetary Compensation means
- Earning more than livable wage: not just make ends meet
- Be able to make purchases, do activities, not just pay for daily expenses
- Being blind carries extra expenses including:
  - Additional equipment and technology for independent living and leisure
  - Hiring sighted people to provide supports like driving and reading inaccessible print materials.
  - Paying for expensive medications, treatments, surgeries and hospitalizations when additional related complications exist.
  - Completing academic degrees or training courses may take longer, requiring additional tuition payments.

Slide 19 - Title: Achieving a Sense of Agency
Image: blind sailor Lucy Hodges (from UK) standing at the helm of her ship, with her hands on the wheel, with blue sky and ocean behind her

Slide 19 TALKING POINTS
Achieving a Sense of Agency - one of the themes that was the greatest insight during the analysis. What does Agency mean in this context and how is it possible to give someone a sense of agency?
Slide 20 - Title: Acquiring Valuable Knowledge, Skills & Abilities
Image: blind girl with headphones at school computer

Slide 20 TALKING POINTS
Acquiring High Value Knowledge, Skills and Abilities
When asked why they thought employers were motivated to hire them initially, the first response from a large majority of participants was prompt and specific: the ability to do the job.
• Being able to use information technology
• Knowing how to code
• Strength of communication ability
• Creative problem solving
• Skill and experience in special niche, such as corporate law, disability compliance

We need to urge blind people and their families, educational institutions, and vocational rehabilitation agencies to focus on acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for obtaining employment at all levels.
Efforts should be made to widen the circle of employers who understand that with the proper training, tools, and techniques, blind people can bring the knowledge, skills and abilities required in the 21st century workplace.

Slide 21 - Title: Support from Family
Image: silhouette of family walking with one kid riding Dad’s shoulders

Slide 21 TALKING POINTS
Support From Family
Families can help in childhood development, in schooling, finances, and in strengthening core values.
• Self-realization that one can problem-solve difficulties from being blind
• High expectations held for the BVI person
• Sense of responsibility and accountability
• Advocacy skills
• Strengthening person’s sense of agency and self-efficacy

More attention should be paid to educating the family about their pivotal role, requiring contributions to the family through chores, and allowing the freedom to experiment, fail, succeed, and thus develop a sense of agency.
Slide 22 - Title: Participation in groups & teams
Image: 2 tandem bike teams with blind riders in back, all grinning

Slide 22 TALKING POINTS
Participation in Teams or Groups
People who were encouraged to follow interests in team or individual sports, including competition felt this contributed to their employment success. Participation in group activities, like singing in a choir, working with others to champion a cause, was also very helpful.
• Learning how to work in a team or group
• Getting in front of people
• Communication skills
• Expressing oneself without fear or doubt
• Learning to be self-disciplined, and accept constructive criticism
• Accountability and reliability
• Being proactive and a self-advocate
Involvement in teams and groups afford unique opportunities for overcoming the barriers of noninclusivity by being integrated into groups including nondisabled peers.

Slide 23 - Title: Supported & Valued by Boss
Image: silhouette of 3 people on mountain top, the highest outstretching to help the others reach the summit

Slide 23 TALKING POINTS
Being Supported and Valued by Immediate Supervisor
Employees have a better chance of success if their immediate supervisor has a positive, supportive, problem solving attitude and values their contributions.
• Viewed as capable instead of disabled
• Encouraged by supervisor to learn and grow
• Promoted to take on more responsibility
• Assisted in team and organization inclusion and value
Slide 24 - Title: Employer Accommodations & Accessibility
Image: business dressed blind man in office with highly magnified screen

Slide 24 TALKING POINTS
Employer Accommodations and Accessibility
In a computer based world, blind people must be able to efficiently use the tools required to deliver on their direct work accountabilities.
- Software and other tools fully accessible and usable
- Time sheets, employee benefits information, internal chat rooms, bulletins, cafeteria menus and the like, must be accessible
Hiring a blind person to do a job that requires use of a tool that is not accessible is akin to hiring a person in a wheelchair to work on the 100th floor of an office building with no elevator.

Slide 25 - Title: Inclusivity as Core Value of Senior Management
Image: Obama leaning over to type into keyboard while facing Haben who is reading the Braille output at her finger tips

Slide 25 TALKING POINTS
Inclusivity as a Core Value in Senior Management
There is more successful development of inclusive cultures when top management teams understand the positive correlation between hiring BVI and their business objectives.
- Not only looking at it from an employment perspective, but with many viewpoints.
- Diversity and inclusion can begin at any level, but must be supported by top management
- These concepts should be incorporated at all behavioral and conceptual levels
- Openness to hiring BVI people at all levels needs to be increased
- Positive experience in hiring BVI people, accompanied by the increased awareness of their potential contribution, should be communicated from top management
BVI job seekers and those supporting them need to target employment with companies demonstrating direct, active support of inclusion at the CEO level.
Slide 26 - Title: Disappointment
Image: man in office clothes, looking dejected with forehead against office door, with uninterested people sitting in row of chairs waiting their turn

Slide 26 TALKING POINTS
Disappointment
Although not a majority theme, disappointment about increased inclusion and changed in the working environment were voiced by a few participants.
- Not having access to needed work tools
- Being left out of teams or groups
- Being considered an outsider
- Others being jealous of any accessibility or other accommodations given to BVI people
- Hostility and harassment
- Having opinions or ideas disregarded
- Not seeing an intentional corporate transformation into inclusivity

Some successful employment trajectories include rising above the disappointments of occasionally being hired into a corporation which does not promote inclusivity or finding value in BVI people.

Slide 27 - Title: Conclusions
Image: a gathering of people climbing up a ladder to get over a tall wall, with people on the top helping those who are climbing up
Text: Success Factors & Ongoing Barriers

Slide 27 TALKING POINTS
Describe the success factors and ongoing barriers you think are the most important for the committee to hear

Slide 28 - Title: Moving Forward
3 Images: 1. Blind man with dark glasses and white cane smiles and shakes hands with woman at a job fair booth, 2. AFB child as astronaut 3. AFB slogan “No Limits” with Braille lettering below

Slide 28 TALKING POINTS
This is where you can continue telling the story from the beginning, imagining the CEO who visits the department where more than a few BVI people are now working. He meets with his director, then has a group lunch with the team and gets perspectives from both the BVI and sighted employees about what its like working together and why they think more BVI should be recruited. End with plans for directed recruiting of more BVI and PWD employees
Slide 29 - Title: Anticipated Questions, Concerns & Next Steps
Image: checklist illustration with red pen checking off boxes
Text: Discussing your suggestions, Adding in the missing pieces, Completing final checklists

Slide 29 TALKING POINTS
As you wrap up, you will be asking for the final checklists for what you need to do to complete the manuscript. Make sure someone is ready to take notes about the specific change requests you need to consider and then plan to discuss the list of changes with Philomena before we go back into editing the manuscript.

Slide 30 - Title: Thank You!
Image: You smiling, sitting in a chair with Yahoo! Signage behind you.
TALKING POINTS - You could say "Yahoo! I think that's it for my prepared comments!"
Statement of the Problem

Previous Research

Research Questions

RQ 1: How do blind individuals find successful and fulfilling employment?

RQ 2: Why and how do employers make it possible for blind individuals to enjoy successful and fulfilling employment?

Methodology

Snowball recruiting of 11 participants

Semi-structured interviews by phone

Recorded & transcribed

Study Participant Demographics

Gender: 5 female / 6 male

Age: all over 25 years old, seven over 40 years, and four under 40 years old

Employment Status: 1 retired, 8 long term employees, and 2 newly hired

Participant Types of Visual Impairments

Stereoscopic

Dyslexia

Cataracts

Glaucoma

Vitreous Hemorrhage

Traumatic Blindness
**Participant Communication Tools**

**Participant Mobility Tools**

**Data Analysis & Results**

**Limitations**

**Emergent Themes**

**Monetary Compensation**
Achieving a Sense of Agency

Acquiring Valuable Knowledge, Skills & Abilities

Support from Family

Participation in groups & teams

Supported & Valued by Boss

Employer Accommodations & Accessibility
Inclusivity as Core Value of Senior Management

Disappointment

Conclusions
Success Factors & Ongoing Barriers

Moving Forward
grow up knowing no limits

Anticipated Questions, Concerns & Next Steps
- Discussing your suggestions
- Adding in the missing pieces
- Completing final checklists

Thank You!
Source Images for Dissertation Defense PowerPoint Slides

Slide 1: Woman climbing through dense forest [Digital image]. (Source unknown)


Slide 5: Man at laptop [Digital image]. (Source unknown)

Slide 6: Boy with bandages over eyes [Digital image]. (Source unknown)

Slide 6: Medical staff conferring during rounds [Digital image]. (Source unknown)


Slide 15: Tables 4.1 & 4.9 from dissertation manuscript.

