

Effective school-work transitions for youth with mild intellectual disability: Norwegian employers' expectations, attitudes, and experiences

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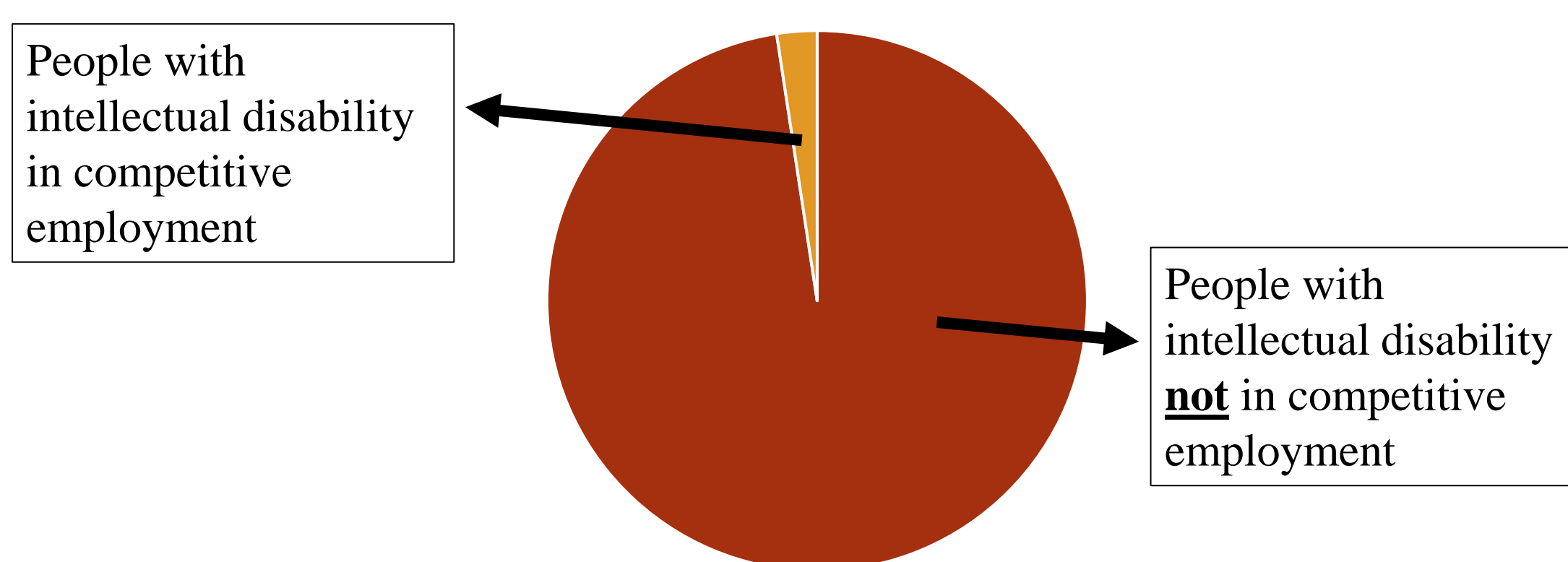
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INTRODUCTION

Mild intellectual disability (MID) is characterized by impairment in intellectual and adaptive functioning, and the condition occurs during the developmental period (World Health Organization, 2020). It is estimated that approximately 1% of the world's population meets the criteria for this diagnosis. According to the International Classification of Diseases, 11th revision (ICD-11) (World Health Organization, 2020), adults with MID "can generally achieve relatively independent living and employment as adults but may require appropriate support". This suggests that individuals with MID can be active and valuable participants in the labour market.

Yet, only a small minority of adults with MID are in competitive employment. According to a systematic review by Ellenkamp and colleagues (2016), international estimates of the employment rates for people with intellectual disability range from 9 to 40%. In Norway, only 2.4% of all individuals with intellectual disability are in competitive employment (Wendelborg et al., 2017). Thus, competitive employment remains largely out of reach for people with MID, and the goal of employment for all seems distant. A serious consequence of this exclusion from the labour market is that individuals with MID miss out on the benefits that employment offers, such as greater financial independence, a sense of purpose, increased social networks, and increased autonomy (Grant, 2008).



This exclusion from the labour market for a large group of individuals makes it pivotal to investigate what is needed to help individuals with MID to gain access to employment. Wendelborg and colleagues (2017) suggest that employers may be reluctant to hire employees with intellectual disability, and that schools and special educators may find it difficult to prepare their students for an uncertain labour market. Hence, people with MID may meet obstacles in both ends of the school-work transition process. On the one hand, special educators struggle with identifying which skills and competencies students with MID need for successful labour market participation, and this may result in educational goals that do not meet the requirements that 21st century workplaces pose. On the other hand, employers may have attitudes, expectations or previous experiences that form a barrier towards the recruitment of employees with MID.

OBJECTIVES

This study is part of a larger project that aims to explore effective school-work transitions for young adults with intellectual disability. The aim of this study is to examine the expectations and experiences that Norwegian employers have concerning hiring employees with MID, regarding both general employment skills and the need for follow-up in the workplace.

This knowledge is important because:

- It may inform special educators as to how they may prepare students with MID better for their role as employee and which educational goals are worthy of pursuing in regard to the transition to adulthood and employment;
- It may inform policy makers about the supports that may facilitate the labour market participation of employees with MID;
- It may contribute with identifying possible pathways towards a more inclusive society where adults with MID are considered as assets in the labour market.

METHOD

We developed an online survey to assess expectations and experiences that employers have regarding the employment of people with MID. Our survey included, amongst others, items regarding available supports at the workplace for employees with MID, beliefs about working life skills and assets that employees with MID possess, and the experienced contribution of the employee with MID in the workplace.

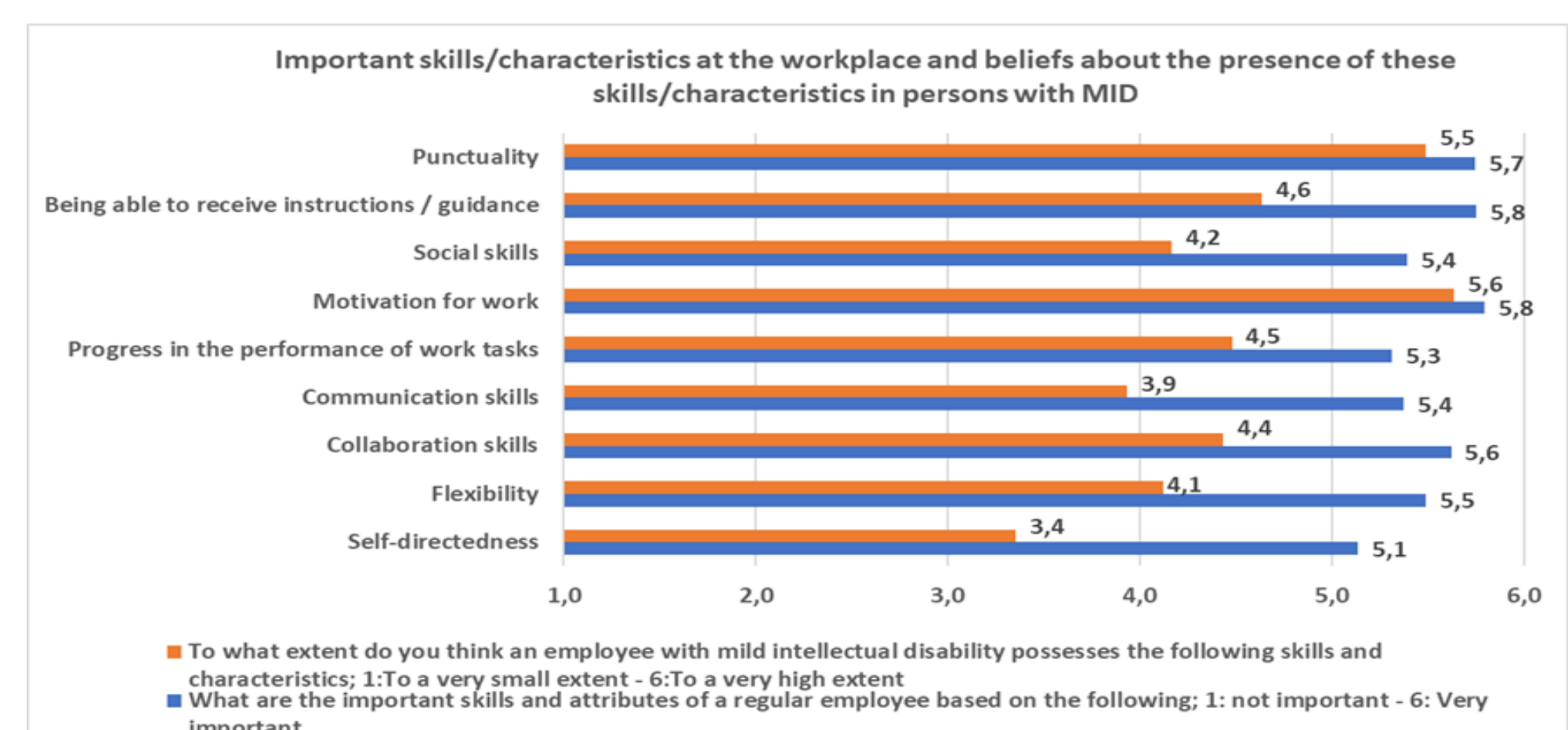
Employers rated on a scale from 1 ('not important') to 6 ('very important') the importance of several skills and attributes in their employees in general. Employers provided ratings for each of the following: Punctuality, being able to receive instructions/guidance, social skills, motivation for work, progress in task performance, communication skills, collaboration skills, flexibility, and self-directedness. Then, employers were asked to rate the extent to which they believed employees with MID to possess these attributes.

The survey was sent out to 2,530 employers, of which 478 responded.

RESULTS

Descriptive data analysis indicates that respondents consider all mentioned skills and attributes to be very important assets for regular employees (range 5.1 - 5.8). The most important skills were being able to receive instructions/guidance, motivation for work, punctuality, and collaboration skills (see figure 1). Findings indicate that employers believe that employees with MID possess these skills and assets to a lower degree than regular employees. Especially being self-directed and possessing good communication and social skills were rated lower. Yet, employers do believe that employees with MID also possess most of the mentioned attributes to a considerable degree (range 3.4 - 5.6).

Figure 1. Important skills and attributes at the workplace and beliefs about the presence of these skills and attributes in people with MID.



In our sample, 124 employers had prior experience with hiring employees with MID. Participants were asked to rate the degree of follow-up that employees with MID required in the following areas: Assistance with initiating work tasks, assistance with carrying out work tasks, quality check of the work, and social follow-up. 43.2% of the employers reported that employees with MID require a very high degree of assistance with initiating work tasks. 20.9% reported that employees with MID require extensive assistance with carrying out work tasks. 27.5% stated a strong need to check the quality of the work that is performed by employees with MID. Finally, 35.5% reported that employees with MID require a considerable degree of social follow-up.

CONCLUSION

Findings from this survey illustrate which skills and attributes that employers value especially in their employees, such as punctuality, being able to receive instructions and guidance, and motivation for work. Employers believe that these attributes and skills are to a lesser extent present in employees with MID than what they generally require from regular employees. Data analysis indicates further that employers who have previously hired employees with MID experience that these employees require substantial assistance with initiating and carrying out work tasks, quality check of the work that is done, and a large degree of social follow-up.

These findings provide important information as to how schools may better prepare adolescents with MID for their transition to working life. The school curriculum and the content in individualized educational plans may be adapted to address these skills and attributes to a larger degree. For instance, self-directedness, social communication skills, and being able to receive instructions are all skills that can be trained systematically. Also, schools may collaborate more closely with possible workplaces, so that supports and support needs may be better aligned even before the person with MID enters working life.

With lower perceived abilities and with more substantial support needs, people with MID may experience more difficulty accessing the labour market. Yet, we wish to caution against an understanding of MID that is too individualistic. Even though the diagnosis is characterized by impairments in cognitive and adaptive functioning, students with MID may still learn the skills and attributes that employers expect from their employees. However, this requires that targeted instruction is delivered to them during the school years, with educational goals that are relevant for their future participation in the labour market. This study contributes with information about which educational goals may be especially useful for special educators to focus on.

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