



# Worker Functional Abilities, Occupational Requirements, and Job Accommodations: A Close Look at Three Occupations

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This study explores the role of workplace accommodations as they relate to worker functioning and job requirements. Job accommodations include a wide range of supports, including assistive technology (communication devices, ergonomic workstations), personal assistance, changes to the built environment (ramps; accessible bathrooms, kitchens, and offices), and changes to workplace policies (flexible work schedules, teleworking). While several resources are useful for identifying worker functioning (e.g., Work Disability Functional Assessment Battery, WD-FAB) and occupation-specific job requirements (e.g., Occupational Information Network, O\*NET; Occupational Requirements Survey, ORS), none capture accommodation utility, availability, or use as they relate to worker functioning and job tasks.

We focused our analysis on three occupations highly

represented in the work applicants' histories for Social Security Disability Insurance (cashiers, receptionists, and those in nursing) to understand the occupation-specific requirements, typical worker functioning in both physical and mental domains, and the availability and use of workplace accommodations. We hypothesize that use of accommodations mitigates lower functioning in these occupations.

To assess this, we asked questions about workplace accommodations and administered the WD-FAB to 802 workers currently and recently employed as either cashiers, receptionists, or nurses/nursing assistants. We report the average functioning among these workers in physical domains (basic mobility, upper body function, fine motor function, and community mobility) and mental health domains (mood and emotions, self-regulation, resilience

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and sociability, communication and cognition). Average functioning is reported separately by accommodation use. We found that cashiers or receptionists who use an accommodation have significantly lower mental health functioning than other cashiers or receptionists who did not need an accommodation. The same pattern held for physical health functioning among cashiers in all dimensions except fine motor function. Among our diverse group who work in nursing, including both registered nurses and nursing assistants, a similar pattern holds, but differences between accommodation groups were not statistically significant.

We contextualize these findings by examining expectations of workers as described in the ORS. We identified ORS measures that characterize six of the eight WD-FAB domains and consider the functional areas of relative importance to each of these three occupations.

This work highlights differences in accommodation receipt by specific types of worker functional abilities. This confirms prior research on the importance of accommodations overall in helping individuals maintain employment. While many prior studies have examined whether individuals receive accommodations or not, our study is the first, to our knowledge, to examine accommodation receipt by the domains captured in a validated functional ability tool (WD-FAB) by specific occupations. This provides more detailed information than prior studies and might, in turn, point to more targeted employment or rehabilitation policies and practices to address these disparities. This key finding

also leads to our second contribution.

Second, our study presents a unique method of collecting accommodation information for domains within occupations. We provide some examples of how the domains included in the WD-FAB can be mapped to ORS' worker requirements. This, in turn, suggests a process that could incorporate the collection of accommodation information into ORS or O\*NET. Such supplementary information could possibly better inform SSA's disability determination process by considering how receipt of accommodations might mitigate functional ability limitations.

The complex interactions among human functioning, work, and the work environment make disability determination difficult. Systematic information on accommodations in the context of job requirements and functional ability is a useful yet missing element of the information available to inform Steps 4 and 5 of the SSA disability determination process. This research is intended to be a nascent step in the development of such systematic information, demonstrating an approach to compiling information about occupation and the functioning of workers in that occupation that accounts for the potential for workplace accommodations. In sum, such information has the potential to supplement O\*NET and ORS information, which do not recognize the potential substitutability (and complementarity) among occupational requirements themselves and workplace accommodations. ❖

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**Sponsor information:** The research reported herein was performed pursuant to grant RDR18000002 from the U.S. Social Security Administration (SSA) through the Michigan Retirement and Disability Research Center

(MRDRC). The findings and conclusions expressed are solely those of the author(s) and do not represent the views of SSA, any agency of the federal government, or the MRDRC.

### **Regents of the University of Michigan:**

Jordan B. Acker, Huntington Woods; Michael J. Behm, Grand Blanc; Mark J. Bernstein, Ann Arbor; Paul W. Brown, Ann Arbor; Sarah Hubbard, Okemos; Denise Ilitch, Bingham Farms; Ron Weiser, Ann Arbor; Katherine E. White, Ann Arbor; Mark S. Schlissel, *ex officio*