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Employment Problems of those with
Acquired Visual Disability

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The general population tends to assume that blind people are those without sight and that partially sighted people are those with grossly defective vision. However the registered blind population is largely one afflicted with grossly defective vision rather than blindness in the full sense of the term (see Table 1). Unfortunately employers, like the general public, persist in thinking of the blind as those with no useful vision.

Table 1. The vision of those registered as blind in England and Wales (from Sorsby)

Total blindness (no perception of light)	3.4%
Almost total blindness (perception of light only)	10.4%
Useful vision (hand movements and vision up to 3/60 Snellen)	58.8%
Vision more than 3/60 Snellen	27.4%

Work is as important, if not more important, to disabled people as it is to people without disablement. However one major problem is that disablement at a primary level tends to be dispersed to many secondary levels. This applies when an individual with a particular characteristic, for instance partial sight, is attributed with a number of other characteristics without any evidence being present.

It is often implied that partially sighted people will have extreme difficulty in reading, in moving about, and in relating adequately to people who are not partially

sighted. These secondary characteristics are all implied from the term partial sight. The same phenomenon expects all blind people to read braille, to like music, to be fond of dogs and to move around in a miraculous way using their bionic hearing! These are both examples of secondary characteristics being attributed on the basis of one primary one. Employers generally tend to think of visually handicapped people as being able to do work which is essentially non-visual, does not involve very much moving about, and which is in an environment which has little, if any, danger from exposed machinery or moving traffic.

Of those who are registered as blind and of employment age, less than one third are in employment (see Table 2). However a large proportion of the unemployed are over 50 years old and some are housewives. About one third are classified as not capable of work but this classification of people may be, in part, due to the lack of suitable jobs for the less able and multiply-handicapped. Most of the sheltered workshops are trying to minimise the loss per handicapped worker, and are therefore reluctant to employ multi-handicapped persons who may decrease the overall productivity.

Table 2. Employment of registered blind people, in England (1973), who are of employment age

Open employment	5635
Sheltered employment	2201
Training	395
Seeking employment	1754

Capable but not seeking employment	7162
Not capable of work	7975

The present work opportunities for visually handicapped people fall within a very restricted range. Audio typing, telephony, light engineering, sheltered workshops, home workers scheme - these are the main opportunities for those who completed their training before becoming visually handicapped. The exceptional person might succeed in piano tuning, physiotherapy, computer programming or social work. The previous paper showed what can be done with a good back-up system in the ideal situation, but for most adventiously blind people the prospects are far more limited. Opportunities have started to become more imaginative since it was recognised, rather belatedly, that it is not harmful for people with a visual handicap to use any remaining vision. It is now accepted that people should use vision as much as possible in their daily lives and in their work. This has already led to a significant shift in the employment opportunities for people with a visual handicap.

It would have been unthinkable some years ago if a blind person had found a job as a guide in the Tower of London or had taken a seasonal job as a Father Christmas. These are both real examples of today's situation.

More and more people with residual vision - both blind and partially sighted registrations - are being encouraged to choose their jobs in the same way that a normal sighted person would choose. The philosophy that handicapped people are fortunate to be allowed to work in a competitive society has gone. Almost everyone

believes that the handicapped have a right to work and a right to be allowed to compete on equal terms with non-disabled people. Society is simply acknowledging that there is no need to take steps to keep the visually handicapped in a closed environment or to place them in jobs which, although secure for a lifetime, are boring and non-progressive. We have reached the stage where we are not caring for the visually handicapped, but we are caring about them.

We are beginning to think of career paths for visually handicapped people. Will the job taken allow for promotion? Will it exercise his abilities to the full? Can the job be adapted to allow a visually handicapped person to do it? If three or four people work in a particular employment situation, can there be some reallocation of work to make a place for a visually handicapped person? These are the complex questions which need a considerable amount of expertise to resolve, and we are just beginning to acquire that expertise. We are asking people what kind of environment they would like to work in. We are taking their interests into account, as well as their aptitudes. We hope that people with a visual handicap can exercise an element of choice when they consider work in the future.

Unfortunately, although there is some light in the tunnel, we still have some way to go before we emerge from it entirely. As a whole the system which controls the acquisition of jobs for the visually handicapped is rather slow to respond to change and rather slow to acquire the appropriate expertise. It is worth looking at the system of job acquisition in the light of present knowledge and future prospects. The Employment Service

