

# Workplace Accommodations for Older Workers with Disabilities: An Analysis and Comparison of Recruitment Methods

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## Abstract

Older workers represent an increasing portion of the U.S. workforce, and trends in disability indicate a growing likelihood that these workers will experience age-related impairments, potentially benefitting from workplace accommodations to maintain their employment. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) mandates that employees with disabilities have the right to request workplace accommodations to fulfill their job responsibilities. However, the degree to which older workers with disabilities understand and utilize their ADA rights requires further study. This research aimed to investigate the personal and workplace factors associated with accommodation requests among two groups of older workers with disabilities: one group recruited from the mTurk online marketplace, and another from disability organizations. Researchers recruited 263 participants from disability organizations, and 111 participants via mTurk methods. The two groups showed significant differences in several of demographic and disability-related characteristics. Notably, 74% of the conventionally recruited participants requested a workplace accommodation, compared to 27% of the MTurk sample. This discrepancy suggests that disability researchers who rely on convenience or conventional sampling methods may overlook critical information about the target population. Recommendations for research and training are described.

*Keywords:* disability, aging, older workers, Americans with Disabilities Act, accommodation

## Workplace Accommodations for Older Workers with Disabilities: An Analysis and Comparison of Recruitment Methods

Longer life expectancies, increases in the Social Security retire-

ment age, pension losses and other factors have all contributed to an upward trend in employment rates for older workers (Heinrich, 2022). Between 1995 and 2016, the proportion of older workers in the labor force nearly doubled for both men and women working full-time (Johnson & Wang, 2017). Although employment of older workers declined during the COVID-19 pandemic, analysis of labor market trends indicates a leveling off of these declines for some more highly educated workers, perhaps due to the wider availability of remote work (Joint Economic Committee Democrats, 2022; Schur et al., 2020). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projects that by 2030, one-quarter of the workforce will be 55 years or older (Dubina et al., 2021).

Older workers may experience a range of health conditions that are the direct result of the aging process, such as chronic conditions that worsen over time, or newly acquired conditions, such as arthritis (Whetzel & Goddard, 2021). Although not all these conditions impair activities or job performance, many might either worsen over time, or may require workplace interventions, such as job accommodations, to sustain performance to acceptable standards, and therefore help maintain labor force participation of these employees (e.g., Hartnett et al., 2019). Since remaining in the workforce offers financial, health and social benefits to individuals with disabilities, including older adults (e.g., Dingemans et al., 2016), as well as to employers (e.g., Reade, 2015), it is important to consider workplace policies and practices that can assist workers to remain employed as they age. Given current population projections in the United States, as well as policy shifts prolonging work, clearly, the average age of the American worker will increase over the next decade, as will the likelihood that these older workers may be managing disability in the workplace.

Under Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA);

P.L.101-336), any employee who meets the statutory definition of disability is entitled to its employment-related protections, which include non-discrimination in hiring, pay, promotion, and termination, as well as the provision of reasonable accommodations to otherwise qualified individuals with disabilities to sustain work performance (Shepard, 2022). Reasonable accommodations can include alterations to the physical or structural environment of the workplace, or more commonly, modifications to job tasks or schedules, or the provision of specialized equipment or technology (Shepard, 2022).

A compelling incentive for the enactment of the ADA and its amendments was to improve work access and retention for all people with disabilities, including older workers. Studies have explored the extent to which it succeeded. Most of the research in this area finds little evidence that disability discrimination protections, such as the ADA, negatively impact the hiring decisions of employers (e.g., Neumark et al., 2016), but also little evidence exists suggesting that the ADA has increased the provision of workplace accommodations that can sustain employment (Smalligan & Boyens, 2020). In fact, many studies of the rate of employer provided accommodations to all workers with disabilities report modest accommodation rates (Burkhauser et al., 2012; Hill et al., 2016). Since the incidence of impairment and chronic illnesses increase substantially with age, older workers who age into disabilities may be more likely to leave or lose their jobs at disability onset without access to accommodations (Schimmel-Hyde et al., 2022).

Under Title I of the ADA, reasonable accommodations are mandated, but require that an employee identify the need for one and then request it from the employer; hence the burden is on the employee to know their rights under the ADA and be willing to disclose their condition or impairment in order to invoke them. Numerous studies have suggested that employees may either not know of their rights under the law or may be reluctant to disclose their conditions to an employer (e.g., Nevala et al., 2015; von-Schrader et al., 2014). Recently, a report from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) on employment and workers with disabilities indicated that only 15.6% of workers with a self-reported disability had requested some type of work-related accommodation to improve their job performance, and only 8.4% of disabled employees over age 64 had done so, even though over half of all these workers reported experiencing some difficulty completing their work duties because of their disability. Schimmel-Hyde et al., (2022) using data from the National Institute on Aging's Health and Retirement Study (HRS) found that older employees with disabilities were significantly more likely to stop working compared to their peers without disabilities when they either did not have or did not request accommodations.

Survey studies of accommodation requests among different age groups of workers with disabilities have reported disparate findings. A study by Sundar et al. (2018) using data from the Kessler Foundation National Employment and Disability Survey found 47.6% of workers aged 18-64 had requested an accommodation, and more than half of those requesting had received one. Schur et al., (2020) explored accommodations requested and granted in intensive case studies of eight companies with over 5000 com-

pleted employee surveys, reporting that 43% of all employees with disabilities had requested an accommodation, and almost 75% of those requests were granted by employers. However, the six companies included in the survey were selected in consultation with the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, which might have biased the sample toward employers more encouraging of such requests among their employees with disabilities. Dong (2018) conducted a survey of reasonable accommodations among 231 older workers with disabilities (age 55 and above), finding that almost 80% of his sample reported requesting a work-related accommodation.

The ADA and age discrimination laws, such as the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (P.L.90-202) are designed to protect older workers, including those with disabilities being forced into premature retirement, and a few studies have shown that employees with knowledge of their rights and self-advocacy skills are more likely to request workplace accommodations. For example, one systematic review of barriers and facilitators to accommodation requests pointed to self-advocacy skills as an important determinant of requests (Nevala et al., 2015) across all age groups. Hill et al., (2016) in an analysis of the national Health and Retirement Study data of workers with disabilities, found employees with personality characteristics that could be associated with self-advocacy, such as openness or assertiveness, were more likely to be accommodated. Similarly, Dong's (2018) survey of a sample of older workers with disabilities reported that that self-advocacy skills along with knowledge of the ADA were associated with accommodation requests.

### **Current Study**

This review has highlighted several important issues. First, knowledge and access to disability employment rights under the ADA is a significant feature in sustaining employment among older workers with disabilities (e.g., Schur et al., 2020), and studies have shown its benefits across all ages of employees with disabilities (e.g., Anand & Sevak, 2017). However, evidence of whether this population of individuals with disabilities, employees over the age of 55, know about and access their ADA rights under the law is inconclusive. For example, studies on proportion of requests for workplace accommodations cited in this review ranged from 8.4% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021) to 80% (Dong et al., 2018).

These disparate rates of accommodation requests among workers with disabilities indicate the importance of exploring whether different samples of individuals with disabilities, recruited through different sources, influence relevant findings, and to what extent. Studies that have used different recruitment strategies of disability populations have found significant differences in outcomes depending on the sample recruitment source. For example, studies that have relied on crowdsourcing platforms, such as Amazon Mechanical Turk or MTurk, to recruit persons with disabilities, have found these participants tend to be more racially diverse, have lower household incomes, less access to health insurance, and lower utilization of federal social security benefits (Ipsen et al., 2021), when compared to similar studies of persons with disabilities recruited through conventional means, such as disability affiliated organizations. Other studies of disability populations comparing

samples recruited via Amazon MTurk report significantly different study outcomes depending on recruitment method (e.g., Anderson et al., 2019; Ipsen & Repke, 2022). These differences in study samples depending on recruitment source indicate a gap in the rehabilitation literature, and a potentially important need to explore whether samples recruited via different methods yield significantly different participants and significantly different study outcomes.

Therefore, this study included two main purposes. The first was to explore how the recruitment method influenced sample characteristics and study outcomes. The second was to investigate the rates of accommodation requests among older workers with disabilities and the personal and workplace factors associated with these requests.

Research questions guiding the study were:

1. Are there differences between samples of older workers with disabilities recruited from two different sources regarding their demographics, disability status, workplace factors, and knowledge and utilization of the ADA?
2. What factors are associated with utilization of the ADA by older workers with disabilities in the two samples, and where and how do they differ by sample recruitment method?

The first research question was exploratory. Based on prior studies cited earlier, we expected to find differences between the MTurk and conventional samples in terms of demographic, disability, and background characteristics. However, we could not predict which specific variables, if any, would significantly differentiate the samples. For the second research question, based on prior studies, we hypothesized that visibility of the disability, its impact on performance, disability disclosure, knowledge of the ADA, job satisfaction and disability practices in the work environment would be positively associated with requests for accommodations in both samples.

## Methods

### Recruitment and Participants

The study aimed to recruit individuals who were over 50 years old, had at least one disability, had a job, and lived in the United States. The screening questions included “What is your age?”, “What is your current job status?”, and “Do you have one or more conditions or disabilities below?” Respondents were classified as having a disability if they did not answer “none” to the question regarding disability. To increase sample diversity (e.g., geographical location), both conventional and MTurk recruitment methods were used to recruit participants. The second author’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved the study protocol.

### Conventional Recruitment Method

The conventional recruitment strategy was conducted through the Mid-Atlantic ADA Center, one of ten federally funded regional centers providing local assistance to foster implementation of the ADA. Researchers distributed flyers through newsletters, listservs, social media, and websites or sent direct email requests with survey links to individuals who were on ADA Center listservs. Because survey completion was anonymous, response rates for various strategies were not available. All the participants in the conventional recruitment method were from Washington, D.C.,

Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia. As an incentive to complete the survey, researchers offered respondents the option of providing an email address to enter a drawing for one of ten \$25 gift cards. Email addresses were kept separate from survey responses to retain respondent anonymity.

We received 393 responses from conventional recruitment methods. Of those, we excluded: (1) 48 pilot respondents, (2) 70 respondents who did not meet eligibility criteria, and (3) 10 respondents who had more than 80% missing data. A total of 263 respondents from conventional recruitment methods were included in the current study. *Table 1* shows detailed demographic information.

### MTurk Recruitment Method

For the MTurk recruitment method, we used Cloud Research, an MTurk toolkit designed to simplify and improve participant recruitment (Litman et al., 2017). MTurk permits researchers to selectively sample participants who meet study eligibility criteria, which, in this case, specified being age 50 or older, having at least one disability, being employed, and residing in the United States. The option to complete the survey was only disclosed to potential participants who were eligible by meeting the inclusion criteria of age, disability, and employment status. We also concealed the exact nature of the survey and the potential compensation until a potential participant was screened for eligibility. Because of the highly selective criteria, we administered the survey across four waves until we could achieve a minimally acceptable sample size. Researchers paid MTurk “workers” who met our inclusion criteria and completed the survey a \$2.00 bonus payment, which is consistent with MTurk compensation guidelines.

A total of 149 responses were received. Four responses were dropped, or not approved for missing data, garnering a 96.6% MTurk approval rating. We also excluded 34 cases, even though they were approved, for being under 50 years old: yielding a final sample of 111 MTurk respondents. *Table 1* describes characteristics of the MTurk sample.

### Measures

Demographic information on participants’ age range, gender, race/ethnicity, education, household income, disability status, employment status, accommodation request, and geographic location was collected.

### Job Satisfaction

We revised six items on the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey (Watson & Wooden, 2020) to measure participants’ job satisfaction (e.g., salary and working hours), such as “How satisfied are you with your job security?” Participants reported their satisfaction on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = Extremely satisfied to 6 = Extremely dissatisfied). The internal consistency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ ) for conventional and MTurk samples were .770 and .837. We used the mean of the six items in subsequent data analysis.

### Disability Practices in Work Environments

Based on the Workplace Culture and Disability Inclusion Climate Scale (Iwanaga et al., 2021), we edited six questions to measure company-related disability practices, such as “How do you rate

your comfort in disclosing your disability to your supervisor/ employer? and “How do you rate the accessibility of your workplace for people with disabilities?” Participants rated the items on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = Extremely comfortable/ Extremely positively and 6 = Extremely uncomfortable/ Extremely negative). The internal consistency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ ) for conventional and MTurk samples were .671 and .877 respectively. We used the mean of the six items in subsequent data analysis.

### **Negative Work Experience during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

We created three items to explore participants’ negative job experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as “My employer refuses to provide me sick leave during the pandemic.” Participants rated their experience on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 6 = Strongly agree). The internal consistency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ ) for conventional and MTurk samples were .446 and .459. However, due to the low reliability, this variable was dropped from the subsequent data analysis.

### **Knowledge of the ADA**

Participants evaluated their knowledge of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) on one question “How would you evaluate your knowledge of the Americans with Disabilities Act?” using a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 represents “I Don’t know much about it at all,” 2 represents “Not very good,” 3 represents “Somewhat good,” and 4 represents “Very good.”

### **Data analyses**

For research question one, we used cross-tab analysis (Chi-square tests) to analyze sample differences between recruitment groups (MTurk vs Conventional). For research question two, we used cross-tab analysis and ANOVA to explore how predictor variables were associated with accommodation requests separately for each sample.

## **Results**

Table 1 shows the differences between the conventional sample and the MTurk sample by study variables. In terms of demographic characteristics, the conventional sample was more demographically diverse and slightly older; they had higher household income, and reported multiple disabilities that were more visible or apparent to others. In terms of work-related factors, compared with the conventional sample, the MTurk sample was significantly more likely to be employed full time (73.0% vs. 66.2%) and less likely to report their disability impacted their job performance (37.8% vs. 46%), and nearly three times less likely to have requested job accommodation (27% vs 74%). Although the two groups have similar plan to retire “within this year”, the conventional sample seemed more certain that they would retire by year’s end compared to the MTurk sample (13.3% vs. 2.7%). The MTurk respondents reported higher levels of job satisfaction and better disability practices in their work environment, and rated themselves as knowing less about the ADA than participants in the conventionally recruited group. The majority of the MTurk sample reported working at the business or company most of the time (52%) compared to the conventional sample (28%).

For the second research question, we used cross-tab analysis to explore the contribution of disability and work-related variables (categorical variables) to the decision to exercise Title I rights under the ADA by using request for accommodations as a dependent measure. Because of the significant differences between the two samples, we calculated the association between personal and workplace factors on ADA-related outcomes separately. Recall that the ratio of requests for accommodation between conventional and MTurk was about three to one (74.1% to 27.0%). Analysis of the differences on select variables that are contributing factors to accommodation requests yield interesting comparisons between the two samples. For both samples, the visibility of the disability and disclosure of disability were significantly associated with accommodation requests. Interestingly, whether disability affects job performance and knowledge of the ADA were significantly related to accommodation requests for the MTurk sample, but not for the conventional sample. It could be that conventional sample participants were better able to self-accommodate to reduce the effects of impairment on performance, since only 28% worked on site the majority of the time.

We used ANOVA to analyze how ADA knowledge, job satisfaction, and disability practices in the work environment (continuous variables) predicted requests for accommodation for the MTurk and the conventional samples (see Table 2). The results revealed that for the MTurk sample, ADA knowledge was a significant factor in accommodation requests ( $F(3, 107) = 3.008, p = .034$ ), with higher ADA knowledge being associated with higher likelihood of accommodation request. Neither job satisfaction, nor the aggregate mean ratings of workplace disability inclusion practices, were related to accommodation requests for either sample.

## **Discussion**

Clearly, the conventional and MTurk recruited samples captured different segments of the disability population of older workers. The conventional sample was more diverse, had higher household income, and was more likely to report multiple disabilities. The MTurk sample reported higher rates of mental health and cognitive disorders. The higher proportion of individuals reporting cognitive and mental health disorders in the MTurk sample is similar to other studies reporting disability characteristics of respondents recruited via the MTurk crowdsourcing platform (e.g., Ipsen et al., 2021).

The two samples also differed in their knowledge and utilization of the ADA, as well as the personal and workplace factors that were associated with this outcome. Specifically, the conventional sample reported significantly higher knowledge of the ADA, and requested accommodations at about three times the rate of the MTurk sample. The 74% accommodation request rate for this sample is similar to what Dong (2018) found in his sample of older workers with disabilities recruited through disability affiliated organizations. However, about a quarter, or only 27% of the MTurk recruited sample of older workers in this study had requested a workplace accommodation, a proportion within the range of accommodation requests found among national surveys of all disabled workers cited earlier (e.g., U.S. BLS, 2022; Hill et al., 2016). These disparate rates of accommodation requests between the two samples in this study suggest that individuals with disabil-

ities recruited through disability affiliated organizations, such as our conventional sample and the Dong (2018) conventionally-recruited sample may be more aware of their ADA rights, and more likely to advocate for or invoke these rights in the workplace, and therefore are significantly different from samples recruited through Amazon MTurk and other crowdsourcing platforms (Ipsen et al., 2021). For example, participants recruited through conventional means may already be engaged with systems, such as Centers for Independent Living, and therefore may be more likely to have access to information about disability rights under the law. In addition, disability organizations might inadvertently function as recruitment gatekeepers, deciding which members receive the recruitment emails, thus introducing selection bias into the study. The results of this study, particularly the disparate rates of accommodation requests between the two samples, can complement knowledge derived from conventionally recruited samples and thus assist researchers and practitioners to better understand the needs of the population of persons with disabilities under study.

The finding in the MTurk sample that knowledge of the ADA was associated with accommodation requests may be linked to studies cited earlier that showed the relationship between self-advocacy skills and accommodation requests among disabled workers. For example, Navela et al., (2015) conducted a systematic review of factors associated with requests for workplace accommodations, finding that self-advocacy skills were significantly related to the request. Although their review did not specifically include knowledge of the ADA, it makes sense that employees aware of their rights under the law are more likely to advocate for those rights. Interestingly, the relation between knowledge of the ADA and accommodation requests in the conventional sample was not significant, but we might speculate a ceiling effect as 74% of the sample reported requesting one.

In both these samples, short-term plans to retire – whether prematurely or not – were significantly related to the request for accommodations. In the national study of occupational data drawn from the Health and Retirement Study (HRS), Schimmel-Hyde et al. (2022) identified a relation between onset of disability for older workers and decisions to withdraw from work. Although data on accommodation requests were not available in their study, the authors suggested that employer accommodations might help workers with new disabling conditions to remain in their jobs. In this study, we lack data relative to the timing of disability onset, although it makes sense that newly acquired disabilities resulting from the aging process might accelerate retirement plans, particularly when workers lack knowledge about their accommodation rights under the ADA.

### Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, neither of the samples may be representative of the population of older workers with disabilities. The MTurk sample size was small, despite four waves of data collection, and the conventional sample, recruited via snowball and convenience methods may also reflect selection bias for reasons stated earlier. Second, MTurk is an online platform that offers a pool of participants who may have distinct characteristics, motivations, and demographics compared to the

general population. Therefore, the findings derived from a small MTurk sample may not accurately represent the larger population. Third, differences in findings between sample groups should be interpreted with caution due to uneven sample size; although the sample size discrepancy in this study is similar to those found in other disability studies exploring differential outcomes by sample recruitment source (e.g., Ipsen et al., 2021). Finally, the measures of the current study were self-perceived and self-reported measures. While self-perceived measures reflect participants' own values and provide insights into their subjective experiences, they can be biased and prone to errors in social desirability, honesty, and participant interpretation.

### Implications

It is clear from this study and others (e.g., Dong, 2018; Nevala, 2015) that all employees, including older ones, who know and make use of their rights under the ADA may be more likely to remain employed. The marked contrast between samples in this study, and the fact that only about a quarter of the MTurk recruited sample requested workplace accommodations, underscore the need for more outreach and training about the ADA to older workers who may not be affiliated with disability organizations, or know where to seek relevant information. Disability rights organizations and federally funded ADA technical assistance and training centers (e.g., ADA.org) can partner with broad membership organizations of older adults, such as the AARP (aarp.org) to increase and expand their messaging to the target population. Smalligan and Coyens (2020) pointed out that workers who develop new impairments or chronic illnesses may not be aware of their ADA rights, and recommended that state agencies administering workers' compensation and family medical leave programs launch intensive social media campaigns to educate these potentially eligible employees about return to work and their rights under the ADA. State vocational rehabilitation agencies, as well as county and state senior administrations and centers could assist with these social media campaigns as they use multiple methods to communicate with their members and constituents.

Rehabilitation, independent living, and disability rights advocates can also reach out to senior centers and senior communities in their geographic areas to offer ADA awareness and self-advocacy training for all their members and residents. Aging advocates have long noted the separation of disability and aging services and organizations (e.g., Molton & Ordway, 2019), and that older individuals aging into impairments may not identify with the "disability" community (Fabian et al., 2023), thus underscoring the need to broaden ADA and disability rights training to reach underserved populations.

Since studies have highlighted the benefits companies may derive from sustained employment of older workers, offering ADA training and information referrals to businesses as a means of benefitting their companies may also be helpful. Retaining older workers offers individual benefits, as well as societal benefits, as employed older individuals are less likely to experience poverty, and less likely to file federal disability insurance claims (Schimmel-Hyde et al., 2022).

Finally, this study has implications for rehabilitation research-



**Table 2**  
*Factors Related to Accommodation Requests*

Factors	MTurk	Conventional
Disability Visible	$\chi^2 = 21.118^{***}; p < .001$	$\chi^2 = 21.761^{***}; p < .001$
Disability affects Performance	$\chi^2 = 11.361^{**}; p = .001$	$\chi^2 = .497; p = .497$
Disability Disclosure	$\chi^2 = 13.599^{***}; p < .001$	$\chi^2 = 12.548^{***}; p < .001$
Plan to retire	$\chi^2 = 16.871^{**}; p = .005$	$\chi^2 = 16.026^{**}; p = .007$
ADA Knowledge	F (3, 107) = 3.008*; p = .034	F (3, 259) = 0.595; p = .619
Job Satisfaction	F (18, 92) = 0.828; p = .663	F (21, 238) = 0.708; p = .823
Disability Practices in Working Environment	F (27, 80) = 1.569; p = .064	F (25, 237) = 1.143; p = .296

Note. We used cross-tab analysis for categorical variables and ANOVA for continual variables.

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

ers who use convenience or snowball sampling in recruiting individuals with disabilities in survey research to consider how these recruitment methods via disability affiliated organizations can significantly affect study results. As Ipsen et al., (2021) noted, using a combination of recruitment strategies can result in a more robust and comprehensive dataset to explore critical issues in the disability field.

### Conclusion

The aging of the US population, together with federal policies and laws, indicate a growth trend for older workers remaining employed. The association between aging and disability also suggest that these older workers will benefit from workplace accommodations that can sustain employment and their subsequent attachment to the labor market. However, lack of knowledge on the part of employees regarding their right to reasonable accommodations under the ADA, and perhaps lack of willingness of businesses to provide them, may inhibit access to these job and workplace accommodations that can be mutually beneficial. More sustained and expansive efforts on the part of disability advocates, federally funded ADA information centers, and vocational rehabilitation professionals are needed to educate employees and businesses regarding the processes and values of providing workplace accommodations for aging workers with disabilities.

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