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Integrating Disabled Individuals into the Aviation Industry

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Abstract

Access to certain aviation careers has been limited for people with disabilities. This paper discusses the integration of hiring disabled individuals into the aviation industry and examines disabled individuals' perceptions of and confidence in aviation industry employment. The study included responses from 13 out of 15 former Able Flight participants. Themes examined include the impact of the Able Flight program on participants' views of potential employment within the aviation industry and how the aviation industry would be impacted by hiring disabled individuals. Results indicated disabled individuals are confident in their abilities and feel they would easily translate into the aviation industry. However, exposure and education to a highly competitive industry is a major concern. The paper suggests taking a more educational approach to address the issue and examines the adaptive nature of disabled individuals in a highly technological environment.

Key words: able flight, disability, integration, aviation, industry, employment

Introduction

The future of the aviation industry is an example of a projected fast-growing industry within the next decade, requiring individuals who have an "outside-the-box" mentality to remain sustainable in a highly competitive market. The projected job growth between 2010 and 2020 for aircraft and avionics mechanics is 6%. The projected growth during this time for commercial pilots is 11% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012b). Unfortunately, the aviation industry has made little effort in hiring disabled individuals who have the potential to bring a unique set of adaptive skills to an industry whose technology and processes are continuously changing.

The 2012 unemployment rate of working-age persons (between ages 18 and 64) with a disability was 11.7% compared to 7.5% for persons with no disability. The employment-population ratio for persons with no disabilities was 69.1% compared with 20.5% employment-population ratio for persons with a disability (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012a). Even more alarming is the percentage of Americans living with a disability age 16 and older. According to the 2011 American Community Survey (ACS), a yearly survey conducted by the Census Bureau, of the 241 million individuals age 16 and older living in the United States, 35 million, approximately 1 in 14 individuals cited living with a disability; thus, indicating disabled individuals are one of the largest underutilized populations in the United States labor force (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2011).

Disabilities by Industry

Industries that are most accessible to disabled employees include the education and health services, while the transportation industry employs the smallest percentage of working disabled individuals. According to the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012), 21.9% of employed individuals with disabilities work in education and health services, 12.8% work in retail services, 10.6% in professional services, and 5.3% in transportation and utilities. The types of occupations that were most likely to employ persons with a disability were found in management, 31.7%, followed by the sales and office occupation, 24.6%. The majority of employed individuals with disabilities work in the private sector, 72.5%, while 15.6% work in government-related jobs, and 11.8% elected to be self employed (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012a).

Able Flight

In order to remove perceived barriers to participation and to increase the visibility of opportunities for both life success and employment within the aviation industry for people with

disabilities, the Purdue University Aviation Technology Department has partnered with Able Flight, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization which began in 2007 to expose disabled individuals to the aviation industry by providing the opportunity for participants to earn the following FAA certificates: light-sport pilot, private pilot, dispatcher, and airframe and powerplant. Able Flight's mission is "to offer people with disabilities a unique way to challenge themselves through flight training and by doing so, to gain greater self-confidence and self-reliance" (Stites, 2013). Able Flight has licensed 28 pilots, and provided five individuals with a Career Training Scholarship, two individuals with a Return to Flight Scholarship (for those who have lost a pilot's license), and four with the Flight Training Challenge Scholarship (for those who are not able to attain a pilot's license, but still wish to participate) (Stites, 2012). Purdue-Able Flight joint program's goal is to promote the aviation industry and learn from the participants' abilities to adapt themselves in a highly technological environment. Professor Wulle (personal communication, May, 10, 2012) in the Aviation Technology Department at Purdue University has termed this concept "individual adaptation," adapting the individual to operate in conjunction with current technologies.

In order to better understand these issues, this project will investigate the following research questions:

(a) What are former Able Flight participants' confidence levels and perceptions of aviation industry employment?

(b) What percentage of Able Flight participants are currently employed or seeking employment within the aviation industry?

(c) How would the aviation industry be impacted by hiring individuals with disabilities?

Review of Literature

Rehabilitation Act of 1973 & American Disabilities Act

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 Section 504 forbade employers to exclude or deny individuals with disabilities an equal opportunity for employment and defined the rights of individuals to participate in, or have access to, program benefits and services, in addition to providing reasonable accommodation. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission defines reasonable accommodation for employers; "an employer is required to take reasonable steps to accommodate an individual with a disability unless it would cause the employer undue hardship" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006).

Shortly after the Rehabilitation Act, the American Disability Act (ADA) of 1990 prohibited the discrimination of individuals with disabilities in the workplace. Although its goal was to improve the labor market experience of workers with disabilities, the percent of disabled individuals employed during any given year between 1981 and 2000 was at least 44% lower than that of non-disabled individuals (Hotchkiss, 2002). The American Disability Act of 1990 was amended in 2008, when President George W. Bush signed the ADA Amendments Act (ADAAA) of 2008 establishing broader protections for disabled workers. Although American Disability (ADA) Act of 1990 mandated that disabled applicants be given equal consideration for jobs for which they can perform the essential job functions, stereotypes and lack of knowledge about career opportunities may prevent qualified disabled people from applying in the first place. Many research studies have examined the corporate culture of integrating individuals with disabilities and industry's perceptions of hiring disabled individuals, yet little research has been conducted on disabled individuals' perceptions and confidence of entering the work force.

Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP)

In 2001, the U.S. Department of Labor organized and authorized the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), a sub-cabinet agency, whose goals are to recognize and address the need for national policy to ensure that individuals with disabilities are fully represented and integrated into the 21st century workforce (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2013). ODEP has developed and created several initiatives to influence disability employment-related policies affecting an increase in the employment of individuals with disabilities. Their most recent campaign, the "Because" Campaign, reflects ODEP's priorities to increase expectations by youth with disabilities, their parents, teachers, coaches, and mentors as well as future employers about what persons with disabilities can achieve in their careers, focusing on the "ability" of individuals rather than the "disability" (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2013a).

Additionally, the campaign challenges viewers to rethink how they perceive career prospects for youth with disabilities and help individuals to develop skills transferable into successful careers. ODEP is most applauded for their 2010 campaign, "I Can," which aired more than 78,500 times on television, radio stations, and AMC theaters nationwide, earning an estimated $31 million in donated media time since its release (Office of Disability Employment, 2013a). The campaign demonstrated what people with disabilities could do at work and urged employers to capitalize on these talents through inclusive employment practices. ODEP has also joined U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration (ETA) to fund the Disability Employment Initiative (DEI) beginning fall 2010. Since the initiative, over $21 million has been awarded to nine states to improve education, training, and employment

opportunities for disabled individuals who are unemployed, underemployed, or receiving Social Security benefits (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013b).

Federal Aviation Administration

The Department of Transportation has set a hiring goal of 3% per fiscal year for individuals with disabilities (FAA, 2012). The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is taking action regarding the employment of individuals with disabilities including those with hearing loss, missing extremities, and paralysis. The FAA's National Outreach Program for Diversity and Inclusion: People with Disabilities Program, works to recruit, promote, retain, develop, and advance individuals with disabilities to ensure equal Federal employment opportunities (FAA, 2012). The FAA has access to a broad network of disability coordinators to recruit qualified applicants with disabilities. The program uses an "on-the-spot" hiring process, a non-competitive method for filling vacancies for individuals with disabilities, and fully complying with reasonable accommodation requirements of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (FAA, 2012).

Self-Confidence

Programs and opportunities to practice self-determination skills, such as Able Flight, can increase self-confidence and one's willingness to try again (Stoner, Angell, House, & Goins, 2009). Educational interventions can also increase self-confidence, and should be designed to foster decision-making skills, goal-setting skills, risk-taking skills, self-observation and evaluation, and an internal locus of control (Wehmeyer, 1997).

Purdue University - A "High-Tech" Training Center for the Disabled

As previously discussed, many government efforts have attempted to increase the employment rate of individuals with disabilities; however, the education realm is rarely mentioned. One of the underlying issues that can be attributed to the decreasing employment rate

of individuals with disabilities is the lack of proper placement and education to prepare individuals for technologically-based industries, more specifically aviation. "Utilizing internship and scholarship programs as well as connections to disability organizations can help organizations to successfully recruit employees with disabilities" (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2008e, p.10). When the word "aviation" is mentioned, it is common to immediately think of pilots, when in fact there are a multitude of non-flying positions within the aviation industry, including air traffic controllers, dispatchers, operational managers, meteorologists, and mechanics.

As an example of successful integration of those with disabilities into the workforce, Manpower Inc., the world's largest staffing firm, generates and sustains competitive employment opportunities for qualified workers with disabilities. Large scale school-to-work initiatives called High School/High Tech (HS/HT), engages and prepares students with disabilities for competitive employment opportunities in science, mathematics, and technology-based industries by incorporating a mix of on-site learning, corporate visits, mentoring, job shadowing, and paid internships (Blanck, 1998). Four design features are incorporated into their programs: preparatory experience, connecting activities, work based experiences, and youth development and leadership (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2013c).

Manpower franchise owner, John Gavin, believes there is a potential shift in employment for future generations to come, "People with disabilities are a large and untapped source of workers. A program like High School/High Tech helps companies like Manpower prepare for a new generation of workers for employment" (Blanck, 1998, p.31). Purdue University has already begun exposing disabled individuals to the aviation industry by partnering with Able Flight. The joint-program satisfies one of the design features of a HS/HT, connecting activities (program

linkages). The joint partnership between Purdue University and Able Flight has allowed participants to explore different facets of aviation and potential career fields within the aviation industry. Further research needs to be conducted to evaluate and outline how Purdue University could become a significant aviation training center for individuals with disabilities.

Methodology

Participants

Subjects for this study included former Able Flight participants. Able Flight is a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit organization created to enable individuals with disabilities the opportunity to learn how to fly and exposure to the aviation industry. Subjects' contact information was retrieved from Able Flight's Executive Director, Charles Stites.

Measures

Response data was collected and analyzed using Qualtrics, a statistical analysis software package. The survey was broken up into two components; the first section consisted of seven Likert-scale responses and the second section consisted of seven open-ended questions.

Procedures

Subjects were sent an introductory e-mail with the link to the survey attached (see Appendix A). Participants were given two weeks to complete the survey. A follow-up e-mail was sent after the two-week period to give participants a final opportunity to take the survey. Upon completion of the study, a thank you e-mail was sent to the respondents for their participation and results were shared upon request with the individual participants.

Results and Discussion

The survey was sent to a total of 15 former Able Flight participants. A response rate of 87% was achieved, with 13 responding to the survey. They were asked to respond to seven

Likert-scale statements addressing their perceptions of potential employment within the aviation industry. Response questions ranged from 1 to 5, 1 being strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree.

Research Question 1- Perceptions of the Aviation Industry Employment

Most participants felt confident they could play an integral role within the aviation industry as a whole ($n = 13$, $\bar{x} = 4.0$, $\sigma = 1.47$); 53.8% strongly agreed, 23.1% agreed, 7.7% neither agreed nor disagreed and 15.4% strongly disagreed (see Appendix B). More specifically, most participants also felt confident their abilities could translate easily into a management position ($n = 13$, $\bar{x} = 4.31$, $\sigma = 1.03$, 61.6% strongly agreed, 15.4% agree, 15.4% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 7.7% disagreed; see Appendix C), an air traffic control position ($n = 13$, $\bar{x} = 4.15$, $\sigma = 0.8$, 38.5% strongly agreed, 38.5% agreed, and 23.1% neither agreed nor disagreed; see Appendix D), or a pilot position ($n = 13$, $\bar{x} = 4.08$, $\sigma = 1.04$, 46.2% strongly agreed, 23.1% agreed, 23.1% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 7.7% disagreed; see Appendix E).

When asked if the aviation industry could be positively impacted by hiring disabled individuals, 85% of respondents strongly agreed and 15% agreed ($n = 13$, $\bar{x} = 4.85$, $\sigma = 0.38$). However, most also thought they had little knowledge related to potential aviation industry employment; 54% of respondents said they had little knowledge, 38% had somewhat knowledge, and 8% had extensive knowledge ($n = 13$, $\bar{x} = 1.54$, $\sigma = 0.66$). In summary, most Able Flight participants felt confident they could play an integral role within the aviation industry thus positively impacting the industry as a whole, while the lack of knowledge and exposure of potential employment still presents the greatest challenge.

Research Question 2- Employment within the Aviation Industry

Subjects were then asked if they were employed within the aviation industry. Of the 10 individuals who responded to this question, six individuals were not employed within the

aviation industry, two individuals were currently enrolled in aviation-accredited colleges seeking employment in aviation management, and two individuals were currently employed within the aviation industry, working as an airline dispatcher and owner of a flight school. Of those two, one respondent explained that he/she hopes to continue working toward a private pilot license and instrument rating in addition to taking an online weather forecasting certificate program online to strengthen his/her weather knowledge. Of the 11 individuals not currently employed in aviation or in school, the majority agreed that learning to fly has helped them to develop transferable skills used in their current jobs or schooling; 45.5% of respondents strongly agreed, 45.5% agreed, and 9% neither agreed nor disagreed.

When participants were asked if Able Flight had a profound impact on their view of the aviation industry, nine of 10 participants who responded said "yes." Several individuals explained, "It greatly impacted me and allowed me to pursue something I love," "it made aviation feel more accessible," and "I had no in-road to the aviation industry otherwise." One participant expressed his/her concerns regarding the difficulty of becoming a professional pilot, although he/she stated, "Able Flight introduced me to other areas of the industry where persons with disabilities can in fact have a positive impact on the industry; such jobs including ATC, airline dispatcher, airport manager, and many more." One particular participant noted an important aspect of the program, pointing out a change in attitudes from others, "not only has my confidence improved but others have become more confident in my abilities."

This brings up an interesting concept: a program such as Able Flight not only improves the individual participant's confidence, but also has the potential to enhance others perceptions within the aviation industry, including employers. Such programs provide a means of educating those within the aviation industry about disabled individuals' adaptability and self-determination,

consequently increasing the industry's confidence in hiring disabled individuals. Both education and "success" stories may instill greater confidence in employers, convincing them to hire more disabled individuals. For this to happen, more educational institutes like Purdue University need to create strategic alliances with companies, placing emphasis on mutual benefits for both disabled individuals and employers. One participant stated, "I did not see myself having a large amount of participation within the aviation industry, but Able Flight did allow me to see the potential opportunities that exist." When the same individual was asked if he/she ever planned to pursue employment within the aviation industry, he/she responded "not currently, but you never know what the future may have in store for me." Although this respondent did not see a future within the aviation industry, as a result of Able Flight, he/she has been educated about the potential employment that exists and indicates he/she would consider the possibility of employment, "I would say that I have found the aviation industry, as a whole, to be very accepting, progressive, and open-minded, more so than I had originally thought."

Research Question 3- Disabled Individuals Impact on the Aviation Industry

Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions addressing benefits, implications involved, as well as advantages and disadvantages of hiring disabled individuals into the aviation industry. Some of the benefits mentioned included a new way of looking how people interact with technology from a disabled individual's perspective and an increase in creativity. Respondents explained disabled individuals are critical thinkers and continuously have an "outside-the-box" mentality since most disabled individuals do not have the luxury of doing day-to-day tasks the traditional way. This could potentially translate into improving the efficiency of complex processes involved in the airline industry. Also, aviation is an industry where change is continuous requiring quick adaptation; disabled individuals generally have to do

this on a regular basis making them ideal employees. One respondent sums this issue up best by stating, "Any industry that limits its potential employee base also limits its potential to be successful. By neglecting to acknowledge the disabled community, aviation has no blame to lay for poor performance other than itself." Just as important as it is to evaluate the potential benefits, it is equally important to assess the implications involved in hiring disabled individuals. Respondents were asked "what implications do you think are involved when hiring someone with a disability?" The majority of them did not feel there were many implications that would be involved, rather "only positive implications could come from opening the minds of the incumbent aviation community," as one respondent stated. Several individuals expressed their concerns for companies making accessible workspace and providing reasonable accommodations, fearing the expenses associated with such modifications. In addition to asking respondents about potential benefits and implications involved, they were also asked "what are the advantages and disadvantages of hiring someone in aviation with a disability?" (see Appendix F). The respondents perceived several advantages including an increase in diversity among the industry and stereotypes being dispelled; some of the major concerns (or disadvantages) included workplace accommodations being made and a decline in work efficiency (depending on the type of disability and task required) negatively perceived by coworkers. For the most part, the advantages of hiring a disabled individual outweighed the disadvantages along the social continuum while the expense associated with workspace accommodations remained a major concern for the majority of respondents.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Overall, the results suggest an increase of awareness and education for disabled individuals within the aviation industry is needed. Educational intervention may have the potential to provide transferable skills for disabled individuals, resulting in an increase in self-confidence. An example of such an intervention may include Purdue University becoming a high-tech training center for disabled individuals. Although there are millions of disabled individuals living around the world, the scope of this study was limited to Able Flight participants only. Further research is recommended to survey non Able Flight participants who have had less exposure to the aviation industry. Perhaps the perceptions of those with less exposure may yield different results. Further research could attempt to strengthen the results by analyzing participants' perceptions before participating in Able Flight and after completion of Able Flight to assess Able Flight's impact on disabled individuals' perceptions.

Although the aviation industry is a fast-growing industry continuously changing, access to certain aviation careers has been limited for disabled individuals. The FAA is strategically aligning its efforts to employ more disabled individuals, believing the aviation industry could benefit from hiring highly qualified and adaptable individuals. As the literature suggests, federal policy and legislation have provided the foundation for equal employment opportunities in an effort to increase the labor market for disabled individuals, but a new approach to advance the inclusive workforce is needed. Understanding disabled individuals' perceptions of aviation industry employment may improve efforts to support and employ a largely untapped and able-working population. With this knowledge and awareness, educational strategies can be implemented to address this issue, further influencing disabled individuals' confidence of employment and putting an end to stereotypes within the aviation industry.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Qualtrics survey

You are being contacted to complete a survey to the recent e-mail you received. This survey should take 10-15 minutes to complete. You may withdraw from the survey at any time. The results of this survey will be anonymous and kept confidential. Upon completion of the study, the results will be shared with you if requested. Please respond to the following questions, providing as much detail as possible. Your responses are greatly appreciated by the researcher, and the feedback provided by your survey responses will provide valuable information that will be used to help process the findings of this study. Thank you for your extra time and help!

Statement 1:
I am confident I could play an integral role within the aviation industry.
1(strongly disagree)   2(disagree)   3(neither agree nor disagree)   4(agree)   5(strongly agree)

Statement 2:
I am confident my abilities would translate easily into an aviation management position (airport or airline management).
1(strongly disagree)   2(disagree)   3(neither agree nor disagree)   4(agree)   5(strongly agree)

Statement 3:
I am confident my abilities would translate easily into an air traffic control position.
1(strongly disagree)   2(disagree)   3(neither agree nor disagree)   4(agree)   5(strongly agree)

Statement 4:
I am confident my abilities would translate easily into a pilot position.
1(strongly disagree)   2(disagree)   3(neither agree nor disagree)   4(agree)   5(strongly agree)

Statement 5:
The aviation industry could be positively impacted by hiring more individuals with disabilities.
1(strongly disagree)   2(disagree)   3(neither agree nor disagree)   4(agree)   5(strongly agree)

Statement 6:
Learning to fly has helped me develop skills used in my current job.
1(strongly disagree)   2(disagree)   3(neither agree nor disagree)   4(agree)   5(strongly agree)

Statement 7:
What knowledge did/do you have about potential aviation industry employment for someone with your disability?
1(little knowledge)   2(somewhat knowledge)   3(extensive knowledge)

Question 1:
How would the aviation industry benefit (not benefit) from hiring individuals with disabilities?

Question 2:
What are advantages/disadvantages of hiring someone with a disability in aviation?

Question 3:
Did Able Flight have a profound impact on your view of the aviation industry? If so, how?

Question 4:
Are you currently employed within the aviation industry? If so, in what capacity (position)?

Question 5:
Do you have any future plans to pursue a career within the aviation industry? If so, in what capacity (position)?
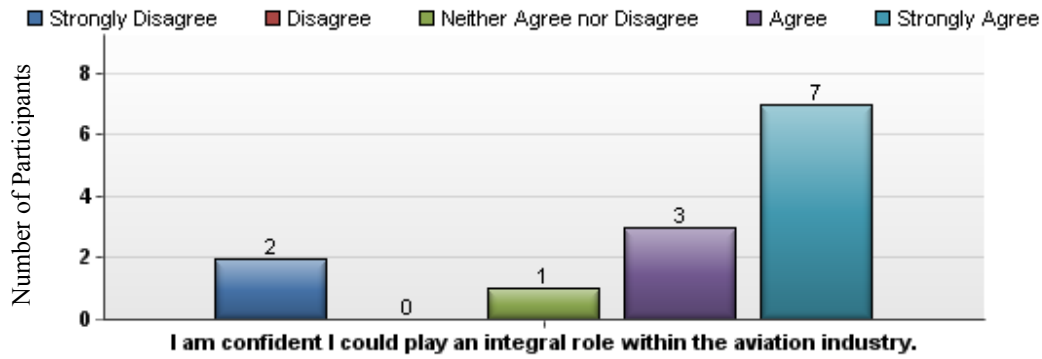
Question 6 (If answered YES to Question 5):
What further preparation do you plan to pursue for the career you are interested?

Question 7:
What implications (if any) do you think will result from hiring someone with a disability into the aviation industry?

*Appendix B: Confidence playing a role within the aviation industry*

Statistic	I am confident I could play an integral role within the aviation industry.
Min Value	1
Max Value	5
Mean	4.00
Variance	2.17
Standard Deviation	1.47
Total Responses	13

*Appendix C: Confident in one's abilities to translate into an aviation management position*
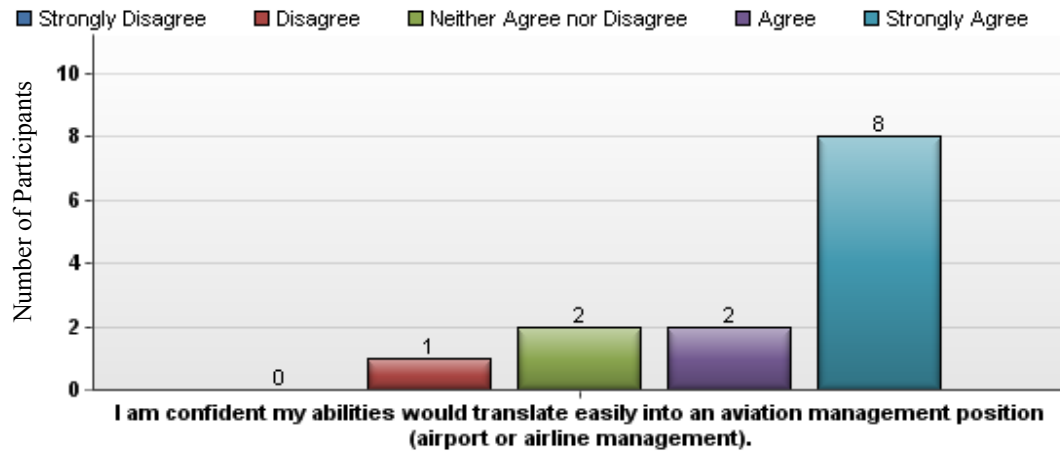
Statistic	I am confident my abilities would translate easily into an aviation management position (airport or airline management).
Min Value	2
Max Value	5
Mean	4.31
Variance	1.06
Standard Deviation	1.03
Total Responses	13

Appendix D: Confident in one's abilities to translate into an air traffic control position
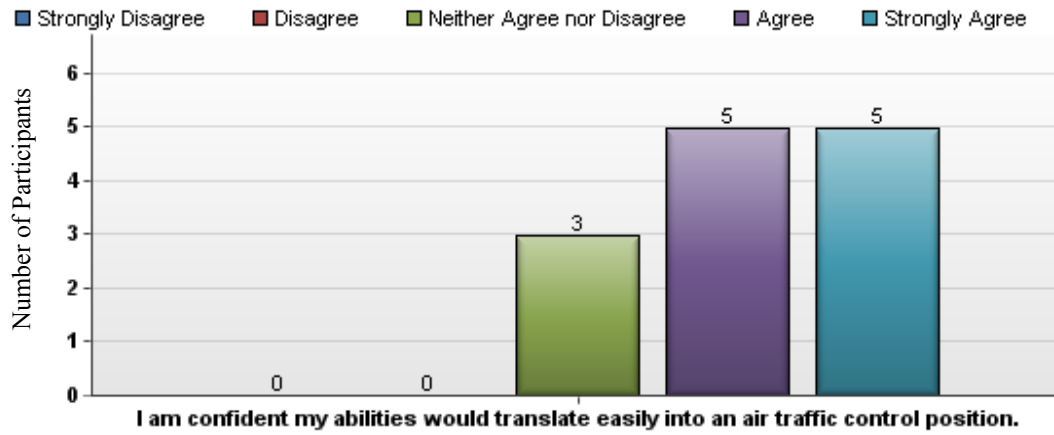
Statistic	I am confident my abilities would translate easily into an air traffic control position.
Min Value	3
Max Value	5
Mean	4.15
Variance	0.64
Standard Deviation	0.80
Total Responses	13

Appendix E: Confident in one's abilities to translate into a pilot position
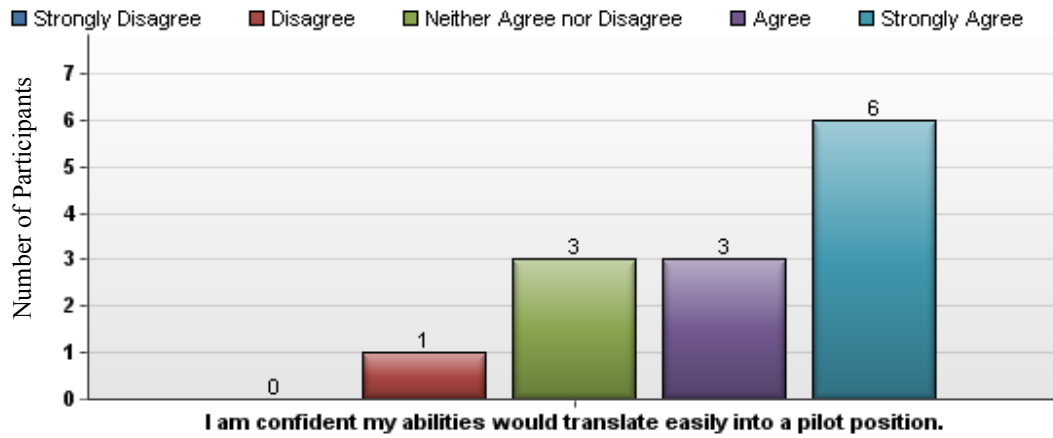
Statistic	I am confident my abilities would translate easily into a pilot position.
Min Value	2
Max Value	5
Mean	4.08
Variance	1.08
Standard Deviation	1.04
Total Responses	13

Appendix F: Advantages vs. disadvantages of hiring someone with a disability

Advantages	Disadvantages
Dismiss stereotypes that only healthy, white males work in the aviation industry	Hiring individuals "just because" they have a disability
Bring people into the industry who have proven experience in handling challenges and adapting to their environment	Co-workers have to pull more weight or pick up in the loss of work efficiency from someone with a disability (depending on the disability and task)
Provide meaningful work for those who thought previously they could hold a menial job	Disability is seen as a weakness in the hiring process and is a large hurdle for companies to overcome
Increases diversity among the aviation industry	Accommodation expense
Disabled individuals are natural problem solvers and critical thinkers	Accommodations cannot be made and work efficiency declines resulting in negative perceptions of coworkers
Diversity helps people create open source solutions to complex-solutions rather than closed loop solutions that become stagnant	Complexities in restructuring workspace
Disabled individuals may perform at a greater level than the average person in order to prove worth and overcome stigma of the industry	
Tax benefits for companies who hire disabled individuals	