Dis/Ability: A Discussion on Creating More Accessible Employment for Assistance Dog Instructors with Disabilities

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Abstract

Disabled individuals can and do lead successful careers as assistance dog instructors. However, the international percentage of professional disabled instructors is significantly lower than their able-bodied colleagues. This paper takes an initial step in questioning the benefits and challenges of creating more accessible and inclusive career paths for disabled assistance dog instructors, hopefully acting as a springboard for future research, and initiating conversation within the assistance dog sector itself, as well. Some disabled individuals may have a disability, or combinations of more than one, which could challenge the welfare and wellbeing of the dogs they educate. Others may have a greater aptitude for educating assistance dogs and offering deeper empathy at times. This paper was inspired by the author’s six years working as a guide dog instructor. It questions what the implications of a disabled trainer’s career might be for the disabled individual, assistance dog, employer, and client.

Keywords

accessibility – assistance dogs – disability – employment

This paper was inspired by the six years I spent working as a guide dog (Canis lupus familiaris) instructor in Germany. During this time, I met competent assistance dog instructors with disabilities. This prompted years of questioning the potential benefits, as well as challenges, of individuals with disabilities...
educating assistance dogs (Yamamoto & Hart, 2019). What might the implications be for the individual with a disability, assistance dog, employer, and client? I became curious about whether the assistance dog sector would welcome a more accessible career path for assistance dog instructors with disabilities. There is no existing literature addressing assistance dog instructors with disabilities (for a case where a guide dog school unsuccessfully trials a visually impaired instructor, see Lucas, 2008). Individuals with disabilities might use methods identical to those of their able-bodied colleagues or alternatives which are suited to their abilities. If their wellbeing and that of the dog is not in detriment, but rather benefits from this, there is something to be said in favor of employing instructors with disabilities. This is dependent on context, as well as on the human and dog individuals involved.

We cannot claim that assistance dogs prefer disabled or able-bodied instructors. To do so is not the intention of this paper. I also do not suggest that we can claim a generalizable benefit to either disabled or able-bodied instructors on the education or wellbeing of assistance dogs. Such preferences and experiences naturally vary among both assistance dogs and instructors individually. Currently, there are simply not enough employed instructors with disabilities for viable conclusions to be made.

Currently, educating assistance dogs is not an accredited profession (Bremhorst et al., 2018). Furthermore, there are no standardized curricula or certifications which are universally accepted or adopted to support this career path (Berentzen, 2016; Sanders, 1999). In the early twentieth century, The Seeing Eye stated that only 5–8% of assistance dog instructors completed their education (Putnam, 1954, p. 97). As a result, starting a career as an assistance dog instructor is often challenging, perhaps even more so for individuals with disabilities in predominantly ableist societies. Clients and assistance dogs can suffer substantially as a result of being taught by instructors lacking a proper education. This has not been addressed adequately in existing literature. It is, however, a glaring reality within the assistance dog sector internationally and begs further academic attention. This career requires a wealth of knowledge,

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1 I define “training” as the process of learning how to understand and respond to cues (i.e., “sit,” “down”). In a move to recognize assistance dogs as working professionals with formal jobs, however, I understand their education as the process of learning how to carry out a job independently, rather than carry out tasks in response to cues. This acknowledges their work as requiring extensive knowledge concerning relevant concepts, coupled with the professional skill to work and reach decisions independently. An example of this, among guide dogs, is “intelligent disobedience” (Pemberton, 2019; Sanders, 1999; Zhu et al., 2020). A trained companion canine would likely cross a road when asked to do so. However, an educated guide dog does so only when they deem it as safe. Such a skill and assessment ability, in addition to knowing when to refuse their human partner’s cues, results from a thorough education, not only training.
experience, and skill when working with both dogs and individuals with disabilities (Berentzen, 2016; Sanders, 1999).

After ending my career as a guide dog instructor, I began to work with Pfotenpiloten – a German nonprofit organization in the assistance dog sector. Pfotenpiloten, along with some of the largest assistance dog organizations and schools in Europe, initiated a KA2-Erasmus+ EU- “Strategic Partnership.” It is entitled: “Collaborative Best Practice Collection in Preparation of a European Curriculum and Certification for Assistance Dog Trainers/Instructors, with Special Emphasis on Enabling Job Entry for People with Disabilities.” A standardized education will be required to truly make the career of an assistance dog instructor an accredited, more inclusive profession. To support an inclusive curriculum, assistance dog schools will need to further discuss actively employing and educating instructors with disabilities and reflect on their current employment practices. In this paper, I aim to initiate dialogue around individuals with disabilities receiving increased employment opportunities as assistance dog instructors. Specifically, the paper questions the benefits and potential challenges that an instructor with a disability, assistance dog, assistance dog school, and client might face within more inclusive employment practices.

**Assistance Dogs**

An internationally agreed upon and standardized definition for assistance dogs does not yet exist (Bremhorst et al., 2018), in part a result of the nomenclature used to describe them (Patterson-Kane et al., 2020). Assistance Dogs International, a global association of accredited assistance dog schools, defines guide dogs, hearing dogs, and service dogs (in addition to dogs offering other forms of assistance for individuals living with psychiatric, diabetic, and autism impairments) as “assistance dogs” – this is the term commonly used throughout Europe (Assistance Dogs International, n.d.) and in this paper. In the United States, the Americans With Disabilities Act (Assistance Dogs International, n.d.) refers to assistance dogs – as well as miniature horses (*Equus ferus caballus*) – as “service animals” (Americans With Disabilities Act, 1990; Americans with Disabilities Act, 2000; Fantaski, 2020).

**Disability and Animality**

Humans and other animals live with varying degrees of disability. Nevertheless, Barnes (2016) states that being petite can be disabling when navigating daily
tasks yet is generally not considered a disability on its own (pp. 17–18). Rather, to borrow from Taylor (2017), individuals find themselves on a spectrum of dependency. Able-bodied individuals tend to view individuals with disabilities, subconsciously or consciously, as less able (Taylor, 2017). Therefore, challenges often arise for instructors with disabilities seeking a career with assistance dogs due to the lack of accessible employment opportunities. Longmore (2003) writes that individuals with disabilities often “prize not self-sufficiency but self-determination, not independence but interdependence, not functional separateness but personal connection, not physical autonomy but human community” (p. 222). Competent assistance dog instructors require these traits as well (Putnam, 1954; Sanders, 1999).

This paper highlights and challenges norms within the assistance dog sector. In my experience, most professional assistance dog instructors are able-bodied. Similarly, as Price (2017) discusses, the dogs themselves are tied to requirements of exceptional temperaments and health. As both critical animal studies and disability studies underline, it is common for humans and other animals to be defined by their ability to function within an ableist framework (Oliver, 2020, p. 111). This is not to say that an assistance dog “should be incontinent, riddled with anxiety, or disruptive” (Price, 2017, p. 6; emphasis in original). The opposite is true, especially in the growing movement toward more humane work for assistance dogs and those working with and for them (see Coulter, 2016b, 2020).

Highlighting the prominence of able-bodied instructors and dogs asks us to consider less conventional forms of assistance dog-instructor relationships. Recent events, such as the devastating Covid-19 pandemic, have shown that work can be approached more flexibly and accessibly when necessary. The pandemic presented “an urgency to acknowledge the interdependence of humans, nonhumans, and our shared environment and lives” (Martino & Lindsay, 2020, p. 3). As will be mentioned in the following section, this time furthermore revealed our vulnerability on the spectrum of disability, ability, and dependency. Now, perhaps more than ever, we must acknowledge and support movements toward more inclusive employment.

**Employment**

Ableism creates greater unemployment rates for individuals with disabilities compared to their able-bodied colleagues (Ameri et al., 2015). According to the *International Labour Organization*, around 386 million working-age individuals internationally are disabled (Bhanushali, 2016). Around 80% (Ali et al., 2011)
express a strong desire to participate in the workforce (Harkin, 2012). In addition, individuals with disabilities are not as likely to be promoted (Benokraitis & Feagin, 2016; Shapiro, 1994). Assistance dog schools often offer clear career paths for both able-bodied employees and employees with disabilities which are based more on experience than formal, theoretical education (Sanders, 1999). Individuals generally start by fostering a puppy or working at a kennel before becoming an apprentice and eventually working as an instructor (Mai et al., 2020).

Increased accessibility and inclusion can be relevant to currently able-bodied instructors, as well. Finding themselves on a spectrum of dependency and disability (Taylor, 2017), able-bodied instructors could injure themselves or develop a disability while wishing to continue their career. Ideally, standards and opportunities would be in place to support this. Fewer than 15% of individuals with disabilities were born disabled (Shapiro, 1994). Most individuals will inevitably experience life with a disability: “Since disability catches up with most of us in old age, it is a minority that we all, if we live long enough, join” (Shapiro, 1994, p. 8).

Considering Assistance Dog Instructors with Autism

A skilled instructor educates assistance dogs competently and humanely while collaborating with clients in a professional manner (Putnam, 1954; Sanders, 1999). By these standards, in some cases, a talented instructor with autism may not meet their employer’s expectations when working with clients with disabilities. This could be counteracted by a second instructor who enjoys to work with humans taking the assistance dog after their education to develop them as a team with the client. This practice is, in fact, common among able-bodied instructors in many assistance dog schools (Fallani et al., 2006; Mouret, 2019).

A colleague, the manager of an assistance dog school in the United Kingdom, employs two instructors who are on the autism spectrum. They are quite happy with these instructors’ contributions (personal communication, November 23, 2018). In their experience, instructors with autism seem to be more empathetic, perhaps as a result of living with assistance dogs and having a deep passion and commitment to the career. The work may therefore have a more personal meaning to them than able-bodied colleagues (personal communication, November 23, 2018).

Describing individuals with autism as being especially empathetic might seem a contradiction to some, as they are often perceived as less empathetic than able-bodied individuals (Monroe, 2018; van der Zee & Derksen, 2020).
While individuals with autism can have a higher tendency to find communicating in an emotional manner challenging, this does not always constrict their ability to empathize (Monroe, 2018). Further interdisciplinary research and critical questioning will offer a deeper understanding of the factors impacting their “empathic integrity” (Song et al., 2019, p. 2). There seems to be no fully agreed-upon definition of empathy. It can often be wrapped together with social cognitive processes (Fletcher-Watson & Bird, 2020; Nicolaidis et al., 2019). Some experience “hyper-emotionality,” causing them to be overwhelmed when emotional interactions are expected (Bergenmar et al., 2015, p. 206; see also Fletcher-Watson & Bird, 2020). However, Davidson and Smith (2012) found that experiences in nature, especially with nonhuman animals, are comparatively less intense for a large percentage of individuals with autism. They suggest that some empathize with other species to the extent that they “feel more like an animal, or even a place, than they feel like other people” (Davidson & Smith, 2012, p. 271; emphasis in original).

Employers within the assistance dog sector will need to listen to what instructors with autism tell them about their lived experiences with empathy (Fletcher-Watson & Bird, 2020). As mentioned previously, heightened levels of empathy can improve the education of assistance dogs. However, Monroe (2018) also reminds us that communicating well and empathizing with other animals does not equate to having a strong emotional bond with or even being liked by them. Nevertheless, perhaps working with an individual with autism could benefit some assistance dogs, even when a strong emotional bond is absent: “Nonhuman animals and autistic people can be allies for each other, and these connections can be a site of solidarity in working against speciesist and ableist oppression” (Monroe, 2018, pp. 196–197).

**Benefits for the Assistance Dogs**

An acquaintance of mine, a deaf woman named Bree, lives and works with her assistance dog, Lola. The deliberate manner with which Bree, as a deaf individual, focuses on her environment seems to transfer to Lola. Their communication is entirely absent of acoustic signals and consists instead of body and sign language. Even when Lola is relaxed, observing her surroundings, she remains attentive towards Bree and reacts immediately to the smallest hand movements. Dogs tend to mirror humans physically and emotionally so that individuals with calm demeanors tend to have calm dogs (Bekoff, 2018). As a professional in the assistance dog field, I have had the delight of observing lovely canine-human dyads. However, I have never encountered such an
extraordinary assistance dog team, both in their relationship and communication, as Bree and Lola.

It could be argued that some dogs and humans are simply calm and that this did not stem from Bree's lack of hearing. Personalities and temperaments can play a crucial role in any animal's ability and motivation to work (Coulter, 2020). However, that alone does not explain their interpersonal dynamic. Communication is visual or tactile, due to Bree's hearing impairment. Therefore, Lola prioritizes looking at Bree over individuals and distractions in their environment to see when she is communicating with her. An able-bodied assistance dog working with an able-bodied individual, for example, understands that, if they are needed, they will automatically be alerted by their human companion's voice, whether they are visually focused on them or not.

There is a widely shared understanding among individuals living with and educating dogs that exceptional education usually has little to do with the words used (Arnold, 2010; Wroblewski, 2008). It was fascinating to see this confirmed through Bree and Lola's silent communication. Bree does not educate assistance dogs professionally. However, she taught Lola together with an instructor and did this quite well. If she were to work as an instructor, her quiet and focused manner, as a result, in part, of her own hearing impairment, could improve the education and wellbeing of assistance dogs.

Being educated by a deaf instructor prior to living with and assisting a deaf individual could strengthen an assistance dog's success and confidence during this transition. Based on professional knowledge, I am aware that able-bodied instructors will “act deaf” to test assistance dogs who are learning to assist deaf individuals. At later stages of the education, they ignore sounds which the dog is required to signal. With a deaf instructor, the assistance dog could collect genuine experiences. I have made similar observations of instructors with mobility disabilities who use wheelchairs, as well as instructors living with diabetes or autism, to name a few. These disabilities can have the potential to prepare an assistance dog for a variety of situations which might arise with their future partner. I propose that, in some cases, it can benefit an assistance dog to receive an education from an individual who has the same disability with which they are being educated to assist.

There are instances where other animals recognize that an individual has a disability and helps them, even when this does not appear to offer them direct practical benefits. For example, canines can offer voluntary work (Coulter, 2016a) by alerting humans (including strangers) to oncoming epileptic seizures (Catala et al., 2019; Martinez-Caja et al., 2019). This can be done around 30 minutes before onset (Kirton et al., 2008), and sometimes this is done without the canine receiving an education to do so (Goodavage, 2019).
I question whether some instructors with disabilities will have a heightened, perhaps more nuanced level of empathy for assistance dogs than able-bodied instructors. For example, Taylor (2017) describes her ability to identify the discomfort and pain in her retired assistance dog, Bailey. Dogs, like humans, can have mood swings due to headaches, lack of sleep, and myriad other triggers (Bekoff, 2018). Able-bodied instructors are generally not likely to experience chronic pain to the same degree and frequency as their colleagues with disabilities and may, therefore, not recognize it as easily in dogs without the presence of obvious physical symptoms. Taylor (2017) understands when Bailey does not want to be touched, which may go unnoticed by the untrained or inexperienced eye. She relates to Bailey’s experiences on a personal level because she experiences comparable symptoms resulting from her disability.

Heightened empathy between instructors with disabilities and dogs could stem from shared experiences living in ableist, anthropocentric societies and being expected, at times, to conform to rigid ableist and anthropocentric ideals (Taylor, 2017). When needs are unmet, both disabled humans and nonhuman individuals are “trained” to look and behave in a manner which is considered socially acceptable within an ableist culture. When individuals with disabilities do “behave,” they might then be likened to calm, domestic pets (Mitchell & Snyder, 2005). For example, Mr. Howe, a young blind and deaf woman’s teacher, compared his experience with her to educating “a very intelligent dog a variety of tricks” (Gitter, 2001, p. 83).

Comparing individuals with disabilities to other-than-human animals, as Mr. Howe did, is not uncommon (Taylor, 2017). In theory, this is not offensive. It is not innately insulting to be compared to another species or to an individual with a disability. Such comments become demeaning when done by an individual who views either group as less worthy than an able-bodied human (Taylor, 2017). Hurtful comparisons can be motivated by, for example, movements of some individuals with disabilities, which can, unfortunately, be viewed as animalistic to ableist bystanders (Goodley, 2018; Walters, 2014): “When I use my mouth instead of my hands in public I realize I am transgressing boundaries, not only of able-bodied etiquette, but of the ways in which one is supposed to inhabit a human body” (Taylor, 2017, p. 155).

Taylor (2017) recognizes movements and gestures similar to her own when her assistance dog adjusts blankets with his mouth. While an ableist individual might make a negative comparison, Taylor shows that she can find comfort

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2 More so historically, in the case of the disabled community, although some beliefs and practices unfortunately remain to this day.
in recognizing herself in her assistance dog. I propose that instructors with disabilities can benefit assistance dogs through heightened empathy. This can directly impact the quality of dogs’ education and work-lives by way of more empathetic acknowledgement and treatment.

Additionally, in my experience, where assistance dogs live during their education greatly influences their learning (Foraita et al., 2021). Many larger assistance dog schools utilize kennels, instead of family homes, to house their dogs (Tomkins et al., 2011). However, smaller assistance dog schools exist, though not overly addressed in existing literature, which consist of one individual who acts as the owner and the instructor (for an exception, see Kohl, 2010). Throughout my career as the owner of such a small school, my colleagues with disabilities and I educated assistance dogs without the use of kennels. Confirmed by conversations with experienced colleagues within the assistance dog sector over the years, the stress experienced by a dog, especially when first arriving at the school, will be significantly lower in a home environment – which most self-employed instructors with disabilities offer – than in a kennel environment (see also Foraita et al., 2021).

Anne, an acquaintance of mine in Germany, lived with two assistance dogs. One was educated with the help of an instructor. She is currently educating the other entirely on her own. Anne uses a wheelchair, and can be mobile for short durations, yet lives with chronic pain. Recently, she became a certified canine instructor with the goal of educating assistance dogs. There are many cases comparable to Anne’s which remain undocumented and excluded from research interests. Anne is retired due to her disability, allowing for a highly flexible schedule. Her assistance dogs receive a level of attention and care which instructors (able-bodied or otherwise) working for larger assistance dog schools would generally not be able to offer each individual dog.

Anne would not have the capacity to care for and educate many dogs, a clear economic drawback for most assistance dog schools with whom I have spoken. However, she could perhaps offer them a higher quality of life and education than those living predominantly in kennels. For example, Anne may notice slight changes in a dog’s behavior, movement, preference, and general wellbeing – cues which instructors working with dogs in kennels may miss due to hours spent apart. In addition, it can be expected that a considerable number of instructors with disabilities will work pro bono, while being officially retired due to their disability. They might choose this profession as a fulfilling and satisfying addition to their life, as most assistance dog instructors do (Putnam, 1954; Sanders, 1999). Assistance dogs could benefit from being their instructor’s “labor of love” instead of “a product” that must be “produced” in
the framework of economic market conditions which place significant strain on the assistance dog sector (Wirth & Rein, 2008). In addition to assistance dog tasks, Anne’s dogs learn tricks which they seem to enjoy, come with her on daily excursions and long walks, then relax together in the evenings in their shared home. Although she experiences chronic pain, her constant presence in their lives (and, therefore, continuous educating of and with them) can make up for days where she educates them less due to a health crisis.

I will address some potential disadvantages of assistance dogs being educated by individuals with disabilities, as broad generalizations are rarely realistic when speaking of interspecies work. Firstly, not all individuals with disabilities will be great instructors – as is also the case with able-bodied individuals. Only a small percentage will have the necessary level of “dog understanding” (Sanders, 1999, p. 92) to educate dogs well, and this applies to both disabled and able-bodied instructors. In some cases, educating assistance dogs to the high level which is required may prove more challenging because of certain disabilities such as cognitive, psychiatric, or physical chronic impairments – in particular, perhaps, when an individual has a combination of these disabilities.

It is possible that certain disabilities could challenge the wellbeing of assistance dogs during their education – despite the best intentions of the instructors with disabilities. There might be cases where the ability to properly educate a dog in a manner which is enjoyable for both will be hindered by a disability. Some individuals with disabilities may have assistance dogs of their own and possess a great deal of experience. It seems logical to think that they would be able to educate one for someone else. While there is some truth in this line of thinking, it would not be wise to assume this as a universal rule. Their assistance dog, if educated by a professional, was taught to assist an individual with a disability before moving in with them. A dog who is still being educated will require an instructor, disabled or able-bodied, who can competently prepare and educate them to work and live with an individual with a disability in a manner which is mutually beneficial and enjoyable.

A guide dog school attempted to teach a visually impaired individual to work as a guide dog instructor (Lucas, 2008). This experiment was deemed unsuccessful due to “numerous variables that ... affected safety, including personal confidence, dog handling skills, and lack of vision” (Lucas, 2008, p. 64). Guide dog instructors are simultaneously responsible for both the education and safety of the dog and client. This is generally incredibly challenging even for sighted individuals (Putnam, 1954), and was reported by the visually impaired individual in Lucas’ research as not being possible. The impaired vision of an instructor could be a significant safety concern for the dog, instructor, and
visually impaired client. In 1819, the director of the Institute for the Blind in Vienna, a man known as Father Johann Wilhelm Klein, was the first individual to specify that sighted individuals should educate guide dogs (Berentzen, 2016; Fishman, 2003; Putnam, 1954). Michalko (1999) argued that being blind should not be an inconvenience, especially in light of modern assistive technologies; nevertheless, educating guide dogs requires sight for the optimal experience and safety of the instructor, guide dog, and visually impaired client (Lucas, 2008; Sanders, 2000).

Alternatively, some assistance dog schools work with visually impaired employees and volunteers who can act as ideal individuals to communicate with and support clients, test guide dogs-in-training (Lucas, 2008), and socialize puppies. Their disability can greatly benefit the school, clients, and dogs. Visual impairment has been used as an example here, as no research, as far as I am aware, has been conducted on instructors with other disabilities. Although some disabilities might complicate work with assistance dogs, others may allow individuals to educate them to a degree which might surpass that of able-bodied instructors.

**Benefits for the Clients**

To return to Bree's story, individuals with a hearing impairment may benefit from working with a deaf instructor. Being fluent in sign language is invaluable when working with hearing-impaired clients (personal communication, November 21, 2018). I would extend this sentiment to the assistance dogs. A deaf individual who is confused about or is misunderstanding what their instructor is communicating (in the case of an instructor who is not as fluent in sign language as a deaf instructor) could be more distracted and, perhaps, stressed. This may negatively affect their interactions and relationship with the assistance dog. Working together with an instructor who is deaf, however, could eliminate this challenge. Clients with disabilities may more easily communicate with, trust, and bond with instructors who have the same or a similar disability (personal communication, November 9, 2018). This stems, in part, from improved communication and, more generally, the ability to personally relate to what the dog and client are experiencing. A colleague explained that instructors with disabilities have inspired clients by working in a generally able-bodied-dominated sphere. Furthermore, having their assistance dog present can allow them to demonstrate tasks before asking the client to do the same (personal communication, November 9, 2018). On the other hand,
it might prove difficult for assistance dog schools to hire an instructor if their own assistance dog's presence limits their ability to educate another dog.

**Potential Adjustments**

While there are benefits to employing instructors with disabilities, it could also present unique challenges, in some cases, for the human and dog stakeholders. For most assistance dog schools, creating an accessible work environment would require an internal adjustment in structure, initiative, and culture. This may shift the focus from a “production” of assistance dogs. Instead, employers might begin to value flexible education styles and working hours (for both the instructors and dogs).

However, an increased reliance on public transportation (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2012) and varying levels of productivity of employees with disabilities could add additional costs for the school. Around 72.6% of companies cite that the nature of the work (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2012) and increased likelihoods of part-time and temporary working arrangements (Ali et al., 2011; Schur, 2003) are considerations when employing individuals with disabilities. For-profit or otherwise small and financially limited assistance dog schools, for example, may declare that employing instructors with disabilities would not be a viable option for them. They might assume that employing instructors with disabilities would reduce working hours and the number of assistance dogs being educated per instructor – ultimately resulting in a financial loss.

Despite these concerns, 80% of businesses hiring employees with disabilities record identical if not superior attendance to able-bodied colleagues (Chomka, 2004; Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2012). To varying degrees, legislation is in place to support individuals with disabilities' rights to equal employment opportunities, free of discrimination. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the United States not only confirms the rights of individuals with disabilities living and working with assistance dogs, but allows them to fully participate in society with what is termed “reasonable accommodation” made to work environments (see Americans with Disabilities Act, 2000). In Europe, the European Disability Strategy (EDS) aims to support an accessible Europe to ensure full participation of individuals with disabilities in European society (Ferri & Broderick, 2020).
Conclusion

Individuals with disabilities can and do lead successful careers as assistance dog instructors, whether self-employed or employed by established assistance dog schools. However, the international percentage of professional instructors with disabilities is significantly lower than their able-bodied colleagues. This article has introduced the necessity for more inclusion within employment practices in the assistance dog sector. It explored some of the benefits and challenges that working with an instructor with a disability might have for the instructor themselves, the assistance dog, the school, and the client.

Some individuals with disabilities may have a disability, or combinations of more than one, which could challenge the welfare and wellbeing of the dogs they educate. Disabilities such as autism could complicate the professional exchange with clients – dependent, of course, on each individual case. Certain disabilities, however, may improve an instructor’s ability to work with their clients with disabilities by deepening communication and heightening empathy. This could benefit the assistance dog as well. Simultaneously, disabled workers may have a higher aptitude for educating assistance dogs and deeper empathy. Visually impaired individuals often offer schools improved communication and support with clients, and test guide dogs at the end of their education. They are, however, generally not suitable as assistance dog instructors, due to the lack of sight. Working with sight is essential to ensure the safety of instructors, dogs, and clients, as well as a thorough education of the guide dogs (Lucas, 2008). This paper takes an initial step in questioning the benefits and challenges of creating more accessible and inclusive career paths for assistance dog instructors with disabilities. It was written with the hope of acting as a springboard for future research and initiating conversation within the assistance dog sector itself. As Monroe (2018) wrote, “We need diversity of expressions and experiences because, as we are interdependent, we all contribute to helping each other in different ways” (p. 253).

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References


