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COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT, FATIGUE, AND WORKPLACE ACCOMMODATIONS IN MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS: IMPACT ON EMPLOYMENT RETENTION

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ABSTRACT

Multiple Sclerosis significantly impacts employment retention due to its early onset and progressive nature, necessitating a comprehensive understanding of contributing factors beyond physical disability. This narrative review explores the profound influence of cognitive impairment, fatigue, and the efficacy of workplace accommodations on maintaining employment for individuals with MS. Specifically, this review synthesizes current literature to delineate how these non-physical symptoms frequently precipitate job loss and absenteeism among people with MS (pwMS). Beyond merely physical limitations, factors such as fatigue, cognitive decline, and mental health issues are significant predictors of reduced working hours and early retirement for individuals with MS (Pokryszko-Dragan et al., 2022). These non-motor symptoms can create a complex "vicious circle" that adversely affects vocational status, often intertwining with mental health challenges that independently influence professional activities (Pokryszko-Dragan et al., 2022). The diverse manifestations of MS, encompassing motor, sensory, and cognitive deficits, along with chronic fatigue, significantly impede work performance and overall quality of life (Pokryszko-Dragan et al., 2022; Valadkevičienė et al., 2024). While previous research has identified disease severity, fatigue, and cognitive impairments as key predictors of employment outcomes, persistent limitations in generalizability stem from sample variability, socioeconomic factors, and diverse healthcare systems (Iron et al., 2025). This narrative review aims to comprehensively address these gaps by synthesizing evidence on the multifaceted interplay between cognitive impairment, fatigue, workplace accommodations, and their collective impact on employment retention in MS. Understanding these intricate relationships is critical for developing targeted interventions and supportive strategies to enhance vocational longevity for individuals living with MS (Moccia et al., 2022; Pokryszko-Dragan et al., 2022).

KEYWORDS

Multiple Sclerosis, Employment, Cognitive Impairment, Fatigue, Workplace Accommodation, Job Retention

CITATION

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Introduction

Multiple Sclerosis is a chronic, demyelinating disease of the central nervous system that frequently impacts individuals during their prime working years, typically between 20 and 40 years of age, imposing substantial psychological, physical, financial, and social burdens on patients, caregivers, and healthcare systems (Moccia et al., 2022) (Iron et al., 2025). Consequently, a significant proportion of individuals with MS face early retirement or job loss, with estimates ranging from 33% to 45% across different countries, largely due to the pervasive and often debilitating symptoms of the disease (Joly et al., 2025). While physical disabilities like impaired mobility, vision, and balance are often recognized as hindrances to employment, emerging research underscores the profound and often underestimated influence of cognitive impairment and fatigue on vocational retention in this population (Pokryszko-Dragan et al., 2022). These less visible symptoms frequently impede work capacity and performance, leading to challenges in maintaining consistent employment (Joly et al., 2025). Specifically, the unpredictable nature of MS-related fatigue presents considerable challenges to maintaining consistent work schedules, frequently leading to increased absenteeism or the necessity for frequent breaks, which can often conflict with workplace expectations (Iron et al., 2025). Moreover, cognitive deficits, such as impaired memory, attention, and executive function, directly affect an individual's ability to perform job-related tasks, leading to reduced productivity and increased difficulty in adapting to new work demands (Pokryszko-Dragan et al., 2022). This narrative review aims to synthesize current literature regarding the multifactorial barriers to employment in people with MS (pwMS), with a particular focus on the intertwined roles of cognitive impairment, fatigue, and the potential ameliorative effects of workplace accommodations. Understanding the interplay between these symptoms and vocational outcomes is crucial for developing targeted interventions and support strategies to enhance employment retention among individuals with MS (Iron et al., 2025).

Methodology

This narrative review is based on an exhaustive analysis of scientific publications retrieved from PubMed, PubMed Central, Google Scholar, and Scopus. To ensure the most current and evidence-based knowledge on the topic, the analysis primarily focused on comprehensive review articles and meta-analyses published within the last five years.

Results

Cognitive impairment

Despite the common perception that physical disability is the primary barrier to employment, cognitive impairments significantly impact work performance and retention in individuals with MS (Ponzio et al., 2023). These impairments can manifest as difficulties in attention, memory, processing speed, and executive functions, all of which are critical for successful job execution and adaptation to dynamic work environments (Ponzio et al., 2023). Such cognitive deficits can hinder task completion, decision-making, and the ability to learn new skills, often leading to reduced productivity and increased workplace errors. Moreover, the subtle nature of cognitive deficits often leads to them being overlooked by employers, making it challenging for individuals with MS to articulate their struggles or for organizations to implement appropriate support mechanisms (Goodwin et al., 2021; Ponzio et al., 2024). Some reports indicate a range from 43–65% of people with MS developing cognitive symptoms that negatively affect daily functioning and health-related quality of life (Waskowiak et al., 2024). It's important to note that these cognitive impairments can significantly impact daily life and are a primary reason for unemployment in MS (Aarts et al., 2024; Waskowiak et al., 2024). The most commonly and earliest affected cognitive domains include information processing speed, verbal memory, and visuospatial memory (Waskowiak et al., 2024). About 65% of all PwMS become unemployed within 5 years after diagnosis, with cognitive impairment being one of the main reasons for unemployment and work-related problems (Aarts et al., 2024). This early and substantial impact underscores the critical need for timely identification and intervention strategies to mitigate the progression of cognitive deficits and preserve vocational functioning (Aarts et al., 2024; Waskowiak et al., 2024). Indeed, cognitive function, rather than motor function, has been identified as a significant predictor of unemployment in individuals with MS (Kahraman et al., 2023). Specifically, difficulties in processing speed and memory are particularly influential contributors to unemployment among individuals with MS (Kahraman et al., 2023). Furthermore, studies have shown that cognitive performance during dual-task activities, which are common in many work environments, more accurately predicts employment status than assessing motor or cognitive functions in isolation (Kahraman et al., 2023). The ability to concurrently perform multiple tasks, or dual-tasking, is a pervasive requirement in modern workplaces, and individuals with MS frequently exhibit poorer performance on these tasks compared to healthy controls (Kahraman et al., 2023). This dual-task difficulty is significantly associated with reported work-related challenges and can be a substantial risk factor for unemployment in individuals with MS (Kahraman et al., 2023). The significant rates of cognitive deterioration, even in pediatric and early-onset MS, underscore the critical need for early detection and intervention strategies to mitigate long-term vocational impacts (Aarts et al., 2024). The self-evaluation of work difficulties by individuals with MS is significantly influenced by mood factors such as depression and anxiety, which can lead to an underestimation of capabilities or an overestimation of challenges (Joly et al., 2025)., impaired processing speed is a crucial predictor of employment deterioration in MS, often identified through tests like the Symbol Digit Modalities Test (Joly et al., 2025). For instance, while the Symbol Digit Modalities Test is a widely recognized indicator of cognitive functioning in MS, its predictive value for employment outcomes can vary depending on the specific cognitive domains being assessed and the overall disability level of the cohort (Hiele et al., 2021; Moccia et al., 2022). These findings underscore the necessity of incorporating comprehensive neuropsychological batteries that evaluate a range of cognitive functions and their interplay with daily activities to accurately predict and support employment retention in the MS population.

Fatigue

Fatigue is a pervasive and debilitating symptom in individuals with MS, profoundly impacting vocational functioning and quality of life (Ponzio et al., 2023). Often described as an overwhelming sense of physical or mental exhaustion not relieved by rest, it affects over 80% of people with MS for 55% one of the worst symptoms regardless of disability level fluctuates unpredictably across all disease types, and manifests invisibly, thereby limiting work-related tasks, concentration, workplace interactions, and complicating employer understanding and accommodations (Agostini et al., 2021; Pokryszko-Dragan et al., 2022; Ponzio et

al., 2023). Its motor, psychosocial, and cognitive dimensions independently correlate with occupational functioning, beyond disability, depression, anxiety, or processing speed; perceived fatigue alone differentiates fully employed from partially employed individuals and predicts absenteeism (Hiele et al., 2021; Iron et al., 2025). Alongside cognitive decline, it predicts reduced hours, schedule limitations, early retirement, and contributes to 43% unemployment within three years of diagnosis, often compounded by physical impairment, with strong associations to lower quality of life, reduced productivity, increased sick leave, and premature workforce departure (Iron et al., 2025; Pokryszko-Dragan et al., 2022; Valadkevičienė et al., 2024; Waskowiak et al., 2024). Fatigue interacts with cognitive impairment to amplify these work challenges, linked neurologically to thalamic atrophy and white matter demyelination in early MS (Ponzio et al., 2023; Valadkevičienė et al., 2024). Due to its individual variability, personalized accommodations and targeted interventions especially for cognitive fatigue are essential (Iron et al., 2025; Ponzio et al., 2023).

Addressing this multifaceted challenge requires a nuanced understanding of its underlying mechanisms and interplay with other MS symptoms (Ponzio et al., 2023). Indeed, fatigue in MS is a complex phenomenon, categorized into primary fatigue, directly resulting from demyelination and neurodegeneration within the central nervous system, and secondary fatigue, arising from factors such as sleep disturbances, pain, depression, and medication side effects (Joly et al., 2025). Differentiating between these forms is crucial for effective intervention and management strategies (Agostini et al., 2021). Given its multifaceted etiology, an integrated approach incorporating both pharmacological and non-pharmacological interventions is essential to mitigate fatigue's impact on employment retention (Ponzio et al., 2023). Non-pharmacological strategies, such as energy conservation, exercise programs, and cognitive behavioral therapy, have shown promise in managing fatigue and improving occupational outcomes (Ponzio et al., 2023). Pharmacological approaches offer symptomatic relief but necessitate careful consideration of side effects and interactions with other medications, along with individualized treatment plans. Early intervention is particularly vital, as prolonged or severe fatigue can trigger a downward spiral of deconditioning and further occupational decline (Normann et al., 2025; Waskowiak et al., 2024). Proactively addressing fatigue through comprehensive strategies thus enhances long-term vocational prospects for individuals with MS (Agostini et al., 2021; Ponzio et al., 2023).

Workplace accommodations

Effective workplace accommodations are crucial for individuals with MS to maintain employment, particularly given the complex interplay of invisible symptoms like cognitive impairment and fatigue (Pérez et al., 2024). However, despite the clear necessity for tailored support, a significant proportion of accommodation requests are denied, leading to decreased job satisfaction and higher rates of unemployment among individuals with MS (Pérez et al., 2023). This denial often stems from a lack of awareness among employers regarding the specific needs of employees with MS and a limited understanding of how reasonable adjustments can preserve employability (Moccia et al., 2022). Such circumstances frequently compel individuals with MS to delay disclosing their condition or requesting support until symptoms become unmanageable, further complicating employment retention (Pérez et al., 2024). This reluctance to disclose, coupled with a general lack of understanding from colleagues and employers about MS's invisible symptoms, underscores the critical need for educational interventions targeting both employees with MS and their workplaces (Pérez et al., 2024). These interventions should provide comprehensive information on symptom management, legal rights related to disability, and effective communication strategies to foster more inclusive and supportive work environments (Pérez et al., 2024).

Furthermore, research indicates that work impact, workplace attitudes, and job flexibility exert greater influence on employment retention than purely physical adaptations (Goodwin et al., 2021). Fostering a supportive environment willing to fine-tune tasks to cognitive abilities and provide emotional support is thus essential for retention (Aarts et al., 2024; Goodwin et al., 2021). Most people with MS consider lack of knowledge about the disease a key driver of discriminatory attitudes; indeed, after disclosing their diagnosis, only 24.1% believed their human resources director, 26.7% their colleagues, and 32.5% their managers had sufficient knowledge of their illness (Vitturi et al., 2022). A comprehensive understanding of these non-physical factors, combined with proactive and flexible accommodation strategies, is vital for mitigating occupational challenges and promoting sustained employment among individuals with MS (Goodwin et al., 2021). These insights highlight the need for a multi-faceted approach that integrates physical and psychosocial considerations to develop effective interventions supporting individuals with MS in the workplace (Goodwin et al., 2021; Ponzio et al., 2024).

Therefore, future research should prioritize developing and evaluating interventions that enhance workplace understanding of MS, encourage early disclosure, and enable flexible, individualized accommodations addressing the disease's multifaceted challenges (Pérez et al., 2024). Addressing anticipated discrimination and cultivating an inclusive culture is equally important, as fear of stigma often prevents disclosure and access to necessary support (Vitturi et al., 2022). Early and sustained vocational rehabilitation tailoring job demands to individual capacities and prioritizing urgent issues is crucial for improving work and health outcomes in long-term neurological conditions like MS (Pérez et al., 2024; Ponzio et al., 2023). Ultimately, perceptions of stigma and discrimination significantly influence disclosure decisions, serving as barriers to essential accommodations (Vitturi et al., 2022).

Discussion

This review synthesizes a broad range of evidence highlighting that the employment challenges faced by individuals with MS extend far beyond mere physical limitations, critically encompassing the insidious effects of cognitive impairment and pervasive fatigue. These invisible symptoms frequently exert a more profound influence on an individual's capacity to maintain employment than visible physical disabilities, necessitating a re-evaluation of traditional workplace accommodation frameworks (Goodwin et al., 2021). Indeed, it is the impact of these non-physical symptoms—rather than the symptoms themselves—that primarily determines employment participation (Goodwin et al., 2021). Consequently, effective interventions must prioritize comprehensive strategies addressing these nuanced, often hidden, factors to bolster vocational retention and improve overall quality of life for individuals with MS (Goodwin et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the decision to disclose an MS diagnosis in the workplace is heavily influenced by the perceived risk of stigma and discrimination, which often prevents individuals from accessing necessary accommodations and support (Vitturi et al., 2022). This review underscores that an individualized and flexible approach to workplace accommodations, particularly vocational rehabilitation, is paramount for ensuring sustainable employment (Ponzio et al., 2023). By aligning job demands with individual capabilities, these interventions have demonstrated success in improving work and health outcomes for those with long-term neurological conditions such as MS (Ponzio et al., 2023). Employers must therefore move beyond a simplistic understanding of disability to recognize and address the complex, fluctuating nature of MS symptoms, thereby fostering environments conducive to long-term employment (Goodwin et al., 2021). Achieving this requires a shift towards proactive risk analysis and management strategies aimed at identifying and mitigating factors that predict early exit from work strategies that are fundamental to preventative approaches designed to enhance overall workforce participation and retention for individuals with MS (Ponzio et al., 2023). Ultimately, understanding and addressing the broader context of workplace dynamics, including attitudes and flexibility, proves more influential for job retention than solely focusing on physical adaptations (Goodwin et al., 2021). This comprehensive perspective emphasizes the necessity of tailored vocational rehabilitation interventions that empower individuals with MS to better understand and manage their condition in the work environment, while also educating employers about the fluctuating nature of MS symptoms and their legal responsibilities (Pérez et al., 2023).

Conclusions

This narrative review has elucidated the multifaceted challenges individuals with multiple sclerosis encounter in maintaining employment, emphasizing that cognitive impairment and fatigue often present more significant barriers than physical disabilities. A critical understanding of these difficulties, viewed as a function of both MS symptoms and features of the working environment, can guide more effective vocational rehabilitation interventions (Ponzio et al., 2023). Vocational rehabilitation, through a multidisciplinary team, can effectively manage the interplay between MS impairments, the physical environment, and job demands, thereby improving work and health outcomes for individuals with MS (Ponzio et al., 2023). Specifically, evidence indicates that vocational rehabilitation services can achieve a 48% success rate in sustained employment for individuals with MS (Ponzio et al., 2023). However, the existing evidence on the effectiveness of these interventions remains inconclusive, owing to a lack of rigorous effectiveness studies and variability in outcome measures (Pérez et al., 2025).

To address this, future research should prioritize robust, methodologically sound trials that standardize outcome measures to conclusively demonstrate their efficacy (Pérez et al., 2024). Moreover, employing realist methodologies to explore the underlying mechanisms of vocational rehabilitation will clarify how these interventions work under diverse circumstances, for specific individuals, and why they succeed (Pérez et al.,

2024). Such insights would enable the development of more personalized, evidence-based programs, ultimately enhancing employment retention and quality of life for individuals with MS (Pérez et al., 2024; Ponzio et al., 2023).

Central to this is identifying the most significant work-related difficulties to design interventions that optimize individuals' ability to manage job demands (Ponzio et al., 2023). Vocational rehabilitation should therefore involve employers and co-workers to cultivate supportive environments, with flexible delivery and content that accommodates MS's fluctuating nature and daily activities (Pérez et al., 2024).

Key directions for future research include implementing person-based approaches to tailor job retention interventions to individual needs and contexts (Pérez et al., 2024); developing a core outcome set for vocational rehabilitation in MS (Pérez et al., 2025); assessing long-term cost-effectiveness; standardizing neuropsychological assessments for integration into routine care, despite challenges like time constraints and limited trained professionals (Pérez et al., 2024); and evaluating technology-assisted options, such as telerehabilitation, to overcome geographical barriers and expand access (Pérez et al., 2024). Studies should also investigate co-worker awareness of MS-related workplace needs and limitations, standardize information disclosure to employers, and develop neurodiversity-supporting policies with clear accommodation guidelines tailored to MS's unique challenges. Additionally, proactive employer engagement programs to educate on MS's invisible, fluctuating symptoms could foster inclusive environments. Finally, deeper exploration of psychosocial factors—like stigma and self-efficacy—and their interplay with symptom management is essential for holistic interventions promoting long-term employment stability.

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