

Reflections from Employers on the Disabled Workforce: Focus Groups with Healthcare, Hospitality and Retail Administrators

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Abstract Historically, employment rates for people with disabilities have been low. Despite legislation that prohibits the discrimination of this group in work settings, employers are reluctant to hire people with disabilities. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of employers with workers with disabilities. Three focus groups were conducted with 21 administrators from three business sectors (i.e., healthcare, hospitality, and retail). Content analysis indicated five primary themes: (1) importance of disability employment agencies and disability advocates; (2) persistence of manager bias; (3) lack of promotion opportunities; (4) costs associated with having workers with disabilities; and (5) benefits associated with having workers with disabilities. Implications include the need for intervention studies that address the challenges experienced by individuals with disabilities, particularly during hiring and promoting phases of employment, and educational efforts to inform administrators and managers of the few costs and numerous benefits associated with having workers with disabilities.

Key words workers with disabilities · employer attitudes

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Introduction

Historically, individuals with disabilities have not fared well in the US' labor market. Of over 21 million working-age adults with disabilities, only four out of ten work full- or part-time. In contrast, the employment rate among non-disabled working-age adults is eight out of ten (Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Demographics and Statistics 2005). In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, Public Law 101–336, 42 U.S.C. § 12101) extended civil rights protection to individuals with disabilities within the employment arena. Specifically, Title I requires that employers (with 15 or more workers) provide equal employment opportunities for qualified applicants and employees with disabilities. This Title covers all aspects of employment and requires the provision of reasonable accommodations, unless the accommodation poses an undue hardship to the employer. Despite the passage of the ADA, Harris Polls of adults with disabilities dating back to 1986 indicate that employment figures for this group have remained low (Taylor 2000).

Employer perceptions toward the disabled workforce have been cited as a significant barrier to the employment of people with disabilities. In a review of research, Hernandez *et al.* (2000) found that while employers tended to espouse positive *global attitudes* toward workers with disabilities, when *specific attitudes* related to the hiring of this group were assessed, views were more negative. In particular, there were concerns with the productivity, demand for supervision, and promotability of workers with disabilities, as well as concerns with the cost of accommodating their needs (Jonhson *et al.* 1988; McFarlin *et al.* 1991). Furthermore, these concerns have been persistent, as evident in prior reviews of employer perceptions of workers with disabilities (Greenwood and Johnson 1987; Wilgosh and Skaret 1987).

From the research (Hernandez *et al.* 2000), it is apparent that an overarching concern among employers has been that the costs associated with hiring people with disabilities will outweigh the benefits. These perceived concerns with costs include the provision of expensive accommodations, decreased employee productivity, and increased supervisory time. However, such concerns may have limited supporting data. For example, Sears, Roebuck, and Company reported that from 1978 to 1996 nearly all of the 436 accommodations sampled required little to no cost; moreover, during 1993 to 1996, the average direct cost of an accommodation was \$45 (Blanck 1996). Studies conducted by the Job Accommodation Network indicated that over two-thirds of effective accommodations implemented cost less than \$500. Furthermore, for every dollar invested in accommodations, companies reported an average of \$40 in benefits (Job Accommodation Network 1999). In addition, E.I. DuPont de Nemours and Company conducted surveys of its employees with disabilities in 1958, 1973, 1981, and 1990. Their findings indicated that workers with disabilities were equivalent to their non-disabled counterparts with respect to job performance, attendance, and safety (DuPont 1993).

Purpose of the Study

To date, there have been numerous studies examining employer perceptions of workers with disabilities (Greenwood and Johnson 1987; Hernandez *et al.* 2000; Wilgosh and Skaret 1987), and the majority have used quantitative surveys or quasi-experimental designs. As such, we have a general sense of employer concerns with the disabled workforce. While such data are valuable, the in-depth experiences of employers have not been more fully explored. Thus, this qualitative study used focus groups to explore the experiences of

administrators from the healthcare, hospitality, and retail sectors in relation to their workers with disabilities. Specifically, experiences with recruiting, interviewing, hiring, providing accommodations to, retaining, and promoting employees with disabilities were addressed, along with perceptions of costs and benefits associated with this workforce. Focus groups are particularly useful when researchers are exploring a new or under-investigated phenomenon as they produce concentrated data on the topic of interest and rely on the interaction or synergy of the group in doing so (Morgan 1997).

Method

Participants

Participants included 21 employers from 16 companies representing the healthcare ($n=7$), hospitality ($n=5$), and retail ($n=4$) sectors from the greater Chicago, IL, USA area. Individuals in upper level management and hiring positions were invited to participate because they had direct experience with the employment process and issues related to hiring people with disabilities. Participants included Directors and Managers of Human Resources ($n=13$), Employment Directors and Specialists ($n=5$), President and CEO ($n=1$), Vice President ($n=1$), and District Store Manager ($n=1$).

Instrument

The focus group guide was developed for the purpose of this study. The guide consisted of open-ended questions and clarifying probes that were asked as needed. Specific questions included:

1. What has it been like:
 - a. *Recruiting* applicants with disabilities?
 - b. *Interviewing* applicants with disabilities?
 - c. *Hiring* workers with disabilities?
 - d. Providing *accommodations* to workers with disabilities?
 - e. *Retaining* workers with disabilities?
 - f. *Promoting* workers with disabilities?
2. Are there *costs* (financial or organizational) associated with hiring people with disabilities?
3. What *benefits* (financial or organizational) are associated with hiring people with disabilities?
4. Do you have any other thoughts or experiences relevant to recruiting, interviewing, hiring, retaining, promoting, and/or working with people with disabilities?

Procedure

Participating companies were recruited by the City of Chicago Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, Mayor's Office of Workforce Development, and *disabilityworks* (a partnership between the city of Chicago and the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce which brings resources to businesses, people with disabilities, and service providers throughout Illinois). More than 50 companies were invited to participate as part of a larger study; however, time constraints limited the participation of many invitees. The majority of

participating companies had over 150 employees and prior experiences with hiring people with disabilities.

One focus group was held per sector (i.e., healthcare, hospitality, and retail), for a total of three focus groups. Focus groups were facilitated by the first two authors who had training and experience with this process (Morgan 1997). Focus group sessions lasted approximately 90 min, were audio-taped, and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were analyzed using content analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994). Four researchers independently coded the three focus group transcriptions to identify core concepts and relationships among them. The researchers met to discuss coding agreements and disagreements and to build consensus on final codes.

Focus Group Themes and Discussion

Qualitative data from the focus groups were categorized into five major themes: (1) importance of disability employment agencies and disability advocates; (2) persistence of manager bias; (3) lack of promotion opportunities; (4) costs associated with having workers with disabilities; and (5) benefits associated with having workers with disabilities.

1. *Importance of Disability Employment Agencies and Disability Advocates*

Administrators from all three sectors indicated that most employees known to have a disability worked with agencies that specialized in the training and placement of people with disabilities in jobs. According to participants, disability employment agencies were critical for identifying qualified applicants with disabilities and for providing support (e.g., job coaches) once people with disabilities were hired. Participants from the healthcare and hospitality sectors added that internship programs for high school and college students with disabilities were particularly useful as they led to many successful hires. A healthcare participant noted, “*The experience of hiring people off the street...we didn’t really see a lot of people [with disabilities] coming in. But, when you meet somebody through an organization and they get support, you seem to have more success.*” Although there were many positive experiences with disability employment agencies, administrators expressed concern with some agencies for not remaining in contact and stressed that ongoing communication was key to success. In addition, participants emphasized the need for agencies to focus on the quality of referrals (i.e., qualified applicants for specific jobs) rather than the quantity of referrals.

Administrators also spoke about the need for disability “champions” within their companies who would advocate strongly for the hiring of people with disabilities. These champions included employees from the general workforce, as well as powerful and influential administrators. Their advocacy efforts helped create viable employment opportunities for people with disabilities. As a participant from the healthcare sector shared, “*It’s really not a lot different than breaking down any other prejudicial barrier that we have in our society... there has to be a champion in the organization and the champion doesn’t always have to be the CEO, but the champion has to be somebody that can gravitate and bring in formal power to the organization.*”

Previous research supports the important role that disability employment agencies and disability advocates play in recruiting and hiring people with disabilities (Bruyère 2000; Gilbride *et al.* 2003). For example, Gilbride *et al.* (2003) conducted focus groups and individual interviews with people with disabilities using employment services, employers, and disability employment agency providers. The authors found that disability agencies

played an important role during the employee–employer matching process and helped employers make accommodations. Further, Fabian *et al.* (1995) found that characteristics associated with successful disability employment programs included concerns with making a good job match; understanding job requirements, supervisory needs, and applicants' abilities; and follow-up. With regard to disability advocates and champions, Bruyère (2000) surveyed approximately 800 private sector and 400 federal employer representatives and found that top management commitment to hiring people with disabilities ranked as important when addressing barriers to their employment.

2. Persistence of Manager Bias

From administrators' perspectives, manager bias against workers with disabilities existed. These biases included fears that supervisory time would increase, productivity would suffer, and frequent absences would incur if people with disabilities were hired. For example, a hospitality sector participant stated, “*I think [managers are] scared, there's fear there. Not knowing ... how to communicate with the individual [with a disability], not knowing what their limitations are. Specifically, to feel like it [the disability] might slow down the operation.*” The interview process seemed to be particularly challenging for managers, as administrators described fear of disability-related litigation. Consider these two quotes shared by participants from the hospitality and healthcare sectors, respectively, “*It's nerve-racking in some cases [when interviewing applicants with disabilities] because you're kind of afraid of saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing*” and “*I think it is scary ... you are afraid that you are going to be charged with discrimination.*”

Administrators also reported managerial concerns related to the cost of accommodations, and potential for overgeneralization and increased manager bias, if a manager had a negative experience with an employee with a disability. Often, managers' concerns were linked to their lack of experience with workers with disabilities and lack of knowledge with the ADA.

The theme of manager bias against workers with disabilities has been a persistent finding in this line of research and has been associated with a lack of experience with disability issues. Dixon *et al.* (2003) found that the top employer-related barrier to hiring people with disabilities was employer discomfort and unfamiliarity with disability issues. Bruyère's (2000) research also indicated that a lack of experience with people with disabilities may be common among employers. To mitigate these negative views, building positive experiences with the disabled workforce is critical. Research has shown that employers with previous experiences with workers with disabilities reported more favorable attitudes toward this group and were more willing to hire them than employers without such experiences (Hernandez *et al.* 2000; Unger 2002).

3. Lack of Promotion Opportunities

Administrators shared that workers known to employers to have a disability were employed mostly in entry-level and semi-skilled positions (e.g., clerical, food service, laundry); few were identified as being in professional positions. Further, administrators noted that many workers with known disabilities usually did not advance within their organizations. The lack of promotion opportunities for this group was viewed as an issue with both employee- and employer-related contributors. Participants speculated that employees with disabilities might become comfortable with their positions, which in turn inhibits the desire to be promoted. A hospitality representative shared, “*I think it's by choice ... they are happy with their jobs and they want to stay where they are.*”

Healthcare participants added that employees with disabilities might not seek promotions because of new probationary periods and accessibility concerns. One health care representative noted, *“The risk is greater for someone with a disability to move out of [a current position] than for someone without.”* Participants also shared that companies did not necessarily foster promotion opportunities for workers with disabilities. For instance, a participant from the hospitality sector stated, *“I’m embarrassed to say, I’ve never promoted one [person with a disability] to a supervisory or higher level, but I’ve never had one ask either.”*

From an employer perspective, the Hernandez *et al.* (2000) literature review did reveal concerns related to the promotability of workers with disabilities. However, most of those studies utilized quantitative and quasi-experimental designs. To the authors’ knowledge, this is one of the first studies to examine employers’ perspectives on promotion opportunities for people with disabilities in an in-depth manner. From the employee perspective, in a survey of over 1,000 individuals with disabilities, 17% indicated that they were refused a promotion (Harris Interactive Inc., 2004). The theme of promotion opportunities for workers with disabilities is important and warrants further investigation.

4. *Costs Associated with Having Workers with Disabilities*

Overall, administrators reported that the cost of accommodating workers with disabilities was minimal. Types of accommodations provided to employees with known disabilities included stools for check out lanes, special lighting, computer software that allows for large font type, and availability of sign language interpreters. One healthcare participant estimated the average accommodation cost to be under \$500. A retail participant commented, *“We haven’t absorbed much cost. Sometimes, it’s a matter of making a special badge to say, ‘Hi, I’m [employee’s name]. I’m deaf and hard of hearing.’ Which was relatively no cost because we managed to do it ourselves.”* Despite minimal costs, participants expressed that some managers still feared that costs associated with accommodating workers with disabilities were high.

Prior studies corroborate the experiences of our participants. Despite managerial perception of high-cost accommodations, actual costs are usually low and reasonable. In a study of disability-related accommodations at Sears, Roebuck, and Company, 72% required no costs, while 27% cost less than \$500 (Blanck 1996). Noteworthy, workplace accommodations that cost over \$1,000 were uncommon and found to benefit employees with and without disabilities by providing state-of-the-art technology to perform jobs productively, cost-effectively, and safely (Blanck 1996).

5. *Benefits Associated with Having Workers with Disabilities*

Lastly, administrators shared that there were numerous benefits to hiring people with disabilities. Among this group, participants noted low absenteeism rates and long tenures. They also described employees with disabilities as loyal, reliable, and hardworking. One retail participant shared, *“[An employee with a disability has] been with us for 35 years. He’s never missed a day and he’s never late. Whenever there’s a snowstorm, he prepares to get to work on time and most of the time the manager’s not there. So, we look at that individual and say, ‘Wow! We need more guys like that.’”*

An additional benefit to hiring individuals with disabilities was the diversification of work settings, which led to an overall positive work environment. For instance, hiring people with disabilities helped other employees be more accepting of diverse groups and sent a positive message of independent living and community inclusion, especially for

patients and customers with disabilities in the healthcare and retail sectors. A hospitality participant indicated, “*I get wonderful feedback from our associates who will say, ‘It’s so nice that we work for a company that looks at everybody.’*” A retail representative added, “*The customers really appreciate [our associates with disabilities]”*.”

Several studies have highlighted the benefits of employees with disabilities in terms of productivity, reliability, and attendance (Blanck 1996; DuPont 1993; Oshkosh Area Workforce Development Center 2007). Although benefits are considerable, the employment rate for people with disabilities remains low. This gap suggests the pressing need to educate the business community about the benefits of having a disabled workforce, and how these benefits may outweigh perceived costs.

Conclusion

This study employed qualitative methods to gather in-depth data on employers’ perceptions of the disabled workforce. From the perspectives of administrators representing the healthcare, hospitality, and retail sectors, we learned that: (1) having committed disability employment agencies and disability advocates within companies fostered viable employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities; (2) managers’ bias against workers with disabilities seemed to limit the hiring of workers with disabilities; (3) employees with disabilities rarely sought promotions and employers rarely encouraged such opportunities; (4) costs associated with employing individuals with disabilities were minimal; and (5) benefits to hiring individuals with disabilities included having loyal and reliable employees who diversified the workforce.

By understanding the perspectives of employers, we are in a better position to identify areas in need of intervention to encourage the recruiting, hiring, and promoting of workers with disabilities. Targeted intervention efforts may prove effective in increasing employment rates for individuals with disabilities, as legislation alone has been unable to do so. For example, researchers can partner with disability advocates within companies to better understand and enhance their efforts of creating viable employment opportunities for the disability community. In addition, the experiences of companies that are successfully employing people with disabilities can be shared with the larger business community to foster similar experiences. Clearly, more attention needs to be paid to correcting manager bias against employees with disabilities. Establishing mentoring relationships, whereby managers with prior experiences with workers with disabilities mentor those with less experience, may prove beneficial.

Lastly, to address promotion opportunities for individuals with disabilities, disability employment agencies and employers can encourage opportunities that enhance the career development of existing employees with disabilities. By building on the strengths and talents of this pool of employees, the benefits would likely be reciprocal and worthwhile. Further, it would send a powerful message of inclusion and equality throughout all levels within corporate settings and likely impact biases that may exist among managers.

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