

**The Association on Employment Practices and Principles (AEPP)**

**2007**

**Ft. Lauderdale, FL, Oct. 4-6, 2007**

**“Managing Stakeholder Relationships”**

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

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## **Reflections on the Disabled Workforce: Focus Groups with Healthcare, Hospitality, and Retail Administrators**

### **Abstract**

Historically, employment rates for people with disabilities have been low. Despite legislation that prohibits the discrimination of this group in employment settings, employers are reluctant to hire people with disabilities. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of employers as they pertained to workers with disabilities. Three focus groups were conducted with 21 administrators. 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 workers with disabilities; and (5) benefits associated with workers with disabilities. \*

**KEY WORDS:** workers with disabilities; employer attitudes.

### **Introduction**

Historically, individuals with disabilities have not fared well in the United States' 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, pp.11-12). In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) extended civil rights protection to the disability community, with Title I prohibiting disability-related employment discrimination. Since the passage of the ADA, employment figures among the disabled have remained persistently low. Employer attitudes have been cited as a 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 were assessed (e.g., hiring people with disabilities), views were more negative (p.5). Moreover, employers expressed concerns related to Title I of the ADA, viewing it as complex, costly, and tangled with potential legal sanctions.

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\* We extend our appreciation to Jay Rosen, Dan Schober, Anna Kushnir, and Jessica Ruiz. We also want to acknowledge the collaboration and commitment of *disabilityworks*, City of Chicago Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, and Mayor's Office of Workforce Development. Funding for this project was provided by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO). The opinions expressed here are those of the authors and not necessarily those of our collaborators or DCEO.

One overarching concern among employers has been that the costs associated with hiring people with disabilities will outweigh the benefits. Perceived 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, p.19). Studies conducted by the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) indicate 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 (JAN, 1999).

Although there have been studies examining employers' perceptions of workers with disabilities, the majority have been quantitative and suggest that employer attitudes are complex (Hernandez *et al.*, 2000, p.14). To more fully understand employers' experiences, the current 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, with attention paid to the costs and benefits associated with this particular 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, pp.13-15).

## **Participants**

Participants included 21 employers from 16 companies representing the healthcare (7), hospitality (5), and retail (4) sectors. 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 employing people with disabilities. Participants included Vice Presidents, Directors and Managers of Human Resources, Employment Specialists, President and CEO, and District Store Manager.

## **Instrument**

The focus group guide was developed for this study and included open-ended questions, with clarifying probes asked as needed:

1. For those who have had the experience, 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* (an affiliate of

the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce). More than 50 companies were invited to participate; however, time constraints limited the participation of many invitees. The majority of participating companies had a large number of employees (greater than 150) 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 researchers who had training and experience with this process (Morgan, 1997, pp. 45-58). Focus group sessions lasted about 90 minutes, were audio-taped, and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were analyzed using content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994, pp. 56-63). Four researchers independently coded the transcriptions and built consensus around the main themes.

## **Focus Group Themes**

Qualitative data from the focus groups were categorized into 5 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 with disabilities 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 shared 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 also expressed concern with some agencies for not remaining in contact and stressed that ongoing communication was key to success.

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.

Previous research supports the important role that disability employment agencies and disability advocates play in recruiting and hiring people with disabilities (Bruyère, 2000, p.15; Gilbride *et al.*, 2003, p. 135). Characteristics associated with successful disability employment programs include concern with making a good job match; understanding job requirements, supervisory needs, and applicants’ abilities; and follow-up (Fabian *et al.*, 1995, p. 46).

### *(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. According to our participants, there were also managerial concerns of budgetary strains over the provision of disability-related accommodations.

Often, managers' concerns were linked to their lack of experience with workers with disabilities and lack of knowledge of the ADA. Participants described managers as fearful of asking the "wrong" question and responding in ways that would make them liable under the ADA. Participants also felt that a negative experience with an employee with a disability could lead to overgeneralization and increased manager bias. A participant from the retail sector stated, "*I do think we could educate our managers better though. Get them more comfortable. I think our biggest problem is people just aren't comfortable with the whole process [of hiring people with disabilities].*"

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 (p. 22). To mitigate these negative views, building positive experiences with the disabled workforce is critical. Specifically, research has shown that employers with previous experiences with workers with disabilities tended to report more favorable attitudes toward this group and were more willing to hire them than employers without such experiences (Hernandez *et al.*, 2000, p.14; Unger 2002, p.8).

### *(3) Lack of Promotion Opportunities*

Administrators also shared that workers known to employers to have a disability were employed in entry level and semi-skilled positions (e.g., clerical, food service, laundry, and bus person); few were in professional positions. The lack of promotion opportunities for workers with disabilities was viewed as an issue with both employee- and company-related contributors. Most participants felt employees with disabilities became comfortable with their positions, which inhibited the desire to be promoted. Healthcare participants added that employees with disabilities might resist promotions because of new probationary periods and accessibility concerns. Participants also shared that companies did not necessarily foster promotion opportunities. For instance, a participant from the hospitality sector noted, "*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.*"

To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study to examine employers' perspectives on promotion opportunities for people with disabilities. 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, p. 12). The issue of promotion opportunities 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 included special stools for check out lanes, special

lighting, computers with large print, and use of a sign language interpreter. One healthcare participant estimated company cost to be under \$500. For example, a retail participant said, “*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 the perception of high costs associated with accommodations, actual costs have been reported to be 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, p.17). Of note, the 3% of workplace accommodations that cost over \$1000 were 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, p.19).

#### *(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 their employees with disabilities as loyal, reliable, and hardworking.

*“[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.” (Retail participant)*

An additional benefit to hiring people with disabilities was the diversification of work settings, which led to an overall positive work environment. For example, 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.”*”

Several studies have highlighted the benefits of employees with disabilities in terms of productivity, reliability, and attendance (Blanck, 1996, p. 11; Oshkosh Area Workforce Development Center, 2007, p.5). 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. As we better understand their perspectives, we can identify areas in need of targeted intervention to encourage the recruiting, hiring, and promoting of workers with disabilities. Such efforts may prove effective in increasing employment rates for the disability community, as legislation alone has been unable to do.

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