



Cornell University
ILR School
Employment and Disability Institute

Research Brief:

Employer Practices and the Employment of People with Disabilities: Scoping the Literature

Research presented at the
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Improving Employment for People with Disabilities

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Overview

Policymakers and advocates for people with disabilities have sought for decades to understand the reasons for ongoing disparities in employment rates between people with and without disabilities. Despite the passage of legislation to promote workforce participation for people with disabilities, they continue to be employed at far lower rates than their nondisabled peers.

Research to date has for the most part focused on supply-side solutions (the skills, education, and workforce development of persons with disabilities) to address these disparities in employment, while considerably less emphasis has been placed on understanding the impact of the demand-side factors (e.g., employer human resource practices, employer needs and attitudes, etc.).

Much of the literature about disability employment aimed at employers has consisted of checklists and recommendations of best practices that are loosely based on academic theories of diversity but lack research-based evidence of their efficacy. Little measurement has been done to determine whether the identified practices show real-world promise in improving employment rates for people with disabilities. As Kreitz (2008) says many of these articles “Rely on brief case studies or anecdotal stories” and are not based in research.” The experimental research that has been done has been heavily focused on the perception of and beliefs about applicants and employees with disabilities and attitudes towards disability itself.


To address this information gap, in 2010 the National Institute of Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) issued an RFP for a national-level Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Employer Practices related to employment outcomes among individuals with disabilities. NIDRR noted: “obtaining empirical data about actual employer practices, and further investigating the extent to which these practices are associated with employment for individuals with disabilities, would inform the development of interventions to improve the number and diversity of employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities.”

Review and Scoping of the Literature

As a first step, the Cornell EP-RRTC team conducted an in-depth review of existing literature on employer practices related to disability. The review focused on the 20-year period coinciding with the passage and implementation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990-2011), and sought to identify literature related to ways in which employers engage in specific practices around the hiring, retention, and advancement of individuals with disabilities, and whether these practices promote positive employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

The team then undertook a more in-depth scoping review of identified literature to understand the types of research that had been conducted, the methods used, and the topics covered. A scoping review is a process of systematically mapping the existing landscape of literature and examining gaps. This type of review does not examine the *quality* of evidence or produce a quantitative estimate of effect sizes based on the available literature.

Three key overarching framework concepts were used to target the search for articles to be included in the initial literature review: employer *policies and practices*, the concept of



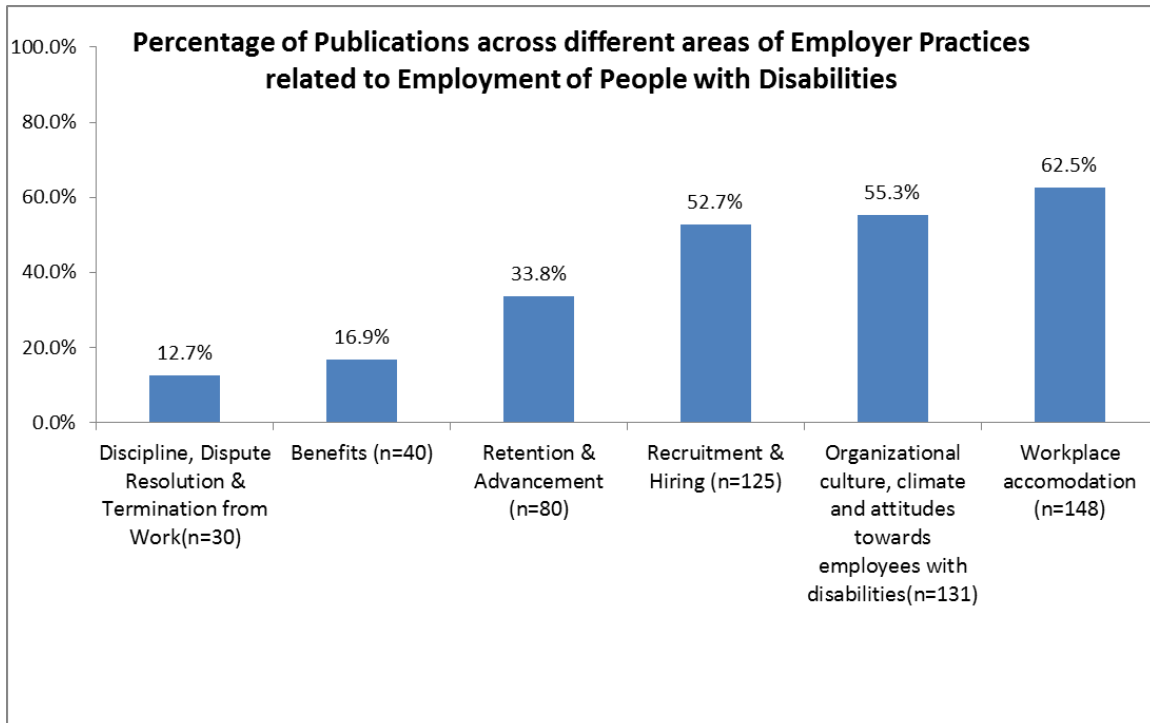
disability, and various *parts of the employment process* (e.g., hiring, promotion, retention, termination). Search terms related to these concepts were used across multiple scholarly databases. Websites of employer organizations, NIDDR-funded research projects, and disability advocacy groups were also searched for relevant research reports.

Articles were first categorized roughly as being research-oriented, legal analyses, practice recommendations, or others. The research articles were the focus of this scoping review. Each research article was examined to determine which part or parts of the employment process it addressed, its research purpose, the target audience of the publication, and the research approach or methods used. Analysis was limited to articles that studied these practices from the employer perspective, rather than that of the VR counselor or the employee. For the final report, 243 articles were included in the categorization.

Results

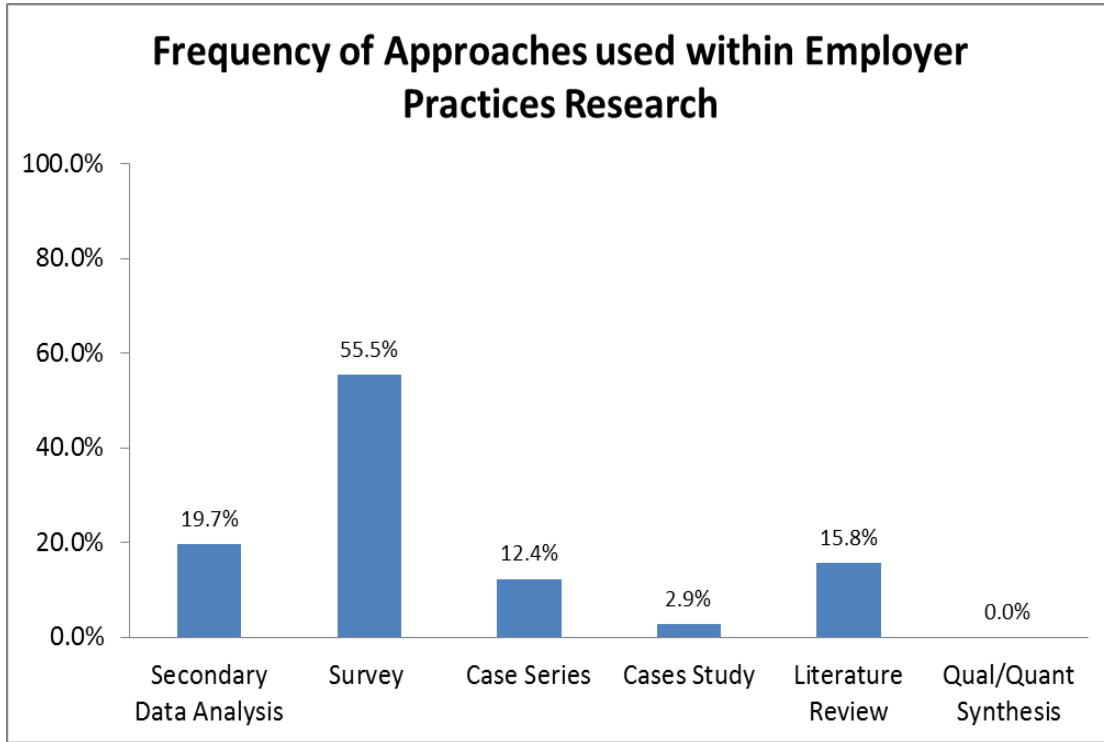
Three quarters of the 243 research articles were published in peer reviewed journals; the rest were government agency or organizational reports, theses/dissertations, or trade journals. The total number of articles published each year rose sharply after 1996 and has continued to rise each year.

Most Commonly Studied Areas of the Employment Process



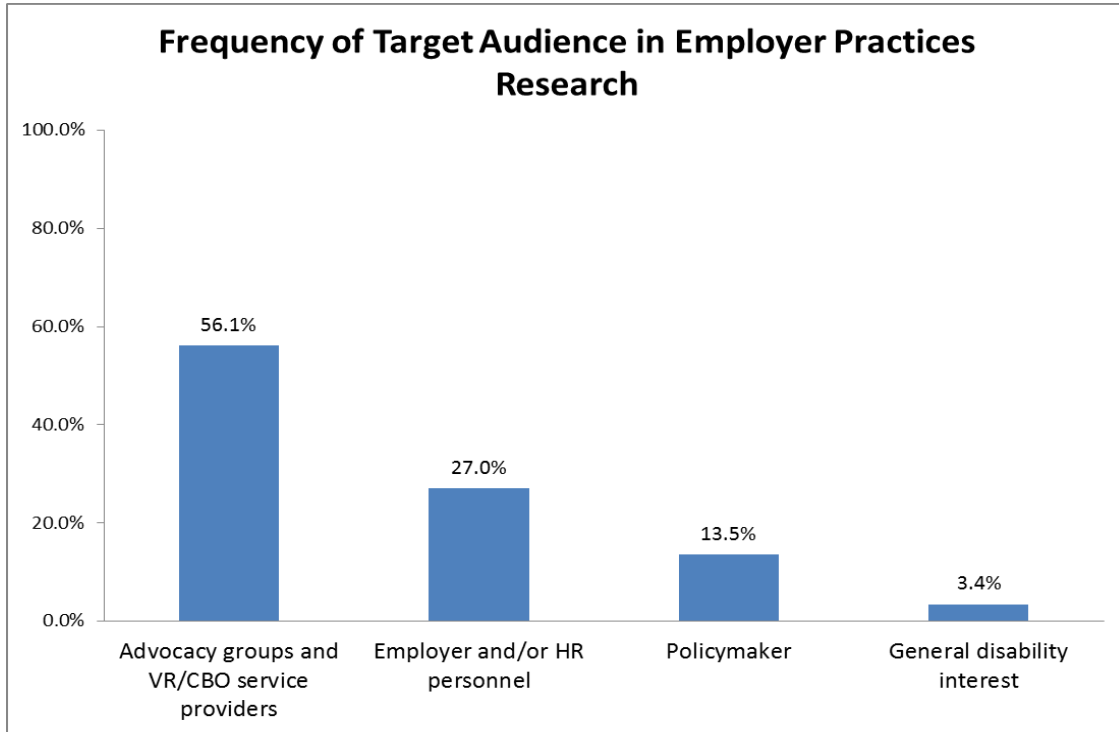
More than half of all articles included a focus on workplace accommodation (63%), organizational culture, climate, and attitudes (55%), and/or recruitment and hiring (53%). Less than one fifth of articles reviewed addressed the areas of benefits (17%) or dispute resolution and termination from work (13%). Many articles did address multiple areas of employer practice (e.g.: “attitudes in the hiring process,” or “accommodations during recruitment”).

Most Frequently Used Research Approaches



More than half of the articles utilized survey methods to collect data (56%). Surveys ranged from small questionnaires sent to a selection of local employers to large random samples of national organizations. Nearly a fifth used secondary data analysis (20%), often from the American Community Survey (ACS) or from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) claims data. About 16 percent used a selective review of literature to inform on various employer practices. Case series methods were reported in nearly 13 percent of the articles. Interestingly, only a handful of articles utilized qualitative/quantitative (mixed methods) synthesis of evidence.

Target Audience of Published Research



Advocacy groups and vocational rehabilitation/community-based service providers were the target audience for study results in Over half (57%) of the articles, while employers and/or human resource (HR) personnel, supervisors and coworkers were the target audience in less than one third of the articles (27%). Policymakers were the least commonly targeted audience, with only about 14 percent of publications targeted specifically to them. General disability interest was least with 3.4 per cent.



Discussion

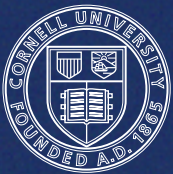
It is important to note that the scope of this review was information regarding the employer perspective on employer practices around disability; this may have – and did – limit the overall scope of identified research.

Research on employer practices has focused predominantly on workplace accommodations. This focus is not necessarily misplaced; as analyses of current employment disability discrimination charges filed with the EEOC found that nearly 44 percent of EEOC discrimination charges were in the area of reasonable accommodation, and this has been true over a number of years.¹ That this is true despite the emphasis on accommodations identified in the literature suggests the possibility of a ‘knowing-doing gap’ among employers who, often lack tools and capacity to bring in new practices to implement them to support their workers, which perhaps point to a need for improved dissemination or knowledge translation of research around accommodation practices more broadly.

It is of some concern that so few articles addressed discipline, dispute resolution and termination. This lack of research on leading practices involved in fairly administering disciplinary, dispute resolution and termination processes for employees with disabilities, may contribute to continuing hesitancy on the part of employers to hire applicants with disabilities. Research may be lacking in this area because the most commonly used methodologies – survey research and secondary data analysis - can access areas of the employment process such as recruitment, hiring, and accommodations most directly. Surveys conducted to date have found that of the minority of employers who keep any disability data on their workforce, an even smaller percentage keep data on disability retention, advancement or termination, as opposed to recruitment and hiring data. Research on these parts of the employment process may require changes in employer recordkeeping policies.

Most of the literature was written for an audience of disability advocacy groups and rehabilitation service providers (state vocational rehabilitation and community-based), rather than managers, human resource staff, or policy makers. Even as researchers have begun to address the need to incorporate employer perspectives into disability employment research, they have continued to publish their work primarily in rehabilitation and advocacy journals. It is important that the field should also focus on disseminating knowledge to these groups, allowing the development of practical strategies for employers and/or HR practitioners to build their capacities in employing people with disabilities while supporting their organization’s development of a diverse and inclusive workforce.

¹ Bjelland, M. J., Bruyère, S. M., Von Schrader, S., Houtenville, A. J., Ruiz-Quintanilla, A., & Webber, D. A. (2010). Age and disability employment discrimination: Occupational rehabilitation implications. *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation*, 20(4), 456–471. doi:10.1007/s10926-009-9194-z



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