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Leveling the Playing Field

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Attracting, engaging, and advancing people with disabilities

Leveling the Playing Field

Attracting, Engaging, and Advancing People with Disabilities

Executive Summary R-1498-12-ES

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Research for this report was supported by:

Cornell University
ILR School
Employment and Disability Institute

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recession or boom, business leaders consider finding and keeping the right talent a constant challenge. Executives spend significant amounts of time and money recruiting, retaining, and promoting the employees they think have the talent to secure success. *Leveling the Playing Field: Attracting, Engaging, and Advancing People with Disabilities*, a report from The Conference Board that is based on a year's worth of research by the Research Working Group for Improving Employment Outcomes for People with Disabilities, explores how people with disabilities, including recent veterans, can be part of the talent solution—both as a source of talent and a spur to make organizations better places to work. People with disabilities may even be a bellwether of changes in the workplace for all employees. As demonstrated in a case study about Walgreens in the full research report, employers who foster the employment of people with disabilities often see benefits for all employees and the organization as a whole.

Employers may become more motivated to attract, engage, and advance people with disabilities in coming years. For one thing, the proportion of the workforce with disabilities will increase as the population ages.[1] Improvements in technology and work design will also make access to work and the work itself easier for all employees, making it simpler to accommodate existing workers and hire people with disabilities. These employment strategies may even result in new opportunities for developing competitive advantage.

About the Research Working Group

The Conference Board Research Working Group on Improving Employment Outcomes for People with Disabilities was convened to address how to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities. Preparation of this executive summary was supported by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research of the U.S. Department of Education, through its Rehabilitation Research and Training Center grant to Cornell University (No. H133B100017). The contents of this paper do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education or any other federal agency, and readers should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government (Edgar, 75.620 (b)). The authors are solely responsible for all views expressed. Additional support came from members of the research working group.

The Numbers: Anyone Can Join the Ranks of People with Disabilities at Any Time

Over 10 percent of the current U.S. population is composed of people with disabilities, and that percentage is expected to grow for a number of reasons, including an aging population with many mature workers who choose to remain in the workforce and veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with some kind of service-incurred disability. Aggressive outreach to people with disabilities, as well as working to retain employees who incur disabilities after they are hired or later in life, can significantly expand the talent pool and create new business opportunities. Members of the research working group consistently reported, however, that most employers believe they do not know the current representation of people with disabilities in their employee populations.[2] The vast majority of people with disabilities are unidentified, and most become disabled after being hired. These employees are often reluctant to disclose a disability in an "official" manner because they are concerned about the repercussions of disclosing, see no benefit from doing so, and have learned to self-accommodate.

Technology, Work Design, and Access

The increasing decentralization of the workplace has made remote workers and virtual work teams commonplace.[3] People with disabilities, who often face inadequate transportation systems and travel limitations, could benefit from this trend because of:

- The rising acceptance and acknowledgment of the economic benefits of employees working from home.
- New technologies that improve remote-work productivity for all and the ability of some people with disabilities to take on an increasing number of jobs.
- Better access to existing information and communications technologies because of the provisions of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, which requires that information and communication technologies be accessible to federal employees and to the public that is being served by federal agencies.[4]

Despite the opportunities offered by these new circumstances, people with disabilities continue to face an attitudinal barrier. They are all too often regarded by the American workplace as the "piece" of the work process that needs to be adapted, whether through personal adjustments or intermediary tools and technologies. But adapting the work process to the individual rather than the individual to the process may be the key to breakthrough productivity gains and competitive advantage.[5]

While reasonable accommodations certainly include "job restructuring," such accommodations tend to emphasize adjusting or augmenting the worker and the workplace (e.g., making facilities accessible; offering flexible work arrangements; acquiring or modifying equipment; changing tests, training materials, or policies; providing qualified readers or interpreters; or reassignment to a vacant position).[6] In addition to putting efforts into accommodation, companies should consider the potential rewards to be gained from radical reconsiderations of the work itself and determining how to achieve business goals in a new way.

One approach is the practice of universal design, which focuses on designing products and production processes "to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design."[7] Instead of reinforcing a dichotomy between people with disabilities and those without, this paradigm encourages companies to design products and production processes that work across the widest practical range of individual differences. Although there is nascent evidence in the Walgreen's case study featured in the full report that universal design may yield superior results, more research is needed.

Veterans with Disabilities in the Workplace

Veterans returning from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq with disabilities are increasing public awareness of the issues related to hiring people with disabilities. While there were 5.5 million veterans of working age who reported a disability in 2008, the real rate of disability is believed to be higher due to underdiagnosis and underreporting.[a] For example, about one-third of veterans returning from deployment in Afghanistan and Iraq report symptoms of at least one of the three "signature disabilities": post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and depression. About 5 percent report symptoms of all three.[b]

In August 2009, those with service-related disabilities had an employment rate of 70.7 percent, compared to 81.9 percent for those veterans without a service-related disability.[c] (According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the employment rate of working-age people without disabilities in the United States in 2009 was 76.8 percent.[d]) Hundreds of thousands of soldiers have returned home from Iraq and Afghanistan, yet tens of thousands more are still serving. In a few years, many of these soldiers will be discharged and begin seeking civilian employment, including those who will be returning to the workforce with some form of disability.

Due to their military background, veterans, whether they are disabled or not, bring valuable traits to the workplace, including discipline, practical skills received as part of their training, the ability to work as part of a team, and knowledge gained from the special training they received in return for their service.[e] There are several resources available to help organizations hire disabled veterans, including Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS), the U.S. Department of Labor's Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program (DVOP) and Local Veterans' Employment Representative (LVER), various Wounded Warrior Initiatives, and Army Wounded Warrior (AW2).

a "Veteran's Day 2009," U.S. Census Bureau website, last modified October 13, 2009, accessed June 20, 2012 (www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_editions/cb09-ff21.html).

b Terri Tanielian and Lisa Jaycox (eds.), *Invisible Wounds of War: Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences, and Services to Assist Recovery*, RAND Corporation, Center for Military Health Policy Research, 2008.

c "Employment Situation of Veterans," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "BLS Spotlight on Statistics," May 2010 (www.bls.gov/spotlight/2010/veterans/).

d "Current Population Survey: August 2009 Veterans Supplement," U.S. Census Bureau, 2009.

e *Recruiting Disabled Veterans: A Primer*, United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) (affnet. ucp.org/ucp_channeldoc.cfm/1/17/11928/11928-11928/4649).

Unclaimed Financial Benefits Could Mean Money Left on the Table

Although there are numerous incentives—government programs and tax deductions and credits—to encourage the hiring of people with disabilities, 77 percent of companies participating in a 2003 survey did not take advantage of existing cost-saving and tax-deduction opportunities.[8] The most significant federal programs that directly benefit businesses are the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Program, the Disabled Access Credit, Internal Revenue Code Section 44—Expenditures to provide access to disabled individuals, and Internal Revenue Code Section 190—Expenditures to remove architectural and transportation barriers to the handicapped and elderly. There are also state-based incentives that go directly to individuals with disabilities to prepare and encourage them to work, as well as community-based organizations that provide assistance with pre-employment skills training and on-site job coaching. These partners can be found through State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) programs, the Department of Labor One-Stop Career Centers, the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF), and AskEARN.org.

New Design, Equivalent Standards, Superior Results

In 2003, Walgreens began planning for a new distribution center in Anderson, South Carolina. According to Randy Lewis, senior vice president of supply chain and logistics at Walgreens and the force behind the plan, they started with three goals. First, they sought to set a new performance benchmark and a higher norm for productivity for Walgreens, which, in May 2011, employed 10,000 full-time employees and had 7,600 stores and 17 distribution centers, including the Anderson distribution facility. Second, they wanted to establish "an inclusive environment where one-third of the workforce was made up of people with disabilities who might not otherwise have a job." Third, they wanted a sustainable business model, not a charity, "where people with and without disabilities work side by side, earning the same pay, doing the same jobs, and [are] held to the same productivity and other workplace standards."

Walgreens exceeded all of its goals. The center has been 20 percent more efficient than other plants. People with disabilities now constitute almost 40 percent of the Anderson workforce. There has been no additional cost for these accomplishments. All employees have been held to equivalent standards.

Source: Testimony of J. Randolph Lewis of Walgreen Company to U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, March 2, 2011.

The Talent Pipeline

In addition to these financial incentives, there are existing and proposed hiring targets for federal agencies and federal contractors to encourage U.S. employers to hire people with disabilities. The Obama administration issued Executive Order 13548 on July 26, 2010, which requires federal agencies to increase the percentage of people with disabilities in the federal workforce; to date, these goals have not been met.[9] Organizations that operate globally also face regulatory mandates regarding employees with disabilities. In some jurisdictions (e.g., select countries in the European Union and in Asia), companies may find themselves paying hefty fines for not hiring a sufficient number of people with disabilities.[10]

> "We are firmly committed to building on our position as a leader in the area of diversity. Doing so takes passion and an abiding belief that it's the right thing to do. But beyond that, our success is rooted in the fact that, for us, diversity is a business imperative—one that is aligned with and supports our firm's strategic priorities. Our intellectual capital must be as diverse as the clients we serve and the communities in which we work. It is our belief that a diverse work force, with distinct and varied experiences, talents, ideas, and perspectives, is a critical component to our continued success."
>
> **John Veihmeyer**
> Chairman and Chief Executive Officer
> KPMG LLP

Increasing visibility

While the addition of all of these incentives and requirements is welcome, these measures cannot have the intended effect if people with disabilities are not identified. To increase their presence in the workforce, people with nonvisable disabilities must be persuaded that it is in their best interest to disclose their disabilities. Also, schools (K-12, community college, technical schools, four-year colleges) need to be encouraged to recognize that students with disabilities have unique talents that should be developed as an asset for the work world. Institutions of higher learning can also develop programs that help college students with disabilities obtain interviews with major organizations or win summer internships.

> "Integrating people with disabilities into the workplace completes the diversity mosaic"
>
> **Gary Karp**
> Modern Disability

People with Disabilities Add to the Diversity Case

All of the efforts to develop the organizational readiness to attract, engage, and advance people with disabilities and make them an accepted part of business culture are a continuation of the work begun by other diversity and inclusion initiatives. For diversity executives, many of the premises related to this endeavor will not be new, but diversity leaders will need to apply the concepts in new ways if they want to reap a diversity dividend from employing people with disabilities.

Although no research was identified that specifically isolates the impact of incorporating people with disabilities onto work teams, there is research that suggests diverse groups may offer a performance advantage because they tend to have more information, a richer range of perspectives and means of addressing problems, and a wider repertoire of problem-solving approaches.[11] In one large-scale analysis of 108 empirical studies, which covered 10,632 teams, a significant positive relationship was found between cultural diversity and creativity.[12] People with disabilities may be able to contribute these and other advantages to the diversity mosaic because of their individual experiences and offer a performance advantage to the companies that actively recruit and retain them.

Busting the Misperceptions and Myths

Despite the potential benefits of hiring people with disabilities, including recent veterans, employers often remark that there is no business case for doing so and that organizations employ them only because it's the right thing to do. This is a misperception. Research reveals that many of the concerns about employees with disabilities are actually myths that need to be dispelled.

Myth The only reason to hire people with disabilities is to do the right thing.

In fact, there is a strong business case for hiring people with disabilities. The report's business case views people with disabilities through seven lenses: talent pool, costs, benefits, revenue and market share, work group performance, financial incentives, and mandates. For six of these lenses, people with disabilities are at least equal to their peers without disabilities. The exception is the cost lens, through which people with disabilities appear to be costlier employees than people without disabilities (for example, due to higher health costs), but only marginally so. Although more definitive research is needed, the conclusion of the full report, which is based on a review of the available literature and examples presented by and to the research working group participants, is that people with disabilities are a solid business investment.

Myth People with disabilities are not a significant market for our company.

In the United States alone, people with disabilities earned an estimated $269 billion in 2009, and households that included people with disabilities and their family members represented a population of 54.7 million.[13] So businesses might want to reconsider whether people with disabilities are part of their customer base, especially if the businesses make themselves accessible and are considered inclusive employers. Eighty-seven percent of consumers "agree" or "strongly agree" that they would prefer to give their business to companies that employ people with disabilities, and 92 percent of consumers are "more favorable" or "much more favorable" toward companies that hire people with disabilities.[14] Executives should also consider the strength of the assistive technology and support service market. Annual revenue for services, excluding medical services and overnight housing, is estimated to be $34 billion,[15] and revenue for assistive technologies, including eyeglasses and contact lenses, is $39.5 billion.[16]

Myth Employees with disabilities cannot meet performance expectations.

In a 2002 study, people with disabilities performed as well as or better than people with no disabilities for almost every measure of performance.[17] The study compared observations of 255 supervisors on the work performance of employees with disabilities and coworkers with no disabilities. On average, the managers judged employees with disabilities better performers than their coworkers in terms of punctuality, attendance, work quality, task consistency, overall proficiency, and work speed. The full report examines four particular concerns about employees with disabilities—they have more accidents, require more supervision, are absent more, and hurt business—and reveals them to be, based on the available research, relatively unfounded. Employers should consider the efforts people with disabilities have made to arrive qualified for the job at the company's door, especially if the disability is severe. To overcome personal limitations and externally imposed barriers, such candidates likely possess extraordinary levels of persistence, resilience, and ingenuity.

Myth People with disabilities are less educated.

Although the overall population of people with disabilities is less educated than the rest of the population, this is not true for those seeking employment. According to a 2009 release by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 8.3 percent of people with disabilities who were jobless and actively seeking work held a bachelor's degree, compared to 4.5 percent of those with no disability who were similarly unemployed.[18] For veterans with a disability, the picture is particularly strong, as 98.6 percent of active duty enlisted members have at least a high school diploma, compared with 86.6 percent of the 25-and-over civilian population.[19]

Myth Employees with disabilities aren't dependable.

In a 2000 survey of 250 managers who had experience supervising at least one worker with a disability, all of the respondents said they were either "generally likely," "likely," or "very likely" to recommend hiring workers with disabilities.[20] According to a 2010 study, 33 percent of human resource managers and senior executives said they believed that employees with disabilities had lower rates of turnover, while only 7 percent said the population had higher rates.[21] Participants in a 2007 study reported that employees with disabilities stayed on the job an average of 4.26 months longer than employees without disabilities.[22]

Myth Providing the federally required accommodations the Americans with Disabilities Act requires will be expensive.

Research findings in numerous studies suggest that workplace accommodations do not impose a high direct-cost burden.[23] Of accommodations implemented or being implemented in 2004 and 2005, 49.4 percent of employers reported zero direct cost. The median cost of an accommodation in the first year was $600, but when those that had zero cost were factored in, the median cost of a first-year accommodation was $25.[24] In addition to the minimal costs of accommodations, there are the many direct and indirect benefits accommodations offer, including the retention of qualified employees and increased productivity (Table 1).[25]

Table 1

Percentage of respondents citing the following as benefits resulting from making reasonable accommodations for employees with a disability

Direct benefits		Indirect benefits	
Company retained qualified employees	86%	Increased overall company morale	61%
Increased the employee's productivity	72	Increased overall company productivity	59
Eliminated costs associated with training new employees	55	Increased workplace safety	47
Saved workers' compensation or other insurance costs	47	Improved interactions with customers	37
Increased the employee's attendance	39	Increased overall company attendance	27
		Increased profitability	24

Source: Selected from Beth Loy and Linda Carter Batiste, "Universal Design and Assistive Technology as Workplace Accommodations: An Exploratory White Paper on Implementation and Outcomes" (Job Accommodation Network, Office of Disability Employment Policy, US Department of Labor), May 2007, Table 4, p. 11. Over 1,000 employers were surveyed (1,182), of which 96 were "employers who incurred a cost purchasing or modifying a product" to accommodate an employee.

Conclusion

Having the right talent needed to achieve institutional success is a constant struggle for leaders of most organizations. Hiring people with disabilities may lead to a performance advantage in team problem-solving and decision-making activities by allowing them to apply the ingenuity required of them in everyday experiences to business problems. Perfecting the organizational competencies needed to manage their differences and fully use their capabilities can provide the foundation for managing both today's workforce and the workforce of the future. Efforts to effectively employ people with disabilities can be considered a metaphor for maximizing the potential of all employees and the performance of the entire organization.

Getting Started

To begin the journey toward becoming an employer of choice for people with disabilities, including veterans, the research discussed in the full report indicates that the following steps are critical to success:

- Identify a strong senior manager to lead the organization's efforts to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities.
- Find an organizational partner with deep experience in fostering employment opportunities for people with disabilities.
- Implement guidelines and policies for flexible work arrangements for all employees, including people with disabilities.
- Use the concepts of universal design to make your workplace accessible to people with disabilities, increase overall productivity, and facilitate the organizational flexibility and agility required to compete in the global marketplace.
- Centralize the reasonable accommodations process.
- Craft a supportive work environment that encourages people with disabilities to self-identify and install the mechanisms that will enable self-identification.
- Establish requirements and a target for the proportion of interviewees who must be people with disabilities and then hold recruiters and hiring managers accountable.
- Institute an employee resource or affinity group for employees with disabilities and those employees who are caregivers and friends.
- Ensure that employees with disabilities have career development plans.
- Train managers on awareness of and etiquette toward people with disabilities.
- Require leaders to chair or sponsor the employee resource group for people with disabilities, serve on the board of an organization directly serving people with disabilities, and speak out in favor of employing people with disabilities.

Endnotes

1 See Susanne M. Bruyère and Linda Barrington, "Employment and Work," in *The SAGE Reference Series on Disability: Key Issues and Future Directions* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2012), pp. 66-67, 90-91, 139.

2 In addition to the full *Leveling the Playing Field* research report, see also "CAHRS Working Group Summary—Attraction, Retention, and Reward for Employees with Disabilities," summary of October 14, 2011, meeting of the Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies working group at Cornell University's ILR School. (www.ilr.cornell.edu/cahrs/research/upload/exec-summary_CAHRS-Working-GroupDisabilities10-14-11.pdf).

3 Stan Panis, "The Future of Work for People without or with Disabilities," Advanced Analytical Consulting Group, presentation at the December 8, 2011, meeting of the Research Working Group for Improving Employee Outcomes for People with Disabilities in Los Angeles.

4 For more information on Section 508, visit the United States Access Board website (www.access-board.gov/sec508/guide/act.htm).

5 For a successful example of such an adaptation, see the Walgreens case study in full research report.

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About This Executive Summary

This Executive Summary is based on *Leveling the Playing Field: Attracting, Engaging and Advancing People with Disabilities*, a Research Report by Peter Linkow and Ivelys Figueroa that is the result of the work of The Conference Board Report of the Research Working Group on Improving Employment Outcomes for People with Disabilities. Preparation of this executive summary was supported by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research of the U.S. Department of Education, through its Rehabilitation Research and Training Center grant to Cornell University (No. H133B100017). The contents of this paper do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education or any other federal agency, and readers should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government (Edgar, 75.620 (b)). The authors are solely responsible for all views expressed.

The Employment and Disabilities Institute (EDI) at Cornell University's ILR School advances knowledge, policies, and practices to enhance the opportunities of people with disabilities through projects, educational activities, research, publications, and technical assistance (www.ilr.cornell.edu/edi). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Cornell University or those of the United States Department of Education.

The Conference Board would also like to acknowledge WFD Consulting of Waltham, Massachusetts, for supporting this research project through the donation of services and sharing their expertise in global work-life and diversity matters.

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