

Cornell University
ILR School
Employment and Disability Institute

Conference Proceedings: Abstract and Executive Summary

STATE OF THE SCIENCE CONFERENCE

October 22-23, 2013

Washing, D.C.

Sponsored by the Rehabilitation and Research Training Center on
Employer Practices Related to Employment Outcomes among Individuals
with Disabilities at Cornell University

Abstract

This document provides an overview of research findings presented and audience response at the “state-the-science” conference conducted by Cornell University October 22-23, 2013 in Washington, D.C. on the topic of *Innovative Research on Employment Practices: Improving Employment for People with Disabilities*.

As recently as 2011, the employment rate of working age people with disabilities in the U.S. was 33.5 percent, compared to 76.3 for their nondisabled peers.¹ U.S. employers vary widely – by size, sector, industry, and culture – and little is understood regarding the relationships between these employer characteristics, their workplace practices, and employment outcomes of persons with disabilities. Further research is needed on how company policies and practices, and the corresponding attitudes of hiring managers, supervisors, and co-workers, affect the employment opportunities of people with disabilities in order to inform the development of evidence-based practices.

Identifying barriers to improving the current situation and expanding employer practices that advance the employment of people with disabilities is imperative. The aim of the conference sponsor, the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Employer Practices Related to the Employment Outcomes Among Individuals with Disabilities (EPRRTC) at Cornell University, was to focus on this need and disseminate information on the research results achieved during the first three project years of a five-year project. This document provides an overview of the information distributed in the state-of-the-science conference held October 22-23, 2013.

The EPRRTC State of the Science Conference presentations, derived from EPRRTC research projects, touched on areas such as compensation, disability discrimination, an aging workforce, HR policy and practices to minimize employment disability discrimination, health insurance as an influencer of job attachment for people with disabilities, as well as information gleaned from employer case studies.

¹Erickson, W., Lee, C., von Schrader, S. (2014). Disability Statistics from the 2012 American Community Survey (ACS). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Employment and Disability Institute (EDI). Retrieved May 26, 2014 from www.disabilitystatistics.org.



The conference was exceedingly well attended and received, with the 122 registrants including representatives from federal agencies, employers, researchers, and disability advocates.

The EPRRTC at Cornell University has been funded by the U.S. Department of Education National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research to create new knowledge of specific employer practices most strongly associated with desired employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities and the prevalence of these practices.

In conducting its research, Cornell University's EPRRTC partnered with employer organizations, federal agencies, and private and public sector employers to conduct multi-disciplinary research projects to expand the availability and accessibility of useful information on how employer practices are related to employer success in hiring, retaining and advancing people with disabilities. Partners include the Society for Human Resource Management, The Conference Board, the Cornell University Center for Advanced Human Resources Studies, and Institute for Compensation Studies and the Human Capital Development Program within the Cornell University ILR School. The EPRRTC seeks to incorporate our research findings into workplace practice, policy and innovation, improving the employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

An overview of the *Innovative Research on Employment Practices: Improving Employment for People with Disabilities* conference agenda, presentations, and needed next steps identified by participants follows in the materials in this proceedings document. In the Executive Summary below, we provide information from attendees about the importance of the research and of the Conference, key themes that emerged from presentations and related discussions, and needed next research and policy steps identified by panelists and participants.


Executive Summary

Importance of the Research and of the Conference

There is an urgent need for new knowledge to address continuing employment disparities for people with disabilities, who represent a significant portion of the U.S. population (estimates range as high as 16.6 percent) (Brault, 2010). Considerable prior research on barriers to employment for people with disabilities has not eliminated the significant knowledge gaps. Economic studies using national survey data confirm that people with disabilities fare poorly compared to their nondisabled peers in terms of overall workforce participation rates, pay, full-time employment, and post-layoff re-employment, but the causes of these inequities are still not well understood (Acemoglu & Angrist, 1998, 2001; DeLeire, 2000a, 2000b; Burkhauser, Houtenville & Wittenburg, 2001; Burkhauser & Stapleton, 2003; Hotchkiss, 2005; Houtenville & Burkhauser, 2005; and Jolls & Prescott, 2004). More research has been needed to examine employer-related information within these data sources and to understand what is behind the continuing disparity in employment.

Existing studies largely agree about the barriers that employers report regarding the employment of people with disabilities: lack of work experience and skills, supervisors' lack of knowledge about accommodations, perceived cost of accommodations, and attitudes/stereotypes of supervisors and co-workers about people with disabilities (Able Trust, 2003; Blanck and Schartz, 2005; Brannick & Bruyère, 1999; Bruyère, 2000, 2002; Dixon, Kruse, & Van Horn, 2003; Domzal, Houtenville, and Sharma, 2008; Gilbride, Stensrud, Vandergoot & Golden, 2003). Many of the barriers identified by employers may be mutable by educating employers on issues of disability, and specifically by providing information on effective workplace policies and practices. Further research on how company policies and practices and the attitudes of hiring managers, supervisors, and co-workers affect the employment opportunities of people with disabilities is needed to inform the development of evidence-based practices to address these barriers.


The focus of the Employer Practices Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (EPRRTC) has been to create new knowledge on employer practices in the employment of people with disabilities. Through a series of 14 research projects and 14 training, dissemination and technical assistance projects, we are successfully meeting the goals of the project to: (a) create new knowledge of specific employer practices



most strongly associated with desired employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities and the prevalence of these practices; (b) increase knowledge about how these practices relate to employer success in hiring, retention, and promotion of individuals with disabilities; and (c) increase incorporation of these findings into practice and policy by collaborating with employer groups to develop, evaluate, or implement strategies to promote utilization of positive practices identified by the RRTC. Employers were also engaged in the planning and conducting of specific research projects to increase the ultimate workplace applicability of the research results.

The purpose of the state-of-the-science conference conducted on October 22-23, 2013 was to disseminate a summary of research findings to date, as well as collect participants' perceptions of the importance of the research and the conference, and needed next steps for effective dissemination of these findings and in the next stages of research. Conference participants cited the value of the research and the conference event itself as fulfilling the following purposes:

- Providing information about research with high methodological rigor to inform employer policies and practices, contributing to improved employment outcomes for people with disabilities;
- Creating a forum to hear directly from employers about their experiences and perspectives on the issue of employment barriers and facilitators for people with disabilities;
- Affording a multi-faceted perspective from federal government agencies, private industry, and service providers such as the state-federal Vocational Rehabilitation system on the issues of employer practices to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities;
- Employing a useful conference design whereby research findings were shared, and stakeholder panels of employers, policy makers, and disability advocates were afforded an opportunity to comment and discuss the implications of each study;
- Providing attendees an opportunity to connect with leading researchers in the field of employment and disability and discuss ways to maximize the impact of their work through implementation at the field level;

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- Highlighting both the public policy implications, but also the workplace practice implications of the findings to improve future public policy and employer efforts;
 - Identifying systemic barriers to employment that exist for people with disabilities, created by existing policies and workplace practices; and
 - Underscoring the importance of establishing effective data collection methods for evaluating the underlying factors leading to both positive and negative employment outcomes among people with disabilities.

Overarching Themes Across Research Findings

As detailed in the conference agenda, presentations were conducted across a number of research areas, reporting results from specific studies. These presentations are summarized in what follows. PowerPoint slides, transcripts, and research briefs of each study are also included.

A broad overview of results across all studies presented is below, clustered by the broader themes that emerged. For a fuller understanding of the implications of these findings, please consult the relevant research brief or PowerPoint presentation, or contact the principal investigator(s) of that study for a copy of the working paper or journal article of interest.

Available Research and Data on Disability and Employment


- A literature review of employer practices that affect employment outcomes for people with disabilities found that --
 - 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%).
 - More than half of the articles utilized survey methods to collect data (56%).
 - 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) per-


sonnel, supervisors and coworkers were the target audience in less than one third of the articles (27%).

- The Cross-Data Catalog of Disability and Compensation Variables, built as part of the EPRRTC effort, informs rehabilitation researchers, policymakers, educators, and students about which national survey and administrative datasets can appropriately and adequately inform a particular area of study, better enabling them to conduct quantitative research evaluating the role of demographic and workplace characteristics on employment outcomes for people with disabilities.

Employer Practices and Policies


- About three-quarters of surveyed organizational HR representatives had implemented at least one of the eight specific good policies/practices identified in the SHRM/Cornell survey.
- The practices most commonly implemented were forming a relationship with community organizations (51%) and including persons with disabilities in their organization's diversity and inclusion plan (50%).
- Only about two in five (39%) HR professionals surveyed said their organization actively recruited persons with disabilities. (Note: this survey was conducted prior to the recent OFCCP regulations on increasing representations of employees with disabilities.)
- About a third of HR professionals surveyed reported having strong senior management commitment for hiring persons with disabilities.
- Overall, the most significant predictors for disability-inclusive practices were:
 - larger organizations
 - federal contractors
 - non-profits
- Organizational characteristics associated with higher ADA (employment disability discrimination) charge rates include:

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- smaller individual establishments
 - larger parent organizations
 - federal contractors
 - multi-unit headquarters
 - establishments with a high proportion of minority employees relative to state/industry level
 - services sector (as compared to manual (composite that includes manufacturing, agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting, mining, utilities, and construction) and sales sectors)
 - counties with lower prevalence of disability, higher unemployment rate
 - Relatively few organizations have considered an aging workforce in designing absence and disability management programming.
 - Flexibility, maintaining and enhancing benefits, wellness programming, safety checks, accommodation, return to work programs, and improving communication and culture, were identified as good practices for retaining all workers, and as particularly important in addressing the needs of older workers.
 - Factors that employers ranked highest as barriers to the hiring, retention, advancement and inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace were: cost of accommodations, lack of qualified applicants with disabilities, leader's lack of knowledge of which accommodations to make, and attitudes/stereotypes.
 - Visible top management commitment, paying closer attention to physical accessibility (i.e., in buildings/facilities), ensuring HR/EEO staff are highly knowledgeable about disability policy and accommodations, and framing accommodations within broader workplace flexibility initiatives were rated as the most effective interventions by HR professionals surveyed.
 - The more inclusive a work unit's climate, the higher the proportion of managers of a unit who have undergone disability awareness training, and the more aware unit managers are of disability policies and practices, the more positive are unit employees' perceptions of disability climate.

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- Employees report more positive perceptions of disability climate when they work for managers who believe that the underlying motivation for adopting disability policies and practices is to promote inclusion and/or strategic objectives as compared to managers who believe that disability policies and practices are adopted for compliance/legal reasons.
 - Managers' perceptions of the effectiveness of these policies are positively associated with employees' perceptions about the organization's commitment to these issues.
 - Visual top management commitment continues to be seen as a key factor in reducing barriers, but line managers are also a critical element in the experiences of people with disabilities in the workplace.
 - Experiences of disability-related bias are negatively associated with manager awareness of disability practices and overall perceptions about the effectiveness of those practices.

Employee Total Benefits Considerations

- Overall, disability status has a smaller effect on total compensation than on wage and salary income alone, supporting conjecture that workers might substitute wage and salary income for other types of benefits.
- These findings are consistent with the idea that employees make tradeoffs between wage/salaries and non-wage-and-salary benefits in their decisions to work.
- Considering only wage and salary income (as is done in many empirical labor market studies) masks the true gaps in total rewards.
- In order to attract and retain workers, an adequate balance of pay and benefits should be considered in the total compensation package. Those seeking to place or hire individuals with disabilities may want to reevaluate the importance of non-wage-and-salary benefits.
- With some employers re-evaluating whether to offer health insurance benefits under the ACA, it is likely that employees who value their benefits could move to jobs that provide such benefits.


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- With job-locks substantially reduced by policies such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), lack of employer-provided health insurance contributed to higher rates of job-change among employees with disabilities compared to their peers without disabilities.
 - Workers have more options to change jobs in a good labor market, and employers might want to consider offering Employer Health Insurance as a benefit to retain their high performing workers, who may have disabilities.

Employment Situation for Individuals with Disabilities

- People with disabilities are more likely to be in occupations associated with fewer abstract tasks and greater levels of routine and manual tasks.
- The economic return to abstract tasks is clearly positive and the economic returns to routine tasks and manual tasks are both negative.
- The gap in wages could be tied to these task measures that have lower rates of return.
- Among employed individuals, 53% of people with disabilities had employer-paid health insurance; about 57% of people without disabilities had employer-paid health insurance.
- Nearly 60% of adult workers (ages 25-44 and 45-65) had access to employer-paid health insurance compared to roughly one-third (34%) of younger workers.
- Workers with post-secondary education were more likely to have access to employer-paid health insurance compared to their counterparts with less education.
- Nearly 14% of employees with disabilities changed jobs in a given year, compared to 10% of employees without disabilities.

Disability Disclosure


- Employees are significantly (at least 1.5 times) more likely to self-disclose to other individuals (managers, coworkers) than to formal entities (HR, EEO, employee records, etc.).

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- When employees with disabilities work within departments in which more employees feel supported, fairly treated, and embedded, they are more likely to feel “safe” about disclosing their disability.
 - Employees who have been with the organization longer tend to have more positive experiences when disclosing a disability to formal organizational entities.
 - Disability type and visibility do not appear to predict the favorability of disclosure experiences.

Needed Next Steps

The following were some suggested next steps for research. These suggestions came out of an open forum discussion at the conference event, and follow-up ideas offered as comments in the event evaluation:

- Find ways to define more clearly what the measurable benefits of hiring individuals with disabilities are for employers.
- Identify specific workplace practices that change the culture of employers to embrace the hiring of individuals with disabilities.
- Identify any inherent disincentives to work that are created by the current system of means-tested benefits allocation.
- Continue to isolate promising practices designed to encourage disclosure of non-visible disabilities in the workplace.
- Mitigate a potential skills gap by finding creative ways to help older workers remain connected to the workforce.
- Establish methods to more accurately evaluate employment outcomes of people with disabilities across industries.
- Generate strategies for aligning supply-side rehabilitation and training initiatives with demand-side needs and priorities.
- Promote systems that leverage technological advancements to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

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- Help organizations develop practices that are empirically associated with higher rates of employment among people with disabilities and can produce measurable outcomes.
 - Develop more comprehensive data tracking mechanisms which enable researchers to study employment impacts of different disability populations.
 - Cultivate behavioral insights as an approach that combines economics, social psychology and behavioral economics to compel outcomes via effective policy.
 - Create a multi-faceted approach to communicating the policy implications of the research findings.
 - Conduct additional research which specifically focuses on retention and leadership development of employees with disabilities.
 - Investigate the impacts of the Affordable Care Act on employment patterns and job tenure among people with disabilities.

In Summary

Individuals with disabilities continue to be disadvantaged in entering the workforce and remaining employed. They also face barriers in getting access to higher paying jobs and positions with advancement opportunities. Employers are the gatekeepers to the workplace, making an exploration of their activities critical to understanding these disparities. Beyond that, identifying which workplace policies and practices have the greatest impact on the recruitment, hiring, retention, advancement and full inclusion of people with disabilities is imperative. The research conducted by Cornell University under the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Employer Practices Related to the Employment Outcomes Among Individuals with Disabilities (EPRRTC) at Cornell University, funded by the U.S. Department of Education National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR), has been designed to meet this need. The state-of-the-science conference described in these proceedings enabled us to share the significance of these findings, through the unique multi-disciplinary perspectives and methodologies among our team of Cornell University experts. In addition, panelists representing employers in industry and the federal government, policy analysts, federal agencies responsible for improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities, and disability advocates,

provided input that enabled us to further clearly identify important next steps in public policy, ways to further employer good practice through dissemination, training, and technical assistance, as well as fruitful areas for future research.

Next steps in this process will be dissemination to other researchers through the publication of articles in scholarly journals, as well as broad distribution of our research executive summaries. Dissemination to employers will occur through webinars/webcasts, newsletter articles to our employer network and partner organizations, ongoing technical assistance, and the design of an online benchmarking tool for employers to identify good practices for their consideration and adoption. Pre-service and professional development efforts to bring this information to rehabilitation counselor students and practitioners, rehabilitation educators, and researchers are also underway.

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