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# **The Issue of Unemployment Among People with Disabilities**

by

Angelina Pagano

**Keywords:** disability, unemployment, stigma, education, self-identification

## **Abstract**

The rate of unemployment for people with disabilities continues to rise greatly above that of people without disabilities. The issue seems to be exacerbated by employer biases and concerns which are not supported in the face of evidence. A lack of employer education on disability related subjects causes this misconception among both employers and the public as a whole. To resolve the underlying problem of miseducation, an increase in the self-identification of people with disabilities is necessary to provide researchers with data to assist in the formation of a revised curriculum.

## **Implications of Unemployment**

As of 2019, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics reported the employment-population ratio of people with disabilities to be at 19.3%, as compared to the employment-population ratio of non-disabled people, which was 66.3%. This stark contrast in percentages shows just how prominent the issue of unemployment is among the disabled community. Implications of this problem include a rising poverty rate, a lower standard of living for people with disabilities, and a possible socioeconomic gap that may form between those with and without disabilities.

However, it is not just people with disabilities who are affected by this issue; if unemployment among the disabled community persists, the surrounding communities will have to provide increased financial and societal support for these individuals, as well as lose out on a useful opportunity for diversity in the workforce.

### **Defining the Problem**

Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber define a wicked problem as a problem which has a variety of potential solutions, different solutions based on different focuses, and which has originated from another problem (160-166). The issue of unemployment among people with disabilities fits all of these categories. If the focus of unemployment is on education, then the solution appears to be funding education programs for people with disabilities and/or employers. However, if the focus of unemployment is on job availability, the solution appears to be creating more jobs for the community. Thus, focusing on a different aspect of unemployment of people with disabilities, such as employer education, leads to alternate potential solutions. The issue of unemployment among the disabled also stems from a variety of interconnected problems. For example, unemployment of people with disabilities is partly caused by employers deliberately not hiring disabled individuals, which can be attributed to the issue of stigma around disabilities, which in turn is caused by the problem of miseducation, and so on. Referencing the categories given by Rittel and Webber, unemployment among the disabled community proves itself to be a wicked problem in nature.

### **Hiring Practices and Disability Disclosure**

In order to find the cause of unemployment among people with disabilities, it is best to first look at employer hiring statistics. In a report by Dalgin Spirito, an experiment was

performed to observe the hiring characteristics of employers in various industries (6-15). The employers were shown the same video of an interview, with the only difference being whether or not the participant disclosed a physical disability, a psychiatric disability, or no disability at all. The results of the study found that employers were much more likely to rate the person in the video highly if they disclosed a physical disability or no disability. The employers who watched the video with a psychiatric disability disclosure were the least likely to rate the person highly. However, while employers rated the person who disclosed a physical disability highly, there was no correlation between the candidate's rating and their likeliness of being employed. According to Spirito, "this is consistent with research that shows that although applicants with disabilities are evaluated more positively, they are still less likely to be hired than are candidates without disabilities" (7). Thus, the research and data indicate that the root of the wicked problem does not lie within the qualifications or education of people with disabilities, since the employers were still less likely to highly rate the person who disclosed a psychiatric disability, even though they were shown videos of the same person with the same qualifications. The problem must then lie with the negative societal stigma surrounding disabilities. This factor would explain the employers' low ratings of the person who disclosed a psychiatric disability in the experiment, since the societal stigma surrounding psychiatric disabilities and mental health issues is much larger than that of physical disabilities. Disability stigma such as this has a heavy impact on disabled individuals in the hiring process as well as the workplace. As Sandra, an employee with a mobility disability explains, "part of being disabled is...you have to do extra work. You have to be assertive without being aggressive...You have to act like you don't have a disability" (Jans et al, 2011). However, additional factors can explain the hiring patterns of employers during the interview process.

## **Employer Fears and Concerns**

In a study performed by Stephen Kaye, 81.4% of employer respondents stated that they were concerned about the cost of accommodations for people with disabilities, and 68.5% stated that they were worried about the performance of people with disabilities as compared to workers without disabilities (529). A major concern of employers that was also mentioned in the report was the fear of lawsuits brought on by firing an employee with a disability. These three major fears of employers can explain their hesitancy of hiring people with disabilities. However, research proves that these fears are not supported when faced with the evidence. According to Dr. Lengnick-Hall in his report on employer attitudes, “accommodations for PWDs [people with disabilities] may entail additional costs to employers, but evidence to date suggests that these costs are usually minor and unlikely to tip the benefit versus cost assessment away from hiring from this source of labor.” The data presented in the report for the President’s Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities shows that 20% of accommodations are no cost, and 80% of accommodations cost \$1000 or less. Regarding job performance of people with disabilities, Michael Stein notes in his “Labor Markets, Rationality, and Workers with Disabilities” that the U.S. Office of Vocational Rehabilitation reports that 91% of employees with disabilities were rated “average” or higher by employers (as cited in Lengnick-Hall et al). Dr. Lengnick-Hall also presents information that goes against employer fears of lawsuits via the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), stating that “Allbright (2002) and Lee (2001) reviewed a total of 696 lawsuits charging violations of the ADA. Of these, 96% of the decisions were favorable for the employer, either through summary judgment or through merits of the case.” Based on the data above, employer fears about accommodations, performance, and lawsuits

appear to be unjustified. Therefore, the question that arises is: Why do employers have fears about hiring people with disabilities when the data suggests otherwise?

### **Disability Education for Employers**

The main answer to this question is that employer fears are exacerbated by a lack of education about the disabled community and the systems surrounding it. Although the ADA protects people with disabilities from being discriminated against in the workplace, legal protections do little to educate employers on how to handle disability-related subjects. Employers need to be educated on the different types of disabilities (including physical, psychiatric, cognitive, developmental, etc.) in order to understand what a disabled person's strengths and weaknesses might be and how to properly provide accommodations for those individuals. Through disability education, employers would be able to understand the reasonable and inexpensive nature of accommodations, as well as the equal performance levels of people with disabilities compared to people without disabilities. As Jim Fruchterman, founder of Benetech, explains in "Expanding Employment Success for People with Disabilities," a lack of education leads to employers viewing disabilities through a compliance lens rather than one of opportunity (2018). By this, the authors mean that many employers view the hiring of people with disabilities as compliance to the government and legal standards of the company rather than as an opportunity for company growth and success. This is a problematic mindset that leads to a lack of incentive for employers to hire people with disabilities. However, with the education of employers, members of a company will be able to realize the benefits that disabled workers bring to the industry. If hired, people with disabilities provide diversity to the workplace, which is important for generating new ideas and solutions for the company, as well as adding to its inclusive portrayal to the community. In fact, Dr. Lengnick-Hall adds that "there is a correlation

between prior contact with PWDs and favorable attitudes toward their employment.” The literature reviewed in Dr. Lengnick-Hall’s report showed that, in general, employers who had previous contact with disabled individuals via references or job placement programs were more likely to hire those individuals. The nature of this data proves that the root of unemployment lies with a lack of education among employers. The proof lies with the fact that employers who had previous contact with disabled individuals, and therefore had expanded their knowledge of the disability and eased their fears, were more likely to hire people with disabilities. However, if the issue is a lack of education, then there must be an explanation as to why employers are not being educated on disabilities, and why existing lessons regarding disabilities are not effective.

### **The Role of Self-Identification**

In order for any curriculum to be developed, a great deal of data and information in relation to the topic must be gathered. Therefore, in order for a curriculum surrounding disabilities to be developed, information about people with disabilities must be gathered. Although, as Jim Fruchterman, points out, “there are general statistics about how many PWDs are unemployed, but a lack of useful data about who those people are with respect to segmentation” (2018). What Fruchterman means is that the public has a general understanding about employment of people with disabilities, but lacks an understanding of each type of disability in its own right, as well as the necessary accommodations needed for each disability type. The solution then appears to be to conduct surveys and other types of research to receive information about the first-hand experiences of people with disabilities. However, therein lies another problem: many people with disabilities choose not to self-identify in surveys and questionnaires performed by researchers. Fruchterman again states in his report that “while 99.5% of employees responded to the gender question, and 88% answered the ethnicity question,

less than 20% of employees answered the disability status question” (2018). Reasons behind the lack of self-identification from people with disabilities may vary, including factors such as a fear of stigma or a fear that they will lose their employment. Regardless of the reason behind this trend, research into the betterment of employer education cannot be completed without the self-identification of people with disabilities. Thus, unemployment of people with disabilities becomes a cyclical problem: people with disabilities are afraid to self-identify due to lack of employer education, but employers cannot be educated without self-identification by people with disabilities. In order to break this cycle and provide a resolution to the issue of unemployment among people with disabilities, researchers, human resource personnel, and those involved in data collection must use their current and limited knowledge about people with disabilities to increase self-identification. Possible methods of increasing self-identification among people with disabilities in research and surveys include adding a sense of privacy, as well as rephrasing questions so that the wording is more inclusive and less intricate. Through the accumulation of this type of data, the public can become educated on the subject matter of disabilities, and in addition witness the large extent to which people with disabilities make up the community.

### **Public Awareness**

If the self-identification of people with disabilities is successfully increased, employers will become aware of the large number of disabled individuals that are currently in the workforce who have been previously ignored. With that in mind, employers will be more inclined to hire and provide the necessary accommodations for disabled employees. A similar situation can be seen with the hiring of LGBTQ+ individuals. As Fruchterman concludes in regards to his research on hiring practices, “it wasn’t until self-identification became much more widespread, that employers took the issue of LGBT rights more seriously” (2018). Thus, a comparable



outcome should come about through the increase of self-identification by people with disabilities. Starting with the elimination of self-identification barriers, researchers may be able to collect data surrounding the experiences of disabled individuals in order to educate employers and provide a resolution to the issue of unemployment among the disabled.

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