

# BBI BRIEFS

*A publication of the Burton Blatt Institute (BBI) at Syracuse University*

## **Model Diversity Policy: Changing Policies, Practices, and Culture March 2011**



**Burton Blatt Institute**  
**SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY**

## Overview

The Burton Blatt Institute (BBI) at Syracuse University has undertaken a number of projects to study corporate practices and the employment of persons with disabilities. Exploration of these issues, through the development of scientifically rigorous and externally valid research standards, and company case studies derived from these standards, helps to address the gap in field research and strives to positively influence the employment of people with disabilities.

BBI researchers have been examining the employment of persons with disabilities and corporate culture for over 16 years, and have produced a body of scholarly articles investigating the different aspects of these issues, disseminated through a wide range of peer-reviewed publications, newspapers, and magazines.

Americans with disabilities have significantly lower levels of employment than their non-disabled peers. Prior study of employment rates among people with disabilities generally has relied on a “supply-side” approach, analyzing how personal characteristics predict employment and earnings. These models have not sufficiently analyzed variables related to employer demand (and the interaction of employer demand/supply and the environment) as predictors of employment outcomes for people with disabilities. Thus, there is a need to systematically understand demand characteristics for qualified workers with disabilities, particularly as work requirements change over time.

This project, funded by a five-year grant from the U.S Department of Education, National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR), sets out scientifically rigorous and evidence-based methods to develop, identify, and evaluate employment demand-side models. It generates new knowledge to better understand market-driven workforce trends: to improve employment outcomes and inform employment practices and policies to prepare individuals with disabilities for the changing needs and requirements of the present and future workforce.

The project weaves together a series of eight targeted and coordinated demand-side research projects, providing new data gathering, data analysis, hiring tools, partnership building, and experimental study, to inform comparison of the efficacy of demand- and supply-side models in understanding and improving employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

Additionally, the sub-projects deal directly with issues of “corporate culture,” including focus groups and town meeting to understand the nexus between disability and corporate culture, as well providing specialized trainings for senior management, department heads, and hiring personnel.

The partnership is an unprecedented nationwide collaboration of economists, statisticians, and leading experts in law, public and disability policy, corporate culture, applied life studies, technology, rehabilitation, and education. Project partners will translate findings into valid and practical tools for large and small businesses in different market sectors to improve employment outcomes for persons with disability.

To learn more go to [bbi.syr.edu](http://bbi.syr.edu)

## Model Diversity Policy: Changing Policies, Practices, and Culture

In recent decades, “diversity” has been recognized as a critical concern in contemporary workplaces.<sup>1</sup> An inclusive workplace involves the full and successful integration of diverse people into a workplace or industry. A diversity policy and plan are among the tools needed to develop an inclusive culture.

Perspectives and orientations toward substantively realizing workplace diversity vary widely.<sup>2</sup> The model components and policy imperatives presented in this brief are not necessarily the only valid approach to enacting workplace diversity. They represent synthesis of research focused specifically on improving the representation, experiences and participation of people with disabilities in the workplace.<sup>3</sup> This brief conceives of diversity policies as one element of inclusive workplace cultures. For background on the broader prospects and case for inclusiveness in contemporary work, see our brief: *What is an Inclusive Culture?*

### Developing and Implementing a Diversity Policy

Considerations involved in developing and implementing a diversity policy include:

- Integrating diversity policy into multiple facets of the workplace,
- Disability-specific and integrated approaches to diversity, and
- Strategies for communicating and publicizing policy.

Diversity policies can encompass a wide range of goals and strategies, geared towards improving representation of various groups and facilitating positive relationships between employees from varying backgrounds and demographics. They may be specific to just one demographic, such as a gender, or may cover multiple categories including race, gender, age, religion, nationality, marital status, sexual orientation, veteran status, and disability.

### Integrating Diversity Policy into Multiple Facets of the Workplace

In some work environments, diversity policy may be treated as the equivalent of a non-discrimination policy, or may be framed as an agenda for realizing sensitivity or respect between diverse demographics.<sup>4</sup> Other conceptions of diversity policy expand in the direction of active efforts to ensure proportionate representation of various demographics among the labor pool,

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Office of Disability Employment Policy, United States Department of Labor, *Diversity & Disabilities*, available at:

<http://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/ek96/diverse.htm> (last visited May 3, 2010); Taylor Cox, Jr., *Creating the Multicultural Organization: a Strategy for Capturing the Power of Diversity* (2001); Peter Wood, *Diversity: The Invention of a Concept* (2004).

<sup>2</sup> Id.

<sup>3</sup> Sources include: Disability Case Study Research Consortium, *Conducting & Benchmarking Inclusive Employment Policies, Practices, and Culture* (2008), [hereinafter Consortium]; Ball et al, *Disability as Diversity in Fortune 100 Companies*, 23 *Behavioral Sci. & the L.*, 97 (2005); Lisa Schur et al, *Is Disability Disabling in all Workplaces? Workplace Disparities and Corporate Culture*, 48:3 *Industrial Relations* 381 (2009); Peter Blanck & M. Marti, *Attitudes, Behavior, and the Employment Provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act*, 42 *Villanova L. Rev.* 345 (1997); Tatiana I. Solovieva et al, *Cost of Workplace Accommodations for Individuals with Disabilities: With or Without Personal Assistance Services*, 2 *Disability & Health J.* 196 (2009).

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Kathryn Canas & Harris Sondak, *Opportunities and Challenges of Workplace Diversity* (2010) (hereinafter Canas).

involving outreach, affirmative action policies, and targeted recruitment efforts.<sup>5</sup> In addition, diversity policies may focus on fostering professional development and advancement opportunity for under-represented groups, through mentoring or networking sites, or related supports.<sup>6</sup> Ideally, diversity policy can address each of these agendas, embodying values of respect, equal opportunity, and inclusion.<sup>7</sup>

The following include core components of a model diversity policy<sup>8</sup>, intended to ensure that multiple areas of the workplace are thoroughly addressed:

- **Recruitment and Hiring:** Policy should explicitly identify concrete and considered strategies for outreach and recruitment and geared towards reaching all target worker populations. In addition, training, orientation materials or guidelines for human resources personnel and management involved in hiring should specifically address equity and non-discrimination during interview and hiring processes. More information is available through our brief on: Inclusive Policies and Practices. In addition, our Toolkit for employers includes an Accessible Recruitment Checklist, and information on Planning a Targeted Recruitment Strategy.
- **Job Training & Advancement:** Policy can provide for equitable access to training and advancement opportunities throughout the workplace, and can also provide targeted resources for particularly under-represented groups as needed. In addition, training protocols may include a component explicitly fostering sensitivity and respect between co-workers. More information on training is available through our brief on: What is an Inclusive Culture? In addition, our Toolkit includes an Accessible Training Checklist.
- **Social Spaces and Activities:** Diversity policies will more commonly address access to formal opportunities such as hiring and promotion, but may neglect attention to including diverse employees in networking opportunities, company social activities, and access to spaces and resources where employees socialize. However, social and networking opportunities have been correlated with opportunities for advancement<sup>9</sup>; exclusion from social spaces can have negative effects for career opportunities. Furthermore, Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act mandates that employees with disabilities have equal access to communal and social spaces within the workplace as well as to the equal enjoyment of company-sponsored activities and outings.
- **Work Structures and Composition:** Areas of consideration including ensuring that work norms and practices do not exclude or disadvantage particular employees, or create a hostile environment. In addition, policy in this area should include concrete goals and

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<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Walter Broadnax, *Diversity & Affirmative Action in Public Service* (2000).

<sup>6</sup> See Canas, *supra* note 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*; Consortium, *supra* note 2.

<sup>8</sup> The various components are derived in combination from the following sources: Consortium, *supra* note 2; Canas, *supra* note 4; Karen E. Jehn et al, *Why Differences Make a Difference: A Field Study of Diversity, Conflict, and Performance in Workgroups*, 44:4 *Administrative Science Quarterly* 741 (1999); Michalle E. Mor-Barak, *Managing Diversity: Toward a Globally Inclusive Workplace* (2004) (hereinafter Mor-Barak).

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Upwardly Mobile, Inc & Pepperdine's Graziadio School of Business Management, *Professional Networking and Its Impact on Career Advancement: a Study of Practices, Systems, and Opinions of High-Earning, Elite Professionals* (2009).

strategies for ensuring that people of diverse backgrounds are present at every level of the business organization, including within management, not simply represented as a percentage of the total workforce.

- **Conflict Resolution:** Explicit protocols for addressing conflict, concerns, or allegations regarding discriminatory treatment or harassment are critical parts of a diversity policy. Written and implemented policies regarding outreach and advancement alone cannot ensure that employees do not become alienated, due to workplace tensions or inequities. Conflict resolution strategies and policy can help ensure that the work site is a positive environment for all employees.
- **Training Human Resources Staff and Middle Management:** Staff training in diversity sensitivity and issues is essential for effective implementation of written policy. No diversity policy, no matter how comprehensive, can be effective if supervisors and human resources personnel are not equipped to comprehend and respect the needs and concerns of diverse employees. For this reason, a policy on staff training is an essential aspect of diversity policy. In addition, all staff responsible for implementing policy should receive written and verbal explanations and reinforcement affirming the employer's commitment to diversity, and of the process and plans for ensuring that diversity is achieved across target demographics, specifically including disability. More information is available through our brief on: Inclusive Policies and Practices.

There is no universal strategy for policy development. However, many employers may find it useful to address diversity simultaneously (and may replicate language) both as part of a broader system of workplace policies, as well as within a comprehensive policy on the theme of diversity. We provide some template language and policy structures in our Toolkit, in the section on Model Diversity Policies.

### **Disability-Specific and Integrated Approaches to Diversity**

Should employers integrate disability into broader diversity policies as one of many categories, or should they create a disability-specific diversity policy? Research indicates that it is important to recognize and include disability within broader diversity initiatives, such as race, gender, and age, in order to ensure that people with disabilities are recognized as an integral part of a diverse workplace.<sup>10</sup> This integrated approach helps to ensure that people with disabilities will be considered and recognized as a focus within diversity initiatives geared towards including, for instance, women or racial minority groups.

Employers may opt to take both approaches—addressing disability as part of a broader diversity agenda, and developing a more in-depth disability-specific policy. Disability-specific diversity policy may include guidelines and protocols for ensuring that work spaces, materials, outreach, practices and initiatives are accessible. More information on inclusive practices is available through our brief on: Inclusive Policies and Practice.

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<sup>10</sup> Consortium, *supra* note 2; Mor-Barak, *supra* note 8.

## Communicating and Publicizing Policy

It is important that diversity policies be made available to all employees.<sup>11</sup> In order to ensure that a diversity policy is equally accessible to workers with disabilities, written policy in this and other areas should be made available in a variety of formats, including digital, large-print, and/or audio-taped versions.<sup>12</sup>

## Tracking and Assessing Policy Effectiveness

Two areas of interest in assessing the effectiveness of diversity policy include:

- The numerical representation of diverse groups, including people with disabilities, in multiple arenas within the workforce: Current research indicates that people with disabilities under the age of 65 are at least twice as likely to be unemployed as people without disabilities.<sup>13</sup> In addition, people with disabilities make up approximately 20% of the U.S. population.<sup>14</sup> While a smaller percentage of people with disabilities are unable to work, many unemployed people with disabilities are capable of working, if the workplace is accessible and inclusive.<sup>15</sup> While we do not provide a specific quota or numerical goal, diversity policy should ideally be geared towards ensuring at minimum, that people with disabilities who are qualified to work are included in the employee pool, proportionate to their presence in the population.
- Employee satisfaction and collegiality: In an inclusive workplace, employees are more likely to feel respected and valued, and to experience themselves as integral members of the organization.<sup>16</sup> For specific resources related to Assessment of Employee Satisfaction, see our Toolkit. Our brief, *Understanding a Benchmark System*, discusses some key markers of employee satisfaction.

Tracking and carefully implementing diversity policy (and disability inclusion policy and practice generally) can be facilitated by communication between staff or management from different divisions within a business organization.

Some employers use a technique called a “trading zone”, wherein people from different areas within a company meet formally or informally to trade information on hiring, retaining and promoting people with disabilities.<sup>17</sup> This technique may be particularly helpful in identifying ways to effectively reach prospective employees, and to organize work allocation and expectations in ways that best fit the abilities and skills of every employee with or without disabilities. Recruitment efforts can be strengthened when employers make the effort to create

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<sup>11</sup> Id.

<sup>12</sup> For background, see

<sup>13</sup> American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau, available at: <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Products/> (last visited April 27th 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Current Population Reports, Series P70-33, Americans with Disabilities. 1991-1992.

<sup>15</sup> See Harlan Hahn, *Public Support for Rehabilitation Programs: The Analysis of U.S. Disability Policy*, 1:2 *Disability & Soc'y* 121 (1986).

<sup>16</sup> Paul Wehman, *Workplace Inclusion: Persons with Disabilities and Coworkers Working Together*, 18:2 *J. of Vocational Rehabilitation* 131 (2003); Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, *Creating a Welcoming Workplace for Employees with Disabilities*, available at: [http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pubs\\_pol/hrpubs/tb\\_852/cwwed1-eng.asp](http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pubs_pol/hrpubs/tb_852/cwwed1-eng.asp)

<sup>17</sup> Riley, *supra* note 3.

customized employment for workers with disabilities<sup>18</sup>, and to publicize that activity, as prospective employees then have information useful in assessing whether the work expectations are a good fit for their strengths and abilities.

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<sup>18</sup> For background on customized employment, see Peter Blanck, et al, Disability Civil Rights Law & Policy (2009). The concept of customized employment was first advanced by the Office of Disability Employment Policy of the U.S. Department of Labor (2001).

**YOUR FEEDBACK IS IMPORTANT TO US!**

You are invited to participate in a research study examining the benefits and impact for employers of the Employer Demand briefs and toolkit resources. [Learn more about the survey](http://bbi.syr.edu/projects/corpculture/survey.htm) <<http://bbi.syr.edu/projects/corpculture/survey.htm>>

## Project Partners



**Center for Research on Collaboratories and  
Technology Enhanced Learning Communities**



**Program for Disability Research**



**Disability Research Institute**



**International Center for Disability Information**

**Disability  
Statistics  
Center**

**Disability Statistics Center**



**Law, Health Policy, & Disability Center**

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**To learn more go to [bbi.syr.edu](http://bbi.syr.edu)**



**‘We can change the world.  
The first step is to change ourselves.’**

**- BURTON BLATT**

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