BBI BRIEFS

What is an Inclusive Culture?

March 2011

Burton Blatt Institute
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

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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." These include focus groups and town meetings 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 disabilities.

What is an Inclusive Culture?

An inclusive culture involves the full and successful integration of diverse people into a workplace or industry. While an inclusive culture certainly encompasses a commitment to workplace diversity,[1] it is not limited simply to basic representation; it indicates a climate in which respect, equity and positive recognition of differences are all cultivated and the social and institutional response to disability poses no barrier to a positive employment experience.

Additionally, inclusive cultures extend beyond basic or token presence of workers who have disabilities. They encompass both formal and informal policies and practices, and involve several core values:

- **Representation:** The presence of people with disabilities across a range of employee roles and leadership positions[2]

- **Receptivity:** Respect for differences in working styles and flexibility in tailoring positions to the strengths and abilities of employees[3]

- **Fairness:** Equitable access to all resources, opportunities, networks and decision-making processes[4]

When workers with disabilities experience the benefits of an inclusive culture, they are likely to be more satisfied with the job and often correspondingly more loyal and invested in the work product and performance.[5] In addition, a disability-inclusive culture often will provide positive results for overall employee satisfaction and productivity among workers with and without disabilities. This occurs because when an organization commits to equity, flexibility, and professional development for workers with disabilities, it frequently will generate more employer responsiveness to the individual capacities, health needs or varying work preferences of employees who may not identify as people with disabilities. In other words, inclusive cultures promote healthy and functional organizational environments.[6]

In this brief we review three elements of an inclusive culture:
- Universal Design: Referring to the creation of work spaces and structures that fully include people with disabilities, without additional adaptation
- Recruitment, Training and Advancement Opportunities
- Workplace Accommodations and Accessibility: Policy & Practice

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1 See Ball et al, Disability as Diversity in Fortune 100 Companies, 23 Behavioral Sci. & the L., 97 (2005).

2 Disability Case Study Research Consortium, Conducting & Benchmarking Inclusive Employment Policies, Practices, and Culture (2008), [hereinafter Consortium]

3 Id., Deepti Samant, Michal Soffer, B. Hernandez, Meera Adya, Omolara Akinpelu, Peter Blanck, et. Al, Corporate Culture and Employment of People With Disabilities: Role of Social Workers and Service Provider Organizations,
8:3 & 4 Journal of Social Work in Disability & Rehabilitation (2009); P. P. Moen, E. Kelly, R. Hill. Does Enhancing Work-Time Flexibility Reduce Turnover? A Naturally-Occurring Experiment. 58:1 Social Problems 69 (2011) [hereinafter Moen]

4 Id., Charles Riley, Disability & Business: Best Practices & Strategies for Inclusion (2006) [hereinafter Riley]

5 Id., Lisa Schur et al, Is Disability Disabling in all Workplaces? Workplace Disparities and Corporate Culture, 48:3 Industrial Relations 381 (2009) [hereinafter Schur]

6 MMoen, supra note 3; Riley, supra note 4.

Key Elements of an Inclusive Culture

1.   Universal Design

One of the most heralded concepts in disability advocacy and cultures in the last decade is the concept of "universal design". Universal design refers to the construction of structures, spaces, services, communications and resources that are organically accessible to a range of people with and without disabilities, without further need for modification or accommodation.[7] While accommodations procedures remain a needed function of most contemporary institutions and industries, forward-thinking approaches to disability inclusion will frequently involve developing sites and resources that require no accommodation to be fully usable and receptive to people with disabilities.

A few examples of ways universal design practices may apply in the workplace include:

- Routinely providing manuals, materials and forms to all employees in a variety of digital formats that are as readily accessible to people who use adaptive computer technologies as to other employees.

- Building workspaces accessible to people who use wheelchairs or other assistive devices, as well as to all other employees.

- Providing employees with a variety of flexible schedule and work options. This allows employees who have energy or functionality limitations to organize their time and strengths, and all employees are better able to manage time and life/work balance.

For more information, please go to the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University.

Ideally, a fully universally designed workplace would negate the need for more disability-specific accommodations and programs. In the immediate context, contemporary workplaces usually will need to integrate both some elements of universal design and other more targeted or disability-specific programs, in order to work with limitations in existing architecture, technology, broader social barriers or workplace structures. The next elements include both strategies consistent with universal design principles and measures and remedies designed to manage or mediate aspects of the workplace environment that otherwise would not be inclusive or accessible.

Over the long-run, a fully inclusive workplace can rely more on universally designed structures, policy and practices; but in the immediate context, our recommendations are designed to assist companies looking to transition in the direction of maximum inclusivity, without instant or drastic change, or substantial expense.

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7 Consortium, supra note 1. See Myhill, W.N., Cogburn, D.L., Samant, D., Addom, B., & Blanck, P. (2008). Developing Accessible Cyberinfrastructure-enabled Knowledge Communities in the Disability Community: Theory, Practice, and Policy. Assistive Technology Journal, 20(3), 157-174.

2.   Recruitment, Training, & Advancement Opportunities

Recruitment:

Effective recruitment of people with disabilities involves two components: a) accessible outreach and hiring practices and b) targeted recruitment of workers with disabilities.

a) Accessible outreach and hiring practices essentially entail making sure that outreach materials, networking and recruitment sites, communications, and application processes all include a range of accessible options, or are free of barriers that might inhibit people with disabilities from participating. Wherever possible, outreach and hiring resources generally should be equally accessible to workers with and without disabilities. For example, making recruitment literature and job applications readily available in digital and large-print formats, or holding outreach events in spaces without stairs or other barriers and with accessible communications technology, helps to ensure that people with disabilities will be included in recruitment practices. Training recruiters in effective outreach to prospective employees who have disabilities is also critical. Our Toolkit includes an ***Accessible Recruitment Checklist*** designed to assist employers in designing equitable outreach and hiring practices.

b) Targeted recruitment involves specific outreach to people with disabilities. Although making general recruitment practices more accessible goes a long way towards building an inclusive hiring structure, individual employers are not always able to overcome existing barriers for instance, when recruiting via externally sponsored job fairs that are not accessible. Therefore, targeted recruitment enables employers to reach and interview qualified people with disabilities. [8] In turn, having accessible recruitment practices relative to hiring, materials and communications helps to ensure that targeted recruitment will be successful not just in identifying qualified candidates, but by making sure there are no barriers to effective outreach and eventual employment. For more information see the ***Accessible Recruitment Checklist*** in our toolkit.

Training:

Training plays a dual role in the creation of inclusive workplace culture. The first consideration involves the degree to which people with disabilities have equitable access to training sites, events, and materials. The second concern relates to the training of managers, particularly middle management, and human resources staff, to work effectively with all people, including those with disabilities.

Research indicates that workers with disabilities are comparatively less likely to feel that adequate training is available to them or that existing training resources are accessible to them.[9] The consequences of inadequate training are substantial, in reducing job satisfaction, with corresponding negative consequences for productivity and retention.[10] In turn, companies favored by employees with disabilities make a concerted effort to create equitable and

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8 Consortium, supra note 1.

9 Consortium, supra note 1; Schur, supra note 5.

10 Id.

accessible training resources.[11] An ***Accessible Training Checklist*** for use in designing training programs and resources is available through our Toolkit.

Many states provide funding incentives to support workforce development. Employers may use these resources generally to develop enhanced training for all employees, and specifically to support the development of accessible programs. Information on Workforce Development Resource is available through our Toolkit.

The training of management staff to work effectively with people with disabilities involves several goals. First, training should focus on reducing paternalistic attitudes towards workers with disabilities.[12] Workers with disabilities are comparatively more likely to be treated as if they are children, or less capable of autonomy, based on supposedly benevolent or protective assumptions.[13] In companies demonstrating inclusive practices, paternalistic treatment is less likely to be reported, with corresponding positive impact for job satisfaction.[14] For more information on the role management can play in promoting positive workplace cultures, see our research brief: ***Inclusive Policies & Practices: What Do We Know?***

Advancement:

Research demonstrates that in order to have equitable opportunities for promotion and professional development, like most employees, workers with disabilities typically require access to mentoring. As with recruitment, mentoring and coaching involves a dual dynamic in which: a) existing mentoring programs are advertised, implemented and maintained with attention to inclusion of workers with disabilities, and b) targeted mentoring and coaching programs specifically assist employees with disabilities.

Targeted career advancement policies geared towards employees with disabilities are another benchmark of an inclusive workplace culture.[15] These may include the creation of explicit disability affirmative action policies related to promotion, targeted professional networking opportunities, and the establishment of disability affinity networks and related supports to encourage full integration into the workplace culture.

3.   Workplace Accommodations and Accessibility: Policy & Practice

Policy plays a critical role in generating meaningful inclusion of people with disabilities. In addition to recruitment, training and advancement, workplace policies need to carefully plan for the provision of reasonable accommodations.

When assessing the effectiveness of existing accommodations policies, employee experiences can be described based on two measures of equity. The first indicator of an inclusive workplace culture involves the perception of "procedural justice", meaning that employees with disabilities

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11 Id.

12 Id.

13 Peter Blanck & M. Marti, Attitudes, Behavior, and the Employment Provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act, 42 Villanova L. Rev. 345 (1997).

14 Consortium, supra note 1.

15 Consortium, supra note 1.

perceive the accommodations policy as fair, accessible and functional.[16] The practice of negotiating and providing accommodations constitutes an additional opportunity for generating an experience of "interactional justice".[17] Interactional justice refers to the experience of feeling that the managers or colleagues with whom one is interacting are behaving fairly, reasonably and respectfully.[18]

Experiential and Bottom Line Outcomes: The Benefits of an Inclusive Workplace Culture

Inclusive cultures are specifically beneficial for employees with disabilities, but also have positive results for all employees, as they include a number of elements of a healthy work environment.[19] Specific positive outcomes[20] include:

- Reduced expenses corresponding to reduced employee turn-over
- Increased worker commitment to and identification with organizational success
- Improved employee health and well-being
- Improved productivity
- Increased employee investment in work performance
- Reduced perception of discrimination and inequity
- Improved cooperation and collaboration between co-workers, and between employees and management[21]

In addition, studies indicate that many consumers (87% in a national survey)[22] prefer to work with or spend money in businesses that include employees with disabilities. Therefore, employers who commit to an inclusive workplace benefit both in terms of workplace functioning and productivity, and often also in terms of marketplace and public appeal. In sum, the development of an inclusive workplace culture represents a win-win scenario, for workers with and without disabilities, and for employers.

More tools and resources related to developing a positive and disability-inclusive working environment are available through our Toolkit at the ***Demand-Side Employment Placement Models project website.***

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.

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16 Id.

17 Id.

18 Id.

19 Id.

20 Id.

21 Id.

22 Gary N. Siperstein et al, A National Survey of Consumer Attitudes Towards Companies that Hire People with Disabilities, 22 J. of Vocational Rehab. (2005)

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

 Law, Health Policy, & Disability Center

The Demand-Side Employment Placement Models project is a comprehensive research and dissemination grant from the U.S. Department of Education, National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR), Grant No. H133A060033. Led by the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, the project is generating a better understand of market-driven workforce trends, and informing employment practices and policies to prepare individuals with disabilities for the changing needs and requirements of the present and future workforce.

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'We can change the world.
The first step is to change ourselves.'

- BURTON BLATT