

# BBI BRIEFS

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

## **Inclusive Policies & Practices: What Do We Know?**

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**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.” 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.

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

## Inclusive Policies & Practices: What Do We Know?

Inclusive policies contain provisions and guidelines that support the full integration of all employees, including those with disabilities, into an equitably functioning workplace. An inclusive policy may be one that is specifically geared towards eliminating discrimination or facilitating diversity. Or it may be related to any kind of structural or personnel issue, such as workforce training, parking, employee benefits, communications or work procedures. It may or may not include specific language about the inclusion of resources for people with disabilities. The measure of whether a policy is inclusive is essentially, its outcome – meaning that when the policy is implemented as intended, it helps to generate a work environment in which no employees are excluded, marginalized, treated unfairly, or prevented from accessing any resources, responsibilities, opportunities or benefits of employment.

Inclusive practices may or may not be explicitly indicated in written policies. Inclusive practices refers to all the day-to-day or specific operations and activities that structure how work is accomplished, how personnel matters are attended to, and how employees and supervisors interact with one another – provided that the outcome is an inclusive workplace. In some instances a policy may, on its face, be written to facilitate inclusion of all employees. But, when implemented, supervisor or management behaviors, attitudes, or lack of consciousness about disability may nevertheless result in a negative outcome or experience for workers with disabilities.<sup>1</sup> Management practices are therefore particularly crucial in ensuring that policies are given meaningful substance, rather than solely indicating a commitment to inclusion on paper. For more background on the elements and meaning of an inclusive workplace culture, see our brief: [\*\*\*What is an Inclusive Culture?\*\*\*](#)

In the remainder of this brief, we review a few areas of critical attention, related to inclusive policies and practices. These include:

- The Role of Management & Diversity Behaviors
- Peer Support & Affinity Groups
- Recruitment & Hiring
- Accommodation Policies & Practices

These are not by any means an exhaustive discussion of all of the many facets of policy and practice that relate to the challenge of building an inclusive work environment. However, the discussions will illustrate the types of considerations that go into creating a positive relationship between policy, practice, and inclusiveness.

### The Role of Management & Diversity Behaviors

Research indicates that a primary problem in supervisor/employee relations involves paternalistic attitudes towards workers with disabilities.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> In companies demonstrating

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

2 Id.

inclusive practices, paternalistic treatment is less likely to be reported, with corresponding positive impact for job satisfaction.<sup>4</sup>

Implementing a policy and plan for delivering manager training relating to inclusion is a critical means to draw attention to and debunk stereotypical assumptions about the capabilities, independence, and skill sets of people with disabilities.<sup>5</sup> Further, manager behavior towards disability and requests for disability accommodation has broader influence on all workers.<sup>6</sup> For instance, when employees witness a manager berating or disciplining an employee who operates or works differently from a workplace norm because of a disability, it reinforces a stereotype that workers with disabilities are less competent or do not pull their weight. These perceptions may both generate tension and resentment among employees and also increase anxiety among all employees that medical difficulties or differences in work styles, whether they are identified as related to disability or not, will not be tolerated. Therefore, training management to model positive relationships to employees with disabilities is a means to positively influence the totality of the work environment.

Second, management training should be geared towards encouraging “diversity behaviors” (i.e., meaning communication, attitudes, and power sharing) that demonstrate respect for all employees.<sup>7</sup> For instance, acknowledging the contributions of all workers, modeling inclusive decision-making practices, promoting cooperation, and showing respect for differences help contribute to a climate where workers with disabilities feel valued and experience a sense of belonging.<sup>8</sup> In addition, developing workplace norms and operations that meet the needs of all workers remains a critical managerial diversity behavior.<sup>9</sup> This particularly requires that managers understand and be receptive to meeting the needs of workers with disabilities.

Third, the quality of the relationship between management and employees with disability has been identified as a critical factor in developing an inclusive workplace culture.<sup>10</sup> It is unfortunately common for employees with disabilities to experience disproportionately lower quality relationships with management, as compared to employees without disabilities.<sup>11</sup> Management relationships with employees range from “low-quality” economic exchange relationships typified by minimal motivation on the part of employees to do more than just what is formally required in their job parameters, to “high-quality” social exchange relationships, which involve mutual respect, reciprocity, and worker investment in the workplace.<sup>12</sup>

Managers therefore should be encouraged to overcome social or interactive barriers in order to enable stronger, positive relationships with employees with disabilities. Inclusive practices involve a dynamic wherein employees generally enjoy comparatively higher quality relationships

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

4 Consortium, supra note 1.

5 Id.

6 Id.

7 Id.; Marti, supra note 3.

8 Consortium, supra note 1.

9 Id.

10 Id.

11 Id.

12 Id.

with management, and where employees with disabilities are not excluded or disadvantaged from strong relationships with management, compared to those without disabilities.<sup>13</sup>

## Peer Support & Affinity Groups

At least some workers with disabilities will face social and interactive challenges in the workplace, in relating to peers and to management. Reasons for this dynamic include:

- The stresses of dealing with injury, illness, or certain types of impairments,<sup>14</sup>
- Social differences or awkwardness,<sup>15</sup> and
- The difficulties of confronting stereotypes and misconceptions on the part of peers and supervisors.<sup>16</sup>

As a consequence, employees with disabilities may have a particular need to establish social networks and find peer mentoring and support, with other employees with disabilities. Benefits of disability affinity groups include: information-sharing and strategizing about improving accessibility, efficiency, and quality of work; psychological and social validation; and stress relief.<sup>17</sup> Management can play a role in enabling positive peer support by allowing work time, modest funding, legitimacy, and/or social encouragement for employees who want to establish an affinity group or network for employees with disabilities. While not all employees with disabilities will opt or want to participate in this type of resource, supporting its existence also signals to all employees that workers with disabilities are an established and supported part of the work environment.

## Recruitment & Hiring

When planning recruitment and hiring policies, it is helpful, as a baseline, to ensure that existing literature, outreach, forms and applications, and networks are as accessible as they can be to workers with disabilities. In other words, accessible recruitment – meaning equitably including people with disabilities in existing recruitment procedures and practices wherever possible – is one useful consideration. However, although an employer may not always be able to ensure full accessibility in external resources such as employment agencies, job fairs or educational sites, the employer should always ensure that its employment materials are available in alternate formats and that its representative be willing to adapt to prospective employees' accommodation needs. In addition, it is also often necessary to establish a targeted recruitment policy, and accompanying practices and procedures, in order to specifically solicit and hire workers with disabilities.

Critical components of targeted recruitment include:

- a. Advertising open positions to professional networks, community networks, and affinity groups for people with disabilities
- b. Developing and publicizing materials describing existing accommodations and resources for workers with disabilities, willingness to providing reasonable accommodations, and commitment to accessible employment options

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<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*: Joseph W. Madaus et al, *Attributes Contributing to the Employment Satisfaction of University Graduates with Learning Disabilities*, 26:3 *Learning Disability Quarterly* 159 (2003); JAMES A. D'ANDREA, *ILLNESS AND DISABILITY IN THE WORKPLACE: HOW TO NAVIGATE THROUGH THE LEGAL MINEFIELD*; RUTH O'BRIEN, *CRIPPLED JUSTICE: THE HISTORY OF MODERN DISABILITY POLICY IN THE WORKPLACE* (2001);

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> Consortium, *supra* note 1; Rob McInnes, *Corporate Affinity Groups*, *Disability Network Newsletter* (March 2005), available at: <http://www.diversityworld.com/Disability/DN05/DN0503.htm>

- c. Active collaboration with vocational rehabilitation resources and other relevant state agencies to provide detailed descriptions of open positions, and solicit applications from qualified people with disabilities. For more information see **Vocational Rehabilitation: Helping Employers Staff a Skilled Workforce**.
- d. Networking with relevant student professional associations (whether specific to disability, or not) and campus career and disability services offices to invite applications from new graduates with disabilities, and to advertise accessible hiring practices<sup>18</sup>

Careful planning and active participation in targeted recruitment practices are generally beneficial in developing an inclusive culture.<sup>19</sup> In addition, employers who engage in targeted recruitment are likely to be more competitive and successful in attracting particularly skilled employees with disabilities, as compared to employers whose commitment to accessibility and targeted outreach is relatively weak.<sup>20</sup> That is, targeted recruitment can enable employers to more successfully attract the “cream of the crop” -- talented workers with disabilities who perceive accessibility and inclusion to be desirable employer characteristics.

Further introduction to both accessible and targeted recruitment strategies is detailed in our brief: **What is an Inclusive Culture?** Our Toolkit also contains an **Accessible Recruitment Checklist**.

In addition to successful outreach, assessment of the fit between employee skills and job requirements is a critical and often neglected aspect of recruitment and hiring. Workers with disabilities often develop strong compensatory skills to manage any obstacles posed by impairments, or by structural barriers within the workplace. Ideally, employers can work on tailoring job structures so that the skills of workers with disabilities are used to the maximum benefit, while tasks which are not easy to accomplish relative to impairment are either more carefully accommodated or shifted. This is often easiest to achieve for larger employers, but may still be very effective even in small workplaces, when employees are paired in specific tasks based on complementary skills.

## Accommodation Policies & Practices

Policies specifically addressing employees with disabilities may fall into a few areas, including areas such as non-discrimination and workers compensation. Policies related to reasonable accommodation of disabilities are particularly central in ensuring that any existing barriers to the workplace are remedied effectively and fairly. There are many components of a successful disability accommodation policy, related to both its content, and its implementation. The following are elements of and strategies for manifesting a successful and inclusive disability accommodations policy:

- a. Developed policies and easily available information on procedures for requesting accommodation
- b. Minimal, transparent and written bureaucratic process involved in advancing an accommodation request

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<sup>18</sup> Riley, supra note 3 (addressing the particular practices of IBM, Microsoft & Merrill Lynch, in outreach to Career Opportunities for Students with Disabilities, and colleges which are known for catering heavily to students with disabilities, e.g. Gallaudet College).

<sup>19</sup> Consortium, supra note 1.

<sup>20</sup> Id.

- c. Clear identification of point people involved in evaluating accommodations requests and transparent process of negotiating accommodations requests
- d. Internal company disability advocate to assist employer and employees in negotiating accommodation<sup>21</sup>
- e. Centralized company funding source, so that any costs of accommodations are not borne by smaller units or divisions.<sup>22</sup> This latter consideration is helpful in decreasing the likelihood of resentment by peers or middle managers. Specifically, where the cost of accommodation is taken from the limited budget of a particular division, it may occasion resentment or create an incentive to displace or relocate workers with disabilities. Locating any funding for accommodations in a distinct budget helps ensure that employees with disabilities are not resented or perceived as being a drain on collective resources, within a unit.

A primary indicator of an inclusive workplace culture involves the perception of “procedural justice”, meaning that employees with disabilities perceive the accommodations policy as fair, accessible, and functional.<sup>23</sup> Notably, disability accommodations policies seem to be most effective when disability accommodations are not segregated out from other worker accommodations related to family needs, general health and well-being, life-work balance, or professional development opportunities.<sup>24</sup> In other words, inclusive cultures are generally typified by flexibility and receptivity to meeting all employee requests for accommodations, wherever possible and reasonable. In this type of climate, disability accommodations are not seen as special treatment, but rather just one form of accommodations that all employees can access. Therefore, flexibility about worker accommodations meets the needs of workers with disabilities without contributing to stigma or alienation.<sup>25</sup>

The practice of negotiating and providing accommodations constitutes an additional opportunity for generating an experience of “interactional justice”.<sup>26</sup> Interactional justice references the experience of feeling that the managers or colleagues with whom one is interacting are behaving fairly, reasonably and respectfully.<sup>27</sup> Elements associated with interactional justice include:

- a. Employee perception that requests are welcomed, respected and evaluated carefully
- b. Management flexibility in attempting to meet accommodation requests wherever possible given funding and work product requirements. Commitment to an interactive process, such that if an accommodation request cannot not immediately met, managers make a substantial effort to find a mutually agreeable and effective alternative
- c. Confidentiality relative to employee personal and medical privacy, such that only information about a disability’s functional limitations specifically needed to evaluate the accommodation request is solicited

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21 Id.

22 Id.; 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).

23 Id.

24 Id.

25 Id.

26 Id.

27 Id.

The practical and economic benefits of providing accommodations wherever reasonable are substantial, both for employers and employees. While many accommodations are without economic cost, or are low-cost, even those accommodations that involve some expense frequently involve substantial rewards, relative to improved productivity and performance, and related economic benefits of worker job satisfaction.<sup>28</sup> It is also possible that the cost of an accommodation can be subsidized by a third party, such as Vocational Rehabilitation, or by tax credits.

In assessing the functionality and impact of accommodations, employers benefit from documentation and tracking of disability accommodations. Record-keeping related to types of disabilities and corresponding accommodations, and longevity of accommodated employment can be particularly useful. As management personnel shifts over the years, record-keeping is particularly helpful in order to ensure that lessons learned from prior successful or refined accommodations practices continue to benefit workers. Moreover, careful record-keeping helps the employer assess whether accommodations are reaching the maximum number of employees who need them. In addition, specific assessment of the functionality and comparative success or failure of accommodations can be implemented based on multiple indicators:

- Surveys of employees receiving accommodation
- Work performance, both before and after accommodations are secured, and compared between workers with and without disabilities
- Employee feedback, both written and documented verbal
- Employee retention rates
- Employee advancement rates

In sum, inclusive policies and practices interact to generate a more positive climate for workers with disabilities, and for workers at large.<sup>29</sup> By implementing a plan across areas such as recruitment and hiring, employee relations, peer support, and policies specifically related to accommodation, a more comprehensive approach to inclusion can be realized.

For more information see 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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28 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); Schur, supra note 5.

29 Consortium, supra note 1.



## 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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