

Diversity Management Series Part III: Employing People With Disabilities

SHRM Briefly Stated

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Fast Fact

Individuals with disabilities comprise less than 10% of companies' total workforces.

Source: *Employer Incentives for Hiring Individuals with Disabilities Survey, 2003.*

Introduction

Diversity management focuses on the many different types of employees working together, including being attuned to, appreciating and utilizing new perspectives in the workplace to best leverage talent for the benefit of the organization. Further, to be competitive, organizations must attract and retain talent. One group relatively untapped in the marketplace is people with disabilities. In general, companies have not focused on people with disabilities as a source of talent.

Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 protects qualified individuals with disabilities from unlawful discrimination in the workplace, including access to training and career development. A disability is defined as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. Specifically, a qualified individual with a disability is someone who can perform the essential functions of the job with or without reasonable accommodation ¹ (for additional information, see www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/adahom1.htm).

The cost of ADA accommodations is not necessarily substantial. For example, according to a 2002 survey on employer incentives to hire people with disabilities, 38% of employers spent nothing on reasonable accommodations, 28% spent \$1,000 or less, 8% spent between \$1,000 and \$5,000 and 14% spent more than \$5,000. ²

Advantages of Hiring People With Disabilities

Based on the business case for workplace diversity, retention is a primary reason to focus on diversity management. People with disabilities offer many advantages to employers, such as employer loyalty. For example, research that reviewed 90 studies reveals that employees with a disability have better safety records, equal or better turnover and absentee rates, equal or better job assignment flexibility and better than average

attendance records, compared to non-disabled employees. They work hard, are reliable, punctual and as productive as others.³

Hiring people with disabilities may have other financial paybacks. For example, the government offers employers financial tax incentives, such as the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (www.uses.doleta.gov/wotcdata.asp). However, research indicates that HR professionals may not be aware of the available governmental tax incentive programs and consequently do not take full advantage of these programs (see Table 1).⁴

Table 1 Employer Incentive Program Participation	
Program	Percentage Participating [Number of Respondents=275]
The Work Opportunity Tax Credit	16%
The Welfare-to-Work Tax Credit	12%
The Veterans Job Training Act	5%
The Social Security Administration Employment Network Cash Provision	2%
The Disabled Access Credit, IRC Section 144	1%
The Mentor-Protégé Program, PL. 102-172, Section 8064A	1%
The Architectural/Transportation Tax Deduction, IRC Section 190	Less than 1%
None of the above	77%

Source: SHRM®/WSU/UTSA/CPRE Employer Incentives for Hiring Individuals With Disabilities Survey

HR's Role

There are many types of disabilities. For example, an employee might be nearsighted or have limited ability with advanced mathematics. Under the ADA definition, approximately 49 million Americans are disabled; 26 million are severely disabled.⁵ Building effective relationships inside and outside the workplace depends on understanding, respect and appreciation of others.

Under the umbrella of workplace diversity, HR plays a significant role, from providing education regarding working with others who are different to ensuring the company HR policies, practices and programs are clear and nondiscriminatory. For example, training or workshops help other employees understand how individuals with disabilities may experience the world and the barriers they may face (e.g., discrimination, prejudice, stereotypes). In addition, HR promotes equal opportunity for employees with disabilities by ensuring job requirements are clearly stated (e.g., essential job functions and physical ability are clearly defined). In addition, it is important that HR promotes fair and equal

treatment (e.g., illegal questions are not asked during a job interview).⁶

Literature and Research

*Disability as Diversity in Fortune 100 Companies*⁷

This study examined the extent to which the top 100 Fortune companies in 2003 included people with disabilities in their diversity policies. The findings indicate that the majority of these companies had developed and implemented diversity policies. Of those organizations, 42% had diversity policies that included people with disabilities in their definition of a diverse workforce. In addition, 47% of companies with policies regarding workplace diversity did not expressly include nor exclude people with disabilities. Yet only 15% of suppliers with diversity policies included disability in their definition of diversity. The study also found that a significant number of companies had criteria allowing a business owner with a disability to benefit from the company's supplier diversity program.

*Diversity and Disability: Exploring the Experiences of Vision Impaired People in the Workplace*⁸

Discussion regarding diversity has often focused on gender and race. In contrast, there has been limited attention given to people with disabilities as a minority group in the workplace. Obtaining and keeping employment can be a challenge for people with disabilities, notably for those with vision impairment. This study explored issues faced by people with this disability in the workplace. The research points out that with certain accommodations to the workplace, employees who are vision-impaired can be as productive as other employees. The study results note that the major barrier facing disabled employees is overcoming the misconceptions and negative attitudes of colleagues and employers.

*Survey of SHRM Membership on IT Access in the Employment Process*⁹

Researchers interviewed 433 HR professionals regarding their organizations' use of Web technology in computer accessibility issues and HR processes in the workplace. The survey results show that only one out of 10 HR professionals saw computer use as *not* presenting a barrier at all to people with disabilities. Yet there was much variation across disability types regarding the degree of perceived difficulty. For example, a greater barrier was anticipated for those with visual impairments than for employees who used wheelchairs. Also, employers who had previously made adaptations for Web/computer accessibility for employees were less likely to perceive making such accommodations as a challenge. Finally, 84% of HR professionals said the best resources regarding gaining Web/computer accessibility were the disabled employees.

In Closing

When organizations hire people with disabilities, they make a statement to their workforce, the community and their customer base that they care, appreciate and respect all employees. This statement represents a fundamental part of the philosophy of workplace diversity and goes a long way in terms of employer reputation, brand and

employee loyalty and community relations.

Resources

Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990: www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/adahom1.htm

Cornell University/School of Industrial and Labor Relations: International Disability: www.ilr.cornell.edu/ped/int/int.html

Disability Accessibility and Accommodation/Federal Sector Employer Disability Policies and Practices: www.ilr.cornell.edu/ped/daa/daa_survs.html?cat_id=40

National Organization on Disability: www.nod.org

SHRM Diversity Home Page: www.shrm.org/diversity

The Work Opportunity Tax Credit: www.uses.doleta.gov/wotcdata.asp

Endnotes

¹Society for Human Resource Management. (2005). *The SHRM learning system: Module 2: Workforce planning and employment*. Alexandria, VA: Author.

²Lengnick-Hall, M. L., Gaunt, Ph., & Collison, J. (2003, April). *Employer incentives for hiring individuals with disabilities survey*. Alexandria, VA: Society for Human Resource Management.

³Carr-Ruffino, N. (1999). *Diversity success strategies*. Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann.

⁴Lengnick-Hall, M. L., Gaunt, Ph., & Collison, J. (2003, April). *Employer incentives for hiring individuals with disabilities survey*. Alexandria, VA: Society for Human Resource Management.

⁵Carr-Ruffino, N. (1999). *Diversity success strategies*. Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ball, P., Monaco, G., Schmeling, J., Schartz, H., & Blanck, P. (2005). Disability as diversity in Fortune 100 companies. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 23, 1, 97-121.

⁸Smith, T. (2002). Diversity and disability: Exploring the experiences of vision impaired people in the workplace. *Equal Opportunities International*, 21, 8, 59-73.

⁹Bruyère, S. M., Erickson, W., & VanLooy, S. (2003, January). *Survey of SHRM membership on IT access in the employment process*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.

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