

Employer Practices in Improving Employment Outcomes for People With Disabilities: A Transdisciplinary and Employer-Inclusive Research Approach

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Objective: Share new knowledge about workplace practices related to employer success in hiring, retaining, and promoting people with disabilities, and promote use of findings to employers and service providers.

Design: A transdisciplinary and multifaceted data gathering approach.

Results: Provides an overview of the research approach taken and the strengths regarding this approach.

Conclusions: The significance of findings for rehabilitation researchers and policy makers focused on improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities, for rehabilitation counselor educators preparing future service providers, and for practicing professionals providing services to individuals with disabilities and consultation to employers regarding disability issues, are presented.

There are numerous reasons why the employment of people with disabilities needs to be in the forefront of the thinking of both corporate America and the rehabilitation service delivery community. There are significant continuing disparities in equitable access to employment and economic security for people with disabilities. In addition, with an aging workforce and veterans returning from current conflicts having incurred disabilities and yet wanting a place in the American workforce, we can safely assume that employers will increasingly need assistance in identifying successful practices in the recruitment, accommodation, retention, and equitable advancement of people with disabilities. This focus is now also being reinforced through a focus in the federal government on

employment of people with disabilities and enhanced regulations for affirmative action by federal contractors. In addition, there is now a United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities which takes the focus of furthering the rights of people with disabilities to a global level.¹

Although it has been nearly 25 years since the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law and 40 years since the Rehabilitation Act became the first civil rights law in the United States to guarantee equal opportunity for people with disabilities, there remains a wide employment gap between people with disabilities and those without. In 2012, the employment rate of working age people

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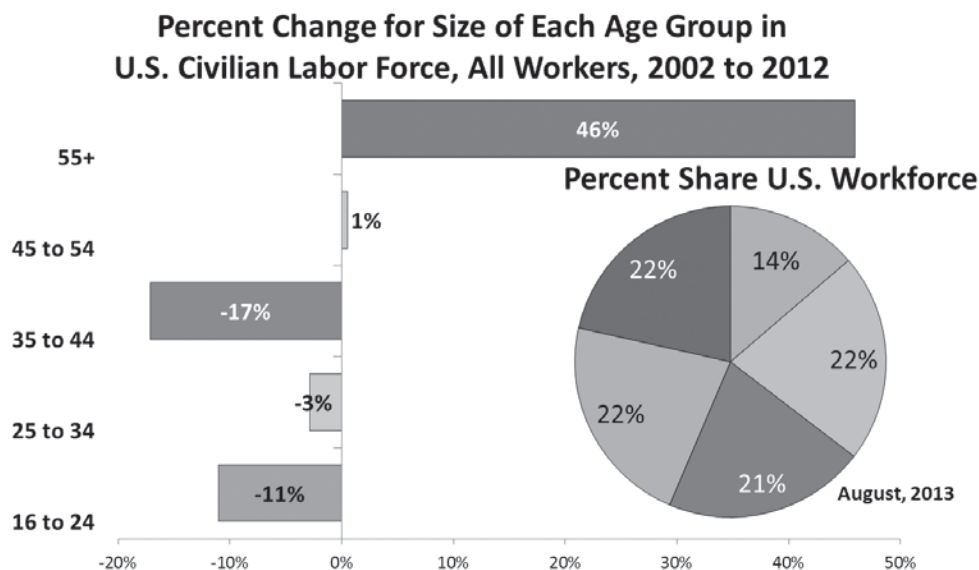


FIGURE 1. Increasing presence of older workers. Data taken from Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2013). Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, August 2013 (CPS Series ID Nos. LNU01000000, LNU01024887, LNU01000089, LNU01000091, LNU01000093, LNU01000095, LNU01000097). Retrieved from <http://www.data.bls.gov/timeseries/>

with disabilities in the United States was 33.5% compared to 76.3% for people without disabilities. Even among those choosing to enter the labor force, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities, although fluctuating month by month, is consistently more than 50% higher than the unemployment rate for those with no disability. This disparity creates a significant economic disadvantage for people with disabilities: 28.4% of working-age Americans with disabilities living below the poverty line, compared with 12.4% of their nondisabled peers (Erickson, Lee, & von Schrader, 2014).

Within the United States, the employment situation for people with disabilities is all the more important because of larger demographic changes. The aging baby boomer generation (those born between 1946 and 1964) is becoming a larger share of the labor force. Those 55 years and older now compose more than one-fifth (22%) of all of those in the U.S. labor market (see Figure 1). In addition, U.S. military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan has created a new generation of wounded war-

riors, a population that many employers state they are interested in employing. In a recent Cornell University study (Rudstam, Strobel-Gower, & Cook, 2012), employers reported positive value from hiring veterans with disabilities (VWDs) and expressed interest in employing more from this population, believing VWDs would benefit their organizations and perform as well as non-VWD employees. The employers readily admitted to barriers, though. Key knowledge gaps on accommodation for employees with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI) and on disclosure issues were common. Yet the surveyed employers

- believed employing VWDs would cost more and demand more of a manager's time;
- expressed uncertainty as to whether employees with PTSD were more likely to be violent in the workplace;
- were not, in general, using VWD-specific resources for recruitment; and

- had little accommodation experience with employees with PTSD and TBI.

Clearly, these findings suggest opportunities for improving employers' recruitment and advancement of VWDs.

In the federal sector, an Executive Order (13548) was put in place in 2010 that requires that the U.S. Office of Personnel Management design model recruitment and hiring strategies for federal agencies to increase employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities; require each federal agency to develop a plan for promoting employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities, including performance targets and numerical goals; designate a senior official to be accountable; use Schedule A authority to hire applicants with mental retardation or a severe physical or psychiatric disability to fill any job in which the person is able to perform with or without reasonable accommodation; and improve retention and return to work (*Increasing Federal Employment of Individuals with Disabilities*, 2010).

On August 27, 2013, the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) released final regulations outlining changes to Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973² and the Vietnam Era Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act (VEVRAA).³ Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act prohibits federal contractors and subcontractors from engaging in employment discrimination against individuals with disabilities generally and also requires of such contractors that they engage in affirmative action practices regarding recruitment, hiring, promotion, and retention of protected individuals with disabilities. VEVRAA similarly prohibits federal contractors and subcontractors from discriminating against protected veterans with disabilities and requires certain affirmative action practices regarding recruitment, hiring, promotion, and retention of protected veterans. The new regulations add to the requirements of federal contractors, especially regarding affirmative action. Assisting both federal agencies and federal subcontractors to use the most effec-

tive policies and practices possible to successfully navigate these provisions is imperative for timely response and the ultimate desired success that the provisions were intended for.

On a global scale, the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is drawing more attention to employment paths and workplace conditions for people with disabilities, and, as a result, countries are expanding their own national policies regarding workplace representation of people with disabilities. Approximately 147 countries now have ratified the Convention and will need to be abiding by the regulations of Article 27, the work and employment provisions (*United Nations Enable*, 2014).

WHY EMPLOYER PRACTICES?

Employer practices and employment outcomes for people with disabilities are inseparable. Although there is a strong role for public policy and advocacy and service organizations, the final decisions of both employers and people with disabilities regarding employment, retention, and advancement are made in the context of specific workplaces and the employer practices therein. Even acknowledging ideological differences on the merit and efficacy of market versus regulatory action to better employment outcomes for people with disabilities, both sides of the ideological debate would agree that there is value in better understanding employers' actions and motivations and in educating and inspiring employers to advance the world of work for all.

Scholarly research has been done on employment practices regarding people with disabilities, but significant gaps remain. Existing studies largely agree about the barriers employers report regarding the employment of people with disabilities: lack of work experience and skills, supervisors' lack of knowledge about accommodations, perceived cost of accommodations, and attitudes/stereotypes of supervisors and coworkers about people with disabilities (*Able Trust*, 2003; *Blanck & Schartz*,

2005; Brannick & Bruyère, 1999; Bruyère, 2000; Bruyère, Erickson, & Horne, 2002; Dixon, Kruse, & Van Horn, 2003; Domzal, Houtenville, & Sharma, 2008; Gilbride, Stensrud, Vander-goot, & Golden, 2003). Many of the barriers identified by employers may be mutable by educating employers on issues of disability and specifically by providing information on effective workplace policies and practices. Several studies have provided preliminary information on effective accommodation and human resource (HR) practices, employment disability discrimination, attitudes toward disability, and workplace culture, but these studies have also produced conflicting results and have lacked a comprehensive perspective on the workplace. Further research on how company policies and practices and the corresponding attitudes of hiring managers, supervisors, and coworkers affect the employment opportunities of people with disabilities is needed to inform the development of evidence-based practices to address these barriers.

Research on workplace accommodations for people with disabilities has produced conflicting results. Several studies indicate that employers who hire people with disabilities make accommodations relatively easily, whereas others find relatively few employers are making accommodations and few employees are receiving them (Able Trust, 2003; Brannick & Bruyère, 1999; Bruyère, 2000; Bruyère et al., 2002; Dixon et al., 2003; Domzal et al., 2008; Zwerling et al., 2003). Much of the experimental research to date focuses on attitudes toward applicants and employees with disabilities and toward disability itself. Many find that attitudes of supervisors and coworkers have a strong effect on the experiences of employees with disabilities (Bruyère, Erickson, & Ferrentino, 2003; Colella, 1996, 2001; Colella, DeNisi, & Varma, 1998; Florey & Harrison, 2000; Hernandez, Keys, & Balcazar, 2004). Several studies focused on employment discrimination claims (Bjelland et al., 2010; McMahan, Shaw, & Jaet, 1995; Moss, Ullman, Johnsen, Starrett, & Burris, 1999) find that although alleged unlawful discharge complaints are most common, reasonable accommodation is the second most

common issue on charges, and employees with disabilities are perceiving discrimination across the employment process—from hiring to on-the-job harassment and disparate treatment.

These studies provide a useful starting point in identifying employer practices and barriers, but further empirical data is needed to more deeply probe the characteristics and practices of employers and behaviors of supervisors that lead to discrimination charges or contribute to positive employment outcomes. In addition, research is needed to increase our understanding of how heightened corporate emphasis on organizational and employee productivity in the current economy may disparately impact people with disabilities. Interventions can then be designed to proactively address the barriers identified.

A critical initial part of the efforts of the work described in this special issue was an extensive review of previously published articles and reports on employer practices related to employing persons with disability in the workplace. A second step in this effort, a scoping review, found that of those publications, less than a quarter were empirically derived and from the employer perspective (Karpur, VanLooy, & Bruyère, 2014).

Although the existing body of literature assembled from this extensive review of the literature provides a useful starting point, findings confirm that the fields of both business and rehabilitation can benefit from further empirical analysis that probes deeply into the characteristics and practices of employers, and the behaviors of supervisors and coworkers, that may lead to disability discrimination charges at one end of the spectrum or contribute to positive employment outcomes at the other. Approaching existing data sources in new ways, to better reveal how employer practices correlate with workplace decisions made by people with disabilities (such as occupational selection), is one avenue to strengthen the research underpinning of promising employment practices and policies. Creating new data resources from within company walls is another.

An alternative path for research to better inform employers, disability practitioners,

policy-makers, and researchers is partnering with employer organizations to probe front-line insights on internal workplace practices, the needs employers have, and the challenges they face in working to improve employment outcomes for their employees with disabilities (e.g., which metrics would be most effective in helping individual employers make advances in employment outcomes for people with disabilities). Partnering directly with employers to undertake an evidence-based case study within their organization is challenging, but the resulting learnings can be rich and illuminating.

NEED FOR A TRANSDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

About 34.8 million people in the United States and between 785 and 975 million people worldwide older than the age of 16 years report a disability (Erickson, Lee, & von Schrader, 2012; World Health Organization, 2011). Because employment rates for people with disabilities remain stubbornly low, and the number of people with disabilities continues to grow, transdisciplinary approaches to researching how to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities are all the more important. Many have argued the importance of drawing approaches from multiple disciplines to study the scope and magnitude of social issues which are multifaceted and therefore require a diversity of methods, theories, and practices (Kessel & Rosenfield, 2008; Nissani, 1997; Pitt-Catsouphes, Kossek, & Sweet, 2006; Qin, Lancaster, & Allen, 1997; Rosenfield, 1992). Disability is an issue which is complex and interacts with many other fields and functions, including employment in intricate ways on multiple levels. Taking a transdisciplinary approach to research allows for an effective and flexible response to the complexity of current disability and rehabilitation-related issues and is more likely to yield fresh and possibly unexpected results, including new hybrid theories.

Being purposely transdisciplinary has allowed us to broaden the scope of our investiga-

tion. But, simply using approaches from multiple disciplines isn't enough by itself. The disciplines incorporated need to be applied to studying the workplace *decision making* of employers as well as that of individuals with disabilities themselves. It is decision makers in organizations (whether for-profit, not-for-profit, or government agency, large or small) that ultimately hire, retain, and advance employees. In this special issue, we present multiple research studies that are transdisciplinary and focus on and speak to decision making by employers.

The researchers and faculty of the Employer Practices Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (EP-RRTC) at Cornell University, whose wide array of research projects is represented in this special issue of *Rehabilitation Research, Policy, and Education (RRPE)*, are from multiple disciplines, resulting in a versatile approach to the overarching research question, "How do employer practices relate to employment outcomes for people with disabilities and how could better progress be made?" Team members are experts in the fields of economics, industrial and organization, law, rehabilitation psychology, mathematics and statistics, environmental analysis and design, human resources, employee compensation, vocational rehabilitation, and survey research. More important, many have direct experience partnering with business, and all have prior research focused on employment practices and/or outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

The sequenced approach taken in the EP-RRTC is composed of four phases. Phase 1 of the stream of research and outreach activities was to simultaneously conduct a literature review, catalogue eleven national data sets (creating the publicly available Cross-Dataset Catalog of Disability and Compensation Variables), and survey employers to inventory their workplace practices regarding people with disabilities and obtain a self-assessment of the effectiveness thereof. In sum, Phase 1 was designed to identify

gaps in the existing research and robustly document the broad landscape of current employer practices and attitudes relating to employment outcomes for people with disabilities.

On this foundation, several Phase 2 research projects were launched using national survey and administrative data sets related to disability claim filings, employer costs for employee compensation, health benefits, occupational characteristics, and accommodation requests, which allowed us to study various dimensions of labor market outcomes for people with disabilities.

In parallel to the analysis of existing nationally representative data sets, in-person forums with employer representatives were launched through partnerships with two distinct business membership associations. Over the course of 8 months, collaborative research and focused conversations were conducted through these meetings, to probe the challenges identified by those whose direct job responsibilities include working to advance the hiring, engagement, retention, and advancement of people with disabilities within their organizations.

Informed by the initial findings of these Phase 2 projects, two case studies were conducted as Phase 3, to more closely examine specific management and coworker attitudes and behaviors that can further or hinder the workplace outcomes of employees with disabilities. The combined EP-RRTC learnings from these sequenced research activities will be captured and distributed through a comprehensive Phase 4 design and implementation of an online self-assessment “tool” for employers wishing to better their workplace practices and outcomes.

RESULTS

Phase 1: Surveying the Gaps and Landscape

As previously discussed, although a strong body of literature exists on the employment of people with disabilities, empirical research on employment practices of organizations is much

more limited (Bond, Wehman, & Wittenburg, 2005; Colella & Bruyere, 2011). A critical initial part of the efforts of the work described in this special issue was a review of previously published (1990–2011) articles and reports on employer practices related to employing persons with disability in the workplace, which yielded 867 publications. After building a large bibliography that included grey literature, such as that found in non-peer-reviewed business publications, a scoping review was designed to rigorously document evidence relating to employer practices in recruitment and hiring, benefits, accommodations/dispute resolution, workplace culture and attitudes, retention and career advancement, and termination of people with disabilities.

A full presentation of this scoping review appears in “Employer Practices for Employment of People with Disabilities: A Literature Scoping Review”, in this special issue by Karpur, VanLooy, and Bruyère (2014). The authors reviewed the literature from 1990 to 2011, limited to research in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom to ensure similar working contexts and government regulations. A scoping review was conducted in select areas of employer practices, including (a) recruitment and hiring; (b) benefits—disability management and return-to-work; (c) workplace accommodations; (d) organizational culture, climate, and attitudes toward employees with disabilities; (e) retention and advancement practices; and (f) discipline, dispute resolution, and termination from work.

To inform the specific project design of Phase 2 research, the EP-RRTC also inventoried national survey and administrative U.S. data sets within Phase 1. Eleven data sets in all were reviewed for employer variables related to compensation (ranging from wage and salary income to health benefits and accommodations) and individual variables related to disability characteristics. In “Rehabilitation Related Research on Disability and Employer Practices Using Individual-Based National and Administrative Datasets” in this *RRPE* special issue (Nazarov, Erickson, & Bruyère, 2014), the authors provide

an overview of several national administrative and survey data sets and other data products that aid to investigate the impact of various employer practices on employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. A related literature review, description of the methodology used to select data sets, and implications for rehabilitation research, policy, and practice are provided.

The final component of Phase 1 was to survey the landscape of current employer practices and employer attitudes regarding the effectiveness of these practices to improve employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities and retention of an aging workforce. Partnering with the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and the Disability Management Employer Coalition (DMEC), surveys were conducted of HR personnel and employers using and service suppliers providing absence and disability management services to create an inventory of practices and measure employer attitudes thereof. In this issue, “Disability-Inclusive Employer Practices and Hiring of Individuals with Disabilities” by Erickson, von Schrader, Bruyère, VanLooy, and Matteson (2014) presents the research using the survey of 675 HR personnel conducted with SHRM. The authors report on their examination of variations in the implementation of disability-inclusive policies and practices by private employers in the United States, analyzing them by employer size, federal contractor status, for-profit/not-for-profit status, and industry. Although the study covers all parts of the employment process from recruitment through hiring, training, and accommodation, to advancement, a special focus is on policies and practices of organizations who are hiring people with disabilities.

Information about the results of the survey of the DMEC membership is not presented in this special issue because the focus was on the aging workforce. Interested readers can find further information about the results of this study in the white paper by von Schrader, Bruyère, Malzer, and Erickson (2013).

Phase 2: New Analysis From Existing Data and Employer Insights

In reviewing existing literature, cataloging compensation-related variables in existing public data sets, and surveying the landscape of workplace practices related to employees with disabilities, Phase 1 of the EP-RRTC revealed many opportunities where knowledge could be furthered by applying new empirical approaches to existing public data sets.

In “Comparison of Employer Factors in Disability and Other Employment Discrimination Charges,” in this special issue, Nazarov and von Schrader (2014) use two administrative data sets from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to examine characteristics of mid- to large-sized private employers who do and do not receive disability discrimination charges. Their study seeks to better understand which employer characteristics are associated with employee perceptions of disability discrimination. The findings show that there are more charges against smaller establishments, multiunit headquarter organizations, federal contractors, and transportation and service industry sectors. The findings of this study will be useful to employers, policymakers, and organizations working with employers to reduce disability employment discrimination. For those employers most at risk for receiving charges, this study could help surface evidence of employer practices that may mitigate perceived discrimination in the workplace.

Also in this issue, Hallock, Jin, and Barrington (2014) discuss the total compensation gap between U.S. employees with disabilities and their nondisabled peers, expanding the framework to include compensation beyond wage and salary pay (“Estimating Pay Gaps for Workers With Disabilities: Implications From Broadening Definitions and Data Sets”). The authors describe analysis using three different national survey data sets in their analysis, finding considerable heterogeneity in the pay gap across differing measures of pay, definitions of disability, and data source used. Consistently

across data sets and definitions, however, the wage and salary gap for people with disabilities is larger than the total compensation gap. This study supports the conjecture that workers might substitute other benefits in the compensation package for wage and salary pay. It also demonstrates that researchers and practitioners should be careful in interpreting point estimates in research studies, given that different data sources and measures of disability yield different estimated pay gaps. For employers looking to hire persons with disabilities or those offering employment placement services, an important implication of this study is that substantial weight should be put on the importance of non-base pay compensation when seeking the optimal employee–employer match.

A key element in successful hiring and retention of people with disabilities is the work place accommodation process. Yet, from national survey data, there is relatively little information about the patterns of accommodation requests, but there is some information accommodation need and use. Post ADA, there have been three nationally representative survey data sources that include questions about disability accommodation in the workplace; however, these data sources focus on a specific age groups and only ask accommodation related questions of individuals with disabilities. An additional study, reported on in this special issue, uses the Current Population Survey (CPS) March Supplement. The article in this special issue, entitled “Accommodation Requests: Who Is Asking for What?” (von Schrader, Xu, & Bruyère, 2014), summarizes findings this additional Phase 2 study, which examines requested accommodations by disability type, whether they were granted, the number and types of accommodations requested, a comparison of accommodation requests by those with and without disabilities, as well as variations in accommodation requests by occupation and industry.

Two additional research projects have been undertaken on existing national data sets as part of the Phase 2 of the EP-RRTC. One studies health care benefits and job change patterns for

individuals with disabilities (Karpur & Bruyère, 2012). The other investigates job match of employees with disabilities to occupations with specific characteristics (Hallock & Jin, 2013). Hallock and Jin will be forthcoming as a working paper, not as yet having been submitted for publication.

Simultaneously to conducting the new empirical research on national survey and administrative data sets heretofore described, we partnered with The Conference Board and the Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies at Cornell University’s ILR School, two preeminent employer associations, to engage employer representatives directly in the EP-RRTC research process.

The Conference Board Research Working Group on Improving Employment Outcomes for People With Disabilities

The Conference Board (TCB) describes itself as a global, independent business membership and research not-for-profit, which works in the public interest to provide leading organizations with practical knowledge to improve their performance and better serve society. TCB is headquartered in New York City, with offices in Brussels, Singapore, Hong Kong, Beijing, and Mumbai. They produce the Consumer Confidence Index in the United States as well as the U.S. Leading Economic Indicators and comparable indicators for eleven other countries and regions. They convene executives in continuing councils (organized by workplace function, such as chief legal officers, diversity executives, and innovation and R&D executives) and also in terminal, topic-specific research working groups. Partnering financially and through joint participation, the EP-RRTC initiated The Conference Board Research Working Group entitled “Innovative Research on Employment Practices: Improving Employment for People with Disabilities.”

Employer representatives were recruited from the private and government sectors. Marketing materials describing the group as forming to discuss employment disparities and what practice

strategies and methods could help improve workplace recruitment, engagement, and advancement of people with disabilities were distributed to TCB member companies. Ultimately, 16 different organizations joined the Research Working Group. Participants held job titles such as associate director, analyst, director of human resources, vice president of diversity, executive director of inclusion, manager of workforce inclusion, supervisor rehabilitation specialist, and integrated marketing/supply chain director.

This group held three meetings over the course of 6 months (June 1 and 2, 2011–December 7 and 8, 2011). Each meeting lasted 2 days. Discussion was facilitated, but members worked in a confidential “hands-on” environment to encourage the open exchange of ideas. They reviewed and discussed data, scholarly research, and their own workplace practices. External speakers were invited to provide deeper knowledge on specific topics. Members also engaged in peer learning through presentations by fellow Research Working Group members.

In the first meeting, four critical questions were identified by the participants:

1. *The business case*: How is it advantageous to the bottom line for organizations to employ people with disabilities?
2. *Organizational readiness*: What should organizations do to create a workplace that helps people with disabilities thrive and advance?
3. *Measurement*: How can success for both people with disabilities and the organization itself be determined?
4. *Self-disclosure*: How can people with disabilities, especially those whose disabilities are not obvious, be encouraged to identify themselves so that resources can be directed toward them and outcomes can be measured?

Special interest was also identified in veterans with disabilities, employees with disabilities in the global context, and what forthcoming issues and challenges regarding the employment

of people with disabilities might be expected in the coming years.

It was decided that these questions and special interest topics would form a research report written under the auspices of The Conference Board Research Working Group. Over the course of the next 10 months, secondary research was conducted and synthesized. Highlights from the group’s internal conversations were integrated into the report. Original vignettes of interesting and promising practices were also incorporated.⁴

For each of the questions defined by The Conference Board Research Working Group of employer representatives, an interpretation of the report’s content and selected highlights from the underpinning group discussions are presented here.

1. *The business case*: How is it advantageous to the bottom line for organizations to employ people with disabilities?

The business case for expanding recruitment, engagement, and advancement of people with disabilities was organized into four categories: (a) talent pool; (b) costs, including workers’ compensation costs, health care costs, accommodation costs, and legal and related costs; (c) benefits, covering growth in revenue and market share, coworker/team performance, and financial incentives; and (d) fulfillment of executive and legislative mandates.

Existing research was reviewed for each of these topics. In several instances, group members offered stylized business case facts that were hard to substantiate with rigorous research findings. Only research-substantiated claims were included (with annotation) in the business case section of the report. Where a range of documented dollar estimates existed, the most conservative estimates were included in the final publication.

2. *Organizational readiness*: What should organizations do to create a workplace that helps people with disabilities thrive and advance?

To summarize the various components deemed necessary in readying an organization to make effective progress in improving workplace outcomes for employees with disabilities, six pillars providing a foundation of “Values and Beliefs” was identified in the report. These six pillars include (a) top management commitment, (b) internal and external communications, (c) integrative infrastructure that is aligned across all employee touch points, (d) the employment process from job descriptions through career development and advancement, (e) measurement and self-disclosure processes, and (f) an inclusive organizational climate.

3. *Measurement: How can success for both people with disabilities and the organization itself be determined?*

Business culture embraces the adage “what gets measured gets done,” and much time in the three meetings was spent discussing the struggle of defining useful metrics that advance inclusion of employees with disabilities and hopefully will not create unintended consequences. The following questions capture the range of concerns expressed:

- How do you tie measures to organizational goals?
- How do you measure when disabilities themselves are so diverse?
- What is a realistic timeframe for seeing change?
- What behaviors do we actually want?
- What specific metrics will allow you to know if you’ve created a culture or climate in which people with disabilities can thrive?

Defining effective yet user-friendly metrics for employers wanting to measure their progress regarding employees with disabilities is an area in need of much more work.

4. *Self-disclosure: How can people with disabilities, especially those whose disabilities are not obvious, be encouraged to identify themselves so that appropriate resources can be directed toward them and outcomes can be measured?*

Pros and cons of the wording of various self-identification questions, along with the various ways employees could be given the opportunity to self-disclose, were discussed. Many participants originally expressed concerns that it was “illegal” to ask employees to self-disclose their disability status. This widely held belief was dispelled in subsequent conversation, and also addressed directly in the published report. Ultimately, six identification questions adapted from the American Community Survey (ACS) were presented in the report as a useful, albeit lengthy, question format for employee self-identification. The federal government’s Standard Form 256: Self-Identification of Disability⁵ was also presented as an illustration to the private sector of a form widely used in federal workplaces across the United States.

The group reached consensus that clarifying why employees are being given the opportunity to self-identify and how the information will be used is of key importance before a final question format and venue is determined. Presented as Table 1, a “Self-disclosure matrix” was devised as a useful tool for helping to prompt this internal conversation. It summarizes the relationship between the purpose served by self-identification from the employee and employer perspectives and the degree of identification that purpose requires.

**Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies
Employer Research Group**

The Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies (CAHRS) is the leading partnership association between industry and academia in the United States devoted to global HR management. CAHRS has close to 70 corporate members, more than one-third ranking in Fortune 100.

In addition to executive education offerings and opportunities for selected graduate students and graduating seniors from The Cornell University ILR School to meet and exchange questions and ideas with executives from member companies, there are two annual CAHRS

TABLE 1. Purpose Served by Data Collection and Corresponding Degree of Personal Identification Required

Degree of Identification	Collection Process	Purpose Served for Individual Employees	Purpose Served for Employers
None	No proactive collection of disclosure data	Protect individual confidentiality and privacy	Presumably reduce legal risks (avoidance of data collection is no guarantee of protection from legal risk)
Anonymous	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Employee survey –Employee focus groups and interviews conducted by a third party –Data collected/kept separately from all other individual information, such as job applications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Support organizational improvement –Help drive high-level culture or process change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Gather topline metrics on representation as well as recruitment, hiring, and advancement –Create accountability measures –Improve workforce planning
Individual identified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Verbal notification by individual –Form with name identified –Data kept in HR or other company data systems (e.g., emergency preparedness database) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Receive an accommodation –Take advantage of any company career advancement opportunities for people with disabilities –Safety/emergency preparedness –Affirm identity and individual empowerment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Improve employee performance –Strengthen accountability measures for representation, recruitment, hiring, retention, and advancement –Improve talent development

Note: From Table 3, *Leveling the Playing Field: Attracting, Engaging, and Advancing People with Disabilities*, The Conference Board Research Report R-1510-12-RR, by P. Linkow, L. Barrington, S. Bruyère, I. Figueroa, and M. Wright, 2013. Used with permission of The Conference Board.

partner meetings focused on new academic research findings and promising workplace practice applications and meetings of the smaller CAHRS Board. Each year, several CAHRS working groups are also held. Working groups are facilitated by one or more CAHRS research faculty members and generally limited to 20 or fewer representatives of member companies. Each working group meeting is two-thirds of a day and focuses on a specific theme.

Partnering with CAHRS, the EP-RRTC convened two working groups in Phase 2 and a third will be scheduled as part of Phase 3 to discuss the tool, while still in draft or prototype stage. Employer representatives were recruited from among CAHRS member companies. The first of the two working groups was entitled “Attraction, Retention, and Reward for Employees with Disabilities” and the second, “Organizational Culture and Employer

Practices with Respect to Persons with Disabilities.” Across the two groups, a dozen private sector employers participated, some attending both working groups. Attending corporate representatives held job titles including director human resources, director diversity and inclusion, compliance manager, diversity analyst, manager employee engagement, senior director talent acquisition, and human resource generalist.

Each working group began with Cornell faculty presenting a short research finding to frame the conversation. The balance of the program was discussion, facilitated by EP-RRTC representatives but driven by the observations, insights, and questions of the employer representatives.

Both groups spent significant time discussing metrics. In the first working group, a list of aspirational metrics was created in answer to the question “In 5–10 years, how will we know that we’re doing a better job (recruiting, engaging, and advancing employees with disabilities)?” The list included measuring progress in the

- Presence of and participation in employee resource groups, including employees with and without a disability;
- Recruitment of talent with disabilities from “pedigree” colleges and universities;
- Ease (speed and quality of experience) of hiring and onboarding of employees with disabilities;
- Representative share of total employee base that is employees with disabilities;
- Number of senior management who self-disclose (publicly) a disability;
- Metrics on employees with disabilities are as common as those for other dimensions of diversity;
- Numbers of interns with disabilities and offer acceptance rates; and
- Numbers of college offices of students with disabilities services that are integrated into the corporate recruiting process.

Participants in the second working group shared what their organizations are “doing to actually measure inclusion of employees with

disabilities.” Four important practices identified were

- Including a self-identification question in regular anonymous employee attitude surveys, along with other employee demographic questions such as gender and race/ethnicity;
- Constructing a customized “index” of inclusion to measure the inclusiveness of the work environment;
- Tracking how applicants with disabilities found the job posting to improve the reach of recruiting (“website” was the most frequent response identified); and
- Looking regularly at the representation of employees with disabilities in comparison to the representation of people without disabilities among the company’s customer base.

Additional and important questions that these employer representatives felt were still “seeking solutions” included the following:

- What are more effective ways to engage advocates within the work environment for people with disabilities?
- What keeps a person with a targeted disability out of the labor force versus in the labor force but unemployed?
- How can the pipeline of college students with disabilities be strengthened?
- How can we better understand the reluctance of employees with disabilities to self-disclose, so as to encourage disclosure while still respecting that some people do not view their disability as a strong part of their own self-identity?
- How will progress goals be set within the new regulations for federal contractors?

Written summaries of these two CAHRS working groups can be found on the CAHRS website within the Diversity and Inclusion Center of Excellence (<http://cahrs.ilr.cornell.edu/CentersofExcellence>).

Also consistent with the conversations in The Conference Board Research Working Group, the CAHRS working groups highlighted the challenge of inclusion of employees with disabilities on a global scale. Two issues discussed in particular were the global cost of fines for non-compliance with national employment quotas for people with disabilities and the struggle to balance a strong corporate mission on employing people with disabilities with the varying cultural views on disability and employment found in localities in which they operate across the globe.

Phase 3: Case Studies

As mentioned earlier, conducting employer-specific case studies is a valuable but challenging research approach. Cornell University has had prior experience in doing so as part of the Disability Case Study Research Consortium (2008) led by the Burton Blatt Institute of Syracuse University. Findings from the Consortium's research suggested that workplace climate makes a great difference in workplace performance as well as affecting employee experience. Furthermore, overall company policies and the attitudes and practices of managers and supervisors are a vital factor in the ability of all employees, not just those with disabilities, to perform to their full potential. Across six companies studied, there was statistical evidence that employee attitudes and perceptions about the effectiveness of organizational and human resource policies and practices and their organization's commitment to management diversity strongly affect their perceptions of being included and engaged in the workplace and influence their reported satisfaction and commitment to their organization (Disability Case Study Research Consortium, 2008; Schur et al., in press).

This EP-RRTC has also undertaken both a private and public sector employer case study in Phase 3. The purpose of the case studies has been to allow us to probe deeply into the research questions pursued in the other projects regarding the engagement and retention of people with

disabilities. In particular, we focused our energy on trying to understand the role that managers play in the successful implementation of disability practices, cultivation of inclusive climates, self-disclosure of disability, and outcomes of accommodations requests. We also collected data about the characteristics of survey respondents' jobs and their perceived fit with their jobs as a means of understanding the work conditions within which individuals with disabilities are more likely to be engaged and perform well and within which inequities between individuals with and without disabilities tend to disappear. Further information about research findings will be forthcoming in forthcoming publications.

Phase 4: Educating and Assisting Employers

The goal of this fourth and final phase of these efforts is to provide resources that will further inform employer practices as well as the efforts of service providers and disability advocates. Once the analyses of national survey and administrative data sets and the employer-participant research have progressed or concluded, the lessons and insights will be used to shape an online employer practices self-assessment tool. This tool will both serve employers as a ready checklist of best practices which they can benchmark themselves against and provide an ongoing data gathering portal for continued research on these critical issues after this RRTC is complete. Information about this benchmarking tool and related research briefs from specific studies will be broadly promoted through the employer network partners involved in the study process.

IMPLICATIONS FOR REHABILITATION RESEARCH, POLICY, AND EDUCATION

As referenced earlier, seven research studies from transdisciplinary perspectives have been selected to comprise this special issue. These articles are just part of the full range of studies underway, all of which have been informed by

the iterative process described previously, which directly incorporated employers' perspectives through surveys and many forums of conversation. We took insights from earlier research and these more recent employer participation efforts to shape, refine, and inform our research inquiry along the way. In this way, we adapted and shaped the research to improve its direct relevance for employers who are seeking practices that will enhance employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

These findings have significance for rehabilitation researchers and policy makers focused on improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities, as well as for rehabilitation counselor educators preparing future service providers, and for practicing professionals who are providing services to individuals with disabilities and consultation to employers regarding disability issues. We provide a preliminary look at these implications, with further specific ideas for rehabilitation research, policy, education, and practice provided in each of the individual articles included in this special issue.

Although significant new information has been identified in the research described in this special issue, conducted across several data sources and using a wide variety of analytical approaches, many questions remain. Rehabilitation and other workplace practice researchers have a number of significant issues upon which to refine their inquiries. Pressing questions persist about how to foster disability inclusive workplace climates and develop and implement human resource policies that will effectively support a workplace environment where people feel comfortable disclosing their disability and requesting accommodations. In addition, current initiatives focused on federal-sector employment for people with disabilities mean that more precise and readily accepted ways to measure the effectiveness of human resource policies and practices in support of improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities are needed.

There are numerous other areas for further policy research suggested by the findings of the studies described here. One example is in the area of compensation, and particularly health

care benefits for people with disabilities, an area which has been of longstanding concern to policy makers. The EP-RRTC studies focusing on this topic showed that a narrower pay gap between people with and without disabilities is found when total compensation is considered. These findings suggest that employees with disabilities may have stronger preferences for a benefits-rich compensation mix than their nondisabled peers. Employers therefore may want to give substantial consideration to non-base pay compensation when working to find the optimal employee-employer match for individuals with disabilities. A concern that the suggested benefits preference may raise, however, is that employer-provided benefits could create some degree of "job lock." If people with disabilities wish to retain a current level of employer-provided benefits, and employer-provided benefits are becoming scarcer, people with disabilities may be more reluctant to switch jobs for higher wage/salary compensation or better career opportunities unless the benefit level can be matched in a new employment opportunity. These are some of the places where continuing further future research is needed.

Finally, the findings in these studies have significant relevance for training of rehabilitation professionals. A "demand-side" perspective of job development and placement for rehabilitation professionals calls for affording practitioners an expanded perspective of contemporary workplace policies and practices that influence employer hiring and retention of people with disabilities. It will be helpful if we can provide such perspectives in both in-classroom coursework and in-practicum settings by increasing the focus on corporate America's emerging concerns around strategic human capital development and discussing with students how recruitment of people with disabilities might fit into these considerations. In addition, rehabilitation practitioners who are equipped to help HR strategists build a convincing business case for employment of people with disabilities can be of significant service to workplaces if they can advise on how to improve on organizational metrics to capture

employment outcomes for people with disabilities and can provide information on elements of workplace climate and HR practice that will assist in building a culture where people with disabilities will be fully included. Such knowledge areas and technical skill sets will require more in-depth focus than currently afforded if we are to prepare professionals who can confidently and competently address such increasingly needed workplace interventions.

NOTES

1. For further information, see the UN Enable website at <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?navid=12&pid=150>
2. 29 U.S.C. § 793, as amended, at 41 C.F.R. Part 60–741.
3. 38 U.S.C. § 4212, as amended, at 41 C.F.R. Part 60–300.
4. The Conference Board released the final compilation in 2013, entitled *Leveling the Playing Field: Attracting, Engaging and Advancing People with Disabilities*, authored by Peter Linkow, with Linda Barrington, Susanne Bruyère, Ivelys Figueroa, and Mary Wright. The report was released for public download by The Conference Board and is available at www.conference-board.org and digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/edicollect/1292. A *Key Findings* document was also released as a stand-alone publication to serve as a short summary for the senior executive audience who were thought more likely to read the key findings brief than the full-length research report.
5. The Standard Form 256: Self-Identification of Disability can be found at http://www.opm.gov/forms/pdf_fill/sf256.pdf

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