

Chapter 2

Human Resource Professionals and the Employment of People with Disabilities: A Business Perspective

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Organizations often rely on human resource professionals to develop or implement policies and procedures as they pertain to diversity, disability, and accommodation in the workplace. As such, human resource professionals play a pivotal role in the inclusion and retention of persons with disabilities in the workforce. An investigation into human resource professionals' perceptions of barriers to employment for individuals with disabilities and organizational policies and procedures as they pertain to disability in the workplace was completed with 46 human resource professionals.

Results indicate that employers have taken several measures in an effort to integrate persons with disabilities into their organizations. Yet, employers believe they could do more to hire persons with disabilities.

In the last decade, the prosperous economy of the United States has created over 19 million new jobs and an unemployment rate at its lowest point in 29 years (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 1998). An average of approximately 250,000 to 300,000 new jobs were created each month during much of the 1990s. (Anonymous, 1998). The unemployment rate was at or below 5% from April, 1997 to September, 1998, the lowest since 1957. Further, it is projected that during the next 10 to 15 years, the workforce will grow more slowly than at any other time since the 1930s (Fischer, 1995). Due to changing economic and demographic conditions impacting the American workforce, employers across the nation are continuously struggling to identify and retain qualified workers. In order to remain competitive in the global economy, businesses and organizations will consider

previously underemployed or marginally employed individuals as a source of labor (Uhalde, 1999).

State of the Nation

- Nineteen million new jobs
- Unemployment rate at the lowest point in decades
- Decline in new labor market entrants

Labor Force Participation of Persons with Disabilities

One potential source of labor in the United States is the estimated 30 million working-age persons with disabilities (U. S. Census Bureau, 1997). Employment data on people with disabilities indicate that they do not participate in the labor force, nor benefit from participation, to the same extent as their nondisabled peers. For example, a recent report indicated that only 34.6% of individuals with disabilities were employed, compared to 79.8% of those without disabilities (U.S. Census Bureau, 1993). Individuals with moderate disabilities were nearly twice as likely to be looking for work or on layoff as people with no disabilities, and those with severe disabilities were nearly three times as likely (Department of Labor [DOL], 1999). Among workers with college degrees, only 52 percent of those with severe disabilities reported labor market activity compared to 90 percent of those with no disability (DOL, 1999). These labor force findings are especially discouraging in light of the results from a recent survey in which the overwhelming majority (80%) of

unemployed, working-age adults with disabilities wanted to work(Harris, 1994).

Additionally, workers with disabilities are more likely to hold two jobs, work part-time because they can not find full-time employment, and be self-employed and earn less per hour, per month, and per year (Kruse, 1997). Although a number of factors impact the extent to which individuals with disabilities participate in the labor force, the unemployment rate and widespread underemployment of people with disabilities are particularly troubling when one considers the fact that employers are competing for valuable human resources and are offering attractive incentive and benefits packages in an effort to recruit and retain workers.

Labor Force Participation of Americans with Disabilities

- Thirty million working-age persons with disabilities.
- 34.6% of Americans with disabilities are employed vs. 79.8% of nondisabled Americans.
- Likelihood of being unemployed increases as the severity of disability increases.

Social and Economic Costs of Disability

Employment is often the key to improving self-esteem, reducing feelings of loneliness, and moving toward a richer quality of life (Brolin, 1985). Unemployment not only affects individuals with disabilities negatively in regards to their self-esteem, but the high unemployment rate also places a burden on society as the public payments for disability have soared in the last 20 years. For instance, the number of working-age people with disabilities receiving Disability Insurance (DI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits has increased dramatically from 4 million in 1985 to 6.3 million in 1994 (General Accounting Office, June 1996). This creates a huge problem since it leads to enormous expenditures associated with long-term retention on Social Security cash benefit. In FY 1997, the number of people receiving benefits rose to 8 million, resulting in expenditures of 89 billion dollars. Kruse (1997) estimates that if one million more of the 54 million Americans with

disabilities were employed, the nation would save \$286 million annually in food stamp use and \$1.8 billion annually in Social Security Income benefits.

Despite the passage of progressive laws designed to ease the entry of persons with disabilities into the workforce, as well as advances in rehabilitation and technology, the unemployment rate of people with disabilities remains at an unconscionably high level. Significant legislation, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) (ADA), the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), and the Ticket to Work and Work Incentive Improvement Act, are intended to help alleviate employment discrimination, improve workforce training and employment programs, and expand health insurance provisions for job seekers with disabilities. Innovations, such as telecommuting, use of the Internet and computer technology, and mobile telecommunication devices also play an important role in making the workplace accessible to individuals with disabilities (Mabilleau, Szlamkowicz, & Masse, 1997; McCormick, 1994; Perry, 1994). At no previous time in our nation's history has the legislative and economic conditions coalesced to produce a more favorable employment outlook for the millions of Americans with disabilities who desire the opportunity to compete in the labor market.

In order for people with disabilities to capitalize on the favorable economic conditions, they must pursue employment with the businesses that drive the economy in their communities and make organizational representatives aware of their interests and capabilities. Job seekers and human service professionals that assist people with disabilities in participating in the workforce must frequently interact with the "gatekeepers" of the businesses or organizations in which they are seeking employment. Oftentimes, individuals with disabilities or human service professionals must correspond with representatives from organizations' human resource departments or in smaller businesses, those individuals whose job responsibilities include the functions typically associated with personnel or human resource management.

Role of Human Resource Professionals

Human resource professionals serve three vital functions within organizations: 1) **advisory**-gathering facts, diagnosing problems, providing solutions, and

offering objective assistance and guidance on employee-related matters; 2) **service** – providing service to the organization, its employees, and the public; and 3) **control** – reviewing and measuring performance and developing, communicating, and implementing organizational policies, procedures, and rules (SHRM, 2000). In terms of promoting the employment of people with disabilities, as well as retaining and promoting existing employees with disabilities, human resource professionals play a pivotal role.

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(SHRM, 2000)
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In many large businesses, a designated human resource professional is responsible for both interpreting and communicating legislation and state and government regulations, such as the ADA or the Family Medical Leave Act, to other members of the organization. They may frequently be called upon to respond to questions and offer consultation with both management and staff on organizational policies and procedures as they pertain to various aspects of employment-related laws such as affirmative action and providing reasonable accommodations. Employees and supervisors may also seek the assistance of human resource professionals to address or resolve work performance issues. Given their position within the structure of organizations and their job functions, human resource professionals have a unique opportunity to either advance or prohibit the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workforce.

Their perceptions or interpretations of organizational policies and procedures as they pertain to the ADA, disability, diversity, and discrimination may influence how workplace personnel respond to the requirements of the ADA or employees with disabilities. Additionally, the extent

to which employers have implemented formal policies and procedures in addressing the employment regulations of the ADA may provide an indication of the effort to which employers may go in an attempt to include people with disabilities in their workforce. The results of recently conducted research demonstrate employers' awareness of the law, despite limited knowledge of the ADA employment provisions, as well as minimal organizational efforts directed toward implementing the ADA beyond mere compliance with the law (Balser, 1999; Curry, 1996, Lewis, 1996; Thakker, 1997). Findings demonstrate that to some extent employers have adopted or altered formal policies or procedures in an effort to comply with the law (Balser, 1999; Curry, 1996; Harlan & Robert, 1998; SHRM/Cornell, 1999). For instance, one study found that a limited number of employers altered formal policies or procedures (e.g., Curry, 1996) while other findings have indicated that employers have implemented several measures to comply with the law despite these efforts having little impact on the employment outcomes of workers with disabilities (e.g., Balser, 1999) or supervisors' adherence to the law (e.g., Harlan & Robert, 1998; Thakker, 1997).

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- Employers have adopted or altered formal policies or procedures in an effort to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Balser, 1999; Curry, 1996;
Harlan & Robert, 1998; SHRM/
Cornell, 1999

YET

- The existence of disability policies has limited impact on:

Employment outcomes
for workers with
disabilities

Balser, 1999

OR

Supervisors adherence
to the law.

Harlan & Robert, 1998;
Thakker, 1997

The willingness of employers to alter their behavior to comply with the law may depend on their attitudes regarding the law and towards people with disabilities (Braddock & Bachelder, 1994; Ehrhart, 1994; Moore & Crimindo, 1995). Many advocates for individuals with disabilities believe that the Americans with Disabilities Act may make employers change their behavior, but it will do little to change their attitudes and perceptions towards America's disabled population (Harris, 1998; Pati, & Bailey, 1995). Unfounded myths and misinformation may contribute to employers' skepticism in hiring otherwise qualified individuals with disabilities. One such example is the fear of increased costs of insurance when employing people with disabilities. A number of individuals have identified employer attitudes towards individuals with disabilities as an important factor in the staggering unemployment rate of people with disabilities (Blanck, 1998; King, 1993; Smith, 1992). Yet, findings indicate that many employers who have hired individuals with disabilities report favorable experiences with employing people with disabilities (Blanck, 1998; Diska & Rogers, 1996; DuPont, 1990; Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994; Levy, Jessop, Rimmerman & Levy, 1992; Shafer, et al., 1987).

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(Harris, 1998; Pati, & Bailey, 1995)

Persons with disabilities represent an underutilized source of labor, but there is uncertainty surrounding the extent to which employers view people with disabilities as a viable labor source in addressing their human resource needs (Nietupski, Hamre-Nietupski, & DiLeo, 1997; Unger, in press). There is limited research that describes human resource professionals' awareness and knowledge of resources available to assist employers with identifying and supporting people with disabilities in their workforce. Further, research on the extent to which human resource professionals believe existing organizational practices prohibit or advance the employment of people with disabilities is also lacking. Due to the unique role human resource professionals play within their

organizations, it is critical to determine their perceptions of organizational performance in relation to implementing policies and practices pertaining to disability. The purpose of this research was to describe policies and practices of organizations that have employed people with disabilities and to identify perceptions of human resource professionals towards organizational efforts to include individuals with disabilities in their workforce, as well as barriers to employment for individuals with disabilities.

METHOD

The design of this study was non-experimental, descriptive research (Cambell & Stanley, 1963). A total of 43 businesses, operating throughout the nation and representing a diverse mix of industries participated in the research. Trained interviewers conducted structured telephone interviews with 46 human resource professionals lasting approximately 30 minutes to 1-hour and 45 minutes. This analysis is part of a larger study of employers' perceptions of workers with disabilities and their knowledge and utilization of accommodations (Unger, 2001) in which both human resource professionals and supervisors within the same businesses were surveyed.

Participants

A purposive sampling procedure was used in order to identify employers who knowingly employed people with disabilities or had been recognized for disability-friendly work cultures. Employers were solicited from the Society of Human Resource Management, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and the Business Leadership Networks affiliated with the President's Committee on the Employment of People with Disabilities. Representatives from these organizations provided names and contact information for employer representatives or businesses that might be willing to participate in the research. Potential employer participants were also identified from a report published by the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (1998) that contained a listing of private sector employers who were recognized as effective employers in implementing and complying with employment discrimination legislation. Infrequently, employer representatives also assisted in the identification of other businesses that might be willing to participate.

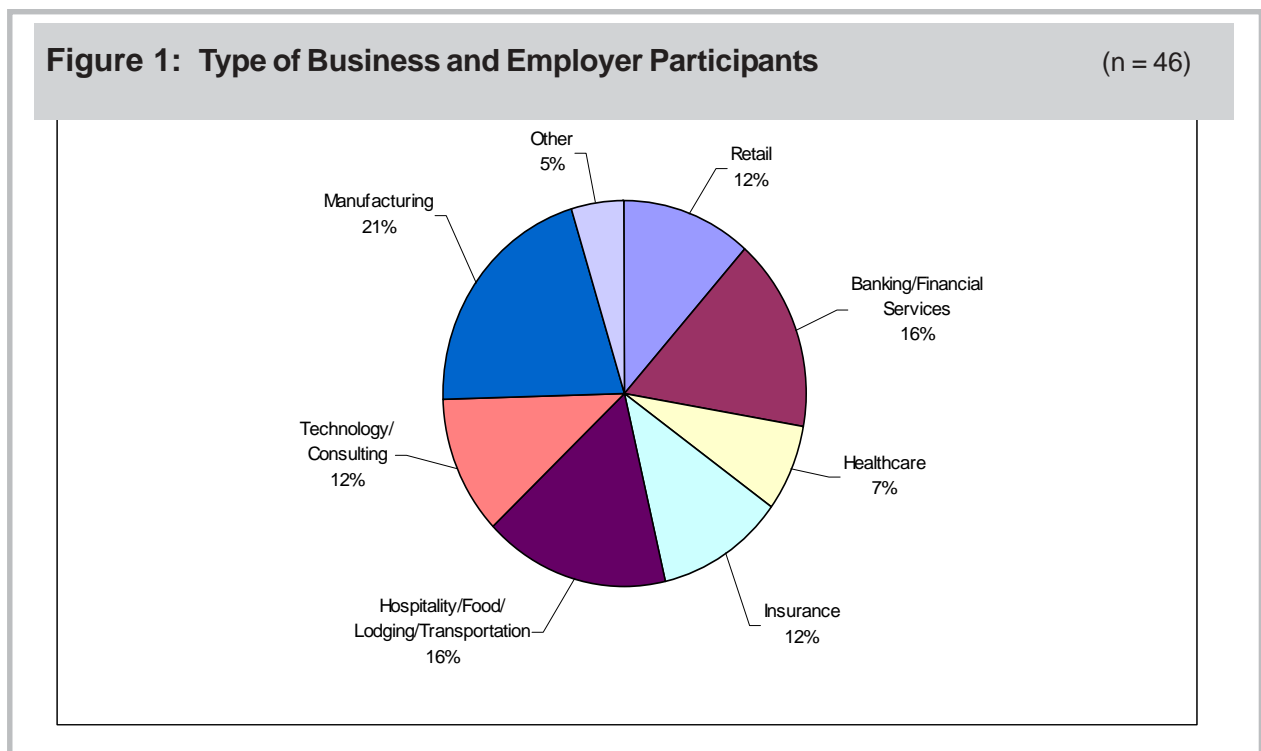
The first step involved contacting the designated organizational representative and describing the purpose of the study, what would be required of employers, and the criteria for participation. Oftentimes, a one-page description of the study was faxed, e-mailed or sent through the mail to the contact person for review. In some instances, referral was made to a more appropriate individual within the organization who possessed greater knowledge about organizational policies and procedures pertaining to disability.

Once a commitment to participate was obtained, the name, phone number and mailing address of the contact person was collected so that information pertaining to the research could be mailed. The packet of information contained a letter identifying the purpose of the research, a one-page description of the study, and one Human Resource Questionnaire.

Of the 76 businesses contacted 43 participated in the research, representing a participation rate of 56.58%. Several employers, who initially agreed to participate, were unable to after receiving the packet of information. Reasons cited by employer representatives included the inability to secure approval from the organization's legal department, limited organizational resources to devote to collecting the information, and concerns regarding the time it would take to complete the survey.

Employers -- The participating businesses were diverse in terms of types of industry and geographic location. A breakdown of participating employers, categorized by industry type is contained below in Figure 1. Employers were predominately larger employers, in terms of the size of workforce, with the average number of employees per business being 36,168 with a median of 12,000 employees. The range for the size of workforce for participating businesses was from 25 employees to 200,000 employees, with only four organizations reporting that their workforce consisted of less than 1000 employees.

Human Resource Professionals -- Human resource professionals were responsible for a variety of human resource functions including compensation, benefits management, health and safety, and organizational development and training. At least one-half of the respondents indicated having responsibilities in the following areas: disability (60.87%); employee relations (58.70%); employment/recruitment (52.17%); and diversity (50%). To a far lesser extent, human resource professionals also participated in other activities typically associated with an organization's human resources department. For example, less than one-third reported their responsibilities to include: administrative (28.26%); compensation (26.09%) organizational developmental (19.57%); legal (17.39%); benefits management (15.22%); health/safety and security (17.39%); and industrial relations (13.04%).



Instrumentation

Description

The Human Resource Questionnaire, was used to identify 1) organizational policies and practices pertaining to disability and accommodation and 2) employer resources available to address the support needs of employees with disabilities. The designated human resource professional within each business or organization was responsible for the completion of this instrument through a structured-telephone interview conducted by the researcher.

Questionnaire Development

Item Generation and Selection

The initial items included in the instrument were developed by a review of the literature pertaining to: 1) employers' perceptions toward Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act and organizational efforts directed toward implementing the ADA; and 2) employer attitudes toward people with disabilities in the workforce. From a preliminary literature review, several categories emerged that provided guidance in the development of questions or specific sub-scales that were used in instrumentation.

The draft survey was then reviewed by a panel of experts, modified, and pilot-tested. Representatives from the VCU Charter Business Roundtable, the Presidential Task Force on the Employment of Persons with Disabilities, the President's Committee on the Employment of Adults with Disabilities, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Society of Human Resource Management, the National Institute on Disability Rehabilitation and Research, the American Telecommuting Association and employers were mailed a draft of the instrument and were asked to provide recommendations on the content of the instrument. Participants were also provided with a description of the proposed study and were asked to provide feedback on the survey items, as well as recommend changes or additions to the instrument. Additionally, the panel of experts and individuals with disabilities, advocates for people with disabilities, and representatives from business and professional trade associations met in Washington, DC to thoroughly review and provide comment on the content and format of the items included in the questionnaire. As a result of the meeting, the instrument was revised until there was agreement on the format and content of the instrument

to insure that it appropriately addressed the purpose of the research.

After the format and the content of the Human Resource Questionnaire were finalized, the instrumentation and procedures were pilot-tested with a large employer located in central Virginia. A structured-telephone interview was conducted by the researcher with the designated human resource professional. During the telephone interview, the human resource professional responded to questions contained on the Human Resource Questionnaire, and commented on the clarity and ambiguity of items, time for completion and any difficulties experienced responding to survey items.

Following the pilot-test of the instrument and procedures, minor changes were made to the format of the Human Resource Questionnaire. The final 11-page instrument consisted of 48 items categorized into the following areas: respondent demographics (2-items); organizational characteristics and workplace culture (9-items); disability-awareness employer characteristics (21-items); ADA characteristics (10-items); and employees with disabilities (6-items). Response format for the survey items included forced-choice, likert-scale type, and open-ended.

Procedure

Once commitment was obtained from employer representatives, a human resource professional within each organization was identified to participate in a 30-45 minute structured-telephone interview to respond to questions on the Human Resource Questionnaire. Then, the researcher mailed the designated human resource professional a letter containing a brief description of the study and notifying the human resource professional that the researcher would be contacting him or her to arrange a time for conducting the interview. Additionally, a Human Resource Questionnaire was included with the letter sent to the designated human resource professional.

Structured-telephone interviews were completed with 46 human resource professionals representing 43 businesses. In some organizations, more than one human resource professional participated. For instance, one organization had three human resource professionals participate and another organization had two human resource professionals participate in the research. Overall, the duration of the interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 1-

hour and 45 minutes. The length of the interviews varied depending on whether the respondent had reviewed or completed the survey prior to the structured-telephone interview.

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- **Sample** -- 46 Human Resource Professionals representing 43 businesses
 - **Instrumentation** -- Human Resource Questionnaire
 - **Procedures** -- 1 hour and 45 minutes structured-telephone interviews with Human Resource Professionals
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Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, primarily frequencies and measures of central tendency, were calculated for responses to survey items. Categories were developed for responses to open-ended survey items, and the items were subsequently coded for data entry. Data was entered and analyzed using Microsoft Access.

Results

Employer Policies and Practices that Promote or Inhibit the Inclusion of People with Disabilities in Their Workplace

Figure 2 on the following page contains a description of the extent to which human resource professionals believe the policies of their organizations reflect a commitment to include people with disabilities in their workforce. As the data indicate, human resource professionals agreed most strongly with the idea that organizational policies reflected a commitment to return workers who are temporarily disabled back to work and to retain existing employees with disabilities. However, human resource professionals were somewhat less certain that the policies reflected an attempt to attract applicants with disabilities or to provide workers with disabilities opportunities for career development and advancement.

Thus, it is not surprising that when human resource professionals were asked to rate the performance of their organizations on several disability-related factors, the three areas receiving the lowest mean scores involved providing workers with disabilities opportunities for promotions (3.27), hiring individuals with disabilities (3.16),

and recruiting people with disabilities (3.09) (see Figure 3 on the following page). Yet, human resource professionals believe their organizations are doing an adequate job of negotiating reasonable accommodations, handling termination of workers with disabilities, and assigning individuals to jobs that match their abilities.

Addressing Attitudinal Barriers and Creating an Inclusive Work Culture -- Human resource professionals also indicated that existing organizational policies reflect an attempt to reinforce managers who embrace diversity-related values and eliminate bias through education and training on disability-related factors (see Figure 2). The vast majority of the businesses also (84.78%) reported the existence of diversity management training programs within their organizations. Perhaps even more encouraging, disability was addressed as a component of the diversity management training program in more than four-fifths (86.49%) of the organizations reporting the existence of diversity management training programs.

As the data in Figure 3 demonstrate, human resource professionals believe their organizations are doing an adequate job of creating more inclusive work cultures. This idea is reflected in the mean scores for measures on organizational performance pertaining to creating a disability-friendly work environment and developing a work culture that embraces diversity. However, there is some indication that organizations could also improve or enhance their efforts in this area. For example, despite the reported availability of disability-awareness or sensitivity training by a majority of the organizations (84.78%), less than half of the businesses (39.47%) report the availability of training to all members of their workforce or that the training is mandatory.

Orientation to Disability Issues and the AdA

Human resource professionals indicate that their organizations have taken several measures in response to the Americans with Disabilities Act. For example, over three-fourths of the organizations reviewed organizational policies (89.96%) or revised organizational policies (80.43%). More than half of the organizations reported developing new organizational policies (63.04%), providing disability-awareness training (63.04%), and distributing pertinent disability information (59.52%). To a lesser

Figure 2: HR Professionals' Perceptions of the Extent to Which Organizational Policies Reflect a Commitment to Include Persons with Disabilities in Their Workforce (n = 46)

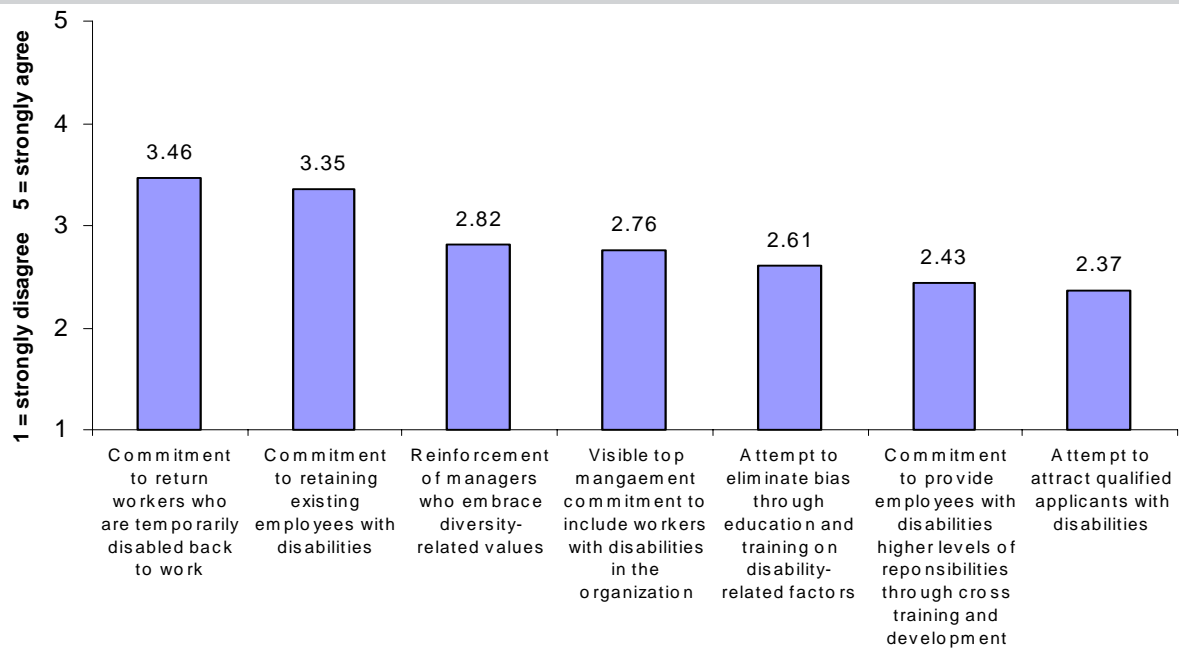
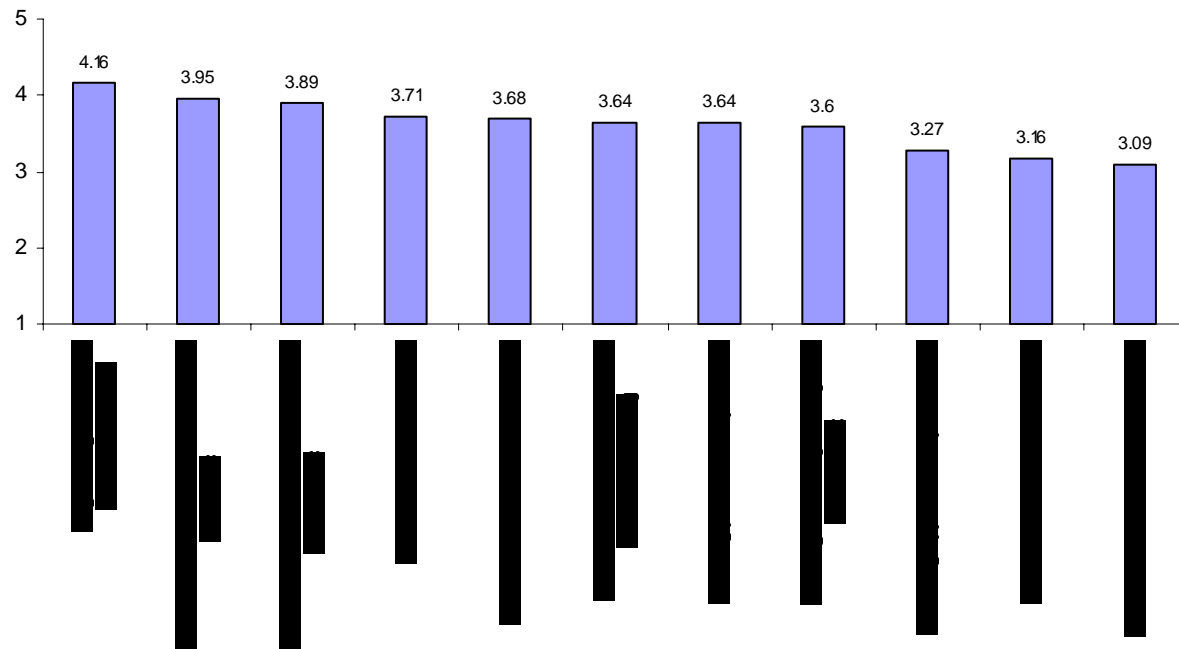


Figure 3: HR Professionals' Perceptions of Organizational Performance and Employee Relations Regarding Employees with Disabilities (n = 46)
(1 = needs improvement -- 5 = we're doing a good job)



extent, organizations also engaged in other activities, such as assigning a person (41.30%) or establishing a new office (15.22%) to be in charge of ADA implementation and compliance.

Human resource professionals report the presence of a variety of ADA related-training activities for their employees. For instance, almost all organizations provide training on non-discriminatory recruitment and hiring practices (93.48%), non-discrimination in the disciplinary process of termination (91.30%), procedures for identifying and securing accommodations for employees with disabilities (88.89%), and identifying essential job functions and developing written job descriptions (76.09%). However, respondents also indicated that human resource professionals are the most prevalent beneficiaries of such training activities in comparison to managers and other workplace personnel. These findings are similar to those reported in previous studies (e.g., Lewis, 1997; SHRM/ Cornell, 1999).

Human resource professionals indicated that training in these areas is often conducted at either new employee orientation or training, on an as-needed basis, or upon promotion to a managerial or supervisory position. In rare instances was training in any of the ADA topics conducted on an on-going basis. For six of the seven identified training areas, the most prevalent response from

human resource professionals was that training was provided on an as-needed basis. When training was provided on a more consistent basis, such as annually, the focus of the training was reported to be disability-awareness and sensitivity training.

Figure 4 below displays data that reflects organizations' orientation to the ADA and factors related to implementing the ADA. Interestingly, human resource professionals most strongly agreed that the potential costs associated with accommodations are worth the investment. They also believe that employees with disabilities are valuable members of their workforce.

Barriers to Employment for People with Disabilities

Human resource professionals were asked to identify the most significant barriers to employment for people with disabilities. The mean scores were calculated for responses to eight survey items (see Figure 5 on the following page). Interestingly, human resource professionals did not view the costs that were associated with employing people with disabilities as barriers in employing these individuals in participating organizations. Employer attitudes were not viewed as a significant barrier, an area that is oftentimes identified as the greatest barrier to employment for individuals with disabilities.

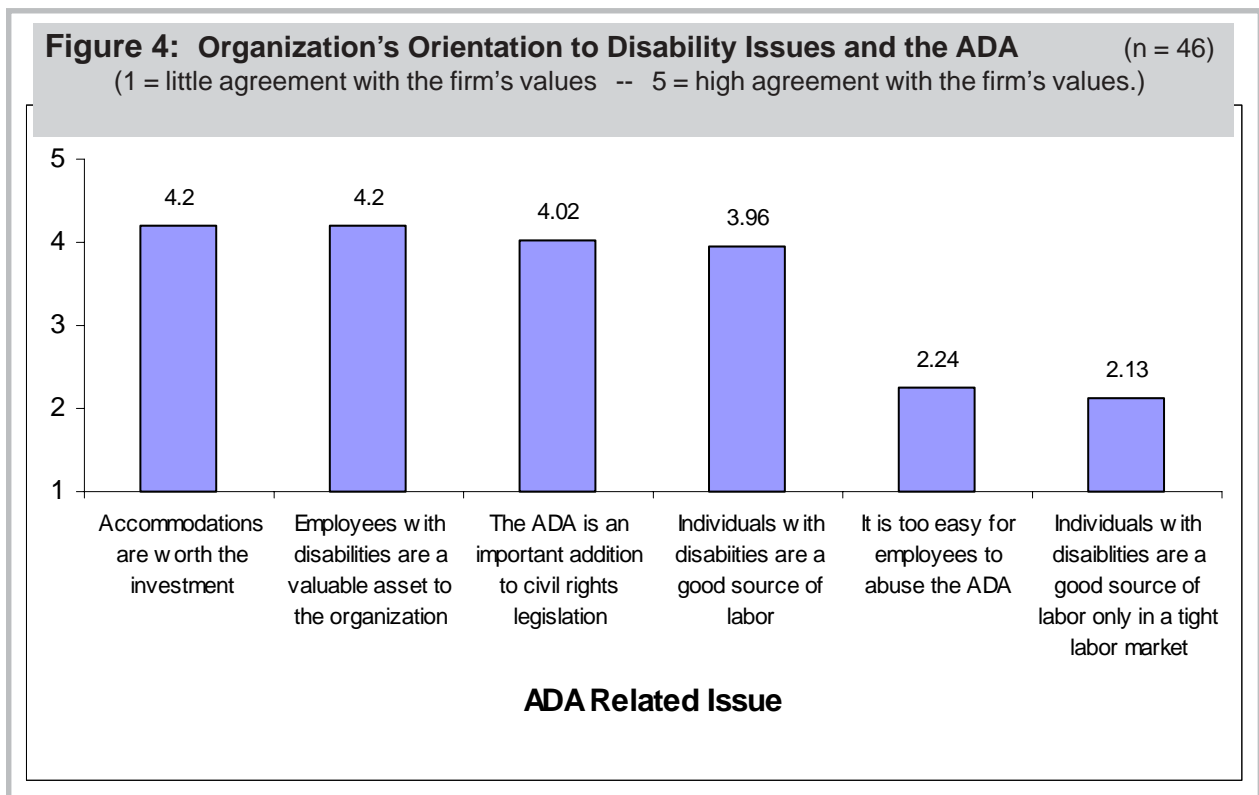
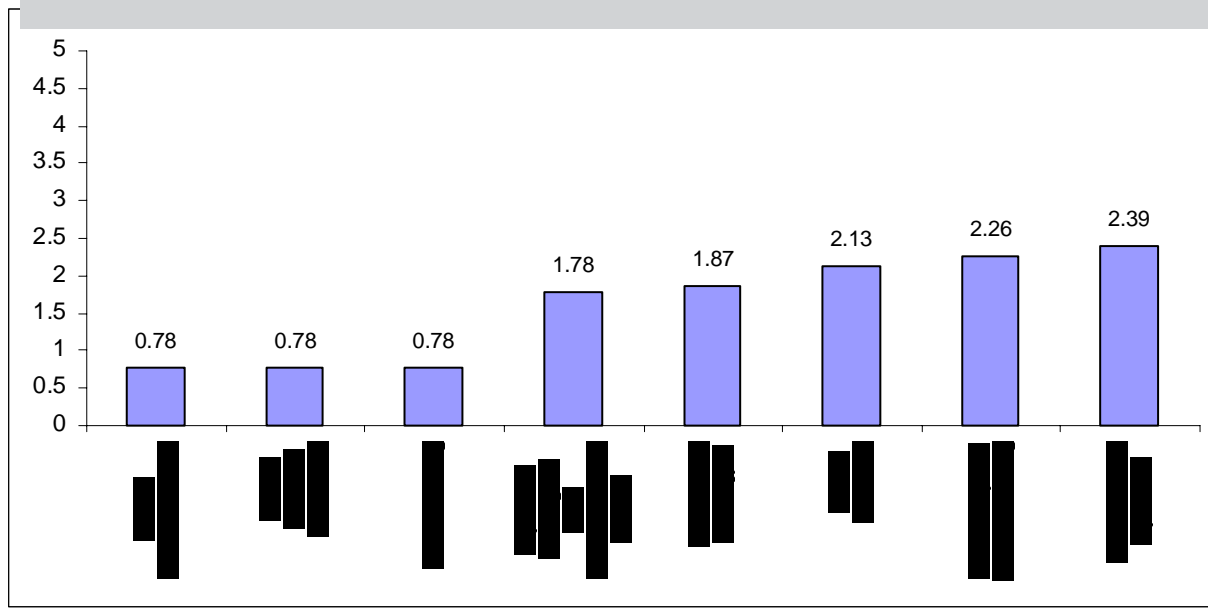


Figure 5: HR Professionals' Perceptions of Barriers to Employment or Advancement for People with Disabilities in Their Organization (n = 46)
 (1 = needs improvement -- 5 = we're doing a good job)



Perception of the Job Skills of Employees with Disabilities and Workplace Impact

Human resource professionals' perceptions of the most significant barriers to employment for people with disabilities provide underlying evidence that many members of organizations may believe people with disabilities lack the necessary skills, education, and training to succeed in today's workforce. However, these three most significant barriers are the same barriers that many nondisabled persons often encounter in their attempts to participate in the labor force (Passmore, 1994).

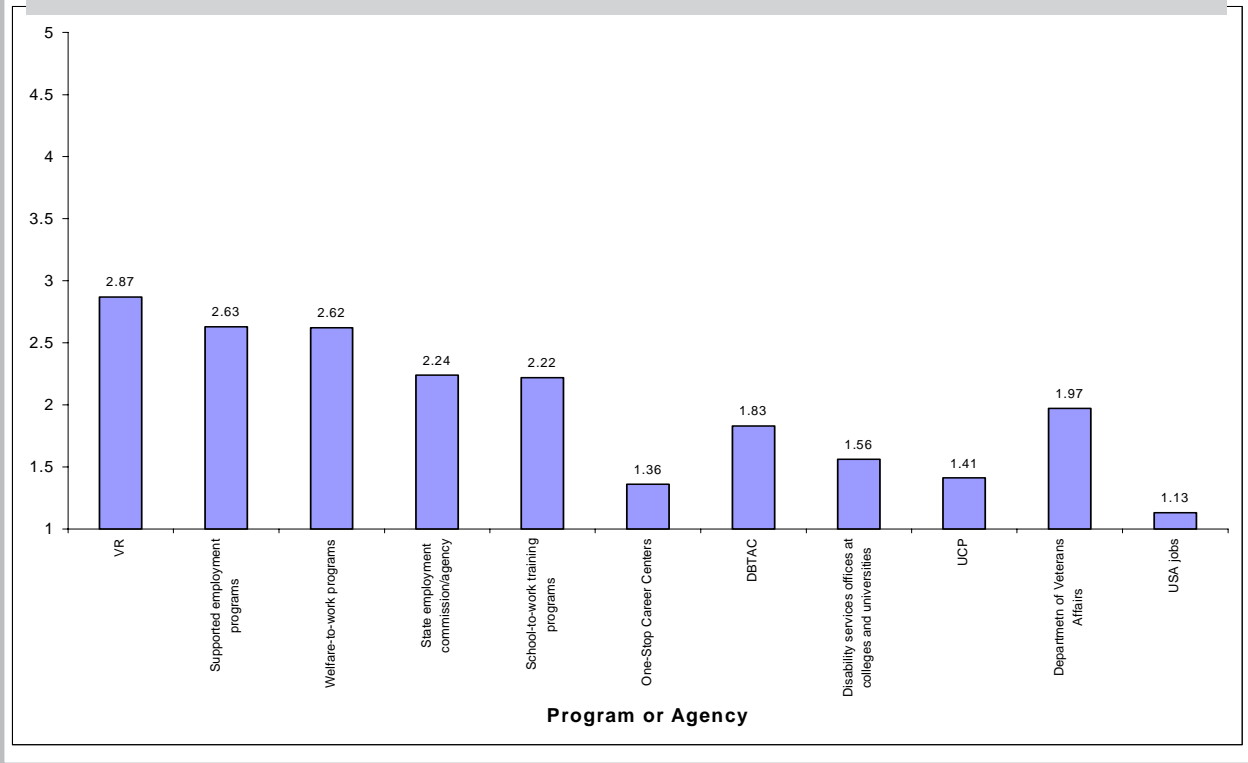
The data also indicate that human resource professionals may have reservations about how employees with disabilities will impact coworker relations and employee morale. For instance, aggregated mean scores for responses to likert-type scale (higher number indicated stronger disagreement with survey item) items pertaining to coworkers, accommodations, and employees with disabilities indicated that human resource professionals were most concerned with coworkers' reactions to the work performance (3.28) and the provision of accommodations (3.65) for employees with disabilities. They were less concerned with whether employees with disabilities would request accommodations when they might not be needed (3.87) or to justify inadequate job performance (3.93).

Role of Human Resource Professionals in Identifying and Providing Accommodations

Human resource professionals identified their role in the accommodation process as being a consultant and information source. A majority of the human resource professionals reported working with supervisors (93.48%) and employees with disabilities (86.96%) to identify and secure accommodations. Slightly less than two-thirds (60.87%) of the respondents indicated having responsibility for referring individuals to external resources to assist in the accommodation process. The data reflect the critical role human resource professionals play in supporting individuals with disabilities in their workforce.

When asked about their awareness and utilization of a variety of programs or agencies that provide training or assistance to people with disabilities seeking employment, human resource professionals indicated they were somewhat familiar with these programs or agencies (see Figure 6 on the following page). It is important to note that the agencies or programs most familiar with human resource professionals were those that most often seek out employers or the business community. Human resource professionals report less familiarity with programs or agencies that offer technical assistance to the business community, such as the Disability Business Technical Assistance Centers (DBTAC).

Figure 6: HR Professionals' Familiarity with Programs or Agencies (n = 46)
 (1 = not very familiar -- 5 = familiar)



DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to provide a preliminary assessment of how human resource professionals in corporate America perceive their respective organizations' performance in relation to including people with disabilities in their workforce. Human resource managers can be considered in many ways as the gatekeepers to employment for people with disabilities, as well as all other potential employees who are seeking employment. When initial inquiries are made about a job within a business or when job applications are filed, it is the human resource professional, personnel director, or personnel specialist who reviews the application and then determines as to whether the applicant meets the minimal qualifications for employment and identifies which department the application will be sent. Usually the specific job application that is being considered within a department is pre-screened and forwarded by a human resource professional for the front-line supervisor to evaluate. Most companies that have a least 50 to 100 employees will utilize this type of applicant prescreening, referral, and

selection. The majority of the 43 companies polled in this study have considerably more than 100 employees.

Human resource professionals have an important role in helping to implement the employment selection process and developing replacement and succession plans for employee advancement and retention within organizations. They have the unique perspective of interacting with all departments and communicating with employees in all levels in the organizational structure on a regular basis, including top management, as well as front-line supervisors. Additionally, complaints related to equal employment opportunity practices, affirmative action violations, and issues pertaining to the Americans with Disabilities Act and reasonable accommodation, as well as discrimination, are all generally routed directly or indirectly through human resource professionals. Therefore, it is essential to understand human resource professionals' perceptions of existing policies and practices pertaining to disability within their corporations.

In this study, a large number of items were identified by human resource professionals that provide us with definitive feedback on how they viewed the salient issues related to the employment of people with

disabilities. For example, after a review of preliminary data, it is clear that the Americans with Disabilities Act is not the barrier that some have indicated it might be; it is also clear that many of the government-funded human service agencies that specialize in employment activities for people with disabilities are not well known by human resource professionals who might benefit from this expertise. The preliminary results of this study yielded at least six major areas that warrant review. A brief discussion of each of these areas follows.

1. Employer Policy and Attitudes

Employers have taken significant steps to address existing stereotypes and attitudes towards workers with disabilities (Unger, 2001). For example, diversity management training programs that contain a component pertaining to disability in the workplace exist in many organizations (McFarlin, Song & Sonntag, 1991). Furthermore, many human resource professionals believe their organizations are doing a good job of creating a disability-friendly work environment, as well as reinforcing managers who embrace diversity-related values (Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994; Levy, Jessop, Rimmerman, Francis, & Levy, 1992).

However, it is possible that those companies who did not feel this way or did not have disability specific training programs, or did not perceive their organization as disability-friendly may have chosen not to participate in the research. Furthermore, the quality of diversity management training programs, or the effectiveness of these programs in driving organizational change, is unknown. Finally, it is unclear whether a company that has a diversity management training program is necessarily hiring that many more people with disabilities, or creating sufficiently more employment opportunities in comparison to organizations which lack such programs.

It is encouraging that such a large percentage of human resource professionals are sensitive to the need for diversity training and have chosen to include a focus on disability in this activity. However, one could argue that in order to really provide substantive impact in this area ongoing technical assistance to front-line supervisors is needed. Our survey was not sensitive enough to determine the specific qualitative factors of different diversity management training programs. However, anecdotally, we

know that most corporations have included disability with other specialty groups protected by equal employment opportunity legislation, such as women, and individuals representing different races or religious beliefs, in their diversity management training programs.

In organizational and systems change, attitudes tend to follow behavior change rather than vice versa (Olson, Cioffi, Yovanoff, & Mank, 2000). Therefore, the more disability-sensitive training programs and affirmative action/equal employment practices for workers with disabilities that are successfully implemented, the greater the likelihood that attitudes towards the work potential of people with disabilities will improve. This is a long-term process that will not be remedied with one law over a relatively short time-period. It will take several years involving corporations representing a wide spectrum establishing not only policies, but also more importantly, managerial practices from the top-down or corporate level that are consistent and demonstrated to be effective.

2. Organizational Policies and Workplace Supports

Businesses feel they are doing a good job of supporting workers with disabilities and arranging reasonable accommodations. There appears to be a very strong commitment to assist temporarily disabled workers in getting back on the job, as well as retaining existing employees with disabilities. The median response from all 46 human resource professionals was 1.00, a perfect agreement score. Furthermore, organizational policies of management seem to suggest that there is an opportunity for workers to be cross-trained and receive additional professional development. However, many human resource professionals believe their organizations could expand their efforts in this area.

Existing organizational policies provide a framework to assess organizational response and performance regarding employee relations with workers who have disabilities. There is strong evidence from human resource professionals that reasonable accommodations can be negotiated effectively and termination issues adequately handled. Also, assigning individuals to appropriate jobs is not a problem. Certainly, these are also issues that are handled initially by the front-line supervisor, not representatives from the human resource department.

It may be that supervisors are in a better position to make these judgements. Discrepancies between human resource professionals and supervisors exist on their organizations' ability to provide accommodations or respond to the support needs of worker with disabilities (Harlan & Robert, 1998; Pitt-Catsoupes & Butterworth, 1995). Future research into front-line supervisor perceptions of organizational performance and employee relations regarding workers with disabilities is warranted.

Recruiting applicants with disabilities was cited by respondents in the survey as the area most in need of improvement regarding organizational performance relating to people with disabilities (Wagar, 1992). This is a very significant finding in that human resource professionals are not saying that they view individuals with disabilities as unable or incompetent; instead, they are concerned about locating qualified individuals and generating a large enough pool of applicants from which to select the most appropriate candidates. Without knowing precisely where to recruit qualified workers with disabilities, it is not surprising that many human resource professionals are struggling with how to get qualified people with disabilities into the most mutually beneficial working environments within their company (e.g., Stein, 1993).

3. The Americans with Disabilities Act

The Americans with Disabilities Act does not appear to be a major barrier for these 43 large businesses in their relations with employees. The human resource professionals that responded feel they understand and support the intent of Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Further, employers indicated that complying with the provisions of ADA has not been difficult and that their employee training programs cover several areas that sufficiently address ADA issues (Jackson, 1993; Thakker, 1997). However, training could be provided on a more consistent basis to their workforce. In light of these findings, it is important to keep in mind that the self-selected nature of employer participants may have impacted the results. For instance, it is probable that employers who believed their organizations were more proactive in implementing the ADA and recruiting and retaining individuals with disabilities chose to participate in the research.

Figure 4 indicates there are several key items in which human resource professionals indicated high levels

of agreement, reporting median scores of 4 out of a perfect score of 5. These areas included the ideas that accommodations were worth the investment; the ADA is an important piece of civil rights legislation; and the idea that individuals with disabilities represent a good source of labor. One limitation of the findings in this area is the inability to control for the response set of social desirability (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997), where participants may respond in a favorable manner to questions of a politically sensitive topic. Yet, when analyzing these results, one needs only to review the plethora of business literature published prior to, or shortly after the passage of the ADA (see e.g., Barnard, 1992; Creasman & Butler, 1991; Darkey, 1990; Jay, 1990; Morrissey, 1991) to realize the progress some employers have made in an effort to proactively implement the ADA. In light of the business community's initial opposition to the ADA, it is encouraging that employers view the ADA favorably and have taken several measures to implement the ADA. The finding that businesses support the role of ADA and that accommodations are worth the investment are critical steps toward increasing employment for persons with disabilities (Walters & Baker, 1995). This finding is, of course, positive and certainly consistent with what the founders and early pioneers associated with the ADA would have wanted to see 10 years later. The ADA has been the most publicized disability law within the last 20 years and was hailed by many as the great civil rights law that would end all employment discrimination and increase the employment rates of persons with disabilities (Pati & Bailey, 1995). In fact, as the Louis Harris Poll (2000) has indicated, people with disabilities continue to be unemployed at a rate in excess of 60%. As noted by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (2000) in its most recent report, it is clear that the ADA has not eradicated unemployment rates. However, understanding the legal provisions of the ADA as well as the general intent is a positive step. The more that corporations understand that disability is an area protected by federal law and expect enforcement of legislation by state and federal government, then the greater the likelihood that there will be employment opportunities for persons with disabilities (McClellan, 1996). However, despite encouraging response to statements about the ADA, the issue remains: How many persons with disabilities are actually being hired, promoted, and retained in corporate America?

4. Costs of Employing Working with Disabilities

The costs of employing workers with disabilities were not viewed as a significant issue for employers in this survey. The costs of accommodations, the additional supervision that may be required and specific workplace training were not viewed as substantive obstacles to employment for persons with disabilities. In fact, a review of Figure 5 indicates that: a) cost of accommodation, b) cost of additional supervision, and c) cost of training were viewed as minimal barriers to employment for individuals with disabilities in the participating 43 corporations. In contrast, human resource professionals indicated that the lack of education, training and specific job skills, and related experience were all viewed as potential obstacles to employment. This response has definite implications for human service providers and One-Stop Career Centers as they reach out to work with business and industry.

These findings are also significant in that one of the most often cited criticisms of the ADA is that the cost for reasonable accommodation would be high, thereby making it far too expensive for companies to hire individuals with disabilities. It is important to remember that the respondents in this preliminary survey were from larger corporations that may have greater financial and internal resources available to support their workers in comparison to business with less than 100 employees. Another factor to consider in light of the findings is that supervisors or managers of employees with disabilities might respond to items concerning the costs of accommodations quite differently than human resource professionals. This might especially hold true, if the costs of accommodations are attributed to a manager or supervisor's work unit, as opposed to cost being attributed to a more general organizational budget. Nevertheless, it is significant that cost was definitively not considered an obstacle.

5. Relationships Between Resource Professionals and Human Service Agencies

One of the most disconcerting findings of these preliminary results is that employers have limited awareness of the wide variety of human service programs intended to promote employment of people with disabilities. While there is a general awareness and familiarity with vocational rehabilitation and supported employment, as indicated in Figure 6, we did not get a sense that these

programs were major sources of recruitment, training, or technical assistance from our interviews with human resource professionals. For example, the One Stop Career Centers, which federal labor legislation has identified as a potential gateway to the workforce for workers with special needs, showed less than average familiarity by these 46 human resource professionals. Even the state employment commissions were not viewed as a resource for employers.

Some business representatives have complained that they do not know where to find workers with disabilities (Brooke et al., 1998). In fact, there may be so many programs dispersed throughout a given community that the human resource professional would not begin to know how or where to look for contact and program information. In fact, many of these human service agencies are not recruiting to send their clients to work.

Nationally, this is a very real issue: How to best enhance the movement of appropriate labor, people with disabilities, into human resource offices filling out applications and interviewing for jobs. From our telephone interviews with human resource professionals, there appears to be a very strong desire or willingness by the business community to hire and support individuals with disabilities in their workforce. The majority of employers reported being involved in various disability specific recruitment activities, such as the Business Leadership Networks and disability-specific job fairs, yet they still reported experiencing difficulty in identifying or recruiting applicants with disabilities. Despite employer involvement in these activities, the data also indicate that employers believed they could improve or expand their recruitment efforts.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study have provided important new information on human resource professionals' perceptions of barriers to employment for people with disabilities in their workforce. Human resource professionals do not believe that the cost of accommodation is an important issue, nor do they view the Americans with Disabilities Act as a major obstacle in the employment of people with disabilities. At the same time, they are very concerned about the most effective recruitment

strategies to entice individuals with disabilities to join their workforce. They indicate that they are unable to find qualified applicants, especially for skilled and professional positions.

Human resource professionals clearly have very limited knowledge about the types of human service programs that are available such as employment programs offered through One Stop Career Centers, the Department of Rehabilitative Services, and other government-funded employment training programs that assist people with disabilities. The government has made enormous investments in assisting individuals with disabilities with their employment needs. Yet, it is clear that a disconnect exists between human service programs and the business community they serve. Human resource professionals in corporate America are not connecting with these programs. There needs to be more effective communication and greater collaboration between human service programs and the business community in an effort to reduce the high unemployment rate of persons with disabilities. Employers would like to know more about how to implement reasonable accom-

modations and workplace supports but at the same time they believe they are doing a pretty good job in this area. There has been an increase in the amount of diversity management programs that have disability specific components. However, it is not clear how intense these programs are and what kind of long-term impact they may have on the recruitment, hiring, and career advancement of employees with disabilities in the company's workforce.

Clearly, the organizations participating in this research have made considerable inroads in developing and implementing organizational policies and procedures pertaining to persons with disabilities in their workforce. Yet, it is unclear the extent to which these policies and practices impact the inclusion of persons with disabilities in their organizations. It is also important to remember that the participating businesses may have considerable more economic and internal resources to devote to the recruitment and retention of persons with disabilities. These findings may serve as an important benchmark for other organizations looking to expand or diversify their workforce or to develop policies and practices to retain or include persons with disabilities in their workforce.

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