

# Chapter 2

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

### *Chapter Overview*

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

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

### **Summary of Findings**

The purpose of the present study was to assess how human resource professionals in corporate America perceive their respective organizations' performance relating to including people with disabilities in their workforce.

- One potential source of labor in the United States is the estimated 30 million working-age people 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]). 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 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).
- 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 expenditure associated with long-term retention on Social Security cash benefits. In FY 1997, the number of people receiving benefits rose to 8 million, resulting in expenditures of \$89 billion dollars. Kruse (117) 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.

- 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 individuals with disabilities, as well as retaining and promoting existing employees with disabilities, human resource professionals play a pivotal role.
- 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).
- 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 really to 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; 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).
- Businesses feel they are doing a good job of supporting workers with disabilities and arranging reasonable accommodations. Business appears to have a very strong commitment to assisting workers who have been temporarily disabled in getting back on the job and retaining existing employees with disabilities. Furthermore, organizational policies of management suggest that there is an opportunity for workers to be cross-trained and receive additional professional development. However, many human resource professionals believe their organization could expand their efforts in this area.
- Existing organizational policies provide a framework for assessing 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, termination issues handled adequately, and individuals assigned to appropriate jobs without 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 do exist on their organizations' ability to provide accommodations or respond to the support needs of workers with disabilities (Harlan & Robert, 1998; Pitt-Catsoupes & Butterworth, 1995). Future research is warranted into front-line supervisor perceptions of organizational performance and employee relations regarding workers with disabilities.

- The Americans with Disabilities Act does not appear to be a major barrier for these 46 large businesses in their relations with employees. The human resource professionals that responded felt that they understand and support the intent of the 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 on the ADA could be provided to all of their workforce on a more consistent basis. 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 chose to participate in the research believed their organizations were more proactive in implementing the ADA and also recruiting and retaining individuals 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, additional supervision that may be required, and specific workplace training were not viewed as substantive obstacles to employment of workers with disabilities. In fact, cost of accommodation, additional supervision, and training were viewed as minimal barriers to employment for people with disabilities in the participating corporations. In contrast, human resource professionals indicated that the lack of education, training, specific job skills, and related experience of people with disabilities 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.
- 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, 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.

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## Conclusion

The results of this study have provided important new information on human resource professionals' perceptions of barriers to employment for people with disabilities within their workforce. They 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 that they do not know 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, Departments of Rehabilitative Services, and other government-funded employment training programs that assist people with disabilities. The government has made enormous investments in assisting people 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 people with disabilities. Employers would like to know more about how to implement reasonable accommodations and workplace supports, but at the same time, they believe they are doing a 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 each company's workforce.

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



## Chapter 2: Chapter Questions

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1. Which of the following best describe(s) the labor force participation of people with disabilities.
  - a. The majority of people with disabilities do not want to participate in the labor force, primarily because earned income will impact the amount of money they receive from their disability benefit.
  - b. Many individuals with disabilities are only able to perform specific types of work and are not qualified for most jobs.
  - c. People with disabilities are not participating in the labor force at the same rate or to the same extent as their nondisabled peers.
  - d. both a and b.
  
2. Which of the following is/are true:
  - a. High unemployment among people with disabilities places a financial burden on society.
  - b. The number of people receiving disability benefits has soared over the last 20 years.
  - c. Progressive laws like the American's with Disabilities Act and the Workforce Investment Act have significantly increased workplace entry for people with disabilities.
  - d. both a and b.
  
3. According the Society of Human Resource Management, the three vital functions of human resource professionals are:
  - a. advisory, service, and control.
  - b. posting job openings, establishing selection criteria, and training.
  - c. human resource development, establishing policies and procedures, and training new employees.
  - d. none of the above.
  
4. True or False: Research reveals that employers have adopted or complied with the American's with Disabilities Act, yet this has had limited impact on employment outcomes for workers with disabilities.
  
5. True or False: People with disabilities and advocates alike believe that the American's with Disabilities Act has lead to positive changes in employer attitudes and perceptions of people with disabilities.

6. Which of the following statements most accurately reflects the human resource professionals' beliefs about their organizations' policies and commitment to including people with disabilities in the workforce?
- a. Human resources professionals agree that organizational policies reflect a commitment to returning workers who are disabled back to work.
  - b. Human resource professionals are certain that policies reflect an attempt to attract people with disabilities, although their organization could do a better job at negotiating accommodations.
  - c. Human resource professionals give their organization's performance highest ratings on hiring people with disabilities, promoting workers with disabilities, and recruiting individuals with disabilities.
  - d. None of the above.
7. True or False: The majority of human resource professionals surveyed felt that their organizations are doing an adequate job of creating more inclusive work cultures. However, there is some indication that organizations could improve or enhance their efforts in this area.
8. Human resource professionals strongly agree that:
- a. potential costs of accommodations are high and unreasonable.
  - b. employees with disabilities experience high turnover in their organization.
  - c. potential costs of accommodations are worth the investment.
  - d. both b and c
9. True or False: Human resource professionals are not familiar with programs and agencies that offer technical assistance to the business community.
10. The results of this study indicate that:
- a. businesses are concerned about effective recruitment strategies and are not able to find qualified applicants for skilled and professional positions.
  - b. the American's with Disabilities Act does not appear to be a major obstacle in the employment of people with disabilities.
  - c. the cost of accommodations of employing workers with disabilities was not viewed as a significant issue for employers in this survey.
  - d. all of the above.
11. True or False: Although there has been an increase in diversity management programs, it is not yet clear how intense these programs are and what kind of long-term impact they have on recruitment, hiring, and career advancement among people with disabilities.



## Chapter 2: Chapter Answers

1. The following statement best describes the labor force participation of people with disabilities.
  - ♦ People with disabilities are not participating in the labor force at the same rate or to the same extent as their nondisabled peers.
2. The following statements are true:
  - ♦ High unemployment among people with disabilities places a financial burden on society.
  - ♦ The number of people receiving disability benefits has soared over the last 20 years.
3. According the Society of Human Resource Management, the three vital functions of human resource professionals are advisory, service, and control.
4. **TRUE** -- Research reveals that employers have adopted or complied with the American's with Disabilities Act, yet this has had limited impact on employment outcomes for workers with disabilities.
5. **FALSE** -- **The correct statement is:** People with disabilities and advocates alike believe that the American's with Disabilities Act has done little to change employers attitudes and perceptions toward people with disabilities.
6. The following statement most accurately reflects the human resource professionals' beliefs about their organizations' policies and commitment to including people with disabilities in the workforce.
  - ♦ Human resources professionals agree that organizational policies reflect a commitment to returning workers who are disabled back to work.

7. **TRUE** -- The majority of human resource professionals surveyed felt that their organizations are doing an adequate job of creating more inclusive work cultures. However, there is some indication that organizations could improve or enhance their efforts in this area.
8. Human resource professionals strongly agree that **potential costs of accommodations are worth the investment**,
9. **TRUE** -- Human resource professionals are not familiar with programs and agencies that offer technical assistance to the business community.
10. The preliminary results of this study indicate that:
- ♦ **businesses are concerned about effective recruitment strategies and are not able to find qualified applicants for skilled and professional positions.**
  - ♦ **the American's with Disabilities Act does not appear to be a major obstacle in the employment of people with disabilities.**
  - ♦ **the cost of accommodations of employing workers with disabilities was not viewed as a significant issue for employers in this survey.**
11. **TRUE** -- Although there has been an increase in diversity management programs, it is not yet clear how intense these programs are and what kind of long-term impact they have on recruitment, hiring, and career advancement among people with disabilities.



# **HR Professionals and the Employment of People with Disabilities**

**Human resource professionals  
report that they have very little  
information related to:**

- One Stop Career Centers;
- Departments of Vocational Rehabilitation; and
- Government sponsored training programs for people with disabilities.

# **HR Professionals and the Employment of People with Disabilities**

**Effective communication and  
greater collaboration needs to  
occur to bridge the huge  
disconnect between human  
service programs and the  
business community  
that they serve.**

# **HR Professionals and the Employment of People with Disabilities**

**Employers report that while they  
feel they are doing a “pretty  
good job” with reasonable  
accommodations, they  
want more information on:**

- Reasonable  
Accommodations and
- Workplace Supports.

# **HR Professionals and the Employment of People with Disabilities**

**There has been an increase in  
the amount of diversity  
management programs that  
have disability specific  
information.**