

Investigating Understandings of Employment Practices for Persons with Disabilities

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■ A quick look:

According to 2019 U.S. Labor Department statistics, persons with disabilities have a much lower employment rate (20.8%) than persons without disabilities (69.2%). Recently, researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 63 staff members, managers, and employment specialists from a large organization that has exhibited a high quality of hiring and supporting individuals with disabilities to gain an understanding of their individual views of disability and hiring practices. What they found was that there were differences in their understandings, motivations, rationales, support strategies, and concerns in regards to the employment of persons with disabilities. Understanding these differences and internalizations is important in the enhancement, expansion of opportunities, and employment support for persons with disabilities.

■ Key Findings:

- ▶ Interview participants articulated their views of hiring and the employment of individuals with disabilities in two ways: charity-oriented or human resources oriented. Most used elements of both in their understanding of their work.
- ▶ The charity-oriented approach tends to rationalize the understanding of the employment of persons with disabilities in the following ways:
 - Employees with disabilities are seen as “different” from employees without.
 - Employees should be treated in an objectively equal way.
 - The staff/organization was “giving” something to the employees with disabilities as opposed to viewing it as the persons with disabilities providing labor.
 - Helping people with disabilities is the “right thing to do” or faith-based altruism.
 - People with disabilities are seen as having special needs, viewed as having a struggle as opposed to skills.
 - Hiring people with disabilities is viewed as good faith despite any costs associated with hiring individuals with disabilities.
- ▶ The human-resource-oriented approach tends to rationalize the understanding of the employment of persons with disabilities in the following ways:
 - The employees with disabilities are well-liked, respected, and seen as assets.
 - There is a focus on the equity of employees with disabilities, they are treated equally while acknowledging their differences.
 - Employees with disabilities should have what they need for success, the same as employees without disabilities.

- Employees with disabilities have unique skills and talents that can be an asset to an employer/ business/organization.
- Hiring persons with disabilities strengthen organizational culture and the bottom-line.

■ Putting It into Practice:

The two approaches described above tend to look at the hiring and employment of persons with disabilities through different lenses. The charity- oriented viewpoint is seeing the individual with a disability as having a deficit that needs to be “helped” or “lifted up.” Whereas the human resources-oriented view is seeing the hiring and employment of the individual as mutually beneficial and seeing the value in the individual’s skills, abilities, and talents. While some of the individuals interviewed during the research process had extreme viewpoints leaning one way or the other, most had a combination of charity and human resource views. Organizations can increase the support for the hiring and successful employment of individuals with disabilities by:

- Implementing disability awareness and sensitivity training for all members of an organization.
- Interviewing the individuals in the organization with disabilities to understand their perspective on workplace culture and acceptance.
- Encouraging employees without disabilities to acknowledge and confront their own biases so that they can re-establish their views to become more inclusive, effectively helping promote a more inclusive workplace as a whole.

■ More About This Research:

Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with participants across four hospitals from a large, multi-site healthcare organization with demonstrated excellence in hiring persons with disabilities. The healthcare system owns, manages, or joint ventures 19 acute-care hospitals, 1 psychiatric hospital, 5 nursing care facilities, 4 assisted living facilities, and 14 home care and hospice services with more than 22,000 employees on the East Coast. Interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes and were conducted in a private setting at the research site.

Learn More ■ Visit the Rehabilitation Research & Training Center on Employer Practices for Individuals with Disabilities at ep.vcurrtrc.org

Questions? Feedback? ■ Do you have questions or feedback about putting this research into practice? We’re waiting to hear from you! Send us your [questions or feedback](#)