

# Health Care Executive Perceptions of Hiring and Retention Practices of People With Disabilities: Results From Executive Focus Groups

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## Abstract

The supply-side approach to providing services without taking into account employer practices has not been effective in achieving meaningful, competitive, and integrated employment outcomes for people with disabilities. This focus neglects the fact that disability and employment is a two-way process with businesses being accountable for such demand-side factors as establishing better hiring, retention, and advancement practices. To initiate the identification of effective employer practices, this article shares the results of two executive focus groups that were conducted in a large health care organization, across four individual hospitals, with a documented success rate of hiring and retaining people with disabilities (PWDs). The purpose of the focus groups was to explore executive perceptions of their organization's success at integrating PWDs throughout their work force. Results are explored through five identified themes: (a) organizational mission guided decision-making concerning the employment of PWDs, (b) executives living the mission through their daily inclusive behaviors led to employing PWDs, (c) organizational values were important to employing PWDs, (d) the organization benefited from employment of PWDs, and (e) employing PWDs benefited organization staff and the surrounding community. The results of these executive focus groups provide an initial glimpse into the culture and practices of a highly effective organization.

## Keywords

focus group, business, employers, people with disabilities, hiring practices

As the U.S. workforce is becoming increasingly diverse and legislation aims to increase the amount of diversity in workplaces, efforts to promote diversity and inclusion are gaining focus in business and human resource management literature (Shore et al., 2018). While this increased focus has broadened the understanding of ethnic, racial, and gender differences, there has been much less emphasis on the inclusion of people with disabilities (PWDs) into the workforce, a diverse group capable of participating in and contributing to corporate culture (Beatty et al., 2019; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2008). With the population of PWDs in the workforce expected to increase, better understanding the needs of and developing inclusive practices for PWDs is a critical research need (Kensbock & Boehm, 2016).

Unfortunately, the employment of PWDs lags far behind the employment of individuals without disabilities. Traditionally, individuals with disabilities are a group that is underrepresented and/or marginalized in the workforce. According to the National Trends in Disability Employment

(nTIDE) September 2019 Jobs Report, the employment-to-population rate for working-age adults with disabilities (31.4%) is significantly lower than the employment rate of working-age adults without disabilities (Institute of Disability, 2019). The presence of individuals with disabilities in the workplace is expected to increase, and currently, there is a gap in the research on leadership styles that foster inclusion of individuals with disabilities (Kensbock & Boehm, 2016). The majority of prior research on promoting employment focuses on the supply side of the labor pool of

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individuals with disabilities rather than the demand-side (Chan, Strauser, Gervery, & Lee, 2010)—the supply-side consisting of individuals with disabilities and those who support them in obtaining and maintaining employment and the demand side being businesses in the community, their hiring needs, capacities, and practices. While this situation is influenced by multiple factors affecting the employment of PWDs, the demand side of this equation has received little attention in research. Nevertheless, there is evidence that business chief executives' and leaders' attitudes toward hiring PWDs has important impact on the middle managers hiring decisions (Burke et al., 2013; Chan, Strauser, Gervery, & Lee, 2010; Chan, Strauser, Maher, et al., 2010).

To address the high unemployment rate of individuals with disabilities, it is necessary to consider factors related to organizational needs and culture; focusing on one side of the problem is not enough (Chan, Strauser, Gervery, & Lee, 2010). To further support this claim, Chan, Strauser, Gervery, and Lee (2010) report on focus group research out of the Office of Disability and Employment Policy (ODEP) that called for more research into employer perceptions of disability as a critical first step in improving demand-side research (Domzal et al., 2008). Chan, Strauser, Gervery, and Lee (2010) report that prior survey research into employer perspectives highlights the need for further examination of employer perspectives on PWDs and that misperceptions and biases abound in relation to PWDs, their hypothesized need for support, lack of qualifications, and potential risks such as litigation or other potential costs to organizations, questions to which we have attended in this study.

The purpose of this article is to explore how executive management teams can develop a corporate culture that supports the decision to include PWDs into their workforce. We will provide an overview of the limited research base on employment for PWDs, and share and discuss the results of two executive focus groups, with an emphasis on acute care hospital settings.

## **The Role of Management in Employment Practices for PWDs**

Prior research conducted with employers, employed PWDs, and placement professionals found that work culture plays the largest role in supporting a culture that is inclusive of PWDs. Work culture consists of an organization's norms, values, and policies in relation to diversity (Gilbride et al., 2003), which is the definition that we operationalize in this study. For example, Stone and Colella (1996) conducted a seminal study on corporate culture and the employment of PWDs, and found three variables that impact manager's decisions to hire: sociopolitical context, features of the corporate organizational climate (norms, values, and policies), and manager's attitudes toward PWDs (Araten-Bergman,

2016). This study inspired research that began to focus more on the perspective of the demand-side and its characteristics related to employing PWDs. For example, Fraser et al. (2010) found that in addition to more support from the supply side and tax incentives, training to address staff biases would provide the most support for the employment of PWDs. Lengnick-Hall (2008) identified the need to increase education and training on disability, support from legislation such as tax incentives for hiring PWDs, and specifically the importance of top level management in supporting the employment of PWDs. A relatively recent survey study by Erickson et al. (2014) indicated that the inclusion of disability in diversity initiatives, tax credits and incentives to hiring, disability awareness training, and policies that allow for accommodations and flexibility are promising practices in promoting the employment and inclusion of PWDs.

Across these studies, management buy-in and sustained investment was demonstrated as necessary to change employment practices. Executive management has the ability to influence corporate culture (i.e., norms, values, policies) and the subsequent inclusion and hiring of PWDs. An emphasis on fostering a culture of cooperation, social justice, and egalitarianism starts at the top and makes it more likely that PWDs will be included (Fraser et al., 2010; Stone & Colella, 1996). Finally, throughout this previous research, there was an awareness that visible, top management support is integral to the inclusion and employment of PWDs (Erickson et al., 2014; Fraser et al., 2010; Gilbride et al., 2003; Lengnick-Hall, 2008). However, methodologically, the majority of this initial research is survey-based and conducted with the intent to summarize employer attitudes and perceived barriers to employing PWDs. A smaller amount of research has looked at comparing information reported in surveys to actual hiring practices and statistics. Through this study, we seek to narrow this gap through the use of focus groups, which allow organizational decision-makers to share their perspectives more generatively. Our intention is to compare and contrast these emergent perspectives with previous summative data. The following analysis of two executive focus groups is the first in publication to focus on how executive management in a large organization with success in employing PWDs make meaning of hiring and incorporating PWDs in their organization. Prior survey and focus group research have not been able to provide such an in-depth analysis of a large organization, from the top-down, and able to directly link organizational characteristics to hiring practices and statistics. One of the reasons this type of analysis was possible is due to a prior 10-year research relationship between research staff and the organization, Project SEARCH plus ASD supports (PS + ASD), which focused on identifying supports that facilitate employment for young adults with autism (Wehman et al., 2019). In this study, we are guided by the following main research question: How do

executive leaders in a large organization with demonstrated success in employing PWDs make meaning of their employment practices for PWDs? The following analytic questions were utilized to guide thematic analysis of the executive focus group sessions:

1. What influences leader decision-making in the employment of PWDs?
2. How do executives create a culture that is accepting of PWDs?
3. What benefits do leaders see from the decision to employ PWDs?

## Method

### Participants/Setting

A total of 27 participants were included in the two executive focus groups. Participants were recruited across four different hospitals that are part of the larger overall health care organization. The first focus group meeting included the majority of the executives from three centrally located hospitals in an eastern seaboard state. The second executive focus group included attendees from a smaller hospital serving a different area of the state and was attended by four executives.

Combining demographic data from both focus groups, 55% ( $n = 15$ ) of the focus group participants were male and 44% ( $n = 12$ ) were female. The mode for age range was 50 to 59 years. All but one participant ( $n = 26$ ) had a graduate or professional degree. In addition, 82% of participants were Caucasian Non-Hispanic ( $n = 22$ , 82%), 7% ( $n = 2$ ) were African American, 7% ( $n = 2$ ) were Asian American, and 4% ( $n = 1$ ) was Other. The mean length of employment with the organization was 12.44 years ( $SD = 10.81$ ) with the median being 8 years. All four hospitals were represented across the two focus groups and most participants were in Administrative Services. The mode and median number of coworkers with disabilities that executives worked with was 2 (44%). The number ranged from 0 ( $n = 5$ ) to 7 ( $n = 1$ ). The mean time working with people with disabilities (PWDs) was 4.83 years ( $SD = 2.36$ ), median was 4, and the mode was 3. The range for time working with PWDs was 0 to 33 years. Table 1 provides demographic information for each focus group.

### Procedures

This study received approval from the university's research organization's Institutional Review Board and the health care organization's internal research review system. Meetings were held between university research staff and health care organization staff to discuss research study protocol and ensure willingness to participate. The principal

investigator met with Human Resource (HR) management to identify hospitals that would be considered high-performing in terms of hiring and including PWDs. The principal investigator then contacted the regional Vice President of Human Resources to assist in scheduling the focus groups during already scheduled monthly leadership meetings, thus the participation rate of these executives with dense schedules was high. The two executive focus group meetings were held to accommodate the geographic locations of executives across the four identified high-performing hospitals. HR sent an IRB-approved email inviting executives at the four hospitals to participate in one of the two focus groups. Emails were sent to potential meeting attendees with a letter alerting them of the research project and a consent form to review.

The mean length of time for each focus group was 55 min. Research staff developed five open-ended questions prior to the focus group sessions (see Table 2). All members of the research team received a 2-hr training session on *concept mapping* and held one additional training meeting prior to conducting the focus groups to review procedures (Guichard et al., 2017). Throughout the meetings, visuals were used to facilitate the focus group process; specifically, the use of concept mapping to ensure that researchers were adequately capturing focus group responses. Questions 1 and 3 were answered using concept mapping and Questions 2, 4, and 5 were explored through bullet point lists. After Questions 1 and 3, the interviewer stopped, and the note takers facilitated the mapping (connecting and clarifying connections) of concepts that had been noted on the paper, which produced an overall understanding of executive's thoughts on these two questions. Thus, the executive leaders could visually see the benefits gained by employing people with disabilities (Question 1) and then later clarify and see the elements of their organization and organizational processes that made this health organization successful at employing people with disabilities.

### Data Analysis

The research team employed a qualitative data analysis procedure, concept mapping. Concept mapping involves visually depicting overall themes and keywords from group responses to focus group questions, and using the visuals to observe and confirm linkages between participant responses (Guichard et al., 2017). The use of mapping techniques in focus group data collection facilitates buy-in to the project illustrates the effects of initiatives and allows for clarifying the responses to increase the accuracy of coding and analysis of data (Burke et al., 2005; Chazdon et al., 2017; Guichard et al., 2017). In fact, the use of concept mapping also allowed for on-the-spot validation by focus group members to further enhance the trustworthiness of the data. Concept mapping allowed the research team to produce a

**Table 1.** Demographics by Focus Group.

Category	Focus group 1	Focus group 2
<i>n</i>	23	4
Age ranges	1 person: 20–29 years 2 persons: 30–39 years 3 persons: 40–49 years 13 persons: 50–59 years 4 persons 60–69 years	1 person: 20–29 years 0 person: 30–39 years 1 person: 40–49 years 1 person: 50–59 years 1 person: 60–69 years
Gender	10 Females 13 Males	2 Females 2 Males
Education	1 Bachelor's 22 Graduate/Professional	4 Graduate/Professional
Race and Ethnicity	2 African American 1 Asian American 19 Caucasian Non-Hispanic 1 Other	1 Asian American 3 Caucasian Non-Hispanic
Years employed at organization	13.25 years ( <i>SD</i> = 11.19) Range = 1.0–34.0 years	6.28 years ( <i>SD</i> = 5.89) Range = 0.60–14 years
Position	18 Administrative Services 1 Informational Services 1 Support Services 1 Other 1 More than one is of work	4 Administrative Services
Number of coworkers with disability (CWD)	Mode = 2 Range = 0–7 5 did not work with CWD	Mode = 2 Range = 2–3
Amount of time have worked with CWD	11.71 years ( <i>SD</i> = 10.29)	4.83 years ( <i>SD</i> = 2.36)
Relationship to worker	5—Coworker 2—Supervisor 13—Other 3 More than one type of relationship	1—Coworker 3—Other

**Table 2.** Focus Group Questions.

1. What are the benefits of employing individuals with disabilities at *your* hospital?
2. How has your organization's mission and vision guided the employment of individuals with disabilities?
3. What do you believe makes Bon Secours successful at employing people with disabilities?
4. What feedback have you received about Bon Secours employing people with disabilities?
5. How do you believe that your customer's perception of your hospital changed as a result of hiring people with disabilities?

pictorial view of the focus group members' ideas and concepts and how they are interrelated during the focus group (Trochim & McLinden, 2017). Focus group members were asked to verify that the concept map graphically depicted their individual views on the topic of hiring and retaining PWDs in their health care organizations. At the conclusion of the focus group, the concept maps, bulleted responses, audio recordings, and verbatim transcripts of the focus group sessions were sent to research staff trained in data analysis. The researcher also interviewed each of the research team members who facilitated the focus groups to further triangulate the meaning contained in the data and ensure the process of concept mapping was conducted with fidelity. This contributed to the researcher's confidence in

the trustworthiness of the raw data. The researcher also observed the degree of convergence and divergence between the two focus groups. Interestingly, there was very little divergence noted between the two groups. The researcher proceeded to develop axial codes from the analysis of focus group artifacts, notes, and recorded transcriptions. Codes were then grouped into themes and frequencies were computed for organizational values. QSR International's "NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software" (2012) 10 Software was used (Wong, 2008). Furthermore, the data were audited by a researcher with training in qualitative methods who was not a part of that research team to verify the path from raw data and artifacts to codes, then to themes. The auditor noted the convergence of themes across the two

focus group interviews and the preponderance of data across participants that supported the identification of the themes.

## Results

Five primary themes emerged from executive focus group data: Theme 1, *organizational mission guides decision-making concerning the employment of PWDs*; Theme 2, *living the mission leads to employing PWDs*; Theme 3, *organizational values were important to employing PWDs*; Theme 4, *the organization benefited from employing PWDs*; and finally, leaders mentioned that *employing PWDs benefited organizational staff and the surrounding community*, Theme 5. The following summary, organized by theme with direct quotations from focus group participants, will explicate these findings.

### Theme 1: Organizational Mission Guides the Decision-Making Concerning the Employment of PWDs

Executive leaders frequently mentioned the organization's mission and vision; history and identity as being driving forces in the decision to employ PWDs. In fact, there was total consensus among all focus group participants of this as a central theme that contributed to their organization's success in the hiring and retention of PWDs. The mission is ingrained in these executives and provides a guide for how they conduct themselves daily as well as a perspective on how they view individuals and carry out their daily management activities. Mission is the underlying reason that executives believed their organization made the active decision to employ and work with PWDs. However, it is important to mention that leaders frequently mention that the mission underlies their beliefs and views of all staff, to include all diverse groups, not just PWDs. "Our mission and vision creates a culture," said one executive; another added, "it is an overlay to how we think . . . [I]t provides our lens through which we see the world. Our perspective" (SMQ2P2). In addition, "mission and vision creates a culture here when we're asked if we can employ someone with a disability, our answer is, let's find a way. It's just our culture" (SMQ2P3). The mission created a culture in which executives felt that it was never a question of whether to decide "yes" or "no" to hire, but rather only a question of "how" to do it successfully.

The original intent of the organization was to treat others, particularly the marginalized, with dignity and respect. This mind-set easily transferred to PWDs as a traditionally marginalized group. "Our mission is to provide good help to those in need, including the poor, the marginalized and the underserved. And so, many times, people with disabilities are marginalized" (SMQ2P1). Executives reflected that

their mission was not necessarily one of a health care organization, but was rooted in ministry and commitment to the surrounding community. Serving marginalized groups serves the greater good:

*[T]he struggle of a more humane world is not an option. I do think that phrase really sums up why this works for us. The frame is that we want to create a more humane world. We do that through health delivery, but there's other ways we can do that. (SMQ2P9)*

Other ways referring to the idea that, despite being categorized as a health care organization, there are other services that fulfill the organization's mission such as deciding to include and employ PWDs within their organization. This decision not only aligns with their mission but also the population that the organization strives to serve as one executive reflected, "our patients are the least compliant, the most sick, chronically ill, and so we've already, we take care of those patients, and so when we look at employing patients with disabilities, it's just a small step for acceptance" (MVQ3P1).

According to the mission of this organization, providing care means more than solely curing illness in the marginalized, their mission is also to bring wholeness and health to people and the communities in which they reside. Health for these folks was more than the physical body, it was the whole person which also included spiritual, psychological, and social dimensions. Providing employment is just another means, in addition to health care, in which to provide this service to their surrounding community and PWDs and to adhere to their mission.

### Theme 2: Living the Mission Leads to Employing PWDs

The organization's mission, as described previously, provided the overarching lens through which the executives viewed their decision to actively employ and retain PWDs within their organization. Many of the executives across both focus groups spoke about the importance of this theme in the hiring and retention of PWDs. To these executives, the mission is more than words and an abstract concept, it is carried out daily through leader actions and social modeling of organizational expectations of acceptance and inclusion to their employees. They actively live and socialize their staff to the mission daily through their leadership and overt behaviors. One way this is carried out is in daily "huddles" that are held in every unit and department, for every shift:

We reinforce our mission with our employees every single day. And, we talk about it, who we are, where we are, what we're here for every single day, and I think that is why we're successful because we keep that at the forefront of everything we do. (MVQ3P2)

**Table 3.** Organizational Mission and Vision Statements.**Mission statement**

The Mission of Bon Secours Health System is to bring compassion to health care and to be Good Help to Those in Need®, especially those who are poor and dying.

As a System of caregivers, we commit ourselves to help bring people and communities to health and wholeness as part of the healing ministry of Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church (<https://bonsecours.com/richmond/about-us/bon-secours-health-system/our-mission>)

**Vision statement**

*Inspired by the healing ministry of Jesus Christ and the Charism of Bon Secours . . .*

As a prophetic Catholic health ministry, we will partner with our communities to create a more humane world, build health and social justice for all, and provide exceptional value for those we serve (<https://bonsecours.com/richmond/about-us/bon-secours-health-system/our-mission>)

Huddles are short meetings held at the beginning of shifts where the CEO sends messages/announcements to staff and positive stories are shared with demonstrations of staff carrying out the ministry and mission. Huddles are always concluded the same way, reminding organization staff of their mission and purpose.

The executives shared that their leadership behaviors are a driving force in actively living the mission and ensuring that staff are socialized to the mission. Members of leadership serve as role models and set the expectation for the rest of the organization's employee base; it is more about showing and modeling expectations rather than telling:

From a leadership standpoint, because I think people cue off their leader. I think we say it, it's more important what we don't say. We expect you to be patient, to be forgiving, to be reflective. To be understanding. And if you don't, you probably are in the wrong culture. (SMQ3P3)

Executives were intentional about selecting staff to join the organization, "we screen employees, we're intentional about bringing people in who fit our mold, if you will, from a cultural standpoint." Success in this organization demands assimilation to cultural expectations, "it's pretty clear that over time, the people who do well in our culture are the people who embody those attributes. And I think that infuses everyone to kind of get onboard" (SMQ3P3).

Executives are intentional and mindful of the culture they are building and maintaining.

Executives mentioned that employing PWDs provided a way to "walk the walk" (MVQ1P2) of their mission for organization employees and the surrounding community rather than just talk about it. Hiring individuals who are historically considered marginalized, and tend to be both undervalued and underemployed, was seen as active choice to not only talk about the organization's mission but to act on it, "it's really a public display of saying what our mission is and really living it" (SMQ1P16).

Executives made the decision to "value people where they are" (MVQ3P2). Executives reflected on their experience with PS + ASD which resulted in the organization

making the decision to employ some of the young adults that participated in internships hosted by the organization. Employment opportunities were developed to facilitate success for these youth with autism and job descriptions were tailored to the needs of the business and the skills of the individuals. This was possible in part due to the fact that it is a health care organization with "a variety of jobs and tasks . . . when something doesn't match, we find the will to better match. Not to give up" (SMQ3P5). Thus, living the mission was a willingness to create opportunities for these individuals that enabled them to experience success. In sum, the executives were immersed in their own messaging of the mission, vision, and organizational values, "from the mission vision standpoint, we are very inordinate in what we put into intentional behavioral messaging in terms of this is what we want to see you do" (SMQ2P10). Leadership is intentional in their expectations for staff and they serve as role models for inclusion and acceptance.

### ***Theme 3: Organizational Values Are Important to Including PWDs***

This organization has eight guiding values that provide a third layer of support for the inclusion of PWDs in addition to the mission statement and actively living the mission (see Table 3). Specifically, four of the organization's eight guiding values—compassion, integrity, justice, and respect—were mentioned most frequently in relation to employing PWDs (Table 4). Values inform how this organization chooses to view diverse groups as individuals with unique contributions and skill sets. This was also a theme where there was unanimous agreement among participants. This was evidenced in the beginning of the focus groups, a demographics question asked executives to report how many PWDs they work with and this was difficult for them to answer. As one participant explained,

That question created a silo or barrier that I don't think about on my day to day actions here. They're individuals, people I work with. And I don't see them for their disabilities. I see them for who they are. (SMQ3P23)

**Table 4.** Organizational Values.**Compassion**

Compassion means experiencing empathy with another's life situation. Compassion is being with another as well as doing for them.

This "being with" is done in such a way that the person experiences acceptance, concern, hopefulness, and sensitivity.

**Growth**

Growth is developing and improving our services and promoting self-renewal and progressive development programs for those with whom we work, our organization, and our community. It implies expansion, embracing change, and seeking new opportunities as an organizational way of life.

**Integrity**

Integrity implies a highly developed sense of ethical behavior, consistent with that expected of an individual or organization with great moral character. Integrity is having our actions in harmony with our thoughts, feelings, and values. This integration of behavior with thoughts, feelings, and values applies to each of us as individuals as well as collectively as an organization.

**Innovation**

Innovation is the process of creating or managing new ideas, methods, and technologies to vitalize existing services and to develop new ones. Innovation is stimulated by a strong awareness of the needs of those we serve and thrives in an organization that promotes new approaches to health care delivery. The innovative organization commits resources necessary for research and development and for change, while recognizing that not all new efforts will succeed.

**Justice**

Justice is the value that supports and protects the rights of all people. It characterizes what we desire in our relationship to those we serve and our coworkers. It promotes the right to have needs met and, in a manner, consistent with human dignity; and it supports and protects the right of the individual to participate in decision-making regarding their care.

**Quality**

Quality is the excellence we strive to reach in the delivery of our health services. It is done in a fashion to meet or exceed clearly established internal and external standards. We will design or modify the ways we do our work seeking to constantly improve what we do so that the right things are done the right way.

**Respect**

Respect is our commitment to treat all people well. It is based on our belief that each person has equal dignity because each individual "is made in the image and likeness of God." We promote self-respect and mutual respect and trust among all the members of the Bon Secours team.

**Stewardship**

Stewardship is the responsible use of all our resources for which they are intended to support, promote, expand, and preserve our mission and ministry. It is the use of good business principles. It is the balanced and right relationship of quality and value with cost and financial return.

Executives report that their orientation is toward valuing individuals and most importantly treating everyone with dignity and respect. Providing employment is a means to facilitate social justice and inclusion. Executives strive to "validate the humanness" (MVQ2P2) of their staff and surrounding community. The playing field is leveled in the teaching of the founding sisters, "we are all flawed, not broken, but flawed. Some of us are better at hiding that." Finally, "we are fundamentally equal, but uniquely original" (SMQ1P9). The values of compassion, justice, respect, and dignity aided the organization's leadership to value and be open to what PWDs had to contribute to the organization.

The organization's values were evidenced in their commitment to the inclusion of PWDs and their decision to be understanding of differences and in how they explained and promoted the inclusion of PWDs in their organization. Executives shared how they observed their staff explain the sometimes "odd" demeanor of the individuals with autism employed by the organization. One executive described a situation where compassion was used when a PWD that was working was also having a bad day and exhibiting behaviors

that were seen as odd by a family. The family members were "taken aback because they don't expect that behavior in this environment" (MVQ4P2). The staff perceived this PWD as being part of the department "family" and responded accordingly. Staff redirected the employed PWD. Then, staff were "very compassionate in their explanation" (MVQ5P2) to family about the employment of PWDs at the hospital. As one executive stated, "We treat people equally . . . [W]e have compassion for them where they are at . . . [and] accept each other individually" (MVQ2P2). Another executive described a frequent interaction they personally had with an individual with autism:

I'm often in the hallway when visitors will approach one of our employees with autism to ask for directions. And that doesn't go very well. Typically, I'll intervene and provide the directions but then I'll also explain to the visitor, we employ people with autism . . . I always get positive feedback . . . That happens a lot, in fact. (SMQ4P2)

In sum, the organizational values of compassion, integrity, justice, and respect are integral to this organization's

views toward diversity, including PWDs. Focusing on treating individuals with dignity and respect and providing opportunities are seen as opportunities to increase social justice. The commitment means that things do not always run smoothly, but executives made the decision to include, accept, and promote individuals with disabilities.

#### **Theme 4: Organization Benefits From Employing PWDs**

While there was some divergence with respect to this theme among participants, many indicated the benefits of employing PWDs. The executives mentioned that the benefits to the organization were twofold; a “feel good” (SMQ1P22) benefit from their decision to employ PWDs but also a “practical” (SMQ1P18), data-driven benefit. From the practical perspective, the organization has a Strategic Quality Plan (SQP) that has a metric for diversity, “it helps us meet our diversity and inclusion plan, which is part of our mission as an organization” (SMQ1P2). In addition,

part of our SQP is to strengthen our culture and capabilities. And we’ve already noted that these individuals are better equipped and probably better at some of these jobs and tasks. And so, I think that helps to strengthen our capabilities as an organization. (SMQ2P5)

Likewise, several executives mentioned that PWDs perform much needed duties, better than typically developing individuals, as one executive stated, “This is work that these particular folks [PWDs] actually enjoy, they’re good at and better at than some of the folks who may not otherwise be differently abled in terms of how they work” (SMQ1P18), “they’re doing good work” (SMQ1P4), and “they provide a return” (SMQ1P7). This “return” enabled executives to feel that PWDs were just like other typically developing employees in terms of expectations of job performance.

The mission of the organization, which informed their decision to employ PWDs, supports long-term retention of staff and hence causes staff to have a more esteemed view of their organization:

People, I would say for the most part, people work here because of the mission and because of who we are . . . we don’t pay the most, but people do, they can leave, but they choose not to. (MVQ3P1)

Employing PWDs provides evidence for the organization’s commitment to their mission and hence they have more respect and are further reinforced for choosing to work there:

I first came here when I walked and kind of toured the facility, I saw the folks who were here. For me I had more respect for the facility because of the fact that they do live up to their

mission. There is equity here. There is fairness here. So, I think a sense of respect. (MVQ5P4)

Employing PWDs encourages other organizational staff to work harder and also improves their morale. “Employees report they feel better about being here when we employ people with disabilities” (SMQ1P14) and that employees with disabilities “raise the engagement level of the entire group” (SMQ3P9), or how PWDs “raise the potential of the care they provide [organizational staff]. Because they see that these individuals actually do a fantastic job. And it raises the bar for everybody” (SMQ1P12). After employing PWDs on their unit, managers’ report that, “the morale of the unit increased, found that people were often less petty and bickering” (SMQ4P10). It also supported organizational staff to put their own daily struggles in perspective.

While the benefits of hiring PWDs was noted by many across both focus groups, there were some who diverged from this theme. One participant described an incident where a PWD was having a “bad day” exhibiting some problematic behavior. The participant noted that a visitor to their hospital was

. . . taken aback because they don’t expect that kind of behavior in this environment from somebody wearing what looks like work clothes . . . The staff on the units are so integrated, these people are so integrated into their [work] family . . . they help redirect the person, the employee, and then they go to the [visitor] and say, bless you, and then have that discussion . . . (MVP2Q5)

Overall, however, the benefits to the organization of employing PWDs were plentiful and far reaching. The organization hits target numbers and has high performing employees; staff work harder and stay longer. The organization has tapped into a market that other organizations have not been able to, their public image is improved, and they are able to provide more than health care to the public.

#### **Theme 5: Benefits to Organization Staff and Surrounding Community**

In addition to serving the organization in multiple ways, benefits from employing PWDs extends to the organizational staff, families of employed people with disabilities, and the surrounding community. Fewer participants expressed this theme than any of the others identified. While this is one of the less-supported themes, there was no divergence observed for this theme. Organizational staff have an increased awareness, knowledge, and expectations of PWDs. For example, one executive shared,

[Employing PWDs] made us more aware of the skills that they do have. You know, I think so often people look at somebody

with a disability and dismiss them, but we've been able to actually integrate them . . . (MVQ1P1)

Executives reflected that their experiences through PS + ASD was not the beginning or their commitment to hire PWDs, but it expanded their ability to do so; also, supply-side support staff played a role in providing needed knowledge and training to organizational staff to support their inclusion practices.

Participant's report that there is a "pay it forward" effect through staff and into the community at large, "Employees go home and teach their children differently than they would have if they didn't have the experience [working with PWDs]. So, important for our society" (MVQ1P1). It is also possible that the care that is being provided to the community is improved through the work and exposure that occurred through employing PWDs; for example, one executive said, "it helps us and our employees to understand if we can impact this person, who else can we impact, it moves it forward . . ." (MVQ1P2). Organizational staff become more aware of their own capacities to make a difference. Likewise, employing PWDs supports community outreach by employing marginalized individuals, which has reduced strain and provided hope for families. As one participant explained,

We're providing the family a chance to live a more normal life . . . [T]hey [family of PWDs] are able to . . . go to their work during the day. They know that their children are meaningfully employed. And so, it's really bringing overall health and wholeness to everybody in that equation, including us as the employer, their family and the individual. (SMQ2P15)

Executives also mentioned that there is reduced dependence on other social service systems that would be caring for these individuals if they were not employed, another overall community benefit. The executives believed that employing PWDs would "bring overall health and wholeness to everybody . . . including us as the employer, their family, and the individual" (SMQ2P15).

## Discussion

Findings from these analyses align strongly with existing research on demand-side practices. Specifically, the role that executive leaders play in supporting and fostering a culture that is inclusive of PWDs. Executives reflected on their influence in all areas that encompass organizational climate; its norms, values, and policies (Stone & Colella, 1996). This study also supports research that identified the importance of top management in creating a culture of inclusion and influencing positive attitudes toward PWDs (Araten-Bergman, 2016; Lengnick-Hall, 2008). Analyses suggest that executive efforts to support the inclusion and employment of PWDs within this organization are undergirded by the values and

beliefs of the organization as a whole, a faith-based organization that was developed to serve and empower the underserved and underrepresented, minority populations most in need of care. This foundational orientation toward PWDs is a practice that is extended to all employees, not just PWDs. This organization approaches employment for PWDs from a strengths-based perspective, as individuals wholly capable of contributing and benefiting the business. This strengths-based perspective is rooted in the idea that we are all flawed in unique ways, PWDs are no more flawed than typically developing individuals. This belief enables executives to meet employees where they are, to tailor unique employment situations that facilitate the success and highlight the strengths of their employees.

While organizational mission and values inform the decision-making and beliefs of these executive leaders, participants also discussed how their commitment to the organizational mission is underscored by its alignment with their personal values and beliefs. Executives report that the organization is intentional in screening future employees to ensure that their values and beliefs align with the organization as a whole. Employees who are not able to assimilate to this culture and its incumbent beliefs are reported to have shorter tenures within the organization. Consequently, executives will make accommodations for employees who align with organizational values but who may struggle in certain positions by finding a "better fit." Fostering a certain culture is more important to this organization than meeting the bottom line, and executives feel that this increases overall employee retention and decreases turnover. This suggests that it might be important for organizations wishing to increase support for PWDs to recruit and hire staff who are sympathetic to this commitment, rather than seeking to cultivate it in employees once they are hired.

## Future Directions/Implications

The results of these executive focus groups provide an initial glimpse into the culture and practices of an organization that successfully hires and retains PWDs. The importance of mission, values, and leadership behaviors that promote and build a culture of inclusion has important implications for both demand- and supply-side practices. Future research could examine how organizations create an inclusive culture, grounded in mission and values, with the purpose of ensuring that a verbal commitment to uphold mission and values is supported through employee action. Stakeholders on the supply side may be able to target organizations with certain mission statements and/or provide training and assistance to instill and support inclusive behaviors and perceptions.

Executives mentioned that support staff on the supply side provided needed technical assistance and knowledge to successfully onboard and retain PWDs. Future research is

needed to explore how supply and demand side can partner to increase the employment of PWDs. In addition, executives mentioned that supply side staff upheld the values of the organization in their support of PWDs and interactions with organizational staff. Future research can examine how supply side staff can best integrate themselves and PWDs into organizational culture.

Recent surveys on employer practices mention the inherent challenges in studying employer perspectives of PWDs such as the difficulty in recruiting participants, moving from employer perception to actual hiring practice, and identifying which employees to survey (e.g., top level management, HR), and comparing overall business practices to those specific to PWDs (Phillips et al., 2019). This focus group analysis was able to address some of the current barriers in demand-side research, in part because of the prior 10-year research relationship through PS + ASD. This study and its subsequent analyses not only align with initial research forays into demand-side practices but also have important implications for identified research gaps, such as disparities between employer report and actual practice, recruiting participants, and identifying which strata of staff to focus on.

### Limitations

This health system and its mission is faith-based, unlike most organizations. This raises the question of whether these findings are transferable to secular organizations. Also, as reported this is a health care organization, it is not evident that these findings would generalize to other employment sectors. It is also possible that the prior relationship with study staff influenced executive report toward the positive side; however, executives mentioned situations in which there were issues related to their decision to include PWDs. Finally, while the organization is known to hire PWDs, exact employment rates of PWDs within the organization are not possible due to issues surrounding employee decisions to disclose.

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