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Philanthropy

Building Best Practices in Disability Inclusion

James Emmett
Meg O’Connell
Judith M. Smith

Over the past 50 years, corporate America has increasingly embraced the fact that hiring employees from diverse populations is key to maximizing the potential of American workers and enhancing economic stability. Unfortunately, while considerable progress has been made with regard to gender, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity, the nation’s largest “minority” group—people with disabilities—continues to lag behind in the workplace for many reasons. Among these are cultural bias, the disability benefits system, subminimum wage practices, and the education system. Perhaps the most limiting factor has been an overarching misconception among employers that workers with disabilities are difficult to train, expensive to accommodate, and have limited capabilities and potential. In short, hiring people with disabilities may be viewed more as an act of charity, goodwill, or legal obligation rather than as good business practice.

Workplace Initiative, a program spearheaded by the Poses Family Foundation, has spent the past five years working with other funders, government agencies, nonprofits, workforce development systems, and, most importantly, companies themselves to help employers see individuals with disabilities for what they really are: one of the nation’s greatest untapped labor forces. With proper counsel and strong alliances, our partners—and a growing number of corporate leaders like them—have seen firsthand that investing in inclusion can pay off with concrete benefits to workforce stability and productivity, corporate culture, industry image, and community relationships.

What follows is an overview of how employers in the United States perceive people with disabilities, why perceptions are finally beginning

to shift, and what industry trailblazers are doing to transform disability inclusion from a charitable endeavor into a profitable workforce strategy that benefits all stakeholders.

A HISTORY OF UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines a person with a disability as someone “who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment” (U.S. Department of Justice 2009). Disabilities can be evident, such as blindness or the inability to walk. Or, they can be “invisible,” as is often the case with chronic illnesses such as epilepsy and multiple sclerosis, mental health issues, and learning and attention issues such as dyslexia and attention deficit disorder (ADD).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination based on gender, national origin, and religion, but it did not recognize people with disabilities (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.). Those formalized protections came with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (U.S. Access Board, n.d.) and the ADA of 1990 (U.S. Department of Justice 2009).

Since its passage in 1990, the ADA has led to improved access to public facilities for people with disabilities. Clear examples of this are the curb cuts, automatic doors, Braille signage, and other equal access features that are now commonplace in communities and businesses across the nation. Yet progress toward equal opportunity and inclusion in the workplace has not been nearly as impressive. Astonishingly, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities is more than twice what it is for people without disabilities (Office of Disability Employment Policy, n.d.). This is true, in spite of the fact that:

- the ADA and other legislation have addressed employment discrimination and provided workplace accommodations for individuals with disabilities;

- seven out of 10 unemployed adults with disabilities say they would prefer to work (Parker and Szymanski 1998); and
- employers have expressed positive attitudes about hiring individuals with disabilities (Kessler Foundation 2017).

For many of the 56 million adults in this nation living with a disability (U.S. Census Bureau 2012), work is a story of potential unrealized, and people with disabilities remain under or off the radar as a viable source of talent for many employers. Of the 20 million who are of working age, approximately 80 percent are underemployed or unemployed (U.S. Department of Labor 2017).

CORPORATE TRAILBLAZING AND LEGISLATIVE MANDATES

Within the past decade there has been some positive change, as companies have taken greater interest in disability hiring initiatives. Their attention, in good part, was triggered by an ambitious inclusion program launched in 2007 by the national pharmacy retailer Walgreens. This watershed initiative garnered even more attention in 2012 when Walgreens published the results of its five-year pilot. Three of the most motivating findings were that 90 percent of employees with disabilities performed on par with or better than their nondisabled colleagues, and employees with disabilities had 48 percent greater tenure and 40 percent less absenteeism (Kaletta, Binks, and Robinson 2012).

These results sparked significant movement in the supply chain and logistics industry. Companies like Best Buy, Lowe's, United Parcel Service (UPS), Starbucks, Procter & Gamble, and others began to follow suit and tap into workers with disabilities. Every one of them reported benefits similar to those of Walgreens (Kaletta, Binks, and Robinson 2012).

The federal government also has had an important hand in increasing disability inclusion, by holding companies more accountable when they discriminate and by creating more impactful legislation. In 2014, changes to Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 proposed a significant new metric, an "aspirational goal" that 7 percent of the

workforce of federal contractors and subcontractors be people with disabilities (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). The amended Section 503 was essentially an affirmative action measure for workers with disabilities, and it affected more than 250,000 employers in the United States (ADA National Network, n.d.). For the first time, federal contractors and subcontractors were not only allowed but also *expected* to ask job candidates and existing employees about their disability status. In addition, they were expected to track and record their disability employment data, hire individuals with disabilities, and create an inclusive culture in the workplace for all.

INNOVATION AND CULTURAL SHIFTS CREATE OPPORTUNITY

Other more general cultural changes have given traction to the disability inclusion movement. A case in point is the technology boom, which has forever changed the way that nearly all people in this nation work, socialize, and think. Technological advances also have created opportunities for individuals with disabilities that did not exist even a decade ago (Greenemeier 2015). People who are blind now have screen readers enabling access to written e-mail and files. Those who are deaf or hard of hearing use instant messaging or online interpreting to communicate with others. People with dyslexia use apps such as Grammarly and spell-check to ensure their writing is error free and text-to-speech to overcome reading hurdles. This changing technology has allowed people who were previously considered unable to participate in a “normal” work environment to thrive.

Work culture itself—in part due to technology—has changed in ways that have benefited individuals with disabilities as well. This includes a greater focus on work-life balance, openness to job sharing, and tele-work and telecommuting opportunities (Owen 2012). All of these influences, combined with a shrinking labor force (Plumer 2013), have created a perfect storm of possibilities for people with disabilities—and the potential payoffs are big for them and employers alike.

THE PAYOFF FOR EMPLOYERS

Started in 2012, the Workplace Initiative has worked with 19 major corporations and 275 partners to help more than 7,500 people with disabilities obtain meaningful, competitively paid employment. This list includes business leaders like Pepsi, UPS, and Cintas; and national and regional nonprofit organizations such as Tangram, Viaquest, Northwest Center, and the United States Business Leadership Network. Employers have reported the following:

- Overall, employees with disabilities have longer tenure, performance that is on par or better than nondisabled colleagues, lower absenteeism, and fewer safety incidents.
- The presence of employees with disabilities has improved workplace culture and increased employee engagement. Managers have said they have become “better managers” because they have learned to individualize their approach to helping each employee succeed (Kaletta, Binks, and Robinson 2012).
- Having a reputation as an inclusive employer and business has opened new market opportunities. Consumer studies have shown that people are more likely to patronize a business that shows a positive commitment to their population, and people with disabilities and their households spend over \$1 billion annually on consumer products (Nielsen 2016).

DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

The Workplace Initiative team has had a front-row seat to many of the nation’s most successful disability inclusion programs. Some of the most exciting trends the team has observed are discussed in the following sections.

Pretraining Programs

Employers are beginning to build their own talent pipeline through pretraining programs. These initiatives—which can run anywhere from

two weeks to three months—help individuals with disabilities learn key job skills so they can enter the workforce prescreened, pretrained, and ready to be productive.

The gold standard program of this kind is the Transitional Learning Center (TLC) developed by UPS, which was recognized as the 2016 “Large Employer of the Year” by the Association of People Supporting Employment First, at its Worldport sorting hub in Louisville, Kentucky. The TLC is a cooperative effort between UPS and the Coalition for Workforce Diversity, a network of employers and service providers committed to helping people with disabilities establish independence and find meaningful work.

The two-week preemployment training program is staffed and operated by UPS training supervisors and by job coaches from Options Unlimited. This program uses a classroom environment to teach participants about job responsibilities and soft skills. The TLC also features a fully simulated Worldport package-handling facility, which provides participants with invaluable hands-on practice.

Through the TLC, UPS has developed the “secret sauce” for sustainable success in hiring, retaining, and supporting employees with disabilities. The recipe consists of four key ingredients (Brody, Coffey, and Donahue 2016):

- **Culture:** With a culture that supports and celebrates all team members, people with disabilities are poised for success. The TLC builds on this culture by providing dedicated leadership, hands-on training, and other concrete evidence of the company’s commitment to inclusion in the workplace.
- **Collaboration:** Seamless internal and external coordination creates a strong but flexible structure that enables the TLC to achieve the goal of placing more than 100 employees in UPS jobs per year. Critical to the success of this collaboration is a cross-cutting leadership structure that drives seamless integration of the TLC into the Worldport training process. The TLC’s success also relies on external collaboration with a partner that facilitates a streamlined system for identifying and vetting potential candidates. This service is provided by Options Unlimited, Inc. on behalf of the Coalition for Workforce Diversity. For maximum continuity, Options Unlimited embeds a full-time employee in the TLC who oversees the recruitment, training, and support of participants.

- **Curriculum:** A “hear it, see it, do it, feel it” approach to every topic provides points of connection and understanding for all participants. In addition to targeted, soft-skills training sessions, TLC staff and participants start each day with an icebreaker activity to foster teamwork and encourage collaboration.
- **Company Return on Investment (ROI):** The TLC operates not out of goodwill but to meet Worldport’s business needs. Data from the program show a clear reduction in turnover, and the TLC provides a consistent pipeline of dedicated and trained employees entering UPS. The TLC team is committed to tracking and analyzing outcome data and aligning outcomes with the broader strategic hiring and onboarding goals of UPS.

Neurodiversity Hiring

Neurodiversity is the idea that individuals with disabilities like autism and ADD think, learn, and process information differently. The concept has been embraced by disability activists who use it to fight stigma and promote inclusion in schools and in the workplace.

The idea of neurodiversity is gaining traction in corporate America. In recent years, numerous major companies have launched neurodiversity initiatives, including Microsoft, SAP, EY, Ford, and JPMorgan Chase. These efforts often focus on recruiting individuals with autism, but some also look to candidates with ADD and learning issues such as dyslexia (Austin and Pisano 2017).

In their 2017 *Harvard Business Review* article about how neurodiversity can provide a competitive advantage in the workforce, Austin and Pisano wrote, “Because neurodiverse people are wired differently from ‘neurotypical’ people, they may bring new perspectives to a company’s efforts to create or recognize value ” (p. 2). In one fascinating and illustrative example, the authors reference an Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Special Intelligence Unit charged with analyzing aerial and satellite images. The group is primarily staffed with workers on the autism spectrum because the IDF has found that these individuals can detect patterns that others do not see (p. 2).

Not all employers have such specific needs. Nonetheless, the early results from neurodiversity initiatives are encouraging. They show that employees hired from a neurodiverse pool can demonstrate high levels of hyper focus and persistence in problem solving; provide a different

and unique perspective on product development; possess outstanding visual, spatial, and lateral thinking skills; excel in creativity; maintain excellent attendance and on-time behavior; and increase positive customer perception of a business (Rogers 2017).

Sourcing, hiring, managing, and maximizing the potential of neurodiverse employees can have its own unique challenges and requires an ongoing investment from the employer. While the scope of what employers are doing to this end is too great to review comprehensively here, examples include:

- **Focusing on job qualifications:** Neurodiverse individuals often behave in ways that do not match up with common perceptions of what makes a “good” employee. They may lack social and communication skills and may have difficulty being team players (Austin and Pisano 2017). Employers are now questioning whether these qualities traditionally deemed necessary for all employees are truly needed for every position, and they are shifting their expectations accordingly.
- **Adjusting the interview:** Understanding that candidates may not perform as well in traditional interview settings, leadership can work with HR to adjust expectations and develop alternate screening options. Job trials and visual supports within the interview process have proven helpful (Austin and Pisano 2017).
- **Structured onboarding:** Supporting neurodiverse employees through visually clear, stepwise, structured training can support successful onboarding.
- **Clear communication:** Providing explicit communication about job expectations and regular feedback on performance can help keep these employees on track and on task.
- **Office accommodations:** Adaptations such as repositioning workstations or supplying noise-canceling headphones may accommodate sensory sensitivities such as difficulty with flickering fluorescent lights or loud noises (Austin and Pisano 2017).
- **Workforce collaboration and support:** Training sessions can help existing employees and managers understand what they should expect from their neurodiverse colleagues. For example, the raw honesty common among individuals on the autism spectrum may be misconstrued as rudeness by some. Additionally,

companies with neurodiversity programs often design support systems for these employees. A “workplace support circle” might include a team manager, a team buddy, a job and life skills coach, a work mentor, and an “HR business partner” who oversees a group (Austin and Pisano 2017).

All of these strategies require commitment and investment, but as Austin and Pisano conclude, “the payoff for companies will be considerable: access to more of their employees’ talents along with diverse perspectives that may help them compete more effectively” (p. 103).

Cultivation of Natural Supports

Traditionally, employers have turned to outside organizations when seeking workplace support for their employees with disabilities. For example, they might hire a specialized job coach who comes on-site to manage a specific employee’s training and supervision. While this practice has considerable benefits and is still widely used, such interventions can be costly and can sometimes lead to stigma and segregation.

For these and other reasons, an increasing number of employers are exploring what can be accomplished with “natural supports.” These supports tap into resources and practices that, in many cases, already exist in the workplace. Rather than assuming that these existing supports are sufficient, however, businesses should consider them a starting point from which leadership can build a strategic plan.

Below is a list of natural supports that have proven effective for workers with—and without—disabilities. They are rooted in the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) concept (U.S. Department of Education 2017), which proposes that adjustments made for individuals with disabilities benefit everyone. UDL supports the idea that all learners have strengths and weaknesses and, as such, can benefit when instructors use a variety of teaching methods and provide tailored support.

- **Modeling:** Many employees prefer training that involves modeling and demonstration instead of continuous verbal instruction.
- **Clear direction:** Providing straightforward and concrete instructions to new employees on core tasks may help them learn more quickly and gain fluency faster as compared to providing over-extended, complicated instructions.

- **Consistent feedback:** Ongoing positive and negative feedback is critical to establishing solid work routines.
- **Mentoring:** Assigning an experienced coworker to mentor a new employee can help that individual learn faster and better understand the formal and informal rules of the workplace.
- **Creating a “culture of help”:** Supervisors can support employees by cultivating a culture where asking for help is encouraged and rewarded.
- **Reviewing past successful supports:** One of the most helpful questions a supervisor can ask an employee is, “What has worked for you in the past and how can we use that support here?”
- **Multimodal training:** Using a variety of instructional approaches that play to visual, verbal, and kinesthetic strengths can ensure that critical training procedures are accessible to all employees.
- **“Celebrating the silence”:** Use silence to help employees with processing time. Allow pauses when delivering information so an employee can digest the material and form questions or validate their understanding of the shared information. Another approach is to allow employees time to digest information and share understandings or questions at a follow-up meeting.
- **Providing visual supports:** More workplaces are embracing principles of visual management and are supporting employees through structured methods such as checklists, signs, calendars, and feedback systems.
- **Formalizing informal rules:** Employees with social skills deficits often struggle with the “unwritten rules” of the workplace. Supports such as “rule cards” can include information to help employees fit in and assimilate to the work culture. Items on rule cards may include things like, “return to the work station 5 minutes before your break is over,” “only ask questions at the end of team meetings,” or “arrive 10 minutes before your start time” can be very helpful.

Community Partnerships

The Coalition for Workforce Diversity in Louisville, Kentucky (which worked with UPS on its TLC), exemplifies another major trend in disability inclusion: large-scale community collaborations.

Coalitions of employment service providers encourage collaboration among multiple agencies that have historically competed for both funding and employer partners. In addition, they make it easier and faster for companies to find candidates with disabilities by building a talent pipeline, conducting assessments and prescreening, and setting up a single point of contact for employers. Many of these coalitions have established agreements whereby they share government funding for placements, further incentivizing collaboration.

A three-year initiative in New York City clearly illustrates the role and potential of such collaborative coalitions. The NYC: AT WORK initiative—the first public-private partnership to advance employment for New Yorkers with disabilities—is led by the Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD). MOPD coordinates all the organizations and systems that support job seekers with disabilities, including employment service providers, high schools, community colleges, colleges, and universities. Coordinated by MOPD, these entities provide a robust talent pipeline for the 50-plus employers that have made a commitment to the initiative. This structure is making it possible for businesses to hire people with disabilities at scale, while also fostering collaboration among players who previously competed with one another and struggled to overcome entrenched silos.¹

PHILANTHROPY

Large and small foundations alike have initiated and funded disability inclusion efforts for decades. They have been leaders and have long helped nonprofits provide advocacy, independent living skills, and training and jobs programs for individuals with disabilities. However, these philanthropic initiatives are more the exception than the rule. Less than 3 percent of all foundations were estimated to provide any funding for disability issues in 2011, and of the foundations that did provide funding, most were dedicated to research (Dickson 2011).

Very few foundations fund disability issues, perhaps because they consider it a health or employment matter for the government to address. The reality is that—with 80 percent of its working-aged adults unemployed or underemployed (Brody, Coffey, and Donahue 2016)—the population of disabled individuals in this nation struggles with the

very issues foundations tend to fund, including poverty and hunger. It would stand to reason that foundations would want to include disability issues as a part of their funding plans.

Over the past several years, 10 national foundations (Poses Family Foundation, Kessler Foundation, Ford Foundation, Autism Speaks, Next for Autism, May & Stanley Smith Charitable Trust, Ruderman Family Foundation, Craig H. Neilsen Foundation, ICD NY, and 100% Wine) have formed a funder collaborative, working together to increase employment outcomes for people with disabilities. Funder collaborative members share knowledge, discuss innovative programs, and cofund projects to improve disability employment strategies and outcomes. These philanthropic leaders believe that competitive employment can be the great equalizer for people with disabilities, helping them acquire new skills, moving them out of hunger and poverty, and expanding their civil rights. Another important goal of the funder collaborative is to help cultivate a better understanding of how disability and philanthropy are linked and to encourage more foundations to fund disability employment initiatives and programs.²

WHAT'S NEXT?

The future is bright for disability inclusion. As more companies become engaged in disability employment and inclusion, their ever-growing bank of knowledge, performance data, and case studies will inform and encourage others to follow their lead. The Workplace Initiative team anticipates increased participation from employers in the United States and around the globe. Companies are educating their employees—recruiters, hiring managers, diversity professionals, and staff at large—about disability inclusion to create an environment that is open and inclusive for everyone. When all employees are confident that they will receive the accommodations and support they need to best perform their jobs, companies, the economy, and our society as a whole will thrive.

Notes

1. For more information, visit <https://workplaceinitiative.org/> (accessed May 17, 2018). Also see NYC: ATWORK, <http://www1.nyc.gov/site/mopd/employment/nyc-at-work.page> (accessed November 9, 2017).
2. For more information, visit <https://workplaceinitiative.org/about/funder-collaborative/> (accessed May 17, 2018).

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