

Employer Engagement Strategy: Workforce Inclusion

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Executive Summary

The U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL) Office of Disability Employment Policy's (ODEP) mission has long focused on encouraging private sector employers to hire more people with disabilities. Sponsored initiatives such as the Disability Employment Initiative (DEI),¹ the Employment First State Leadership Mentoring Program (EFSLMP),² the Job Accommodation Network³ (JAN), and the Employer Assistance and Resource Network⁴ (EARN) operated by the National Technical Assistance, Policy, and Research Center for Employers on the Employment of People with Disabilities⁵ (NETAC), as well as strategic partnerships with the U.S. Business Leadership Network⁶ (USBLN), the Society for Human Resource Management⁷ (SHRM), and the National Industry Liaison Group⁸ (NILG), have all focused on addressing the long-standing unemployment and labor force participation inequities experienced by people with disabilities. The following white paper presents a new employer outreach approach developed during the course of ODEP's Business Case for Hiring People with Disabilities research. This approach is based on research conducted by Social Dynamics, LLC, the Altarum Institute, and a research team from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania led by Dr. Peter Cappelli, the George W. Taylor Professor of Management and Director of Wharton's Center for Human Resources.

Although the Business Case was originally intended as a quantitatively based argument for hiring people with disabilities, literature review findings from the research ultimately revealed a lack of evidence for quantitative advantages for firms hiring employees with disabilities. Available evidence has shown that workers with disabilities were roughly comparable in performance and cost to those without disabilities. In spite of this, individuals with disabilities historically have lower employment and labor participation rates.

In the research examining labor market discrimination, employers choosing to exclude segments of the population from their potential employee pool is well established. Gary Becker (1971), the Nobel Prize winning economist, described the notion that if performance is equivalent, private firms are harming themselves financially by restricting their labor pool through discrimination against segments of the population. Though Becker's research focused on women and minorities in the labor market, parallels can be drawn with people with disabilities in the workforce. However, women and minorities, unlike people with disabilities, have found increasing acceptance in the U.S. labor market, which begs the question, why? Although financial arguments based on Becker's work are well known in economics, Dr. Cappelli and his team have concluded through their research that *exposure* to people from diverse backgrounds has had a

¹ For more information, please visit: <http://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/DEI.htm>

² For more information, please visit: <http://www.dol.gov/odep/media/newsroom/employmentfirststates.htm>

³ For more information, please visit: <http://askjan.org>

⁴ For more information, please visit: <http://askearn.org>

⁵ For more information, please visit: <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/edi/p-netac.cfm>

⁶ For more information, please visit: <http://www.usbln.org>

⁷ For more information, please visit: <http://www.shrm.org>

⁸ For more information, please visit: <http://www.nationalilg.org>

greater influence on the decline in discrimination by employers than the economic argument. For this reason, as well as from information gained through a comprehensive literature review and a series of focus groups with business leaders, Dr. Cappelli and his team at the Wharton School have recommended an employer engagement strategy based on common business marketing principles.

Based on the Wharton team's research, the Employer Engagement Strategy is predicated on the idea that humans do not make decisions, including decisions concerning whom to hire, for fully rational reasons. Calculations concerning return on investment (ROI) are seldom made in personal interactions. Instead, mental schemas concerning who is a viable employee candidate are influenced by psychological processes. Consequently, marketing techniques can influence those schemas through the development of counter-stereotypes that highlight the capabilities of people with disabilities while minimizing the portrayal of differences.

To increase the effectiveness of Wharton's proposed approach, Dr. Cappelli and his research team recommend segmenting the business audience into three groups (i.e., Uninitiated, Inclusives, and Choir). This practice recognizes that employers are at different stages in their inclusionary practices and have different needs and interests based on those stages. Messaging by ODEP that is designed to impact and reach a particular employer segment will likely prove more effective than efforts meant to reach all segments at once.

Adoption of the Employer Engagement Strategy represents a potential second stage to ODEP's current engagement with the business community. Further exploration of the needs and interests of the various segments of the business community, in order to inform a strategy that markets people with disabilities will require two-way communication between ODEP and the private sector. This conversation has the potential to highlight the many capabilities of individuals with disabilities and foster an open discussion with the business community about how they can tap those capabilities with ODEP's assistance.

I. Introduction

The purpose of this white paper is to describe the evolution of ideas that occurred during the execution of the ODEP Business Case for Hiring People with Disabilities research. Originally designed to update previous ODEP business cases by providing quantitative data supporting the value added by hiring people with disabilities, this focus was ultimately shifted in light of the limited research data available to support a quantitative argument. This conclusion was made after several months of review of past and current domestic and international business cases on this topic, a review of the available employment-related research and data, and conversations with ODEP personnel, business school researchers, and private sector business leaders. The available data and expressed interests of the business community have led the research team, comprised of Social Dynamics, LLC, Altarum Institute, and Dr. Peter Cappelli, to believe that a marketing approach, rather than a quantitatively based business case, is a more viable strategy for engaging with the business community and encouraging the hiring of people with disabilities. This paper will describe the findings that have led to this position, their implications for ODEP and its partners, and recommendations for future actions.

This paper begins by providing the historical context for the Business Case for Hiring People with Disabilities project and describing ODEP's original goals for the initiative. This will be followed by the findings from a series of focus groups, the literature review, and conversations with business leaders and faculty conducted by Dr. Cappelli and his research team. Dr. Cappelli and his team's application of these findings, along with their implications for employer outreach, will then be described. These will be followed by the recommendations of the research team on a potential next step for ODEP's employer engagement strategy on behalf of people with disabilities.

Background on the Employment Rates of People with Disabilities

While federal and state policies have helped create and support opportunities for people with disabilities to find employment, data continues to highlight the economic disparities between people with and without disabilities. At the heart of this disparity is a large gap in employment and labor force participation rates between these two groups. The DOL's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) released data in August 2013 showing that people with disabilities experienced unemployment rates nearly double that of people without disabilities (14.1 percent vs. 7.1 percent) and had a labor force participation rate of only 20.5 percent compared to 69.1 percent for people without disabilities (BLS, 2013a).⁹ The data also showed employment rates for people without disabilities rose from 63.8 percent to 64.2 percent, while the rate for people with disabilities dropped from 18 percent to 17.6 percent (BLS, 2013b).

Data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) show similar trends in employment rates over a longer period of time. These data indicate that the labor force participation rate of people with disabilities has fallen over the last four years (from 35.2 percent in 2009 to 20.5 percent in 2013), and at a rate higher than that for people without disabilities (a drop of almost 15 percent for people with disabilities as compared to only an 8 percent drop for people without disabilities; BLS, 2013b).

Beyond these overall statistics on the employment of people with disabilities, it is important to also note that employment rates tend to vary significantly by the type of disability. According to an analysis of 2010 American Community Survey (ACS) data, the lowest unemployment rates existed for people with hearing impairments (13.7 percent), while the highest rates were found among people with cognitive difficulties (28.1 percent). This variation has been attributed in part to differing levels of acceptance by employers of certain types of disabilities (Economic Systems Inc., 2012).

In addition to the different unemployment rates, variances in full-time employment and average salary levels are seen between people with and without disabilities. People with disabilities are much more likely to be employed part-time versus full-time and to earn lower salaries (Schur, Kruse, Blasi, & Blanck, 2009). Both of these factors influence the ability of people with disabilities to attain self-sufficiency and live without dependence on government benefits.

⁹ The participation rate is the percentage of working-age people (ages 16 to 64) who are employed, and those who are unemployed, but looking for work. For individuals 16 years and older, the participation rate for persons with disabilities is 20.6 percent compared to 69.4 percent.

While a variety of factors underlie the variation in employment rates among those with and without disabilities (and among those with different types of disabilities), employer attitudes appear to be one important factor. A 2010 Harris poll showed that 43 percent of people with disabilities stated that they have faced some form of job discrimination (Harris Interactive, 2010). Recent research also indicates that stereotypes and discrimination continue to exist among employers (Lengnick-Hall, 2007). Among the most common stereotypes are that people with disabilities lack the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities for employment, and that they are less productive and more costly to employ. In addition, Pearson et al. (2003) found that not only did employers have a statistically significant hiring preference for workers without disabilities, but that even among workers with disabilities, particular types of disabilities were more often accepted. Employers tended to favor workers with disabilities consisting of hearing impairments, followed by mobility impairments (the use of crutches) and, finally, those with mental health issues (depression). Furthermore, in their study, Boni-Saenz, Heinemann, Crown, and Emanuel (2006) identified a belief held by employers that employing people with disabilities came at a significant economic cost, without offsetting benefits in terms of productivity. In another study, Butterworth and Pitt-Catsouphes (1997) showed that human resource managers and coworkers worried about *their* own lack of expertise regarding disabilities, particularly if problems arose, and their difficulty accessing resources for accommodations. Moreover, in interviews with business executives by Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt, and Kultarni (2008), employers often showed that they possessed stereotypical beliefs concerning workers with disabilities that were not supported by research evidence, and that they were not proactive in hiring from this population.

Beginning with passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, legislation has been passed and several initiatives have been mounted at the federal level with the goal of lessening disparities and increasing the employment rate of people with disabilities. However, the majority of these efforts have focused on the supply side (i.e., providing supports to people with disabilities such as training and accommodations) in an attempt to ready people with disabilities for employment. More recently, the emphasis has broadened to the demand side by providing resources, incentives, and support to employers to hire from this population. An example of this is DOL's recent release of new regulations under Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act, which established a nationwide 7 percent employment goal for qualified individuals with disabilities for companies doing business with the federal government. Another example is Executive Order 13548, "Increasing Federal Employment of Individuals With Disabilities." Signed by President Obama in July 2010 to commemorate the 20th Anniversary of the ADA, this directive calls on federal departments and agencies to increase the recruitment, hiring, and retention of people with disabilities in coming years and includes a hiring goal of 100,000 workers with disabilities by 2015. The Federal Government has also provided incentives and support through means such as tax credits, and demonstrations testing models promoting employment of people with disabilities. Examples of these initiatives include the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC), the Disability Employment Initiative, American Job Centers, Social Security's Ticket to Work program, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services Vocational Rehabilitation, and the Employment First State Leadership Mentoring Program. Additional resources for employers supported by the Federal Government include those that can be accessed through the NETAC, a collaborative that researches, influences, and develops inclusive employer practices and policies; through EARN, which helps employers hire

and retain workers with disabilities; and through JAN, a grant that provides free consultation to employers on worksite accommodations for their employees with disabilities.

Though employment gains for people with disabilities have been documented in the communities targeted by these initiatives, as well as among employers who have utilized the WOTC, little improvement is indicated in the national statistics on labor force participation and employment rates of people with disabilities, reinforcing the need for increased and innovative intervention.

II. Past Efforts to Use a Business Case Approach

Prior to the Wharton research, a primary strategy to increase employer demand had been to document that employing workers with disabilities results in economic benefits to employers, or in other words, to build a “business case” for employers. Several limited studies seemed to support the business case. Research as early as 1949 found that employees in the manufacturing sector with disabilities received good performance ratings, had lower rates of absenteeism and turnover, and had insurance costs in line with employees without disabilities (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Department of Manufacture, 1949). Subsequent studies and case studies developed by various researchers and by EARN continued to demonstrate that workers with disabilities have comparable performance ratings to their colleagues without disabilities, that they actually have higher retention rates once employed, and that any associated costs for accommodations were relatively minor (Hindle, Noble, & Phillips, 1999; Hernandez & McDonald, 2007; Nicolas, Kauder, Krepico, & Baker, 2011). Studies such as these appeared to suggest a robust economic business case for the employment of people with disabilities. And though anecdotally these studies provide evidence to support a business case, more data is needed to substantiate a global economic business case.

In 2006, DOL conducted a national summit with business leaders, researchers, and advocates (the “Employer Perspectives on Workers with Disabilities” National Summit) to develop a research agenda to better understand the reasons for the low employment rate of people with disabilities and identify possible strategies for improving their employment outcomes (MANILA Consulting Group, Inc., 2007). A continuation of this discussion occurred in 2008 during the “Strengthening the Intersection of Demand-Side and Supply-Side Disability Employment Research” National Summit. Through the efforts of ODEP—and particularly through its EARN resource center—extensive outreach and education efforts have been mounted to share these summit findings with employers. These efforts often have focused on distributing information to the professional networks used by businesses in an effort to guide leadership and human resources efforts. These networks include the Conference Board, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Society for Human Resource Managers (SHRM), the National Industry Liaison Group (NILG), and the United States Business Leadership Network (USBLN). Yet, despite these data and outreach, significant progress toward the greater employment of people with disabilities has failed to materialize.

In 2012, acting on interest generated during the 2006 and 2008 national summits, in addition to the ongoing interest expressed by members of the USBLN (MANILA Consulting Group, Inc.,

2007 and 2008), ODEP commissioned Economic Systems, Inc., in consultation with Dr. Cappelli, to develop the Business Case for Hiring People with Disabilities. Economic Systems was directed to strengthen the business case. Specifically, their efforts were to include collecting case study and empirical evidence on themes of relevance to the business community, such as ROI, human capital, workforce diversity, and market opportunity as they pertain to employees with disabilities. Their findings, though limited by the availability data, aligned with previous research and anecdotes that suggests that the cost, performance, and productivity of workers with disabilities were comparable to workers without disabilities. The data also suggested workers with disabilities experienced higher retention rates. Finally, though less quantifiable, employers reported that hiring workers with disabilities contributed to the general benefits of a diverse workplace (Economic Systems Inc., 2012).

It was during the course of developing this new business case that the need for a different strategy began to emerge: the Employer Engagement Strategy. Despite the research that suggests that people with disabilities are vastly underutilized in the labor force, and that there are no real business-related reasons why this should be the case, the business case approach has not made a significant impact on the business community. Although technical assistance and employer incentives are more available than ever, they have thus far failed to show substantial employment results. Ultimately, it now seems apparent that the decision to hire people with disabilities often appears to hinge not just on business-related factors, but on *broader cultural factors*.

III. Wharton's Proposed Shift to a Marketing Approach

Underlying Philosophy

The Employer Engagement Strategy was developed as a result of Dr. Cappelli's work with Social Dynamics in 2013 and is based on two principles. The first principle is that human behavior particularly that which is associated with hiring decisions, is not strictly rational. Quantitative data showing the advantages or disadvantages of a practice, in this case hiring or not hiring people with disabilities, may not actually change an individual's behavior. The second is that these behaviors *can* be influenced through the application of psychological principles.

Evidence of the irrationality of discriminating against certain subgroups of the labor pool has long been available. Gary Becker (1971), the Nobel Prize winning economist, theorized that markets eventually punish employers who exhibit discrimination in hiring. These employers limit their employee pool, and thus have a smaller and more competitive selection, which becomes more costly as wages are increased due to the limited pool from which employers can purchase the services of employees. In spite of this competitive disadvantage, and the consequence of increasing the wages a firm must pay, many employers continue to make the irrational decision to not hire from various segments of the population.

Becker's seminal work on discriminatory hiring practices focused on gender and racial discrimination. Combined with the findings from earlier business cases and associated research, Dr. Cappelli and his team concluded that significant parallels exist between Becker's examination on discrimination and the difficulties associated with impacting the employment

rate for people with disabilities. They concluded that there was no rational reason for employers to not consider people with disabilities as potential employees. In fact, to not do so was associated with an additional cost to employers. Unfortunately, datasets of sufficient size allowing for an examination of discrimination in relation to disability status, functional limitation, work experience, and job characteristics are not available to provide a more nuanced explanation (Baldwin & Johnson, 2006). However, if the argument that people with disabilities, with appropriate accommodations, are as productive as people without disabilities is correct (and the evidence we *do* have does suggest this), then only discrimination, work experience, and job characteristics can be expected to factor significantly in an analysis of the hiring patterns of people with disabilities. A French experimental study conducted by Ravaud, Madiot, and Ville (1992) supports this position by showing that highly qualified applicants without disabilities were 1.78 times more likely to receive a favorable response from employers than applicants with comparable qualifications who disclosed a physical disability in their application. They also found that moderately qualified applicants without disabilities were more than 3.2 times more likely to receive a positive response from application materials than comparably credentialed applicants with a physical disability. These findings support the notion that the perceived capabilities and workplace “fit” of applicants with disabilities are highly subjective and based on the perception of the employers. The research team believes that this perception (and the subsequent behaviors it initiates) is the foundation of the problem presented and that it is alterable through the use of psychological principles.

To address the irrationality of the hiring discrimination exhibited by employers, Dr. Cappelli and his team examined the issue of hiring people with disabilities from a business marketing perspective. As such, the team examined people with disabilities as a brand and employers as consumers who we want to recognize and hire (i.e., buy) people with disabilities. This approach recognizes humans as not fully rational actors and that their decisions are influenced by psychological processes. The fields of consumer psychology and social psychology have the most bearing on the approach advocated by Dr. Cappelli and his research team. In their presentation for the American Psychological Association, Loro and Cronley (n.d.) define *consumer psychology* as the study of the human responses to product- and service-related information and experiences. This field explores the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses of consumers prior to the purchase, use, and disposal of goods and services. Consumer psychology principles will inform how people with disabilities are marketed to private-sector employers. *Social psychology*, meanwhile, focuses on how the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of people are influenced by the actual, implied, or imaginary presence of others (Allport, 1985). Principles from these two fields will form the basis of the marketing strategy advocated by Dr. Cappelli and his research team. Wharton’s Employer Engagement Strategy recognizes the influence of these psychological responses as employers consider an employee candidate.

Focus Group Findings

To expand upon the earlier work of Dr. Cappelli and Economic Systems, the research team decided to explore the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses of employers through two virtual focus groups, known as the Virtual Business Leadership Information Exchanges (VBLIE), consisting of a total of 14 participants from 12 private employers. Conducted using

web conferencing technology, the VBLIEs involved volunteer participants from various levels of corporate leadership, many of whom had no experience with the employment of people with disabilities. Participants were also recruited from the employers who actively employ people with disabilities with the assistance of Mary Wright, formerly of the Conference Board. Each participant volunteered with the understanding that the employment of people with disabilities would be discussed. Questions were developed and presented by Dr. Cappelli to the focus groups on March 11 and 13, 2013, with data collection provided by Social Dynamics and its subcontractor, Altarum Institute. Findings from the VBLIEs were prepared by Social Dynamics and presented to ODEP in a brief on March 29, 2013.

In both focus groups, respondents affirmed their belief that human resource colleagues, as well as other coworkers, felt uncomfortable around people with disabilities and had a mistaken belief that they were suffering (empathetically interpreting the person as being in a perpetual state of distress because of their disability). These findings were similar to those found in a series of focus groups by Fraser et al. (2010), who observed low coworker receptivity to colleagues with disabilities, particularly in medium-sized firms. Respondents believed that this emotional response was based on lack of exposure to people with disabilities and, in particular, limited opportunities to see them as productive colleagues. To this point, several VBLIE participants shared experiences of colleagues whose personal experiences working alongside employees with disabilities had altered their perspectives and made them enthusiastic supporters of inclusionary initiatives within their firms. For those without those personal experiences, stories and accounts from a trusted network of professional colleagues were often inspiring enough to compel them to initiate their own programs to hire workers with disabilities. These personal experiences and anecdotes all highlighted the abilities of the workers rather than their disabilities and supported Wharton's employer engagement research.

VBLIE respondents also shared that they possessed a lack of knowledge on how best to identify qualified employee candidates with disabilities. They were interested in hiring from the population, and recognized diversity, public relations, and federal compliance benefits in doing so. However, they stated that vocational rehabilitation agencies presented them with candidates who lacked the prerequisite skills needed to be viable candidates. Furthermore, employee recruitment strategies were becoming more passive, with LinkedIn and web-based application processes becoming much more prominent recruitment tools. These changes have contributed to fewer personal initial contacts with potential employees and fewer opportunities for candidates to disclose having a disability. This less personal approach has impacted employers interested in hiring individuals with disabilities due to restricted opportunities to identify and select viable candidates for preferential hiring initiatives

Finally, respondents shared that they and their colleagues are interested in changing their behavior concerning hiring and integrating employees with disabilities into the workplace. They are asking for clear metrics, strategies, and technical assistance that they can use to educate their colleagues and expose them to examples of successful inclusion of workers with disabilities in the workplace. Of the material currently available, several respondents stated that there was an overabundance and that discerning what was considered quality guidance was difficult. The VBLIE participants, representing employers interested in hiring and integrating employees with disabilities into their firms, were interested, but did not know how to begin.

IV. Components of a Marketing Strategy

Keller and Lehmann (2006, p. 751) describe a brand as a “lens through which the words and actions of a company, its competitors, and the environment in general are converted to thoughts, feelings, images, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes, etc., about a product.” They continue to state that brands are constructed with the goal of developing a “stimulus-response” among consumers. At present, the brand of people with disabilities is nebulous. The image generated when the word disability is used does not encompass the full scope of the population. Associations frequently focus upon images with clearly observable manifestations of difference, such as the use of a wheelchair or sensory equipment. As Baldwin and Johnson (2006) observed, people with disabilities are a highly heterogeneous group and, as such, are difficult to study or classify using either recognized definitions or psychological schema.

In addition to the two major principles previously described, the Employer Engagement Strategy is based on two major goals. The first of these is constructing a solid and inclusive brand for people with disabilities that can be marketed to employers to provoke positive emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses. Basu and Wang (2009, p. 78) argue that “branding is a process of creating identity for a product.” Interviews with the University of Pennsylvania’s Executive Human Resource Officer and surveys within the Wharton School provide evidence that people with disabilities are not widely viewed as a component of diversity initiatives—they do not have a solid identity. Furthermore, the mental association of people with disabilities outside of the advocacy community is likely different from that within it. As observed by Baldwin and Johnson (2006), the disability advocacy community has been highly critical of medical models or schema focusing on functional limitations. Policy positions influenced by these arguments have limited researchers’ opportunities to study this diverse population by restricting the data available for econometric analysis. These positions have also created a definition of disability that is nebulous and poorly recognized by the private sector. Due to the word disability reflecting such a heterogeneous group of individuals and conditions, the business community is frequently unable to make positive assumptions concerning employment candidates based on their knowledge of the brand.

The Employer Engagement Strategy brand for people with disabilities would focus on competency, skill, and similarity to the populations without disabilities. Louvet (2007) recognized that employee candidates with disabilities were frequently evaluated more negatively based on perceptions of social fit within a job function. This employer perception did not align with the capabilities of the candidate. To address it, disability advocates and their governmental partners should provide an experience “that challenges stereotypical expectations... which results in an experience that has cognitive consequences across multiple domains” (Crisp & Turner, 2011, p. 242). Wharton suggests doing this through the creation of counter-stereotypes, utilizing and managing the empathy held by employers toward the population, and highlighting commonalities with the population of individuals without disabilities. This goal of constructing a new brand aligns with the shift from medical models of disabilities and promotes a focus on highlighting the abilities of people with disabilities.

The second major goal of the Employer Engagement Strategy is for proponents of hiring individuals with disabilities to conceptualize the private employment sector as a market

comprised of different segments with distinct levels of interest in employing people with disabilities, varying levels of knowledge, and particular technical assistance requirements. The research team recommends tailoring outreach strategies to best suit the needs and interests of the customers within each segment. Similarly, these different segments require different levels of technical assistance once interest in employing people with disabilities is initiated.

Dr. Cappelli's research team at the Wharton School identified three distinct segments within the private employment sector. The first of these groups can be described as being at the **Uninitiated** level. Employers at this level have not demonstrated either active or passive initiatives to recruit employees with disabilities or other diverse groups. Many discourage disclosure due to a desire to minimize accommodations and maintain the existing work social structure (Harlan & Roberts, 1998). Firms within this segment frequently lack awareness of the capabilities of employees with disabilities, do not know of the incentives that are available to them to encourage changes in hiring behaviors, and require the highest level of guidance and technical assistance in order to modify employment practices. The research team believes that this is the largest of the three segments, and also the most difficult to reach.

The second segment identified by the research team is at an **Inclusive** level of engagement in inclusive hiring practices. Employers at this level have established programs to recruit select minority groups, but have not yet recognized employees with disabilities as a target group in their diversity initiatives. Firms in this segment have already recognized the contributions of their non-majority employees and are interested in recruiting more. As with the Uninitiated segment, research has shown that these employers lack awareness of disabilities and job accommodations; however, their interest in employees with disabilities increases with exposure and experience (Able Trust, 2003; Copeland, Chan, Bezyak, & Fraser, 2010). Recognition of the capabilities of a new labor pool (i.e., candidates with disabilities) could lead to targeted recruitment efforts for employees with disabilities as well. The research team believes that this segment is the most viable group for the outreach efforts that will be described.

The third segment identified by the research team is best described as being the **Choir** in their hiring and retention practices. Typically larger firms, **Choir** employers have established initiatives to recruit and retain employees with disabilities and are widely recognized as advocates for the population. Firms within this segment frequently have established relationships with ODEP, as well as with organizations such as the USBLN, the NILG, and the SHRM. These companies can be recognized for their accomplishments and invited to serve as paragons and mentors from which firms developing more inclusive hiring practices can look to for guidance and inspiration.

V. Specific Marketing Strategies

Strategies for Positive Branding

Having established that negative stereotypes and bias, rather than economic factors, are leading to employers' reluctance to proactively employ people with disabilities, the challenge is finding

ways to dispel these attitudes and replace them with positive perceptions. The Wharton research findings point to a few ways this can happen through positive branding of people with disabilities.

As described earlier, the goal of branding is to lead the buyer (employer) to a choice based on the trust and reliability of the brand. This brand will contribute to an automatic association of people with disabilities as possessing the qualities of competency, skill, and similarity to the people without disabilities population. The Wharton research team advocates doing this through several strategies aimed at rebranding people with disabilities. According to Wharton, despite the fact that stereotypical responses tend to be “automatic, fixed, and inescapable,” research provides evidence that these responses *are* malleable (Blair, 2002). Support for a rebranding approach also comes from research in the disability area. Louvet (2007) examined how job applicants with or without disabilities were evaluated in relation to the nature of a job. The primary conclusion reached was that to promote the employment of people with disabilities it is important not only to improve their level of qualifications, but also to change the nature of the perceptions that surround them.

According to Wharton, education is the key to bringing about a change in stereotypes. The following are the education strategies recommended by the research team based on our research for the rebranding of people with disabilities in a positive light:

- Create a self and social motive — If people have a strong motivation for adopting a new perception, they may automatically inhibit or moderate their negative stereotypes and replace them with positive ones. They are most likely to do so when they see a benefit to their own self-image or when the stereotypes they hold appear to be counter to social norms. To create these two conditions, the research team suggests that ODEP promote employer practices such as rewarding employees who recommend the hiring of colleagues with disabilities and include people with disabilities in hiring selection committees.
- Promote counter-stereotypes — When people view information that does not support their current stereotypes, or positively interact with others with opposing views, they are more likely to change their personal stereotypes. Promoting opposing counter-stereotypical associations effectively challenges the dominance of stereotypes in an individual’s mental schema. ODEP strategies in this area might include highlighting positive contributions of successful employees with disabilities, and the use of keynote speakers with disabilities who are successful or famous. These strategies would be particularly effective if the events and topics are *not* about disability.
- Focus on attention — Stereotypes dominate unless the perceiver’s attention is shifted instead to learning about the person’s other unique characteristics. In this way, diverting the focus of an individual’s attention can be effective in minimizing or changing stereotypes. Portrayals that highlight an individual with disabilities as capable, confident, and collaborative with colleagues without disabilities draw attention to the individual’s capabilities rather than any disability they possess.

- Configuration of stimulus cues — Even slight changes in the context (i.e., the setting or activity) portrayed or observed can have a major effect on automatic stereotypes. “Positive cueing” could be provided by ODEP in posters and brochures that may include depicting people with disabilities as successful professionals, in social settings, or acting as mentors or volunteers helping others.
- Development of membership groups — The development of career-specific membership groups that can be used to develop professional mentoring and networking capabilities, as well as an identifiable recruitment pool for companies interested in hiring employees with disabilities, is recommended. There are various examples of these membership groups that have been developed by non-majority segments of the population. Examples include the Society of Black Engineers, the Association of Latino Professionals in Finance and Accounting (ALPHA), and the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association (NLGJA). Employers can also develop membership groups, known as Employee Resource Groups¹⁰ (ERGs), that are composed of employees with disabilities. These groups can serve in an advisory role during the recruitment, retention, and strategic planning process as their employer explores the capabilities of employees with disabilities and initiatives designed to employ them.

Differentiated Marketing Strategies by Segment

Segmenting employers by similar levels of advancement in the hiring of people with disabilities is believed by Wharton to offer three distinct advantages to ODEP’s efforts. These benefits include:

- More effective tailoring of marketing content and messaging;
- A better understanding of the types of incentives that will be most effective for a particular business; and
- Offering a means by which employers can gauge where they are and how they can improve.

In the discussion below, differentiated strategies by employer market segment are described.

Uninitiated Business Engagement Strategies

Four key strategies are recommended by Wharton for marketing to businesses at the Uninitiated level. These are to *suggest*, *incentivize*, *nurture*, and *guide*. As a primary tool in suggesting and guiding these employers, Wharton suggests the use of success stories rather than statistics. The underlying rationale for this strategy is that employers at this level more often need to see that hiring people *can* be done and *can* benefit them. Furthermore, the more specific the cases, the more effective a level of detail is needed to provide some guidance for how they can move forward. In contrast, Wharton warns that statistics are less effective with this group. In fact, knowing that discrimination is widespread may make it seem more defensible for them to also

¹⁰ Also known as Affinity Groups, Diversity Councils, and Business Network Groups.

discriminate. The case study resources available through EARN provide a valuable resource for this strategy.

Wharton also suggests promoting empathy to help incentivize employers' change efforts. As found in a national survey of employers and consumers, a positive experience with an employee with a disability in a company diminishes their fear of hiring others with disabilities (Siperstein, Romano, Mohler, & Parker, 2006). According to Wharton, through desensitization, the greater the exposure of companies to people with disabilities, the more positive attitudes within the company will be. Empathy can also be developed through mental cueing as described under the rebranding strategies above. These efforts should focus on showing that people with disabilities are just like people without disabilities. However, it is critical that efforts to raise levels of empathy guard against beliefs that people with disabilities are suffering, as this belief may lead fellow employees to feel uncomfortable.

As the Uninitiated-level employers are those with the farthest to go in terms of an equitable workforce, Wharton also emphasizes the need to nurture this group. Their incremental steps toward improvement and the length of time needed for meaningful advancements in this group need to be acknowledged.

Inclusive Business Engagement Strategies

A primary challenge for the Inclusive group of employers is gaining their understanding that people with disabilities are a critical group for inclusion in their existing efforts related to affirmative action and building an inclusive work culture. A small poll conducted by Wharton's research team on their MBA students showed that while 70 percent associated "equal employment opportunity" with race and ethnicity, and 74 percent linked it to gender, only 14 percent thought of people with disabilities.

Additional support for pursuing more inclusive affirmative action efforts is found in the current nature of the global business landscape. Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 110 countries have established goals and expectations for the employment of people with disabilities. While the United States has not ratified the Convention, it is likely that global U.S. companies will do business in countries that have ratified the treaty. Operations conducted within these countries will be subject to requirements mandated by the Convention (The Conference Board, 2013).

A second vital area of understanding for these companies is in the recognition of the size of the population with disabilities, both in terms of as an employee pool and as a market for their products/services. Recent statistics from EARN (AskEARN, 2013) show that one of the largest population groups and market segments in the United States is comprised of people with disabilities. This population—36 million strong—comprises approximately 12 percent of the U.S. population.

As viewed by Wharton, a particularly useful strategy for encouraging advances in employing people with disabilities among the Inclusive group is peer-to-peer mentoring from the Choir

group. Findings from the Disability Case Study Research Consortium (2008)¹¹ indicate that such efforts need to be multilayered, including managers at all levels. Within this research, it was found that when managers believed the benefits of hiring people with disabilities outweighed the costs, employees' perceptions of prejudice lessened.

Choir Business Engagement Strategies

While Choir businesses have progressed to the point of providing inclusive employment cultures with mechanisms in place to assure affirmative action in recruiting, hiring, supporting, and retaining people with disabilities, they still may face hurdles. As voiced in the VBLIEs, finding well-qualified candidates with disabilities and encouraging self-disclosure are often issues they continue to face. In addition, because of their attentiveness to information about issues related to people with disabilities, they sometimes feel overwhelmed and confused by the volume of data and resources available.

As recommended by Wharton, support to this group of employers should include tools and mechanisms to improve the matching of job candidates with disabilities to job openings. This support must cover improved determination and development of the needed skills for today's labor market, and refined tools for the linking of qualified candidates to available jobs. Wharton's suggestion for meeting these needs are:

- **Create new search tools:** Employers want a “plug and play” database through which they can reach a broad audience of people with disabilities.
- **Improve training:** There is a need for facilitated discussions between employers and education and training agencies in order to provide these agencies with accurate information to train people with disabilities in relevant skills.

In relation to this second recommendation, it has been found that using demand-side employment research on the largest or fastest-growing areas of employment and the skill sets needed for these demand occupations can be effective. Employers are less risk-averse in occupations where the demand is high and the supply of qualified workers is low. Thus, preparing people with disabilities for these occupations will increase their chances of being hired (Chan, Strauser, Gervy, & Lee, 2010).

Complicating efforts to hire people with disabilities is the fact that many times out of fear of discrimination, people with disabilities do not self-identify. Because of this, employers do not always know if their affirmative action efforts have been successful and whether they are meeting their goals in this area. A recent survey by Cornell University's Employment and Disability Institute and the American Association of People with Disabilities states that workplace climate is absolutely critical to self-disclosure—progressive policies alone are not enough to encourage employees with disabilities to self-disclose. The study further highlights the importance of workplace context in the decision to self-disclose, reporting that “individuals with disabilities rated highly knowing their employer has made concerted efforts to create a disability

¹¹ The Disability Case Study Research Consortium was an ODEP initiative commissioned to develop a standard design methodology and conduct case study research to identify ways in which an organization's structures, values, policies and day-to-day practices, facilitate the employment of people with disabilities.

friendly workplace (56.8 percent), knowing that the employer was actively recruiting people with disabilities (50.5 percent), knowing of other employees who had disclosed and were successful (49.9 percent), and having a disability was included in the employer's diversity statement (48.9 percent)" (Von Schrader, Malzer, & Bruyere, 2013, pg. 10).

Choir

- Create search tools for job matching
- Improve targeted training efforts
- Provide employers with strategies to encourage self-disclosure
- Provide employers with more structured and streamlined resources

Inclusive

- Education
- Peer-to-peer mentoring

Uninitiated

- Success stories rather than statistics
- Desensitization to promote empathy Nurture progress

On the basis of these findings, the research team suggests that Choir-level businesses encourage self-disclosure. Some avenues businesses may take to accomplish this goal include:

- Ensuring that their support of people with disabilities is highly visible;
- Advertising their success by sharing statistics on the percentage of people with disabilities employed in their company; and
- Creating ERGs for people with disabilities to promote peer-to peer-support.

Additional feedback from the VBLIEs with Choir-level business representatives indicated that they feel that the current information available to them is “overwhelming and disorganized.” More specific comments from these groups included that much of the existing information and data is neither helpful nor reliable; there are too many metrics and it is unclear which metrics are relevant; and tools are not available to benchmark and improve their performance. Some of the participants also felt that additional resources are needed to individually assist them with questions they have about certain candidates or accommodations. In response to these expressed needs, Wharton recommends that the following resources be developed by ODEP:

- **A “help desk”:** Live support for hiring managers who have questions about hiring people with disabilities.
- **Measures of progress:** Develop effective metrics to measure inclusion and help employers track their performance.
- **A road map:** Organize best practices and offer frameworks so that companies have a clear path to improve over time.

- **Network of vetted consultants:** Review consulting firms to create a vetted list for employers.

While these resources were suggested for the Choir-level organizations, they would also be useful for all businesses in all market segments. Thus, it is recommended that ODEP make them widely available to the business community as a whole.

VI. Conclusion and Implementation Recommendations

In their critique of public health messaging, Basu and Wang (2009, p. 85) contend that many outreach campaigns suffer from “fuzzy” branding that does not promote the same level of interest among the target audience as those for traditional products. This is frequently due to one-way, top-down promotion that lacks the tactical expertise and commitment from the promoter to promote, protect, and sustain their effort. These observations should be considered in light of the approach recommended by the research team.

The strategies presented here represent two-way conversations with the private sector, and recognize that not every segment of the private sector is driven by the same needs and interests. Three distinct markets have been described: a Choir group that has made efforts to hire people with disabilities; an Inclusive group that is persuadable to do so; and an Uninitiated group that does not yet recognize why they should. The Choir group of employers needs tools to make their hiring efforts more effective. The Inclusive group needs to view people with disabilities as an additional diverse group to be considered under their inclusion strategies, with appropriate mentoring from outside organizations. And the Uninitiated group needs to be educated on the capabilities of people with disabilities, and the incentives and initiatives available to assist them in changing their hiring practices. Though certain common approaches, such as developing a capability-focused brand for people with disabilities that offers a strong counter-stereotype are presented, the research team believes that a broad outreach strategy will not address the particular needs of each of these segments as effectively as distinct, targeted interventions.

One could argue that many of the tools and metrics currently available address needs identified within the research literature, expressed by this project’s VBLIE participants, and shared by staff from the Wharton School. Yet, those who represented the business community (Wharton staff, faculty, and students; VBLIE participants) in this project did not share knowledge of these resources, or stated that they were overwhelmed by the volume of resources available. Messages are not being heard effectively by the business community, particularly by those at the Inclusive and Uninitiated levels of inclusionary practice. A dialogue with these segments of the business community would assist ODEP in determining if resources presently available can meet the community’s needs and whether their current messages and tools are reaching those who need them.

The Employer Engagement Strategy represents a potential second stage to the efforts that ODEP has undertaken since 2001. In its focus on the brand of people with disabilities, it shows by example the numerous employment capabilities of people with disabilities. Furthermore, by

highlighting the commonalities shared between those with disabilities and those without, it reinforces that any differences are minor and do not overshadow the productive capabilities of any individual. In addition, the advocated market segmentation represents a conversation with the business community that asks, “What can I tell you about my capabilities?” “How can I help you work through your apprehensions?” and “How can we enhance our employment partnership?” The Employer Engagement Strategy recognizes the voice and influence that ODEP, its partners, and the advocacy community have acquired, and endeavors to use it for a pragmatic conversation with the business community concerning employment. This conversation should be held under the presumption that all that engage in it are equals.

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