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# Employer Practices and Attitudes toward the Employment of People with Disabilities

**Issue Brief: Survey of Employer Policies on the Employment of People with Disabilities<sup>1</sup>**

The U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL) Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) has long focused on encouraging private sector employers to hire more people with disabilities. The DOL Chief Evaluation Office contracted with Westat to conduct the 2018 Survey of Employer Policies on the Employment of People with Disabilities to provide a current picture of employer efforts to employ people with disabilities as well as attitudes toward people with disabilities.

The survey was based on a national sample of businesses stratified by industry and company size to enable comparisons across groups of employers. In this issue brief, we use data from the survey to examine current employment and hiring of people with disabilities and employer attitudes toward hiring people with disabilities.

This brief is one of three on findings from the survey. Others examine the implementation of disability-inclusive workplace practices by federal contractors and the relationship of inclusive practices to hiring of people with disabilities.

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## Overview

People with disabilities face economic disadvantages including lower employment and lower earnings. In March 2019, the labor force participation rate of people with disabilities age 16 and older was 21.5 percent as compared to 68.5 percent for people without disabilities. Additionally, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities was 7.9 percent, which is about twice the unemployment rate (3.8%) of those without disabilities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). People with disabilities also earn less than people without disabilities. In 2017, the median annual earnings for full-time/full-year workers with disabilities ages 18 to 64 was \$40,353 compared to \$45,449 for people without disabilities (Houtenville and Boege, 2019).

One of the major factors contributing to the high unemployment rate is the attitudes of employers toward people with disabilities in the workplace. Research has documented that employers have concerns about hiring people with disabilities (Burke et al., 2013; Karpur, VanLooy, and Bruyere, 2014; Unger, 2002). Employer concerns include work productivity, costs of accommodation, absenteeism, turnover, increased supervision time,

negative reactions of coworkers, and fear of litigation (Burke et al., 2013; Ju, 2012; Karpur et al., 2014; Kulkarni & Lengnick-Hall, 2014; Unger, 2002). However, research shows that workers with disabilities have similar performance and higher retention rates than workers without disabilities and that the costs of accommodation are low (Hernandez and McDonald, 2010; Hindle, Noble, and Phillips, 1999; Nicolas, Kauder, Krepico, and Baker, 2011).

This brief examines employers' efforts to employ, recruit, and hire people with disabilities and their attitudes toward people with disabilities. This issue brief uses data from the 2018 Survey of Employer Policies on the Employment of People with Disabilities. The survey represents a sample of businesses drawn from a nation-wide directory stratified by industry and company size to

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## Key Findings

Between 2008 and 2018, the percentage of companies that currently employ at least one person with a disability increased from 18.4 percent to 22.6 percent, the percentage that recruit people with disabilities increased from 13.5 percent to 17.5 percent, and the percentage that hired at least one person with a disability in the past 12 months increased from 8.5 percent to 13.5 percent.

Using logistic regression analysis, we found that concerns about work performance were negatively related to recruiting people with disabilities. There was no relationship between concerns about cost and recruitment of people with disabilities.

The underlying dimensions of employer concerns about hiring people with disabilities include work performance, social issues, and cost.

Concerns were higher among small companies than medium-sized and large companies and among companies in the goods-producing sector than companies in the service-providing or public administration sectors.

enable comparisons across groups of employers.<sup>2</sup> The survey was a 20-minute telephone interview with senior executives in 12 industries. We conducted interviews from July through October 2018, completing interviews with 2,023 companies. The response rate was 17.3 percent. We weighted all analyses to account for the sample design and adjust for nonresponse. The sample represents (when weighted) 2,007,574 companies. We use results from a similar Office of Disability Employment Policy survey conducted in 2008 for comparisons. All differences discussed are significant at the .05 level.

### Employing, Recruiting, and Hiring People with Disabilities

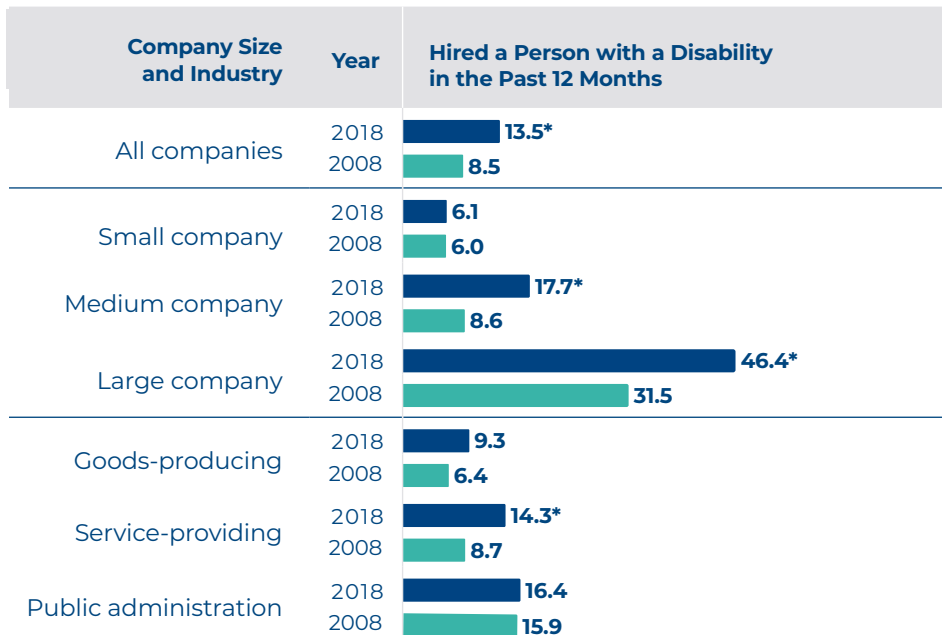
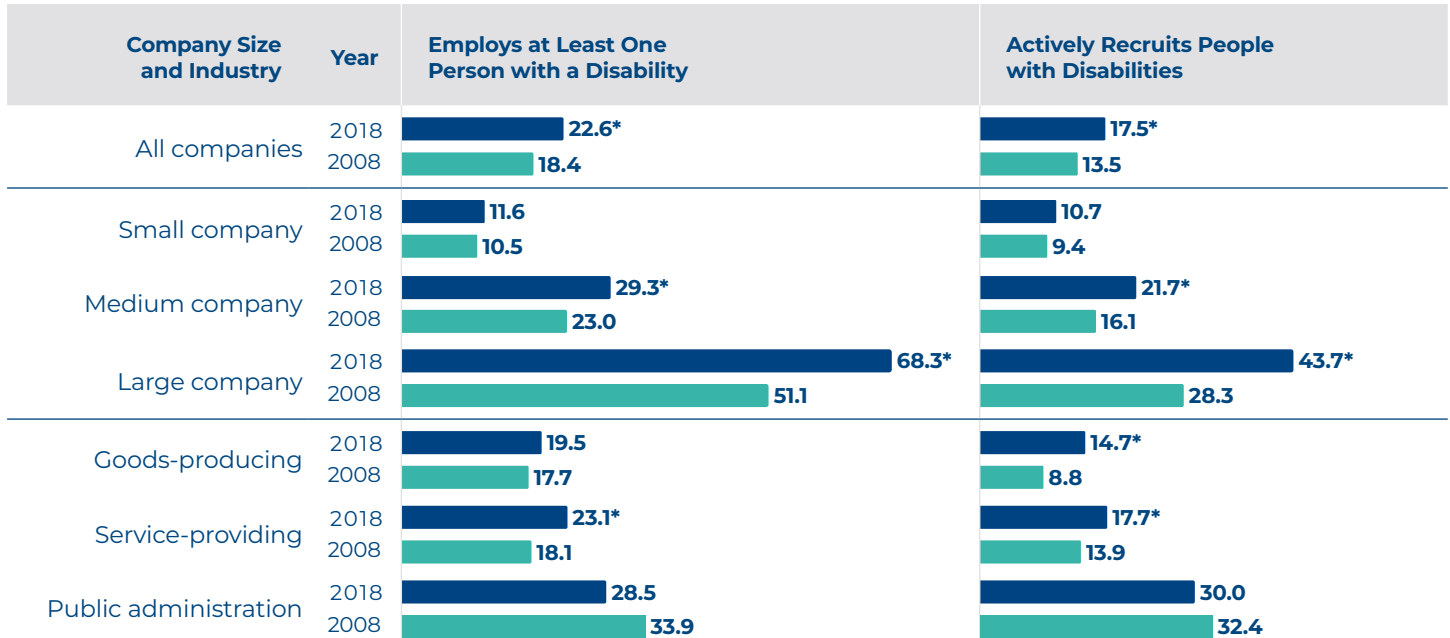
Among all companies, 22.6 percent said that they currently employ at least one person with a disability, 17.5 percent said they actively recruited people with disabilities, and 13.5 percent said they hired at least one person with a disability in the past 12 months in 2018. It is important to note when interpreting these data that companies may only be aware that they currently employ or recently hired a person with a disability if the disability was visible or disclosed. The questions about employing,

recruiting, and hiring people with disabilities were asked in the 2008 Office of Disability Employment Policy survey. Comparing the 2008 and 2018 surveys, the percentage of companies that said they currently employ at least one person with a disability increased from 18.4 percent to 22.6. Similarly, the percentage of companies that said they actively recruit people with disabilities increased from 13.5 percent to 17.5 percent, and the percentage that hired at least one person with a disability in the past 12 months increased from 8.5 percent to 13.5 percent (Figure 1). When examined separately by company

<sup>2</sup> The sampling frame for the survey was the Duns Market Identifiers File maintained by Dun & Bradstreet.

**Figure 1** Percentage of companies that employ, recruit, and hired people with disabilities, by size and industry

■ 2018 N=2,023 companies  
 ■ 2008 N=3,797 companies.



Source: 2008 survey Q10, Q12, Q14; 2018 survey Q16, Q19, Q22.

\* Chi-square test for differences between years is significant at  $p < .05$ .

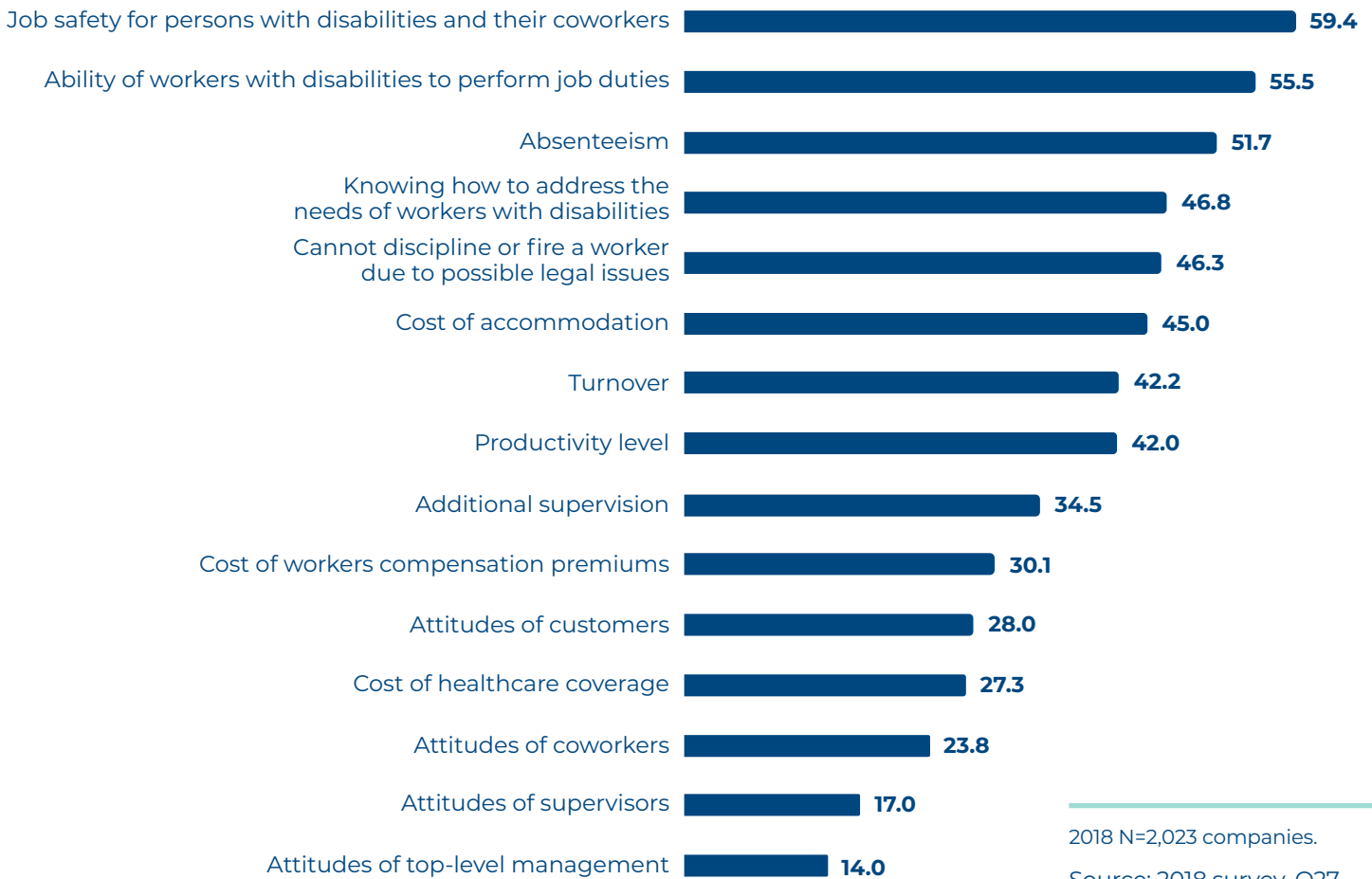
In 2018, chi-square test for differences in employing by company size is significant at  $p < .05$ .

In 2018, chi-square test for differences in recruiting by company size and industry is significant at  $p < .05$ .

In 2018, chi-square test for differences in hiring by company size and industry is significant at  $p < .05$ .

Figure 2

Percentage of companies reporting concerns about hiring people with disabilities



2018 N=2,023 companies.  
Source: 2018 survey, Q27.

size, there were increases in employing, recruiting, and hiring of people with disabilities for medium-sized and large companies but not for small companies. When examined by industry, there were increases in employing, recruiting, and hiring for companies in the service-providing sector, and an increase in recruiting in the goods-producing sector.

**Employer Attitudes**

Interviewers read 15 concerns about hiring people with disabilities and asked respondents to indicate how much of a concern each was for their company. Respondents who

said that the concern was “some-what a concern” or “a major concern” were considered to be concerned. Eighty-seven percent of employers reported at least one concern about hiring people with disabilities. Safety on the job of people with disabilities and their coworkers was the number one concern reported by all companies (59.4%). The ability of workers with disabilities to perform job duties (55.5%) and absenteeism (51.7%) were also concerns reported by more than half of respondents. Other frequently cited concerns included knowing how to address the needs of workers

with disabilities (46.8%), not being able to discipline or fire a worker with a disability due to possible legal issues (46.3%), cost of accommodation (45.0%), turnover (42.2%), productivity level (42.0%), cost of workers compensation premiums (30.1%) and additional supervision (34.5%). The least cited concerns included attitudes of customers (28.0%), costs of health care coverage (27.3%), attitudes of coworkers (23.8%), attitudes of supervisors (17.0%), and attitudes of top-level management (14.0%) (Figure 2). On average, companies reported 5.6 of the 15 identified concerns.

## Dimensions of Employer Attitudes

We used exploratory factor analysis to reduce the 15 concerns into a few correlated and meaningful dimensions. Our analysis grouped together observed variables and separated other variables with low or no correlation. Then, we attributed the grouped variables to an unobserved thematic concept (a factor).<sup>3</sup>

The exploratory factor analysis produced a multidimensional scale with three factors for employer concerns (Figure 3). The first of these, labeled work performance, included seven items that addressed performance of

job duties, productivity, additional supervision, safety, turnover, absenteeism, and legal fears for disciplining or firing. This factor explained 71 percent of the variance in the data.

The second factor, labeled social issues, included four items related to the anticipation of negative reactions of others: attitudes of supervisors, attitudes of top-level management, attitudes of coworkers, and attitudes of customers. This factor explained 21 percent of the variance.

The third factor, labeled cost, included three items related to concerns about the costs of people with

disabilities in the workplace: cost of health care coverage, cost of workers compensation premiums, and cost of accommodation. This factor explained 8 percent of the variance. This factor suggests that some employers have misconceptions about the costs of employing people with disabilities. Studies show that employers who have made accommodations report that doing so costs little or nothing (Loy, 2016; Solovieva, 2011). One item—do not know how to accommodate a worker with a disability—did not load onto any of the scales.

**Figure 3** Items that constitute three dimensions of employer concerns about hiring people with disabilities

### Work Performance

- Ability to perform job duties
- Productivity
- Additional supervision
- Safety
- Turnover
- Absenteeism
- Cannot discipline or fire due to lawsuits



### Social Issues

- Attitudes of supervisors
- Attitudes of top-level management
- Attitudes of coworkers
- Attitudes of customers



### Cost

- Cost of healthcare coverage
- Cost of workers compensation premiums
- Cost of accommodation



<sup>3</sup> Only factors with Eigen values of 1 and factor loading of greater than or equal to 0.4 were retained. Cronbachs alpha was used to test the internal reliability of the items.

## Employer Attitudes and Company and Respondent Characteristics

We examined the relationships of employer concerns dimensions and company and respondent characteristics. This involved creating scales by summing the items included in each dimension. Each item was assigned number values with 1 = Not a concern, 2 = Somewhat a concern, and 3 = A major concern. We standardized the

summed scales to 100 by dividing the score by the total possible score. We then used F-tests and t-tests to determine whether there were significant differences in attitudes by company and respondent characteristics.

Small companies had a higher level of concerns about work performance and cost than medium-sized and large companies to have concerns about work performance and cost,

but there were no differences by size on concerns about social issues (Table 1). Goods-producing employers had a higher level of concerns about work performance and cost than employers in the service-providing and public administration sectors.

Employer concerns are related to characteristics of respondents. Presidents, owners, or chief executive officers had a higher level of concerns

Table 1

Relationship between employer concerns about hiring people with disabilities and company characteristics

Employer Concern Dimension	Company size			Industry		
	Small	Medium	Large	Goods Prod.	Service Prov.	Public Admin.
Factor 1: <b>Work performance</b> <sup>a, b</sup>	56.8	52.9	47.3	59.3	53.6	50.5
Factor 2: <b>Social issues</b>	42.4	42.8	41.5	43.1	42.4	43.5
Factor 3: <b>Cost</b> <sup>a, b</sup>	51.4	45.5	43.0	51.7	47.7	43.3

N=1,927 to 1,947 companies.

<sup>a</sup> F-test for difference by company size is significant at  $p < .05$ . Pairwise t-tests for differences between medium-sized and small companies and between large and small companies are significant at  $p < .05$ .

<sup>b</sup> F-test for difference by industry is significant at  $p < .05$ . Pairwise t-tests for differences between service-providing and goods-producing companies and between public administration and goods-producing companies are significant at  $p < .05$ .

Companies that expressed a higher level of concerns about work performance were less likely to recruit people with disabilities. Companies that expressed a higher level of concerns about social issues were more likely to recruit. There was no relationship between concerns about cost and recruitment of people with disabilities.

about work performance and cost than those in Human Resources and managers, supervisors, or other professionals (Table 2).

### Employer Attitudes and Recruitment of People with Disabilities

We used multivariate logistic regression analysis to examine the independent effects of employer concerns on recruitment of people with disabilities. The regression analysis indicated a negative relationship between employer concerns about work performance and recruiting

people with disabilities: the higher the level of concerns about work performance an employer has, the lower the probability of recruiting people with disabilities (Table 3). If a company responded “not concerned” to all 15 concern items, the probability of recruiting people with disabilities, holding social issue and cost concerns at the mean values, was .276. In contrast, if a company responded “a major concern” to all 15 items, the probability of recruiting people with disabilities is .055. This result suggests that concerns about work performance of people with disabilities

**Table 2** Relationship between employer concerns about hiring people with disabilities and respondent characteristics

Employer Concern Dimension	Position in company			Interacted with person with disability inside or outside of work	
	President, owner, or CEO	HR	Manager, supervisor, or other professional	Yes	No
Factor 1: <b>Work performance</b> <sup>a</sup>	58.3	49.2	52.6	54.0	57.6
Factor 2: <b>Social issues</b>	42.2	41.1	42.3	42.6	42.1
Factor 3: <b>Cost</b> <sup>a</sup>	52.5	43.6	45.8	47.7	51.7

HR, Human Resources; CEO, Chief Executive Officer  
N=1,927 to 1,947 companies.

<sup>a</sup> F-test for difference by position in company is significant at  $p < .05$ . Pairwise t-tests for differences between HR and president, owner, or CEO and between manager, supervisor, or other professional and president, owner, or CEO are significant at  $p < .05$ .

differentiates employers who recruit people with disabilities from employers who do not recruit.

There was a positive relationship between concerns about social issues and hiring people with disabilities. If a company responded “not concerned” to all 4 concern items, the probability of recruiting people with disabilities was .145. If a company responded “somewhat concerned” to all 4 items, the probability of recruiting people with disabilities was .416. One possible

explanation for this finding is that respondents who are inclined to recruit people with disabilities may be more aware of and sensitive to possible negative attitudes of coworkers and superiors that serve as a potential barrier to employment of people with disabilities. An equally plausible explanation is that respondents who have hired people with disabilities have experienced negative reactions of others in the workplace.

Concerns about cost were unrelated to recruiting people with disabilities. It is important to emphasize that these findings are descriptive and do not necessarily indicate that concerns deter employers from recruiting people with disabilities. An alternative explanation is that recruitment of and exposure to people with disabilities decreases concerns about work performance.

**Table 3**

**Regression analysis of the relationship between employer concerns and the probability of recruiting of people with disabilities**

Employer Concern Dimension	Estimate	SE
Factor 1: <b>Work performance</b>	<b>-0.028*</b>	<b>0.007</b>
Factor 2: <b>Social issues</b>	<b>0.022*</b>	<b>0.005</b>
Factor 3: <b>Cost</b>	<b>0.002</b>	<b>0.002</b>
Constant	<b>-1.024*</b>	<b>0.331</b>

SE, standard error

\* p < 0.05

N=1,684 companies



## Discussion

### Key Findings

When we compare the 2008 and 2018 employer surveys, we observe increases in the percentage of companies that employ, recruit, and hire people in the past decade. While these findings suggest increases in employer efforts to employ people with disabilities, they also indicate there is much room for further improvement as less than one-quarter of employers reported that they currently employ people with disabilities.

Across all companies, the most cited concern was about safety on the job of people with disabilities and coworkers. Research indicates that people with disabilities do indeed experience higher risks of injuries on the job (Price et al., 2012). However, with regard to other concerns, most are not supported by research. Studies suggest that differences in productivity, absenteeism, and supervision between employees with disabilities and employees without disabilities are non-existent or small and that the costs of accommodations are modest (Hartnett, Stuart Thurman, Loy, and Batiste, 2011; Hernandez and McDonald, 2010; Schartz, Hendricks, and Blanck, 2006).

Concerns about hiring people with disabilities were higher in small companies and companies in the goods-producing sector. Concerns were also higher among respondents who were owners or chief executive officers rather than HR or supervisors

or managers. One possible explanation is that front-line supervisors or managers may be more likely to have contact with people with disabilities. Prior research shows that experience with people with disabilities reduces or eliminates stereotypes and biases (Unger, 2002).

### Implications

Knowledge of the demand-side factors that influence the employment of people with disabilities from this survey informs the Office of Disability Employment Policy's outreach efforts to employers. The findings suggest that negative employer attitudes may be a barrier to the recruitment of people with disabilities. Research suggests that educational interventions in the workplace and higher education settings may be effective at changing attitudes, at least in the short-term (Hunt and Hunt, 2004; Kleynhans and Kotze, 2014; Oliviera and Pereira, 2017). It appears that outreach efforts should include information about actual workplace accidents related to disabilities, either incurred by people with disabilities or coworkers, and information on physical environment modifications and accommodations that could increase workplace safety. In addition, outreach efforts should also include information about management and supervision practices and training that could be provided to employees to increase workplace safety.

The second most common concern expressed by employers was the ability of people with disabilities to perform required job duties. While this concern may in large part reflect misconceptions about people with disabilities, it may also have legitimacy. Young adults with disabilities are less likely to attend college (Sanford et al., 2011), and one survey found that 41 percent of people with disabilities who were not working said that they did not have enough education or training to get a job (Kessler Foundation, 2015). It is important to continue to focus federal workforce development efforts to improve the skills of people with disabilities to match the needs of employers. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act includes increased focus on integrated, competitive employment and transition services and relationships between vocational rehabilitation and schools. This study indicates that it will be important to continue to strengthen the provision of disability services in the workforce development system and the relationship between employers and the workforce development system.

## Suggested Citation

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