



Cornell University
ILR School
Employment and Disability Institute

Research Brief:
**Inside the Workplace: Case Studies
of Factors Influencing Engagement
of People with Disabilities**

Research presented at the
Innovative Research on Employer Practices:
Improving Employment for People with Disabilities

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Overview

Researchers are working to address the issue of disability discrimination in employment and discover ways to maximize disability inclusion. However, a more precise understanding of the experiences of individuals within the workplace is needed.

Cornell University conducted in-depth studies in both a public and a private sector organization to obtain a fuller understanding of factors in the workplace that impact disability inclusiveness and minimize disability employment discrimination. This research included non-disability-specific factors that have been shown to enhance the advancement and retention of employees in general, with the hope of developing a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of practices and issues that are most influential for people with disabilities.

The study examined the inclusiveness of work units, the quality of supervisor relationships with subordinates with disabilities, job characteristics and fit, access to mentoring, and coworkers' attitudes as potential factors impacting the experiences of people with disabilities. It also looked at obstacles that may impede the effective implementation of disability practices. In addition, the issue of disability disclosure is currently receiving a great deal of attention. The recent revisions to the regulations for Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 mean that federal contractors will be expected to employ enough individuals with disabilities to comprise 7% of their workforce. Employers must rely on the willingness of employees to disclose their disability in order to meet these goals. Very little is currently known about the conditions that make it more or less likely that an individual with a disability will feel comfortable disclosing their disability, to whom they are most likely to disclose their disability, and whether individuals who do disclose their disability have positive disclosure experiences.

We collected survey data from employees of one public (n=1,103; 34% response rate) and one private sector (n=2,240; 36% response rate) organization. Employees provided data about their personal work experiences, disability status, and accommodation experiences, and these data were analyzed within a multi-level context utilizing data from department managers about their awareness of disability policies and practices, and aggregate employee data related to the department's climate and collective employee work experiences.

Here we examine employees' views of three primary issues emerging from our research: employee and managerial perceptions of, and experiences with, disability policies and practices within their organization; disability bias (including factors that impact its likelihood); and self-disclosure, both of one's disability status and also of one's need for an accommodation.

Perceptions of, and Experiences With, Disability Policies and Practices

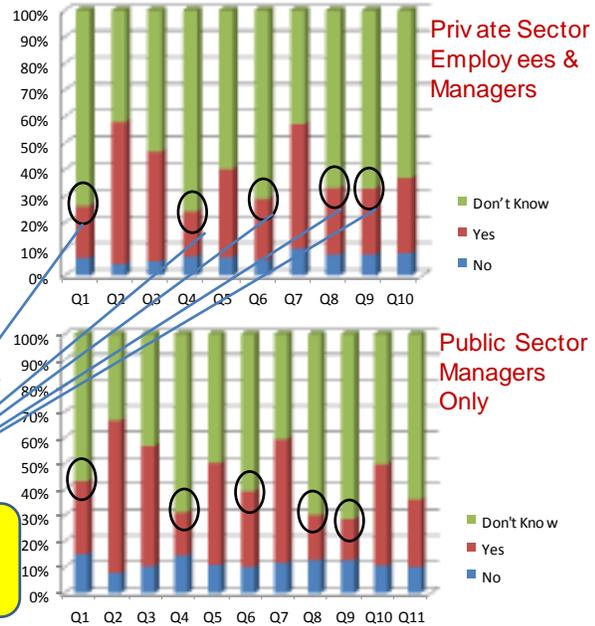
Our past research suggested that the effectiveness of disability policies and practices may be hindered by employees' lack of awareness about their existence and/or knowledge about when and how to apply them. We examined the significance of this issue, and explored the channels through which employees learn about practices. In addition, we sought to discover obstacles to consistent implementation of these practices, and to explore which barriers to employment and advancement are perceived to be the most significant.

Awareness of Disability Practices

Are you aware of whether the following policies and/or practices regarding disability exist within your organization?

- Q1: Targeted recruiting of people with disabilities.
- Q2: Clear policies and procedures for disability accommodations.
- Q3: Including disability in your organization's diversity strategy or mission statement.
- Q4: Centralized source of funding for accommodations.
- Q5: Designated office or person to address accommodation questions.
- Q6: Formal (i.e., written, documented) decision-making process for the case-by-case provision of accommodations.
- Q7: Disability awareness and sensitivity training for employees.
- Q8: Regular review of the accessibility of your organization's job application systems.
- Q9: Training of HR staff and hiring managers on effective interviewing of people with disabilities.
- Q10: Invitation for employees to confidentially disclose whether they have a disability.
- Q11: Disability Advisory Group

**Across both organizations:
Particularly low levels of awareness about disability practices**



Results showed that across both organizations there were particularly low levels of awareness about the organization's disability practices in these areas: targeted recruiting of people with disabilities, a centralized source of funding for accommodation, formal (i.e., written, documented) decision-making process for the case-by-case provision of accommodations, whether a regular review of the accessibility of the organization's job application systems was conducted, or whether training of HR staff and hiring managers on effective interviewing of people with disabilities was regularly conducted.

Public Sector Managerial Perceptions About Barriers and Ways to Reduce Them

In the public organization studied, managers were asked about their perceptions of select barriers to the employment or advancement of people with disabilities. Interestingly, the barriers rated highest were: cost of accommodations, lack of qualified applicants with disabilities, leader's knowledge of which accommodations to make, and attitudes/stereotypes.

Managerial perceptions about the barriers to the employment or advancement of people with disabilities	
	Mean (out of 5)
Cost of accommodations	2.50
Lack of qualified applicants with disabilities	2.44
Leader's knowledge of which accommodations to make	2.41
Attitudes/stereotypes	2.23
Lack of related experience among people with disabilities	2.19
Cost of training	2.07
Lack of requisite skills and training among people with disabilities	2.02
Additional cost of supervision	1.81
Attendance of people with disabilities	1.68
Productivity and performance of people with disabilities	1.58

Public sector managers were also asked about the potential effectiveness of a select number of interventions for reducing barriers to the employment or advancement of people with disabilities. Visible top management commitment, paying closer attention to physical accessibility (i.e., in buildings/facilities), ensuring HR/EEO staff are highly knowledgeable about disability policy and accommodations, and framing accommodations within broader workplace flexibility initiatives were seen as the more effective interventions of the 13 interventions inquired about.

Managerial perceptions about the (potential) effectiveness of interventions for reducing barriers to the employment or advancement of people with disabilities (public sector)	
	Mean (out of 5)
Visible top management commitment	3.94
Paying closer attention to physical accessibility (i.e., in buildings/facilities)	3.85
Ensuring HR/EEO staff are highly knowledgeable about disability policy and accommodations	3.85
Framing accommodations within broader workplace flexibility initiatives	3.65
Ensuring perceived fairness of grievance or complaint process	3.59
Formal mentoring program to ensure employees with disabilities have mentors	3.57
Special budget allocation/centralized accommodation fund	3.54
Better leveraging the Disability Advisory Group to identify and address key challenges	3.54
Engaging the Disability Advisory Group to share success stories of employees with disabilities	3.50
Regular leadership training about the accommodation process	3.40
More consistently including disability within the broader diversity & inclusion strategic plan	3.33
Required annual staff training focused on disability awareness	3.01
Including focus on diversity goals (including disability goals) in supervisors' performance appraisals	2.71

Disability Related Bias

Our analysis of EEOC charge data shows that individuals with disabilities continue to experience discrimination in organizations. Thus, our goal was to understand the disability practice, managerial, and job factors that might make it more or less likely that people report experiencing subtle forms of disability-related bias. Our prior work on disability climate, as well as the broader literature on diversity/inclusion climate, have suggested that people's general work experiences as well as their experiences with bias are heavily influenced by the climate of their workplace. Therefore, we set out to explore the predictors of disability climate, and examine how the experiences of people with disabilities vary as a function of their department's disability climate.

Across both public and private sector organizations, whether or not employees with disabilities experience disability-related bias is negatively associated with the awareness that the managers in their department have of disability practices, as well as managers' overall perceptions about the effectiveness of those practices.

Experiences of disability-related bias (across both samples) are influenced by:

Managers' awareness of:

- **Clear policies for accommodations**
- Designated office to address accommodations questions
- **Formal decision-making process for provision of accommodations**
- The regular review of the accessibility of the company's application systems
- **Disability awareness training for employees**
- Training for HR and hiring managers on interviewing people

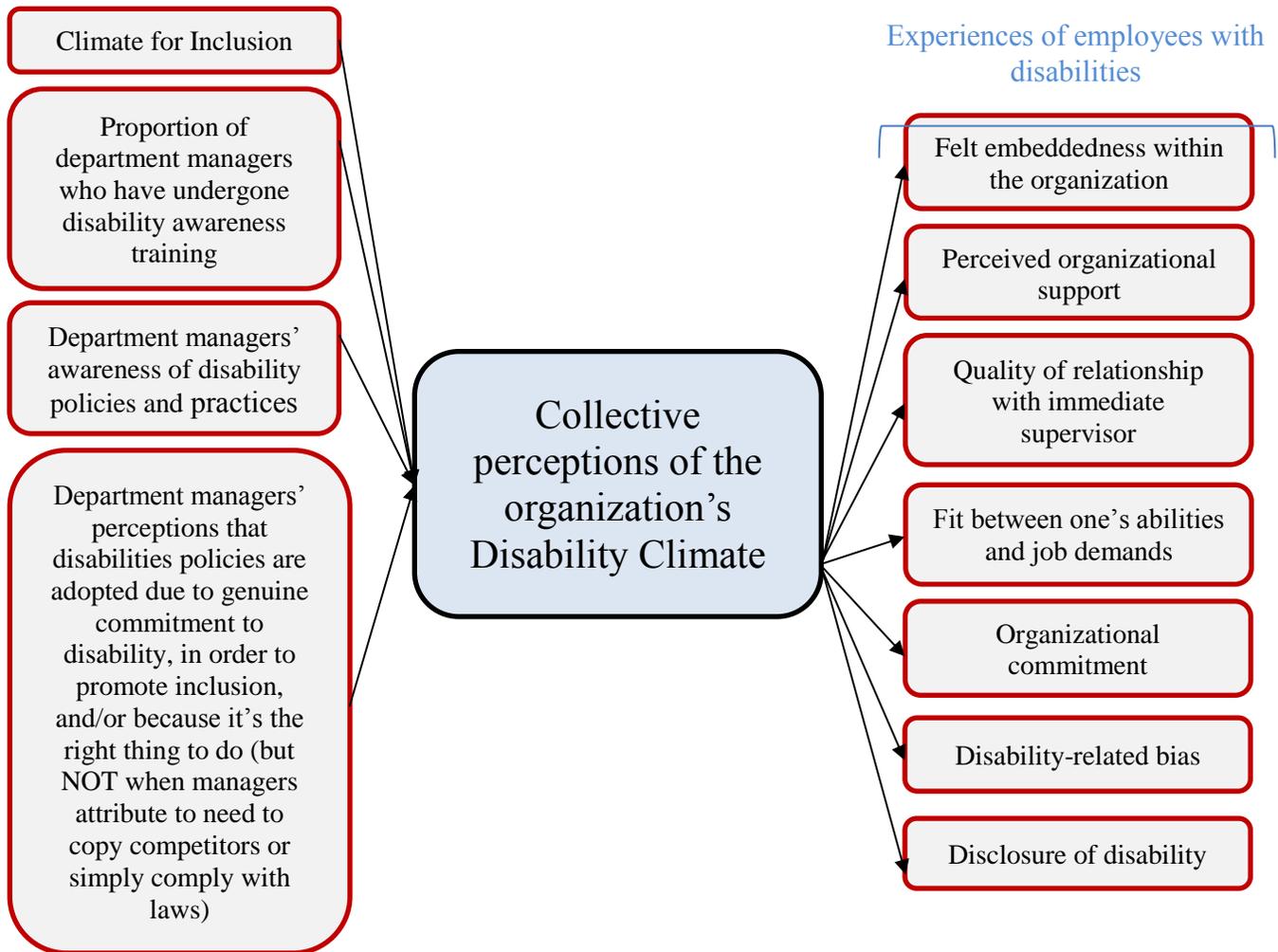
Managers' perceptions about the effectiveness of:

- Clear policies and procedures for accommodations
- Formal decision-making process for the case-by-case provision of accommodations
- **Invitation for employees to confidentiality self-disclose**
- **Designated office/person to address accommodations questions**
- **Disability awareness and sensitivity training for employees**

* Black font = significantly in private sector sample only; blue font = significant in both; green = significant only in public sector sample

Perceptions of the Organization's Disability Climate

Employees' perceptions about the organization's disability climate were assessed with the following items: 1) employees with disabilities have the same opportunities as people without disabilities; 2) the company is making strong efforts to improve conditions and opportunities for people with disabilities; 3) the company is responsive to the needs of people with disabilities; and 4) the company demonstrates a commitment to increasing representation of people with disabilities at all levels of the organization.



A unit's climate for inclusion, the proportion of managers who have undergone disability awareness training, department managers' awareness of disability policies and practices, and department managers' perceptions that disabilities policies are adopted due to genuine commitment to disability, in order to promote inclusion, and/or because it's the right thing to do (and NOT just to copy competitors or comply with laws) all contribute significantly to the collective employee perceptions of disability climate. Perceptions of disability climate are important because they influence the experiences that individuals with disabilities report having, including their felt embeddedness within the organization, perceived organizational support, perceptions of the quality of the relationship with their immediate supervisor, fit between their



abilities and the demands of the job, commitment to the organization, experiences with disability-related bias, and willingness to disclose their disability to others.

Self-Disclosure of Disability

Organizations are increasingly concerned with accurately recording the proportion of their employees who have a disability. Their ability to do this is dependent in large part on the willingness of employees to disclose that they have a disability. Yet little is known about the factors that influence disclosure. We set out to explore to whom people are most likely to disclose, their experiences when they do disclose (and what predicts those experiences), and the fears they may have about disclosing. We examined not just an individual's direct disclosure of a disability, but also their willingness to ask for an accommodation (thereby revealing that they have a disability or health condition).

Employees are significantly (at least 1.5 times) more likely to self-disclose to other individuals than to formal entities (HR, EEO, employee records, etc.). When employees with disabilities work within departments in which employees overall feel supported, fairly treated, and embedded, they are more likely to feel “safe” about disclosing their disability. Employees who have been with the organization longer tend to have more positive experiences when disclosing to formal organizational entities. Disability type and visibility do not appear to predict the favorability of disclosure experiences.

Conclusion

Case study research is valuable in identifying the impact of awareness of disability employment and inclusion policies. However, having a disability-related policy in place doesn't ensure awareness and subsequent use. Also, managers' perceptions of the effectiveness of these policies are positively associated with employees' perceptions about the organization's commitment to these issues. Visual top management commitment continues to be seen as a key factor in reducing barriers, but managers are also a critical element in the experiences of people with disabilities in the workplace. Managers' perceptions of the motivations of their organization (e.g., true interest in inclusion vs. legal compliance) positively affect the organization's disability climate. Disability disclosure is most likely to take place with managers or co-workers, rather than HR staff, such that education and training for all employees about how to deal with disability disclosure in the workforce is imperative.

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