Creating a Disability Inclusive Workplace Through Accessible Hiring

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Abstract

Many employers today are interested in advancing diversity in the workplace. Yet, people with disabilities are disproportionately unemployed compared to their non-disabled counterparts. These disparities may be influenced by employer misperceptions about hiring people with disabilities, including high costs for accommodations and fears around litigation. However, research has identified the benefits of hiring people with disabilities and proven strategies for increasing inclusion of disabled employees. This paper aims to outline the ways in which employers can provide an inclusive and accessible experience in the hiring process for disabled job candidates.

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Introduction

From job descriptions, to interviews, to onboarding, the hiring process is meant to recruit talent, assess skills and qualifications, and determine the best fit for a given role. Sometimes this process is not inclusive of people with disabilities who might need accommodations. The employee experience begins with a job listing where qualifications might include "ability to sit, stand, and walk" by default, but are roles that could be adequately performed by someone who does not meet these qualifications. While the employer may not intend to be exclusionary, potential job candidates who use a wheelchair might disqualify themselves from this role before even applying. The interview process could require interpretation services for someone who is deaf or hard of hearing. The onboarding documents might not be accessible for use with a screen reader. These are all scenarios that require consideration by an employer who is striving to recruit and retain diverse talent. The hiring process as a whole opens a window to the employer's culture and preparedness when it comes to disability accommodations (Shaw et al., 2022). In this paper, I will explore the importance of an accessible hiring process and present strategies for inclusion and accessibility for people with disabilities.

Many employers in the current age are interested in building a diverse workforce because of the business case for diversity (Herring, 2009). The business case highlights the importance of diversity for its financial impact and efficiencies (Scott & DeLollis, 2023). Motivation stemming from the business case creates a surface level commitment to diversity and inclusion (Scott & DeLollis, 2023). For some organizations, work towards these diversity goals might manifest in implementing hiring quotas to ensure people with marginalized identities are equally considered or maybe an implicit bias training to attempt to reduce biased decision making (Bezyak et al., 2025). While these efforts have the potential to be a step in the right direction, a genuine and

strategic commitment to diversity and inclusion is necessary to recruit and retain diverse talent.

Since 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has required employers to provide equal opportunities to people with disabilities in all employment-related activities, including recruitment and hiring (*Guide to Disability Rights Laws*, 2020). One component of providing equal opportunity is to make reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities (*Guide to Disability Rights Laws*, 2020). Although it is the responsibility of the job applicant to inform the employer of their necessary accommodations, some applicants requiring accommodations fear that this will negatively impact their chances of being hired (Alexiou, 2024). Some might also fear that they will be labeled difficult or inflexible (Shaw et al., 2022). Regardless of the reasoning, this does not set the stage for an inclusive working environment. To mitigate this experience, there are many ways employers can communicate an inclusive workplace and accommodating hiring process to potential job candidates.

Literature Review

In the current employment landscape, many employers are striving to develop a diverse workforce. Doing so begins during the recruitment and hiring process. People with disabilities are unemployed at disproportionate rates compared to non-disabled working-age adults, leading to higher rates of poverty, homelessness, and health disparities, among other negative effects (Ameri et al., 2018; Bezyak et al., 2025; Erikson et al., 2014; Lindsay et al., 2018). In order to build a diverse workforce, employers must create an inclusive and accessible experience for all people, including those with disabilities. The current body of literature explores the disparities in employment for people with disabilities, employer misperceptions about hiring people with disabilities, the benefits of disability inclusion in the workplace, and strategies for increasing disability inclusion.

In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations identifies the right to work as an indisputable human right (n.d.). Yet, in 2025 the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics found that people of employment age who had a disability were more than 42% more likely to be unemployed than those without a disability. Despite this disparity in employment rates, people with disabilities desire finding meaningful employment and being engaged in the workforce (Lindsay et al., 2018; Shaw et al., 2022). Disabled individuals are one of the most marginalized groups in today's society as a result of stereotyping, ableism, and inaccessibility of the world around them (Bezyak et al., 2025). As a result, people with disabilities experience higher rates of poverty, poor mental and physical health, and social isolation (Qiu et al., 2023). For disabled individuals who are selected in the hiring process, there are still obstacles to face. Disabled employees are twice as likely to work part-time, depriving them of necessary employment related benefits, most notably, health insurance (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025). They are also often subjected to negative attitudes from coworkers and supervisors, receive less adequate training, and experience stigma around utilizing accommodations (Lindsay et al., 2018; Schur et al., 2024). There are various disparities in employment that people with disabilities face as a result of systemic ableism and structural inequities in the workplace.

The literature identifies employer misperceptions about disability as one contributor to employment disparities and inequality. Employers may worry that hiring people with disabilities will have negative impacts on the business, such as increased healthcare costs, absenteeism, low productivity, or risk of litigation (Bezyak et al., 2025). Most frequently though, employers are concerned that disabled employees will not meet necessary qualifications or that they will require costly accommodations (Bezyak et al., 2025; Erickson et al., 2014). The hiring process aims to recruit candidates that meet the necessary qualifications to perform the duties of the job.

Some employers have suggested that there is a deficiency of qualified disabled employees in the talent pool who would be able to effectively perform the tasks of the job at hand (Erickson et al., 2014). Further, for highly skilled jobs, hiring teams might be more stringent about candidates meeting job expectations and responsibilities (Ameri et al., 2018). As a result, it is possible that the gap in employment grows larger because of bias and false assumptions that people with disabilities are not able to meet the expectations (Ameri et al., 2018). If employers are to find qualified employees with disabilities, they then worry that providing accommodations will be costly (Bezyak et al., 2025; Schur et al., 2024). The ADA requires that employers provide reasonable accommodations to disabled employees unless doing so would cause undue hardship (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.). The legal requirement to meet accommodation needs along with a fear of litigation if disabled employees are unhappy with the employer's efforts are just some examples of misperceptions employers might have regarding disability in the workplace.

Although some employers have assorted concerns regarding hiring disabled employees, the literature has also identified benefits of diverse hiring, in particular of people with disabilities. The business case for diversity has been made by researchers and advocates since the turn of the century, citing that diversity is good for business and the bottom line (Herring, 2009). Most notably, increasing performance in areas such as profits and efficiency are provided as benefits of diversifying the workforce (Bezyak et al., 2025; Herring, 2009; Lindsay et al., 2018). While this can be a compelling argument for some employers, studies have also found that employers who intentionally prioritize diversity and inclusion benefit from a more positive reputation and higher retention, which make for a more competitive workplace (Lindsay et al., 2018). Furthermore, beyond the benefits to the employer, disability inclusion benefits employees.

Creating a diverse group of employees increases inclusion and feelings of belonging, which in turn boosts morale, innovates processes, and contributes to a better overall workplace culture (Lindsay et al., 2018).

Although employers might be able to theoretically understand the benefits of disability inclusion, implementing organizational policies and practices that directly support people with disabilities can be challenging as these steps often require additional effort up front. Some proven strategies employers can use to improve disability inclusion include expanding recruitment strategies, developing a thorough plan for accommodation requests, providing disability training to current employees, and creating a disability focused employee resource group (Bezyak et al., 2025; Erickson et al., 2014). As identified in the literature, the cost of accommodations is a common concern for employers regarding hiring people with disabilities. A recent survey by the Job Accommodation Network found that one third of employers reported a one-time accommodation expense costing less than $300 and over 60% reported that accommodations came at no cost to the employer (*Low Cost, High Impact*, 2025). Although most accommodations are no or low cost, one strategy that has been successful to mitigate this concern is creating a dedicated budget for accommodations (Bezyak et al., 2025; Erickson et al., 2014). Being prepared to support employees of all backgrounds increases accessibility and allows job candidates to gain an understanding of the employer's commitment to diversity and inclusion.

The current body of literature explores the disparities in employment rates for people with disabilities as well as some of the employer misperceptions that might contribute to this problem. Additionally, the literature explores the various benefits of disability inclusion in the workplace along with outlining strategies for increasing inclusion and belonging for disabled

employees. These segments of the literature contribute to the importance of not only fostering an inclusive work environment, but creating an accessible hiring process beginning with recruitment, to the interview and selection process, to onboarding plans. The literature informs the necessities of creating an inclusive process for disabled employees as well as proven strategies to do so.

Organizational Factors

One of the best proven strategies to eliminate discrimination in the hiring process is for employers to have explicit policies supporting inclusive hiring and diversity management (Bezyak et al., 2025; Erickson et al., 2014). While an organization can establish policies and procedures to comply with legal guidelines, the leaders and decision makers involved in the hiring process may have a significant impact on inclusion (Hardy et al., 2022). Depending on an employer's industry or size, hiring decisions are sometimes made by a committee consisting of several stakeholders or are sometimes made by one individual. If staff demographics are already homogeneous, this could result in bias when it comes to decision making (Jain & Miller, 2025). Further, small teams will typically be less diverse by nature, causing decision making to have more potential for bias (Herring, 2009). Bias in the hiring process is a concern that has a direct impact on disability inclusion. Previous research has found that while employers do not report the influence of conscious bias in the hiring process, implicit biases are present in decision making as measured by the Implicit Association Test (Bezyak et al., 2025). Implicit biases have been identified to impact attitudes and assumptions about people with disabilities being incompetent and therefore unqualified for roles as a result of their disabilities (Bezyak et al., 2025). Additionally, any amount of bias impacts evaluation of candidates and hiring decisions (Hardy et al., 2022).

While employers are able to create policies and procedures that comply with the ADA or Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), some employers may worry that hiring more people with disabilities will put them at risk for lawsuits (Bezyak et al., 2025; Kaye et al., 2011). Legal compliance is very important for funding and reputation purposes, so it is something that employers are wary to put at risk. Because there are many regulations and requirements when hiring people with disabilities, in particular around accommodations, employers may worry that accidental mistreatment or perception of discrimination will bring legal action from disabled employees (Kaye et al., 2011). As a result of this fear, employers may avoid hiring people with disabilities at all in an effort to avoid this legal risk.

Legal & Policy Landscape

Disability justice advocates have been advocating for employment rights for many decades. In 1973, the Rehabilitation Act was established to protect civil rights for disabled individuals, including employment protections (Schur et al., 2024). Although the law only applied to employers who were federally supported, the Rehabilitation Act set the first standards for employers to hire and provide reasonable accommodations for qualified individuals with disabilities, setting the tone for disability inclusion and equal access to job opportunities (Bezyak, 2025; Schur et al., 2024). Ultimately, the Rehabilitation Act also paved the way for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. The ADA continued protections for disabled individuals in various aspects of life, including employment (Chamallas, 2023). Along with formalizing protections against discrimination, the ADA also provided a clearer definition of disability as well as guidelines for accommodations (Chamallas, 2023). Today, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) enforces all civil rights laws for covered employers. The EEOC provides the infrastructure for employees to report instances of

discrimination or non-compliance with laws such as the ADA (Chamallas, 2023).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework reveals the key issues in disability inclusion in the hiring process. The issue of disability inclusion and accessibility can be viewed through the lenses of disability justice and diversity management to understand the relationships between employer decision making and the employment needs of people with disabilities.

Recommendations & Interventions

There are many proven strategies to increase accessibility in the hiring process and create an inclusive experience for job candidates with disabilities. The first step in the hiring process is recruitment of job candidates. Diverse recruitment requires intentional efforts to reach qualified candidates where they are (Erickson et al., 2014). This might include attending hiring fairs or networking events organized by disability rights or support organizations, using inclusive language in job descriptions, and ensuring application systems are accessible (Lindsay et al., 2018; Shaw et al., 2022). For employees who are selected for interviews, inclusion and accessibility can be supported by informing all job candidates how they can request accommodations for their interviews (Bezyak et al., 2025; Erickson et al., 2014). Further, to eliminate bias in the decision making phase, all personnel involved in the hiring process should undergo implicit bias training (Bezyak et al., 2025; Erickson et al., 2014). Concluding the hiring process is onboarding and welcoming new employees. At this phase of the process, employers can increase belonging and inclusion for employees with disabilities by providing information about employee resource groups and processes for requesting accommodations and requesting time off (Erickson et al., 2014). Additionally, inclusion and belonging in general will be supported by disability awareness training for all employees (Erickson et al., 2014; Kaye et al.,

2011). All of the following are proven strategies to support disability inclusion in the hiring process, but for employers at the beginning of this journey, it may seem overwhelming. In an effort to enable these necessary changes towards disability inclusion, employers should use a phased approach to assess, implement, and monitor progress (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Disability Inclusion at Work

Phase 1: Audit & Assessment

The first step in making improvements is knowing what inclusive practices already exist and where the opportunities for improvement lie. To produce the best outcomes, the assessment process should be collaboratively led by leaders in the organization along with an expert in disability inclusion. The assessment team should first complete an assessment of all of the organization's policies and procedures to ensure equitable practices and inclusive language. Next, an audit of job descriptions should be completed to assess for inclusive language,

necessary requirements and qualifications, and inclusive attributes of the employer. Following this, the employer should assess current recruitment efforts. This evaluation should consider components such as where job openings are being posted, what hiring events the employer is attending, and if there is an employee referral program. Lastly, web accessibility has become increasingly important in the digital age and therefore the accessibility of the application website or portal should be evaluated.

Phase 2: Revision & Implementation

After assessing the state of current materials, policies, and practices, revisions must be made where there were opportunities for improvement along with implementation of new or improved practices.

Job Descriptions

Job descriptions may be one area where revisions are necessary. First, job descriptions should include an Equal Employment Opportunity statement when applicable, which informs applicants that the employer does not discriminate based on federally protected statuses (Chamallas, 2023). Additionally, job descriptions should utilize inclusive language regarding disability. For example, some jobs might require an employee to "stand for the entire shift" which can be discriminatory, so they should instead use language such as "must be able to remain stationary for the entire shift" (*How to Write More Inclusive Job Descriptions*, n.d.). Finally, including information about accessibility accommodations on job descriptions could aid in attracting disabled employees for open positions because it shows that the employer is prepared to support disabled employees (*How to Write More Inclusive Job Descriptions*, n.d.).

Recruitment

Employers who want to develop a diverse workforce must be intentional about

recruitment strategies. In order to recruit individuals with diverse backgrounds, jobs should be posted in various locations. Along with common job boards such as Indeed or LinkedIn, employers can post openings on sites like abilityJOBS, the "leading job board dedicated to connecting employers and job seekers with disabilities" (www.abilityjobs.com). Along with job boards like these, job openings can also be shared with local groups and organizations committed to equitable hiring. Along with a variety in job postings, employers should expand their in-person talent recruitment efforts. Employers who participate in disability focused job fairs are more likely to increase their employment rates of people with disabilities (Bezyak et al., 2025). Finally, one opportunity for recruitment can be to offer an employee referral program. This may be an opportunity for implementation once employers are further in their journey towards disability inclusion, but once employees are able to trust the employer's commitment to accessibility, the word of mouth can be quite powerful. Employees who recruit individuals from their network can be rewarded for their shared commitment to disability inclusion in the workplace.

Accommodations Process

One critical aspect in creating a disability inclusive work environment is ensuring that there is an explicit process for requesting accommodations for all employees, but also for job candidates. Along with including a statement of commitment to accommodations on job descriptions, the hiring team should provide the necessary information for interviewees to request accommodations if necessary. This process could include an accommodation request form, such as the sample created by the Job Accommodation Network (*Sample Forms*, n.d.). Employers may then use the "Hiring Process Reasonable Accommodation Flowchart" to support their next steps (*Hiring Process Reasonable Accommodation Flowchart*, n.d.).

Phase 3: Training & Resources

Once the foundation of policies, procedures, and tools have been laid, employees must be trained on new processes as well as the concepts of disability inclusion.

Training

All staff involved in the hiring process must be trained on the new or revised processes. This training should include information about what changes were made, the motivation and explanation of the changes, and clearly outline the expectations for all involved in the process moving forward. Beyond training on the procedures, hiring staff should all be trained in the areas of disability education as well as implicit bias. While explicit disability education is a key component, implicit biases may still infiltrate the decision making process. It is necessary to give those making hiring decisions the tools to recognize and challenge implicit biases in order to make equitable decisions.

Resources

Beyond initial training efforts, employers should prioritize the sustainability of the efforts in Phases 1 and 2 by developing resources to foster disability inclusion consistently. This sustainability can be supported through various avenues including education, community, and financial resources. Making disability and diversity education part of the workplace culture can encourage retention amongst disabled employees. Education may also lead to better understanding and opportunities to build community. One strategy to further community building is through an employee resource group (ERG). Not only can strong ERGs support morale, inclusion, and belonging, they can serve as a point of accountability towards the sustainable efforts of disability inclusion. Finally, employers can begin building their financial resources in this phase. Financial resources can be beneficial for providing adequate training opportunities for

employees as well as saving for potential accommodation costs that may occur.

Phase 4: Monitoring & Evaluation

Finally, once the first three phases have been completed, it is necessary to monitor their effectiveness to ensure they are working. Along with general process quality monitoring to ensure administrative success, employers can monitor diversity, retention, and staff satisfaction to measure the effectiveness of these changes. Prior to the changes, baseline data should be collected in these areas and should be monitored every 6-12 months to assess progress. If the employer finds through the evaluation that there are no increases in the data points, they should gather any necessary feedback and cycle back through to Phase 1 of this process.

Conclusion

A commitment to disability inclusion in the workplace requires intentional effort and strategic planning. People with disabilities are unemployed at disproportionate rates and employers can contribute to closing this gap by ensuring that all steps of the hiring process are accessible and accommodating. Many employers are required to comply with the legal guidelines of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission or laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act which have furthered accessibility and inclusion for disabled workers. However, more steps can be taken to move beyond compliance and a surface level commitment towards a genuinely inclusive workplace. From inclusive language in job postings to expanding recruitment efforts to training hiring managers on implicit bias, there are a variety of strategies employers can utilize to not only demonstrate their commitment to disability inclusion, but commit to the actions that meet the needs of disabled job candidates as well.

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