

Leo Grizzaffi

Professors Stiltner & Deschenes

HN-300-Capstone

12/10/18

Adults with Disabilities in the Workplace: Their Struggle for Inclusion and Equality

As Americans, we see it as everyone's basic human right to be equal. The struggle for equality and acceptance has been an ongoing fight with many achievements along the way, yet many groups still strive for full inclusion. The disability community, who make up almost 20 percent of the population (Robert 2013) is one group still struggling for full inclusion in society, and their participation in the employment section is key to their goal. In the United States, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities is 81 percent (U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics). Unemployment among people with disabilities is at a staggering rate and that is due to the perception our society and businesses put on disabled people causing a stigma of looking at someone's disability and not their ability.

For about five years now, I have been the operations manager of a non-profit movie theater called the Prospector Theater in Ridgefield, Connecticut. The mission of the Prospector is to employ people with disabilities through the operation of a premium, first-run movie theater. I have met over one hundred employees with a wide range of disabilities in my time there. Before the theater was built in 2014, a majority of the existing workforce was unemployed. This experience has stoked my passion for ensuring greater inclusion of disabled people in the workforce. This experience has also has given me insight into the challenges

facing this population as well as potential solutions. The stories I have seen in the lives of the Prospector employees are confirmed by the research I conducted. For openers, consider the perspective of employee Michael Obadiah, who suffers from Multiple Sclerosis. Michael said, “Before my disability I have always worked. If you don’t have places to go and tasks to do day to day, it’s a very barren existence. When I was looking around for work and the job counselor told me there’s a new theater that’s focused on hiring people with disabilities, I was so excited about that. I want to work, I want to be with people, I still have ambition. There’s nothing heroic about getting up in the morning and going to work, the problem is, there is such an underestimation of what we are capable of” (Michael 2018).

This statement expresses well some central themes of this paper: work is important for well-being and persons with disabilities want to work as much as anyone else. Through educational outreach to businesses and society, the unemployment rate among people with disabilities can decrease. Greater employment will improve the confidence of disabled people and will help them find more acceptance at work in in society. When this happens, everyone benefits. However, improvements will only come about through concerned effort from the top down and the bottom up.

The Bleak Employment Situation for Persons with Disabilities

People with disabilities are just like your average worker, trying to make enough money to cover everyday living expenses. They face challenges in the so-called “equal opportunity” culture that America prides itself on being. People with disabilities feel like outcasts and have the thought process that they will never get to be a part of something bigger than themselves or have any sort of meaning in their everyday life, but having a job reverse those.

The labor market has made people with disabilities to think they are not likely to obtain employment because of their disability. This lack of confidence is contributing to the high unemployment rate. “Only 25% of unemployed people with disabilities said they are ‘Very Likely’ to obtain a job in the near future” (Ali 2010). This shows that there is lack of confidence among people with disabilities due to a constant rejection from employers in the current job market. People with disabilities don’t seek to go out and obtain employment because they think that the risk of rejection is so high, which is reflected in the unemployment statistic stated above.

“Disabled people actually want the same jobs that the non-disabled worker has” (Ali 2010). It is normal for people without a disability to pursue a career in the field that they are interested and apply for it, with the hopes of at least getting an interview. For the disabled applicant, it is much harder for them to work in the area they are most interested in. This is because most of the jobs that are hiring people with disabilities are jobs that do not require much intellectual and physical activity.

Even if the disabled worker defies the statistics and gets hired by a corporation, they still face many challenges within that specific workplace. The sense of inclusion of people with disabilities is minimal, and they are treated differently by their co-workers, compared to someone without a disability. “Even if organizations hire the person with disabilities face many challenges even after being hired. Many do not feel included in their everyday workplace and feel isolated from the rest of their co-workers” (Robert 2013). They can also face discrimination from co-workers, as suggested by the many cases reported each year. “In a study of 354,923 allegations involving discrimination of people with disabilities in the workplace, 329,029 (92.7%)

were due to the claiming party having a physical or mental disability” (Graham 2018). This continues to discourage people with disabilities to find work or maintain the job they work so desperately hard to achieve.

Disabled workers have a greater chance of facing poverty sometime in their life. “People with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty due to a lower average of workplace income. The U.S average annual salary for non-disabled workers was \$39,587. Employed people with disabilities annual salary was \$24,583” (Myer 2013). This is showing a -37.9% difference between the earning of persons with disabilities compared to those without. With disabled people making 37.9% less than the average worker, it is much easier for them to fall below the poverty line. This number does not even include the little over 80% of people with disabilities that are unemployed and making no income whatsoever.

A job gives people a sense of purpose and makes them feel like they are being integrated in society; the constant rejection is what discourages people with disabilities to discontinue seeking those jobs. “Having a job as someone with a disability not only increases your economic resources, but it has positive sociological effects by incorporating people with disabilities in society, promotes civil skills, independence, and a sense of inclusion” (Ali 2010). It is eye-opening to see that a job can have all of those sociological effects on a person. People with or without disabilities want to feel like a contributing member to society. No one deserves to be outcast just because they have a condition that requires accommodation. They want to work just as badly as someone without a disability. Moreover, as will be suggested later, including a diversity of workers, including the disabled, on equal and respectful terms will promote a productive work environment and overall performance for *all* employees.

But Isn't There a Law?

The landmark Americans for Disabilities Act , or ADA, was signed into law by the late President George H.W. Bush in 1990. “This law requires that recruiters/employees do not discriminate against qualified people with disabilities in any employment practice, such as hiring or promotion. It also requires employers to provide job-qualified people with disabilities reasonable accommodations which enable them to perform their jobs on par compared to other employees” (Robert 2013). This law was a huge leap for the disability community. It finally set some benchmark of the proper way to accommodate a disabled person in the workplace and set standards that discouraged discrimination in hiring processes. An example of accommodation would be the introduction of regulations such as specific length bathroom stall doors, so a wheelchair could fit in them (Robert 2013).

The problem is that companies find ways around the ADA. They do this by saying the applicant is not qualified enough for the position being hired. “Corporations have tried to narrow the definition of what constitutes a disability and they have argued that employing people with disabilities is expensive despite many studies showing otherwise” (Robert 2013). An example of this would be if a disabled applicant got rejected because the employer does not consider them identifying with autism to be severe enough to deem them disabled. This would then make it easy for the employer to say that the applicant was rejected due to their lack of experience or qualifications because if not deemed disabled, they are now on the same hiring level as a non-disabled applicant. The ADA doesn't hold employers accountable for discrimination because it lets them easily come up with reasons, such as underqualification, to

deliver rejection. This loophole gives a disadvantage to people with disabilities before they even get to sit down for an interview.

“Employers often fictionalize people with disabilities, meaning that they make up pre-conceived notions about the interview before they have a chance to sit down and have a conversation with them” (Robert 2013). In most job applications, candidates disclose that they have a disability and often tell the employer in the application that their disability will not affect their job performance. “Disclosing means that when prompted on the application, it will ask if you if you want to self-identify with a disability, and most applicants who are disabled will do this” (Robert 2013). The ADA must be rewritten to try and broaden the definition of a disability and at the same time, close all loopholes businesses use to get around the law. An example of a loophole would be narrowing the definition of a disability based on how the ADA is written, they can get around the ADA’s rules, as the example of the applicant with autism shows above. Discrimination is happening on a day-to-day basis and having a law that is almost impossible to implement makes progress for the future difficult.

The ADA and related laws are enforced by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, or EEOC. The EEOC says, “It is illegal to discriminate against someone (applicant or employee) because of that person's race, color, religion, sex (including gender identity, sexual orientation, and pregnancy), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information. It is also illegal to retaliate against a person because he or she complained about discrimination, filed a charge of discrimination, or participated in an employment discrimination investigation or lawsuit” (EEOC 2018). It is promising to see that the government has set up the necessary departments to ensure that the laws in favor of people with disabilities are followed. The

problem stems from the EEOC having a law like the ADA that is too loose; in the fact that it has many opportunities for loopholes and it makes holding businesses accountable that much more difficult.

The Ultimate Challenge: Changing People's Attitudes

Businesses, from large corporations down to small businesses, have several reasons they do not employ people with disabilities. Business owners have preconceived notions about the disabled before the hiring process even starts, and surveys taken from them reflect this. with personal discrimination being the biggest deterrent. "An employer would be 34% less likely to hire a person with a disability, compared to someone who does not" (Ameri 2018). This shows that employers discriminate people with disabilities whether they get to sit down with them or not. Companies cannot legally say that they discriminate against people with disabilities because every corporation legally has to affirm that they are an equal opportunity employer. These preconceived notions of businesses and corporations are stunting the hiring process of people with disabilities because that 34% statistic already puts a disabled applicant at a disadvantage compared to a non-disabled one. This shows that the process is not equal, and disabled applicants are not being evaluated at the same level as non-disabled applicants.

People in society are a key contribution to the success of a business, but their view of ones who hire people with disabilities can affect an organization in a positive or negative way depending on their perceptions. "In a study of 519,200 people, 43.7% said that people with disabilities should have an unskilled job working with people without disabilities, 34.1% said that they should be in a special workshop with other people with disabilities" (Burge 2013).

These statistics offer a perspective from people in society on how they view people with

disabilities and what jobs they should be doing. It is comforting to see that a majority of the population thinks that people with disabilities should be employed in some capacity. Most people thought that people with disabilities should have an unskilled job, but they must have to work with non-disabled workers to most likely supervise their actions. The second, and the most staggering statistic, was on how a large number of people thought workers with disabilities should not have a regular job and work in a workshop with exclusively disabled workers. That percentage of people have a huge underestimation of what people with disabilities are capable of and shows that the public is not educated on how people with disabilities can be successfully integrated into society.

Much of the public does not have a bold vision for the kinds of jobs that people with disabilities can do. The same survey found that “72% of the public thinks that when a disabled worker is hired, they should be under constant observation by an employee who doesn’t have a disability” (Burge 2013). Between the data listed, it shows that society is not as trustworthy to people with disabilities holding jobs and require constant supervision in order to perform their specified role effectively. In same study, taking the opinion from the sample population, if a business were to employ people with disabilities, what would the public perception of that business be? It showed that “65% of people think that job integration for people with disabilities would not affect their view of a company’s image, safety or productivity. 34% of people think that the employment of people with disabilities should be segregated and if people with disabilities are employed, it would negatively affect the way they view that business” (Burge 2013). To a business, these numbers are concerning. The fact that they could potentially lose 34% of their customer base due to society viewing them in a negative way

would be something that would destroy their bottom line. Society either accepts or rejects a business, and the statistics say that if a business is hiring someone with a disability, it could drastically affect the public's perception. This causes businesses to be scarcer on hiring people with disabilities, due to the fear that they would potentially lose customers because of it. There is still a large percentage of people that are saying that a business that hires people with disabilities would not affect how they view that business, and to a business that means no effect on sales.

Reasons for Hope

One of the main reasons of hope for people with disabilities is the amount of advocacy groups and conventions fighting for their equality on an everyday basis. One of the groups, which is a national one, is the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This is a UN based effort that had 92 signatories at its first signing, the largest ever in UN history. This convention tries to “to change attitudes and approaches to persons with disabilities. It takes to a new height the movement from viewing persons with disabilities as “objects” of charity, medical treatment and social protection towards viewing persons with disabilities as “subjects” with rights, who are capable of claiming those rights and making decisions for their lives based on their free and informed consent as well as being active members of society” (CRPD 2016). The attention that this convention has brought to a national level for people with disabilities is educating businesses and overall society to accept people with disabilities for who they are and show that they can be productive members of society.

Not all awareness happens on a national scale because most are small organizations, like the Prospector Theater. Having the problem brought up on a bigger scale though should

encourage smaller advocacy groups to form. The more people that can be educated and informed of the positives of hiring people with disabilities, the more they will be able to change the perspective of society and the businesses around them.

An example of a state level advocacy group is Disability Rights Connecticut. “Disability Rights Connecticut, Inc. (DRCT) is an advocacy organization that is dedicated to identifying and eliminating the barriers that people with disabilities face in exercising their civil, legal and human rights. As Connecticut’s protection and advocacy system (P&A), we work to improve the quality of life for individuals with disabilities, their families and our community as a whole using the activities and programs below” (DRTC 2018). This group is one that is advocating for the rights of disabled people within the State of Connecticut. Most states do have advocacy groups like these and are state funded. They offer many programs to make the lives of disabled individuals better and more productive. An example of this would be that they post job openings regularly on their website for people seeking employment and they do a lot of hiring of people with disabilities to the organization itself. This group shows that education and advocacy for disabled people does not have to be just at a national level, but it can go down to a state one, and to communities, like the Prospector Theater.

The tighter ADA law as talked about above will help disabled workers because it will make it that much harder for businesses to evaluate them unfairly. A no-loophole ADA law will give people with disabilities a fair and unscrewed hiring process. If this is done, we may see disability unemployment decrease due to the fact that employers are being forced to ignore the disability more and see the *ability*.

Moving Forward

My recommendation to society is that we need to be more open and willing to accept people who are different than us. We all share similar goals and dreams, just because someone has a disability, does not mean that they shouldn't be entitled to that same opportunity. Education for the public is essential and it starts with getting the word out that people with disabilities can work and that starts with small advocacy groups all the way up to the national level. This will start to change the public's perception as to what they think about people with disabilities and will lead to them being more accepting of businesses who hire the disabled.

Businesses need to do a better job in the integration of people with disabilities in their workforce. They need to sit down with their HR departments to tell them not to just throw the application away because someone has a disability. "Most applicants explicitly say that they have a disability when they are applying for a position and how that disability will not affect the position they are applying for, but employers still look at the disability as bringing in someone who is going to stunt the company's growth" (Ameri 2018). This is due to the company not educating its hiring managers on how much people with disabilities have to offer and they can help their company sometimes more than people who do not identify. If and when someone with a disability is hired, companies need to also educate all of its employees on how to interact with someone with a disability and teach how to practice acceptance.

"Education in the workplace about how to integrate people within their organization is essential, this would significantly increase the amount hired" (Burge 2013). People with disabilities want a sense of inclusion and to feel like they have meaning. In the case of

employment, they have gone through many hurdles to get there, they should come into a welcoming work environment, and that starts with the proper education of staff.

Disabled workers need to be educated that they should never stop pursuing the job they are passionate about. They need to be told that they are capable and that they are accepted as a contributing member of society. A little encouragement is all that is needed to get disabled people to fill out applications; they just need to have some knowledge that they are being given a fair chance compared to other applicants. They want to work and shouldn't be constantly rejected by society and businesses.

The perception of people with disabilities has a trickle-down effect in this entire situation. If public perception shifts to a more positive light of people with disabilities, then businesses will start to see that hiring them will not have a negative impact on their business. This will directly impact people with disabilities because they are now given the confidence to go out and seek jobs due more people with disabilities getting them. People with disabilities need to be better integrated in society and should have their rights respected, as every American expects. There is such an underestimation of what people with disabilities are capable of. Those estimates are hard to change, but they *can* be changed with more education. They will be changed when we see more examples of businesses employing people with disabilities, proving that it does work and that it is socially, financially, and morally beneficial for these organizations.

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