

# Addressing the Underemployment of Persons with Disabilities: Recommendations for Expanding Organizational Social Responsibility

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Published online: 3 September 2009  
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**Abstract** The underemployment of persons with disabilities continues to be a societal problem; many persons with disabilities have difficulty securing and maintaining employment. This difficulty contributes to the relatively higher rates of poverty among persons with disabilities as well as their underutilization as productive members of society. This research examines factors that contribute to this underemployment problem. Based on this examination, we develop questions organizations must consider for addressing the problem. These questions are based on creating working relationships for persons with disabilities at an individual level that may be an extension of an organization's corporate social responsibility program. Individuals with disabilities have a right to obtain and maintain successful employment opportunities; this research outlines the factors at play and provides suggestions for employers to consider in addressing this social problem.

**Key words** corporate social responsibility · disability · underemployment · human resource management

According to the 2000 United States Census, people with disabilities represent about 19.3% of the 257.2 million individuals age 5 or older in the civilian non-institutionalized population (Lengnick-Hall 2007a). In spite of various forms of enabling legislation, persons with disabilities (PWDs) continue to be underemployed. Research indicates that the gap in employment rates for working-age people with and without disabilities continues to be approximately 40% (Pelkowski 2007). If underemployment exists within this population, there is also an increased likelihood that such individuals live in poverty (Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Demographics and Statistics 2007). In order to better understand the issues underlying such underemployment, this research describes the context of the employment of PWDs. The factors described in this context include: the

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environment, organizational characteristics, characteristics of an individual disability, and the job. Lastly, this paper makes specific recommendations to employers about how to create a supportive employment relationship for a PWD.

While many firms engage in diversity efforts in order to meet social performance goals through corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs (e.g., diversity) (Greening and Turban 2000), PWDs present different diversity challenges for organizations. Disabilities have different manifestations wherein each individual's workplace accommodation is customized to that person's needs and the organization's context. For example, an individual in a wheelchair who requires no accommodations (e.g., assistive technology, irregular work schedule) may find it easy to function in a modern, corporate office job where the furniture and building structure (e.g., doorways, restrooms, and elevator) is already wheelchair accessible. An individual applying for the same sort of job in an older building may indicate that there are a number of accommodations that are necessarily for them to negotiate the space to successfully perform job duties. Even individuals with the "same" disability may need a different accommodation because of the severity of the disability.

## The Context

In order to structure the recommendations we pose to employers later in this paper, it is first necessary to understand the employment context. The context includes considerations both external (e.g., labor market, legal environment) as well as internal (e.g. organizational strategy, culture) to the organization.

*Labor Market* One argument for actively promoting the employment of PWDs is the role they can play in addressing shortages in the labor market. In early 2000, when the United States was experiencing a nationwide labor shortage, employers were already beginning to look to PWDs as a source of employees (Conlin 2000). In the future, changing demographics in the U.S. labor force due to a declining population and a proportionately large number of older workers getting ready to retire, suggests that using this underemployed group of PWDs could address this anticipated labor shortage (Pelkowski 2007).

*Legal Environment* Most developed countries have some type of legislation that makes discrimination against PWDs in employment decisions illegal. However, as evident by the relatively low employment rates of PWDs, this legislation is not adequate support for obtaining and maintaining gainful employment. For example, in the United States, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 addresses this type of discrimination. According to Keaty *et al.* (2005), the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) defines disability using a three-pronged definition. There must be: "(1) A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of the individual; (2) a record of such impairment; or (3) being regarded as having such impairment." (pp. 43–44). While the ADA has had a positive impact on the employment of individuals with disabilities, Keaty *et al.* (2005) indicate that there is still an employment gap between those with and without disabilities. They state that this gap could, in part, be related to court interpretation of the ADA; similarly, Thompson (2005) reports that the courts often handle disability claims inconsistently. Effective January 1, 2009, the ADA was expanded through the ADA Amendments Act of 2008. This act expands who is protected under the ADA and changes

the focus of the ADA from who is protected to whether employers are complying with their obligations under the law (Postol 2009). It is too early to determine if the passage of this act will impact the underemployment of persons with disabilities.

The ADA mandates that employers provide reasonable accommodation for PWDs. What is reasonable has been the subject of many lawsuits. Crampton and Hodge's (2003) research indicates that 82% of ADA claims occur not at the point-of-hire, but after the implementation of a hiring decision. During the employment relationship, behaviors or actions on the part of employers precipitate feelings of exclusion or hostile treatment of employees with disabilities. Crampton and Hodges (2003) report that 23% of the employment problems faced by disabled workers are related to reasonable accommodation and 50% are related to discharge. Court interpretations of the act have led to confusion for employers regarding what is actually a disability, what is appropriate accommodation, and how mitigating circumstances might enter into any employment decision (Crampton and Hodges 2003; LeVar 2001; Massengill 2004). In our litigious society, the fear of possible claims related to violations of the ADA may cause organizations to be wary of hiring PWDs despite supportive legislation.

*Social Climate* Recent research examines the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in guiding organizational strategy and accompanying policies (e.g., Cornelius *et al.* 2008; Fenwick and Bierema 2008; Fuentes-García *et al.* 2008). Companies respond to the various demands of social interest groups (e.g., environmental, ethical and human rights) by actions that go beyond mere economic interests or generating value for the shareholder (Fuentes-García *et al.* 2008). There is growing evidence that a company's CSR activities comprise a legitimate and compelling way to attract and retain good employees regardless of disability (Bhattacharya *et al.* 2008; Greening and Turban 2000). Fair employment practices are often part of a CSR program.

We suggest that increasing the employment level of PWDs is a socially responsible initiative. Organizations should move beyond the legal requirements of providing equal opportunity and an environment free from discrimination to one that actively pursues the human capital of PWDs. Krepcio and Cooper (2008) state that these efforts are good for the overall well-being of society and also enhance public relations and community perceptions. Coors Brewing Company exemplifies this approach in their *Golden Door Employment Opportunity Training Program*. Because of their commitment to all individuals in society, they have developed a special program to employ society's outcasts (e.g., homeless, former felons, uneducated) in an attempt to give something back to the community (Laabs 1996). According to Robitaille (2008), there is also increasing support for recruiting disabled job seekers. She reports that some organizations are actively recruiting PWDs to make their organizations more attractive to new PWD applicants. She also indicates that some organizations are developing corporate partnerships to link to pools of qualified PWD professionals.

*Organization Strategy* Many organizations take a proactive approach toward increasing the employment of PWDs. For example, organizations marketing their products to PWDs may also employ such individuals because it is not only good business, but provides them with a competitive advantage in product development (Riley 2006). Other organizational examples include, Hewlett-Packard, (Gaunt 2007a) and SunTrust Bank, (Bereman and Hargrave 2007). In the former case, the organization manufactures products that provide accessibility to PWDs; in the latter case, the bank reports that they have more customers with disabilities now that they have PWDs in highly visible employee positions. Because research indicates that

PWDs often have lower turnover and absenteeism rates (Hernandez *et al.* 2008), organizations can consider expanding recruiting pools to include this population. Gaunt (2007b) reports that a small company (20 employees) that had difficulty recruiting qualified employees hired one individual with a disability. Because that person did well, the company now actively recruits PWDs and has a very disability accommodating culture (Gaunt 2007b).

*Internal Organizational Environment* Factors such as the organizational culture, discriminatory behavior, and recruitment and retention strategy are especially important in shaping the work experiences of PWDs.

*Culture* Organizational culture provides individuals with an identity as well as shapes their behavior by helping them make sense of their surroundings (Smircich 1983). Organizational culture contains the espoused norms and beliefs and therefore has a great impact on employee experiences, attitudes and behavior. A culture that supports CSR and PWDs would be proactive in both its recruitment and retention efforts of these individuals. However, integrating a minority group into a dominant corporate culture is not always a smooth process, regardless of a CSR program. Some organizational efforts proposed to make for a disability supportive culture actually force the ‘outing’ of PWDs (e.g., affinity groups and mentoring programs). These individuals may not want to be singled out based on their minority status (Riley 2006).

There is often a lack of connection between awareness and involvement in a company’s CSR activities, which may cause confusion about these initiatives. These activities are meant to increase morale and excitement about the organization being a ‘good’ company both to internal and external stakeholders, but if a lack of connection exists; there may be negative consequences (Bhattacharya *et al.* 2008). CSR approaches are defined in a variety of ways and this in itself can lead to confusion. CSR programs might not be clearly understood by employees below the executive level (Fenwick and Bierema 2008). If a CSR program is not translated into actual practices, it might be difficult to systematically integrate and maintain CSR within a firm. In a study of human resource development professionals, Fenwick and Bierema (2008) found that although the HRD professionals were sensitive to CSR issues, they felt their actual work was disconnected from their firms’ efforts in CSRs.

Because human resource development professionals often hold the role of developing firm practices that promote continued learning and movement throughout an individual’s career at the firm (one of the noted problems in the retention of PWDs), one would suspect that they need to be better connected to CSR. Corporate social responsibility suggests that human resource development programs should create social benefit and improve social welfare (Biereman and D’Abundo 2004).

*Discrimination* Although most countries have legislation that prohibits discriminatory practices in employment decisions, discrimination against PWDs still occurs. For example, in 2007, in the United States, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (the federal agency that deals with claims of violation of the ADA) received 17,734 charges of disability discrimination and recovered \$54.4 million in monetary benefits for charging parties and other aggrieved individuals. In 2006, this agency reported 15,575 charges (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2008). The relatively consistent, and slightly increasing, number of claims each suggests that in spite of the ADA, discrimination against PWDs is still occurring. While these claims typically address overt acts of unfair treatment, there are often more subtle types of adverse treatment that pervade organizations.

Stereotyping is a problem PWDs typically face. In some cases other employees categorize these individuals as having diminished capacity. Negative perceptions, such as these, can have an impact on how the perceptions of PWDs in spite of evidence that these workers typically perform at the same level as able-bodied individuals (Bruyere *et al.* 2003). Perceptions of justice are also likely to have an impact on how successful PWDs view the organization in either accommodating their disability or creating a disability-friendly culture. Shaping these perceptions is key to the successful employment of PWDs. Bruyere *et al.* (2003) suggest that perceptions of both procedural and distributive justice also frame perceptions of discrimination as well as possible ADA claims.

In addition to stereotyping, access and treatment discrimination are possible dynamics within the work environment (Barclay 1982; Terborg and Ilgen 1975). Access discrimination exists when “non-job-related limitations are placed on an identifiable group” during the hiring process (Terborg and Ilgen, p. 353). Treatment discrimination exists when there is “invalid differential treatment” of group members once they have joined the organization (Terborg and Ilgen, p. 353). In one of the few studies that examines these types of discrimination on organizational outcomes, Perry *et al.* (2000) found that individuals with physical disabilities experience more access discrimination than those without disabilities. There were no differences in the level of treatment discrimination between these two groups once employed. It is not surprising that this research also reveals that those individuals who experience access discrimination have lower levels of job satisfaction. Perry *et al.* (2000) suggest that PWDs might be more likely to accept a job offer because they do not typically have as many employment opportunities, regardless of discrimination. An organization attempting to develop a CSR would be sensitive to both expanding the applicant pool to include PWDs as well as insuring that any new employee receives similar opportunities. Craft *et al.* (1980) state that the ‘handicapped’ (PWDs) are often placed in dead-end jobs.

Even in organizations that attempt to minimize unfair discriminatory processes, microinequities occur that can result in less than optimal vocational functioning (Fessinger 2008, p. 257). Microinequities are relatively isolated and insignificant instances of bias that accumulate over time. For example, an individual who needs physical accommodation may find their workspace in a location different than those of their teammates. This in turn makes them feel isolated from their workgroup. In a different context, an individual with diabetes may have to snack in a restroom rather than in a lounge. Microinequities are very subtle, difficult to detect, and often only the individual experiencing them (i.e., the PWD) realizes their existence (Rowe 1990).

PWDs typically experience discriminatory behavior from either a direct supervisor or coworkers. These individuals may hold negative stereotypes about PWD’s abilities and value to the organization. In most organizations, employees in general have a very limited understanding about the legal rights guaranteed PWDs and therefore may make unfair or illegal decisions with regard to these workers. In a focus group study with a variety of healthcare, hospitality and retail administrators, results revealed reservations about hiring PWDs because they would increase time needed for supervision, have a negative impact on productivity and have relatively higher rates of absenteeism (Hernandez *et al.* 2008). These same administrators also report managerial concerns related to the cost of accommodations and potential for increased levels of managerial bias, if a manager had a negative experience with an employee with a disability. This study, along with several others (e.g. Dixon *et al.* 2003), reports that much of the manager bias against PWDs has been associated with a lack of experience (and understanding) of disability issues.

*Recruitment and Retention* During the recruitment process, the ADA is fairly clear about handling questions regarding an applicant's disability. In any recruitment process one should center on screening for the most qualified applicant for the job and its essential duties. Just as employers provide reasonable accommodation upon employment, accommodation is guaranteed during the application process (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2005). For example, many large retail organizations have completely online application processes, although the skills necessary to complete the application are not necessary for the job. A reasonable accommodation would be to offer an applicant who could not complete the online application (due to their disability) another way to complete an application. Other reasonable accommodations include, but are not limited to, providing written materials in an alternative format (e.g., large print, Braille or audiotape), providing readers or sign language interpreters, and ensuring that recruitment, interviews, tests or other components of the application process are accessible (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2005).

It is important that employers are knowledgeable about the rights of PWDs during the screening process. This includes knowing what types of questions are prohibited during the recruitment process. For example, if an individual attends an interview appointment while in a wheelchair, the interviewer cannot ask any questions about this obvious condition. Even if the applicant discusses their condition, the interviewer should not ask any additional questions and avoid engagement on the topic. The interviewer may ask the applicant if they will need any accommodation to complete other aspects of the screening process (e.g., work sample) (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2005). During the screening process it is important to avoid asking questions regarding any medical condition, past sick leave, workers compensation claims or injuries or current medications. However, once a job offer is extended, the employer may ask these questions of all employees, (not just PWDs) if they are relevant to the job in question. Additionally, if a disability is discovered during a post-offer screening (e.g., medical examination), the applicant can only be disqualified from employment if the condition makes it impossible to perform the essential job functions (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2005).

*Disability* Aspects of an individual's disability that might impact working relationships are the disability's visibility and/or level of severity. Many disabilities are invisible to others. Some disabilities are easily managed through medication and therefore any symptoms are mitigated. Other disabilities may not even have symptoms that are readily observed by others unless improperly managed. For example, a diabetic may not have any apparent symptoms unless they have problems managing their blood sugar. This same individual does not have any impairment that would impact their work performance unless they experience those same blood sugar problems while at work. In other words, there is no impairment of concern to the employer. There has been some legal activity concerning whether issues of visibility are covered under the ADA. Because the ADA works to cover disabilities that 'limit' a major life activity, the disability must be shown to do just that. In the case of *Albertsons, Inc. v. Kirkingburg* (1999), the court ruled that Kirkingburg's termination for failure to meet the Department of Transportation's vision standards for commercial truck drivers was not covered under the ADA. Kirkingburg suffered from amblyopia but failed to establish that his condition limited a major life activity (Kleiman and Denton 2000). Kirkingburg was terminated because he failed to meet the requirements of the job, not because of his disability. This is an example of how a PWD, like an able-bodied individual, is equally evaluated in terms of meeting the minimum job qualifications to perform a job. The issue

of impairment can be challenging to organizations. This is where ethical, social and even legal issues in managing employees who are PWDs occur. In *Albertsons, Inc. v. Kirkingburg* the ADA does not apply because the experienced disability was determined not to limit a major life activity. In our earlier example of the individual who is confined to a wheelchair but has no other limitations, accommodation is fairly straightforward to the extent that such accommodation is related to mobility and physical access. However, these issues become complex when the impairment fluctuates as happens with many disabilities. If we return to the example of the individual with diabetes, the supervising manager may not even know the individual is diabetic, especially if the disease is easily managed. If the diabetes worsens, the employee now needs accommodation (e.g., break time to have a snack/inject insulin, new limitations in mobility). How does the organization handle this change in a supportive, legal manner? Depending on the type of disability, there may be questions concerning if any accommodation is reasonable or whether that individual can still perform the essential duties of the job. Organizations can typically manage more routine, systematic issues that arise, however with PWDs; impairment may not necessarily be predictable. It is these types of issues that often limit the continued employment of PWDs.

*Mitigation* Mitigating circumstances can impact many of the characteristics of a person's disability. For example, an individual with a psychiatric disability may not even exhibit symptoms of that disability if properly medicated. Sheffield (2005) reports that, "The US Supreme Court has concluded that a person's impairment is to be judged based on mitigating, or corrective measures (p.6)." If the corrective measure controls the disability, the person would not be "substantially impaired in the performance of one or more major life activities (p.6)" and hence would not be considered disabled under the ADA. As the population ages, we may find more employees seeking mitigation before a disability becomes pronounced and obvious. From an organization's perspective mitigation is problematic since, if they weren't aware of the disability, how could the individual have legal protection? There are several court decisions that illustrate contradictory rulings in this area. In *Denney v. Mosey*, the court indicated that an employer should allow an employee who was diabetic to snack to control his insulin levels. However, in *Orr v. Wal-Mart Stores, Inc.* the court found for an employer who fired a diabetic for trying to eat during a break (Massengill 2004). Mitigation can eliminate a disability, but may also lead to denials of requests for reasonable accommodation that could continue to alleviate problems. This is a confusing area for employers and PWDs (Mello 2002).

The issue of mitigation leads to another issue that frames the dynamics of perceived discrimination, the area of help seeking (Tessler and Schwartz 1972; Williams and Williams 1983). This research indicates that in many cases individuals, who need help, do not ask for it. It may be that individuals are hesitant to ask for accommodation for fear of negative perceptions relating to their work behavior or performance. In some cases, they may be pursuing avenues of mitigation that they hope may "hide" their need for assistance. As a result, if an employer does not know that an individual has a disability that may interfere with work performance, there could be negative attributions about poor performance (the person is perceived as incompetent rather than the person needs accommodation) that could lead to termination (Sheffield 2005). Such individuals might file an ADA claim of wrongful discharge; however, the employer may not even have known about the disability. For example, Mechanic *et al.* (2002) note that fear of discrimination can lead those with psychiatric disabilities to hide their mental history and not ask for accommodation.

*Accommodation* As often mandated by legislation to support the employment of PWDs, employers must provide a reasonable accommodation to either the physical workspace or the job tasks in order to make appropriate modifications necessary to the employment relationship; for example, providing assistive computer technology or a different break schedule. This accommodation is typically deemed reasonable when it does not impose a severe hardship on the employer (e.g., cost or disruption to the work flow). According to the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (the agency that enforces the ADA), a discussion of the disability issues with the employee should work to establish a reasonable accommodation (Kleiman and Denton 2000).

There is research that examines how PWDs are viewed when they seek this accommodation. This research focuses on: 1. Whether PWDs ask for accommodation, 2. What types of accommodation they ask for and 3. The perceptions of their co-workers in relation to any work modifications. Baldrige and Veiga's (2006) research indicates if an employee repeatedly asks for accommodation, he or she may be viewed as imposing on the organization, co-workers may exert pressure to stop a request, and supervisors may hold negative opinions because of repeated (small) monetary costs. This dynamic suggests that an organizational culture can develop that leads to exclusion or an unsupportive environment based on any occurrence of an accommodation requests. This type of culture could lead to both blatant treatment discrimination as well as an environment perceived to consist of microinequities. Some psychiatric disabilities, such as bi-polar disorder, can have a cyclical component that could lead to repeated accommodation requests.

Employers often fear having to do any type of accommodation to employ a PWD; however, the reality is that these accommodations are typically very easy and without significant investment. According to the Department of Justice, 19% of accommodations cost nothing at all, and 69% cost less than \$500 (Riley 2006). Administrators in retail settings report that common types of accommodations included stools for checkout lanes, special lighting for the work station, computer software that allows for large font type, and the availability of sign language interpreters (Hernandez *et al.* 2008).

*The Job* When considering the appropriate ethical and social support necessary to increase the underemployment of PWD, we return to the job itself. We do not advocate that organizations hire workers who do not meet the minimum qualifications for a job nor make unreasonable accommodations for these individuals. Our approach relies on making employment connections between qualified PWDs and appropriate jobs, clearly many PWDs knowledge, skills and abilities are not being recognized by employers.

## Recommendations

The employment gap between disabled and able-bodied individuals can be reduced if organizations consider existing barriers to employment as well as possibly discriminatory behavior in the work environment. The employment context described in the previous section illustrates some of the challenges faced by employers in hiring PWDs, but also suggests that many of these challenges can be easily managed. Based on this research, we propose a set of questions that an organization can consider in order to create a successful working relationship with a PWD, one employee at a time. These considerations could be easily adopted into an organization's CSR program that emphasizes the employment of a diverse workforce.



Lengnick-Hall (2007c) details a business case for hiring PWDs that could be integrated into a CSR program. While his case argues that hiring PWDs could save money, this is not a necessary requirement for a CSR program. At an individual level, he suggests that these workers have lower levels of turnover. He also describes how hiring PWDs is beneficial for all members of an organization's workforce. Because PWDs often require some degree of accommodation, a better-designed workspace based on their needs can be generalized to all employees to enhance work processes. Lastly, Lengnick-Hall (2007b) suggests that an organization that proactively recruits PWDs will both save money and have higher levels of talent. By providing an environment that helps integrate individuals with disabilities, organizations can reduce costs in four ways: 1. Returning employees with temporary disabilities to work more quickly and efficiently, 2. Reducing turnover costs, 3. Reducing litigation costs and 4. Obtaining tax breaks (p. 92). Organizations who promote the recruitment and retention of individuals with disabilities may be able to hire better employees who are ignored by their competitors. Lengnick-Hall (2007b) also suggests that hiring PWDs, as described earlier, can increase market opportunities as well as have a positive impact on an organization's reputation and overall level of diversity. Therefore, from his standpoint, hiring PWDs might be to an organization's economic advantage. We argue that while this might be a motivator, organizations that believe in the employment of all individuals should want to improve the underemployment of PWDs for the greater social good.

A more individualistic type of approach to the underemployment problem is illustrated in a study of successful work experiences for visually impaired employees. Golub (2006) interviewed employers with successful working relationships with their employees with visual impairments and found that a collaborative individual approach to creating a mutually satisfactory working relationship proved most successful. Golub's (2006) employment model is based on success through 'mutual accommodation...and respect of differences regardless of whether they add value (p. 718).' Just as in the questions outlined below, not only does the employer need to create a supportive work environment for the PWD; the PWD must also work to assist the employer in having an appropriate understanding of what is needed in the workplace for success unique to the disability and position. By considering the questions described below, organizations can create a supportive environment whereby the PWD will feel able to discuss issues related to their disability and employment with their employer (e.g., supervisor, human resource management representative).

## Questions Organizations Need to Consider

*Overall Training* Employees working for an organization that is actively hiring PWDs need training on both the legal requirements as well as how to establish and maintain a productive working relationship with that individual who is hired.

Does the organization have training in both the legal environment and in managing a PWD?

Training and employee development in this area may take many forms. While the information contained in the training of the legal issues surrounding the employment of PWDS is likely to be straightforward and consistent, the training on managing or working with a PWD may be most effective if customized for a specific working relationship. Also,

as with any type of diversity training, it is important that all employees, regardless of whether they are immediately working with a PWD be involved in such training at some level. This practice is likely to create a disability-friendly culture. For example, students with disabilities such as autism are now matriculating in increasing numbers at many universities; one of the authors of this paper had such a student in her class. At that time, she was not provided with any guidelines for managing this student. Fortunately, she knew of a variety of resources to help her in understanding how to best work with this individual. In the current environment, the university's disability support services office works much more closely with faculty who typically have no training in either the legal aspects of the situation or the education of the student. This support function makes it easier for the receiving faculty member to know what he or she can or cannot do as well as providing the faculty member with assistance when needed to provide accommodation. At the individual or workgroup level, it is most appropriate for the team involved in working with a PWD to have targeted training in any issues associated with that individual's impairment as it relates to the working relationship. Depending on the comfort level of the PWD, the PWD may be involved in providing information to their co-workers about their disability and any accommodations they may need.

*Recruitment* Recruiting begins before a position opens. Web sites and printed materials that offer job postings should be in formats that are accessible and efforts should be made to link or forward them to service sites with disability constituencies (Riley 2006). Similarly, Robitaille (2008) reports that that National Business & Disability runs a disability-internship program. There are 30 corporate members and the program facilitates placement of summer interns. In order to make sure PWDs are included in the applicant pool, organizations need to develop a rapport with local disability organizations and college campus disability support service offices. Employers can also instruct their executive search firms to reach out to PWDs to develop a diverse applicant pool. Another way is to make sure subcontractors employ people with disabilities through standards imposed by the organization (Riley 2006).

Are the organization's procedures inclusive of PWDs and free from unfair discriminatory practices?

Screening methods that are grounded in more objective criteria and systematic procedures are less subject to bias and prejudice against PWDs. For example, structured interviews have been shown to reduce bias and stereotyping in interviewer ratings of PWDs (Brecher *et al.* 2006). Brecher *et al.* (2006) recommend structuring job interviews by: basing questions on the job analysis, having multiple interviewers, having interviewers take notes, asking behavioral and situational questions, and having behaviorally anchored rating scales for interview answers (p. 165).

*Retention* Organizations need to question whether their workplace is supportive of the *continued* employment of PWDs. The questions that need to be addressed in the retention of these workers include:

What is a reasonable accommodation on the job and how might it impact the overall working environment?

What are the costs (e.g., financial, social) of increasing the employment of PWDs?

Is the workplace supportive of PWDs?

Long-term, is there a presence of PWDs across the organization?

As mentioned earlier, there can be both overt and covert discrimination of a PWD in the workplace (e.g., access and treatment discrimination, microinequities). Organizations need to ensure that issues related to accommodation do not impact a PWD's work experience negatively. Coworkers often view the accommodation granted as unfair. For example, consider the situation where a PWD who is permitted to telework as an accommodation measure, while employees without disabilities in that same job are not afforded that opportunity. The employees without the disability may experience and show resentment as a result of this accommodation if they perceive it to be unfair (Colella 2001).

Any employee needs to be aware of job development opportunities such as promotional, educational or training programs. Employers already know that internal efforts to retain employees can often reduce turnover and recruitment costs. As PWDs are able to observe individuals like themselves in positions across the organization, they are likely to view their own career plans as more viable.

*Human Resource Management (HRM)* HRM activities may be at the forefront of support for an individualized disability management program. This area of the organization is a resource in its disability supportive practices and expertise.

Are the appropriate policies and support mechanisms in place for developing supportive working relationships with PWDs? Do the procedures and policies in place apply to a new or unfamiliar disability or injury?

Through proper training and an increase in the numbers of PWDs in the workplace, there is likely to be increased comfort in working with this traditionally underemployed group. HRM may be able to create a more supportive work environment for PWDs through its programs and policies. For example, there has been some research examining the presence of a disability on performance ratings both of job applicants (e.g. Bell and Klein 2001, Hoff Macan and Hayes 1995; Roberts and Hoff Macan 2006) and current employees' performance (e.g. Colella *et al.* 1997; Miller and Wener 2005). These studies provide evidence that the presence of a disability does affect ratings. For example, Roberts and Hoff Macan (2006) tested whether the disclosure of an invisible disability impacts ratings during the employment interview and found that applicants who chose to disclose their disability were rated as more highly qualified. Although legislation typically prohibits disability information from being used in the employment process, clearly it often enters into shaping perceptions or impacting decision making. One interesting issue raised in the research on existing employee performance is that there may be a different set of unfair or biased standards used to address certain PWDs (Colella *et al.* 1997; Colella and Stone 2005). HRM needs to make sure that both recruitment and retention practices are highly objective in an attempt to remove these biases in the evaluation process.

*Physical Workspace* Because many disabilities are often accommodated through physical modifications in the workspace, one way to ensure accommodation for all is through general redesign of an organization's workspace. Universal design is something organizations should be considering in creating supportive cultures for PWD. Universal design disguises accommodations and makes them an inherent part of any workspace. Therefore, any issues among coworkers in regards to an individual who needs a physical accommodation become nonexistent. The assumption is that everyone has a disability, making it more comfortable for both the person with a disability and the person without it. A related program of managing office space is wayfinding where traffic flow and other

space navigation issues are well designed in order to assist PWDs. For example, highly contrasting colors on the edge of one step and beginning a flat surface, knurled doorknobs, textured floor and walls can assist various PWDs in navigating office space (Riley 2006). Developing an HRM philosophy with a wayfinding or universal approach creates a supportive physical space.

*New or Unfamiliar Disability* It is interesting to note that there is some evidence that individuals do not always respond to all PWDs in the same manner. In their recent review of the literature in this area, Colella and Stone (2005) note several categories of disability that may impact a PWDs employment experience; it is not just the type of disability, but the origin of a disability that shapes individual perceptions. For example, if an individual is perceived as responsible in some manner for their disability, there are more negative evaluations of that person (Colella and Stone 2005). There has also been some research to establish a categorization of responses based on type of disability. For example, people respond most favorably to people with physical disabilities compared to those with sensory or, especially mental disabilities (Colella and Stone 2005). Therefore, these perceptual differences would need to be considered in the employment situation.

## Conclusion

It is clear that there is an underemployment problem for PWDs. By detailing the context (and challenges) of successful employment we provide questions organizations can consider to develop a more supportive work environment. Many individuals with disabilities are ready and able to work if only they can find the right opportunity. Employment benefits individuals in a variety of ways, but it may play an especially positive function for members of minority groups who have been socially marginalized and often denied access to jobs. Employment may increase life satisfaction through increased income (decreased likelihood of being in poverty), decreased isolation, and a greater sense that one is filling a valuable social role (Schur 2002). We believe that increasing employment will develop from a mutually open relationship between the PWD and their employer in understanding any accommodations necessary or other relevant workplace experiences (e. g., discrimination, career development, job performance).

Organizations may be motivated to employ PWDs as a means to address a strategic imperative (e.g., CSR, labor shortage, product development), but whatever the rationale, we believe that underemployment needs to be addressed as a social imperative. Employers have the right to an appropriate workforce and PWDs can easily be a part of that group given the appropriate sensitivity to often minimal accommodations.

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