

Research In Focus: A Weekly Digest of New Research from the NIDILRR Community

Business Leaders Share Their Strategies to Promote Inclusion of People with Disabilities

A study funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR).

More than 20 million Americans ages 16-64 have disabilities, according to the American Institutes for Research. These Americans represent a substantial segment of the possible workforce, yet only about 30% of them are employed, compared with nearly 75% of Americans without disabilities. Americans with disabilities may face challenges to finding or keeping jobs, including negative attitudes or discrimination from employers, a lack of preparation for their career of choice, or a lack of reasonable accommodations in the workplace. However, recent laws and changes in public attitudes have encouraged businesses to hire more employees with disabilities. Business managers are also beginning to recognize the benefits of hiring employees with disabilities. For instance, doing so can improve employee morale. In addition, employees with disabilities are often highly productive and reliable; and businesses with a diverse workforce can attract a more diverse customer base. Businesses can take formal steps to increase their hiring of employees with disabilities, which can benefit their entire community. In a recent NIDILRR-funded study, researchers looked at the public reports of large businesses with good track records of inclusion toward employees with disabilities. The researchers wanted to find out what steps these businesses took to promote inclusion of people with disabilities.

Researchers at the [Great Lakes ADA Regional Center](#) reviewed the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports of large businesses published in 2015 and 2016. The researchers selected the 34 businesses that received a perfect score in 2016 on the Disability Equality Index (DEI), a benchmarking tool used to rate a business's inclusion policies and practices. All 34 businesses had at least 4,000 employees, and they represented a variety of industries including healthcare, aerospace and defense, technology, and banking. The CSR reports described the strategies that each business used to positively impact their community, commenting on the company's overall values and culture as well as concrete actions taken to create positive impact.

When the researchers reviewed the CSR reports from the 34 businesses, they found four overarching themes emerging from the businesses' strategies for inclusion of people with disabilities:

1. Diversity and inclusion statements: Twenty-eight of the businesses included disability as a protected group in their diversity statements, affirming that they welcome a diverse workforce and do not discriminate against people with disabilities, ethnic or sexual minorities, and other protected groups. Although the other 6 businesses did not explicitly mention any specific protected groups, they described a general culture of diversity and valuing diverse experiences.

2. Employee resource groups: Twenty-three of the businesses described having an internal resource group for employees with disabilities. These groups were described as providing peer support or mentoring, and helping employees with disabilities overcome access barriers. Some of the employee resource groups also were open to family members of the employees with disabilities who joined them.
3. Supplier diversity initiatives: Fourteen of the businesses described contracting with or buying supplies from businesses owned by people with disabilities, including veterans with disabilities.
4. Recruitment and hiring initiatives: Ten of the businesses described specific programs to recruit employees with disabilities, such as paid internships or on-the-job training where students with disabilities could be hired temporarily with the goal of preparing them for more permanent jobs. Generally, the hiring and recruitment plans of these businesses describe the benefits of inclusion and detail specific services to support employees with disabilities and retain them in the long term.

The authors noted that the businesses in this study mainly described specialized strategies to promote inclusion. These strategies involved creating specialized employee resource groups or internship programs specifically for employees with disabilities, or improving accommodations for employees with disabilities.

Mainstreaming strategies, in contrast, may involve designing workplaces so that people with and without disabilities can succeed, developing flexible work schedules for all employees, or emphasizing a general focus on diversity without specifically naming people with disabilities as a protected group. Businesses may wish to consider integrating these mainstreaming practices alongside specialist practices, which can further optimize the inclusion of people with disabilities. Future research may be useful to better understand how employers can remove barriers and improve access for all employees, including those with disabilities.

[To Learn More](#)

The ADA National Network has ten regional centers that assist people with disabilities, employers, and public entities in understanding their rights and responsibilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other disability rights laws.

- Find your [regional center online](#) or call 800/949-4ADA (4232).
- Explore [employer resources](#) from the National Network.

The [Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Employer Practices for Individuals with Disabilities](#) conducts research and training on effective employer practices related to the recruiting, hiring, and retaining of workers with disabilities. Explore the [Employer Insights series](#) to hear from business experts and owners on the business case for disability inclusion, why it's important, and how it can be effectively implemented.

To Learn More About this Study

Gould, R., Parker Harris, S., Mullin, C., & Jones, R., (2020) [Disability, diversity, and corporate social responsibility: Learning from recognized leaders in inclusion](#). Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 52(1), 29-42. This article is available from the NARIC collection under Accession Number J83038.

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