
Corporate Culture and the Employment of Persons with Disabilities

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This article addresses key questions arising from the economic and social disparities that individuals with disabilities experience in the United States. For instance, “What role does corporate culture play in the employment of people with disabilities?” “How does it facilitate or hinder their employment and promotional opportunities, and how can corporations develop supportive cultures that benefit people with disabilities, non-disabled employees, and the organization as a whole?” Corporate culture can create attitudinal, behavioral, and physical barriers for workers and job applicants with disabilities. This research concludes that if the employment prospects of people with disabilities are to be improved significantly, attention must be paid to the ways in which corporate culture creates or reinforces obstacles to employees with disabilities, and how these obstacles can be removed or overcome. Ultimately, we will make the case that corporate culture and

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societal attitudes must change if people with disabilities are to be accepted and incorporated fully into the workplace. Copyright © 2005 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

When individuals with disabilities attempt to gain admittance to most organizational settings, it is as if a space ship lands in the corporate boardroom and little green men from Mars ask to be employed

—John, a 58-year-old employed man with paraplegia (Boyle, 1997, p. 263).

What role does corporate culture play in the employment of people with disabilities? How does it facilitate or hinder their employment and promotional opportunities, and how can corporations develop supportive cultures that benefit people with disabilities, non-disabled employees, and the organization as a whole?

These questions are important because the low employment levels among people with disabilities are a major factor in the economic and social disparities they face—employment not only increases financial resources, but helps incorporate people with disabilities fully into mainstream society by increasing their social networks, civic skills, independence, and sense of efficacy and inclusion from filling a valued social role (Schur, 2002a). Both the economic and non-economic benefits of equal employment opportunity helped motivate Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which was designed to improve access to jobs among qualified people with disabilities by ending employer discrimination and making workplaces accessible (Blanck, Hill, Siegal, & Waterstone, 2003).

Has the ADA made a difference in the employment of people with disabilities? Companies have hired more people with disabilities since the ADA's passage in 1990; however, the effects of the Act on employment are subject to debate, depending to a large extent on how disability is measured (Blanck, Schur, Kruse, Schwochau, & Song, 2003; Stapleton & Burkhauser, 2003). While employment of people who report a work-limiting impairment or health condition decreased in the 1990s, employment has risen among those with work limitations or severe functional limitations who report the ability to work (Burkhauser, Houtenville, & Wittenburg, 2003; Kaye, 2003; Kruse & Schur, 2003).

Yet, neither of these findings are completely valid measures of the “ADA-qualified” population, since they are both overinclusive and underinclusive, and changes in reported disability over time likely reflect changes in the social and economic environment.¹ Analyzing the employment trends is further complicated

¹The work limitation measure does not include people who are not work limited but are substantially limited in other major life activities, and does include many who are not ADA qualified because they are not *substantially* limited or are too severely limited to be qualified for employment. Reports of ability to work may understate ADA coverage both because individuals are not aware that they may be qualified if the employer provides accommodations, and because increased access to disability income and reduced access to jobs affect reports of the ability to work. For discussion see Blanck *et al.* (2003c), Burkhauser *et al.* (2003), and Kruse & Schur (2003). See also Blanck (2001) and Blanck and Song (2002) (illustrating empirically, using historical data, that changes in reported disability over time reflect changes in the legal, social and economic environment).

by the fact that public disability income, which is strongly linked to lower levels of employment, has become more available in the 1990s, coinciding with the implementation of the ADA (Stapleton & Burkhauser, 2003).

No matter what the definition, employment levels of people with disabilities remain well below those of non-disabled people, and the majority of non-employed people with disabilities would prefer to be working. Only 28.6% of the 18 million working-age people reporting a work limitation were employed in 2002, compared with 76.6% of those not reporting a work disability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002a, 2002b).

Using an even broader definition of disability, the 2000 census found that 56.6% of the 30 million working-age Americans reporting functional or activity limitations were employed, compared with 77.2% of those without such limitations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Employment rates are lowest among those with severe functional or activity limitations, of whom only 25.4% were employed in 1999 (Schur & Kruse, 2002). Their low employment rates contribute to high rates of poverty (Hartnett & Blanck, unpublished manuscript; Schur, 2002b). Among people with disabilities who are not employed, a Louis Harris and Associates survey in 2000 found that 67% wanted to work (Harris Interactive, 2000).

How can the employment of people with disabilities be increased? Several factors such as information technologies, telecommuting, and other non-standard work arrangements are promising and deserve further study (Blanck et al., 2003c). In addition, better measurement of disability and who is covered by the ADA are critical factors in understanding employment and disability (Blanck et al., 2003c). Another factor that has not received sufficient attention is "corporate culture," which can create attitudinal, behavioral, and physical barriers for workers and job applicants with disabilities.

As suggested by the quote at the beginning of this article, the legal requirements of the ADA are only one element of a larger policy framework aimed at enhancing the employment of persons with disabilities (Blanck & Schartz, 2001). The article will make the case that corporate culture and societal attitudes also must change if people with disabilities are to be accepted and incorporated fully into the workplace.

Few studies have examined the relationship between corporate culture and disability. In this article, we review the limited prior work in this area, suggest directions for future research, and explore the policy implications for companies that want to create a more inclusive environment for people with disabilities.

CORPORATE CULTURE AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Conceptions of Corporate Culture

A preeminent scholar on corporate culture, Edgar Schein, outlines three levels of culture within organizations (Schein, 1992, 1999).² The most fundamental level consists of values and norms that guide an organization as it encounters new

²For a compilation of modern theory and research on corporate culture, see Ashkanasy, Wilderom, and Peterson (2000).

situations and problems. These “taken-for-granted beliefs” usually are unspoken and often unconscious. More formally, corporate culture at this level consists of a

pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems (Schein, 1992, p. 12).

Other conceptions of corporate culture place emphasis on a “common set of shared meanings or understandings about the group/organization” (Reichers & Schneider, 1990, p. 23).³ These fundamental beliefs may be distinguished from Schein’s second level of corporate culture, which is the “espoused values” of an organization (Schein, 1992). Espoused values include the stated strategies, goals, and philosophies that explicitly guide organizational policies. Schein (1999) defines the third level as the manifestations or artifacts of culture, which include the physical and social environment in a corporation (e.g. the organization of physical space, the way people dress, and the overt behavior of members).

While the different levels of culture often reinforce one another, incongruities and conflicts may exist among them. For example, an expressed commitment to hiring more employees with disabilities may be part of the second level of organizational culture (shared meaning), but it may not be accepted at the most basic level—the unstated and often unconscious assumptions of the organization (Lawrence, 1987). This lack of acceptance may, in turn, be reflected in the third level of culture, so that the physical environment remains inaccessible, jobs are structured in ways that make it difficult for people with disabilities to work there, and co-worker and supervisor attitudes remain unchanged.

Studying Corporate Culture and People with Disabilities

Methods

How does one study corporate culture? At a broad level, Schein states that there are three ways for an outsider to develop an understanding of an organization’s culture. The first is to determine the rules for inclusion: “A way of determining a group’s core assumptions and values is to ask present members what they really look for in new members and to examine carefully the career histories of present members, to detect what accounts for their inclusion in the group” (Schein (1988), quoted by Christensen & Shu, 1999, p. 5).

A second way is to study the power structure of the organization, and the “rules on how a person can obtain, maintain, and lose power” (Christensen & Shu, 1999, p. 5). Third, corporate culture may be revealed through its reward and punishment system: “Once one has identified what kinds of behavior are ‘heroic’ and what kinds of behavior are ‘sinful,’ one can begin to infer the beliefs and assumptions that lie behind those evaluations” (Christensen & Shu, 1999, p. 5).

The specific methods used to analyze corporate culture may be divided into qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative research allows the researcher to

³Reichers and Schneider provide a history of the development of the concept of corporate culture.

interpret and explore the meaning of an issue through a variety of techniques, such as in-depth interviews, participant observations, focus groups, case studies, and analysis of archival material. These techniques may be especially useful for understanding “culturally-conditioned beliefs and practices, assumptions and pre-suppositions” (Scott & Usher, 1996, p. 19). Rousseau makes the case that qualitative methods often are most appropriate for studying organizational culture because

- (a) the fundamental content of culture is unconscious and highly subjective;
- (b) interactive probing is required to access otherwise inaccessible and unconscious cultural material; and
- (c) each culture is idiosyncratic and unique and requires non-standardized assessments (Rousseau, 1990).

Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for studying disability issues. Stereotypes and false assumptions about people with disabilities are common, and qualitative approaches help “bridge the gap between the experience of living with a disability and the life experiences of individuals who do not have a disability, raise awareness of the barriers faced in employment, and suggest potential solutions” (Blanck & Scharztz, 2001, p. 7). Qualitative research may be especially useful in new research areas such as the interactions between disability and corporate culture where “little work has been done, few definitive hypotheses exist, and little is known about the nature of the phenomenon” (Patton, 1990, p. 131).

Examples of qualitative research on disability and employment include studies of temporary workers with disabilities employed by Manpower Inc., workplace accommodations made at Sears Roebuck & Co., and the barriers overcome by successful employees with disabilities (Annenberg Washington Program, 1994, 1996; Blanck & Steele, 1998; Boyle, 1997).

Action-oriented alternative modes of research, such as participatory action research (PAR), have also been used to study disability employment issues (Blanck & Steele, 1998; Whyte, 1991). Although there are various conceptualizations of PAR, in general PAR promotes the collaboration of researcher and community members in the creation of knowledge that advances community action and change (Blanck, Ritchie, Schmeling, & Klein, 2003).

PAR research is frequently conducted at the local level, drawing upon the knowledge and expertise of community members (Eriksson, 1999). The PAR team research process often is described as similar to Lewin’s (1948) classic ‘spiral’ of social action, represented as interconnected cyclical steps of planning, action, observation, and reflecting with each cycle influencing the next one (McTaggart, 1997; Stringer, 1996). In contrast to traditional methods where the researcher acts as expert, in PAR research participants become co-researchers and co-investigators. Researchers who use PAR view research as embedded in a social context and “user-friendly” to individuals often marginalized from the research experience (Oliver, 1992).

Quantitative methods have well known strengths, including the generation of standardized data that allow within- and between-organization comparisons using statistical techniques, and they provide greater confidence in generalizing results to the population of interest. Quantitative measures can be drawn from a variety of sources, such as surveys, administrative data, and controlled laboratory experiments.

Qualitative and quantitative methods are complementary. The combination of these techniques is a form of methodological “triangulation” that provides cross-data validity checks. Qualitative data can enrich quantitative material by adding depth and detail to the statistical results (Patton, 1990). Examples using complementary qualitative and quantitative data to study disability and employment include analyses of contingent and part-time workers with disabilities (Schur, 2003) and participants in an “entrepreneurs with disabilities” training program (Blanck, Sandler, Schmeling, & Schartz, 2000).

In studying a phenomenon such as corporate culture, Rousseau makes the case that qualitative and quantitative methods should be used together to obtain the richest and most valid understanding, noting that “[d]ifferent layers of culture are amenable to different research methods” (1990, p. 166). While the deepest layer—the unconscious assumptions of an organization—may be best explored with nonstandardized qualitative methods, the elements of culture reflected in stated values, norms, and artifacts are accessible by standardized and non-standardized methods (Rousseau, 1990). She notes that while quantitative analysis offers “opportunities to assess often-assumed relations between culture and organization success, strategy, and goals,” qualitative research can “explore the meanings behind the patterns” (Rousseau, 1990, p. 185).

Combining research methods is especially useful when studying the relationship between corporate culture and the employment of people with disabilities. Quantitative methods allow researchers to compare the employment of people with disabilities across different companies and industries, and to assess the numerical impact of hiring, promotion, and retention policies. Qualitative methods (e.g., in-depth interviews), in contrast, address questions such as whether the explicit goals or policies of a corporation conflict with underlying assumptions about the capabilities of people with disabilities and the value of bringing them into the organization.

Involving people with disabilities in the design, implementation, and evaluation of research through the participatory process can be the best way to identify key issues, generate hypotheses that may be tested later by quantitative means, and provide in-depth understanding and insights (Blanck *et al.*, 2003b). It also is a way to empower members of the disability community who have been excluded from input into research and policies that affect them directly. As an example, Boyle (1997) conducted four in-depth interviews with each respondent in his study of social barriers facing employees with disabilities, presenting respondents with summaries of the data before the third and fourth interviews so that respondents could compare their experiences with others, and make comments and additions to ensure the findings accurately reflected their experiences.

Existing Evidence from Studies of Disability

What does existing evidence teach us about the relationship between corporate culture and disability? Employer surveys provide insights into the ways in which corporate culture may affect people with disabilities. A 2003 Rutgers University nationally representative survey of private businesses (with five or more employees) found that 20% of employers said the greatest barrier to people with disabilities

finding employment is discrimination, prejudice, or employer reluctance to hire them (Dixon, Kruse, & Van Horn, 2003).

A 1999 Cornell University survey found that 22% of private-sector employers reported that attitudes and stereotypes were a barrier to employment of people with disabilities in their own firms (Bruyère, 2000). In addition, among those who made changes to enhance the employment of people with disabilities, 32% of employers in the Cornell survey said that it was difficult or very difficult to change supervisor and co-worker attitudes, while only 17% said this about creating flexibility in the performance management system, and 17% said this about modifying their return to work policies. The importance of corporate culture is indicated by the Cornell survey's finding that 81% of private-sector employers said visible top-management commitment was effective or very effective for reducing barriers to employment for persons with disabilities, while 62% said this about staff training and 59% said this about mentoring efforts (Bruyère, 2000).

These surveys show that a substantial share of employers believe that employer, supervisor, and co-worker attitudes are a significant problem. These figures are probably understated due to the "social desirability" bias in surveys that leads respondents to avoid acknowledging prejudicial attitudes (Stone & Colella, 1996, p. 393). In addition, a literature review found a consistent discrepancy between the attitudes that employers express towards people with disabilities on surveys and their actual hiring practices (Wilgosh & Skaret, 1987). Assessing corporate culture must therefore go beyond surveys of employer attitudes and opinions.

A few studies have addressed the relationship between social factors within organizations and the employment experiences of people with disabilities. The following section lays out the different ways in which these social factors operate, first looking at how corporate policies affect the incidence of disability, and then reviewing research on the treatment of people with disabilities in the workplace, including the socialization of new employees, performance evaluations, return to work policies, and the provision of accommodations.

Incidence of disability

Corporate culture and practices affect employee stress levels. Increased stress is an important factor in the occurrence of workplace injuries and stress-related health conditions, and in coping with the effects of existing disabilities. A Columbia University study of large U.S. employers found lower rates of lost time days due to illness and injuries among companies that used (1) employee involvement programs (since employees often experience increased stress when they lack participation in decisions); (2) conflict resolution and grievance procedures (reflecting the positive role that social support structures play in decreasing stress); (3) workforce stabilization and continuity policies (since economic insecurity created by lay-offs and reorganizations decrease employee morale and increase stress); and (4) early support and assistance programs for employees who experienced chronic disabling illnesses or injuries (such as job modification for early return to work, employee assistance programs, and health promotion programs) (Lewin & Schecter, 1995). The authors conclude "companies that have well developed policies in these areas are likely to experience lower rates of disability than comparable companies in their industry group" (Lewin & Schecter, 1995, p. 14).

The impact of an organization's social environment on the incidence of disability is reviewed by Yandrick (1997), who notes that "[p]sychosocial and work environmental factors are far more accurate predictors of disability than physical factors," and "[t]he attitude of injured workers toward their job, manager, and co-workers carries greater weight in the occurrence of chronic disability than the severity of the injury itself." Yandrick emphasizes the importance of employee stress and the role of corporate culture:

Having a sense of not fitting into the social structure—for reasons such as a work-related disability—increases stress. The findings imply that supervisors need to be supportive of workers with disabilities and that a parallel need exists to change corporate culture to be more respectful and open to a diverse workforce (p. 156).

*Supervisor and co-worker attitudes toward employees
with disabilities*

The treatment of people with disabilities in organizations is a new research area. The results from the few extant studies, and related psychological evidence, have been used to create theoretical models of the treatment and attitudes toward employees with disabilities. Following is a summary of this evidence and the predictions from these models (drawing in large part from Colella, 1996, 2001; Stone & Colella, 1996).

Supervisor and co-worker attitudes have a profound impact on the employment experiences of people with disabilities. Even in corporations that are committed to hiring employees with disabilities, negative attitudes from supervisors and co-workers affect the socialization of new employees with disabilities, and limit their ability to become fully accepted and well functioning insiders. If employees with disabilities remain marginalized, this limits their job performance and opportunities for training and advancement.

Supervisor and co-worker attitudes toward employees with disabilities reflect several influences.

1. *Stereotypes.* These include the views that people with disabilities are "saints" (courageous, even tempered, easy to get along with and unlikely to get angry), "needy and helpless" (less capable than others and deserving of special treatment), or "embittered" (quiet, withdrawn, depressed, unsociable, insecure) (Colella, 1996, pp. 362–364). Stereotypes are resistant to change, since people selectively attend to information consistent with pre-existing stereotypes (Blanck, 2001).
2. *Negative affect or discomfort in being around people with disabilities.* Negative affect varies by type of disability, with greater discomfort for mental and sensory impairments than for mobility and other physical impairments (Stone & Colella, 1996). The negative affect may be counteracted in many instances by a "norm of kindness," although such a norm can lead to condescending attitudes or overly helpful behavior.
3. *Strain caused by communication difficulties.* Some disabilities, such as speech or hearing impairments, make communication more difficult. Co-workers avoid interacting with employees who have such disabilities because of the extra time and strain involved.

4. *Personality factors*. Prejudice is greater among employees who are high on aggression, anxiety, dogmatism, ethnocentrism, general prejudice, or who have limited tolerance for ambiguity or poor self-concept and body satisfaction (Colella, 1996).
5. *Prior contact with people with disabilities*. Prior contact helps counteract the effects of negative stereotypes, since it allows “individuals to gather detailed information about out-group members (e.g., disabled individuals) so that they are viewed as individuals rather than members of a stereotyped group” (Stone & Colella, 1996, p. 370). Makas (1988) finds that greater contact leads to more positive attitudes toward people with disabilities.

Supervisor and co-worker attitudes in turn affect the following.

1. *Performance expectations*. Stereotypes and negative affect lead to biased views of how well a person with a disability is likely to perform. Of the 13 studies of expectations of future performance or promotional potential for employees with disabilities, ten found evidence of negative bias (Colella, DeNisi, & Varma, 1998).
2. *Performance evaluations*. Negative attitudes lead to lower evaluations of the performance of employees with disabilities, although in some cases there may be a positive bias due to the norm of kindness or initial low expectations. The evidence from employer surveys does not point to a bias in performance evaluations, but the evidence from experiments is mixed, depending on the existence of performance standards, the presence of objective performance data, and the supervisor-employee relationship (Colella et al., 1998).
3. *The desire to work with an individual with a disability*. Negative affect and concern about the effects on one’s own performance lead to unwillingness to work with an employee with a disability. This depends on the type of job and the nature of rewards: an experiment found that there was negative bias against choosing a co-worker with a disability when (a) the job was viewed as a poor fit for the person with a disability, and (b) there were interdependent rewards, for example if the pay of the co-worker would be affected by the performance of the person with a disability (Colella et al., 1998).
4. *Hiring into jobs with discretionary work activities*. Negative affect, low expectations, and expected co-worker strain cause employers to deny employees with disabilities access to jobs with substantial responsibility, leaving them in generally lower-paying jobs that do not allow them much opportunity for developing their skills (Colella, 1996).

Negative attitudes and treatment in turn affect the responses of persons with disabilities. Equity theory predicts that employees decrease their work effort when they believe they have not been justly rewarded; more generally, negative attitudes such as low performance expectations cause employees with disabilities to become alienated and withdrawn, which may itself “confirm” the low expectations (Blanck et al., 2003c).

Employees with disabilities use a number of strategies to shape expectations in the workforce, including (a) concealing the disability, (b) communicating information about the disability to reduce discomfort and clarify norms, (c) requesting help to clarify expected behaviors, (d) emphasizing similarity to others through shared interests, opinions, and values, and (e) becoming a “superworker” to dispel

stereotypes and modify others' expectations (Stone & Colella, 1996, p. 388). In addition, they may take an activist approach and seek to change organization policies on their own or in concert with others, or use cognitive strategies to protect or change themselves, such as by attributing negative outcomes to bias rather than to their own performance problems (Sandler & Blanck, 2005).

Organizational structures, values, and practices

How do organizational structures, values, and practices affect the treatment of people with disabilities? As noted by Stone and Colella (1996),

An organization's norms and values identify the types of behaviors that are appropriate and provide moral justification for organizational policies and practices. For example, values associated with equity, standardization, impersonality, and separation of job and job holder define the policies and practices in a bureaucratic organization... [These bureaucratic values] may place disabled persons at a disadvantage relative to others because disabled individuals may be unable to comply with inflexible rules and procedures (p. 373).

A bureaucratic system often is based on an equity value system, which "pits the fairness of treatment for all employees against the personalized consideration of individuals' needs" (Stone & Colella, 1996, p. 373). This leads to greater resentment of individualized treatment of employees with disabilities than would exist in more flexible, supportive organizations. Other values expressed in the organization are important. An emphasis on rugged individualism, self-reliance, and competitive achievement hinders efforts of individuals with disabilities to show they are qualified for jobs, while an emphasis on cooperation, helpfulness, social justice, and egalitarianism enhances their ability to show they are capable of making contributions to the organization (Stone & Colella, 1996). In addition, companies that value diversity along all dimensions (such as racial, cultural, ethnic, and gender diversity) are likely to create a hospitable environment for workers with disabilities.

Organizational values may be reflected in policies and practices that restrict employees with disabilities. Job analysis that identifies ideal job characteristics, rather than essential job characteristics, may tend to exclude employees with disabilities. Similarly, individuals with disabilities are helped when "interviewers are trained to distinguish essential from marginal requirements" (Stone & Colella, 1996, p. 374). The problem of "established job methodologies" was one of the significant barriers identified by employees with disabilities in the study by Boyle: "the biggest problem is not the unsuitability of jobs but rather finding an organization that is willing to break the mold and allow individuals with disabilities a chance to prove their capabilities" (1997, pp. 264–265).

One example of the successful use of policies and practices to integrate people with disabilities is provided by a study of Manpower Inc., which concluded that

The company's investment in individualized training, job skills assessment, and career development was critical to the company's success in hiring and retaining workers with disabilities and in employees' success in attaining their employment goals... [This] suggested a corporate culture emphasizing that every individual has job skills and aptitudes, every job can be broken down into essential tasks, and every individual can

attain employment if his or her skills are developed to match essential tasks (Blanck & Scharz, 2001).

Other corporate practices that help people with disabilities include visible support from top management to incorporate individuals with disabilities into the organization, selection of managers who are committed to those values, and use of reward systems to reinforce the inclusion of people with disabilities (Stone & Colella, 1996).

Accommodations for employees with disabilities

Providing accommodations for workers with disabilities presents challenges for an organization. Apart from the financial cost of some accommodations, there may be a negative response from co-workers who resent “special” treatment for an individual with a disability.⁴ This is important, since co-worker reactions may influence the success of accommodations—many accommodations require cooperation and support of others in the workgroup (e.g., job restructuring, change in shift schedules). Also, co-worker morale and treatment of the employee with a disability affects workplace relations and performance (Colella, 2001).

When are co-workers likely to see accommodations as unfair? Accommodations are likely to provoke a response when they are salient to coworkers (visible, unique) and relevant to coworkers (seen as having impact or potential impact on their own lives). Colella (2001) notes that if accommodations are viewed as inappropriate for addressing the impairment—possibly requested for utilitarian reasons unrelated to the impairment—they are less likely to be seen as warranted and fair.

In addition, co-workers using an “equity rule” likely view an accommodation as unfair to the extent that the accommodation is seen as (a) making the accommodated person’s work easier, (b) making the co-worker’s job harder or less desirable, (c) a reward or perk, (d) using scarce resources, or (e) causing coworkers to lose competitive rewards. Those who use a “needs rule” are likely to approve of accommodations generally, but are less likely to see an accommodation as warranted if the disability is invisible, undesirable, or seen as self-caused.

The organization of the work and workgroup relationships influences co-worker responses to requested accommodations. In highly regimented workplaces, where work is performed in a uniform manner, accommodations for employees with disabilities stand out as deviations from the “normal” way of doing things. Accommodations are less salient in work environments that stress individual autonomy and let employees decide how to perform their own work (Colella, 2001).

As noted earlier, companies built on impersonal, bureaucratic rules with a strong emphasis on equity may foster greater resentment toward differential treatment of employees with disabilities (Stone & Colella, 1996). Organizations that are flexible, supportive, and sensitive to individual needs (for all employees, not just those with disabilities) engender work group cultures that are supportive of accommodations.

⁴Under the ADA, co-worker reactions to accommodations may not be considered in deciding whether an accommodation is reasonable. However, as a practical (as opposed to a legal) matter, supervisor and co-worker reactions may often determine the success or failure of many workplace accommodations for employees with disabilities (Blanck & Marti, 1997).

To the extent that the accommodated person is valued and integrated into the workgroup, and coworkers like and feel empathy for the accommodated person, it is likely that the accommodation will be seen as needed and fair by coworkers. This suggests that newcomers with disabilities are more likely than established employees who become disabled to face co-worker resistance to accommodations.⁵

Unfortunately, there is little direct evidence on how employer and co-worker attitudes affect the provision of workplace accommodations. The Cornell employer survey found that almost one-third (31%) of employers reported that a barrier to employing people with disabilities was the lack of supervisor knowledge about accommodations, while only 16% said that the cost of accommodations was a barrier (Bruyère, 2000). A study of one company by Harlan and Robert found that a low number of requested accommodations were granted, which they took as evidence of employer resistance to granting accommodations and the company's desire to "maintain control over the workplace in the face of challenges to organizational hierarchy and authority" (1998, pp. 426–427).

In unionized workplaces corporate culture may be reflected in the terms of collective bargaining agreements, which may make it difficult to accommodate workers and job applicants with disabilities (Blanck *et al.*, 2003c). Workers with disabilities are as likely as those without disabilities to be union members (Schur, 2002b). While unions, as well as employers, are covered by the ADA, collective bargaining agreements typically establish seniority systems and other rules that can make workplace accommodations difficult. Many unions have worked with employers to include exceptions in the contract to allow accommodations for workers and job applicants with disabilities. There have been no studies, however, on the extent to which unions have worked with companies to develop policies that help people with disabilities obtain jobs and remain employed.

In summary, corporate culture affects the employment experiences of people with disabilities in a variety of ways. Few studies, however, have examined how supervisor and co-worker attitudes, as well as company policies, influence the socialization and subsequent employment prospects of employees with disabilities. In addition, some of the studies that examine such issues have methodological flaws that limit the applicability of their findings. The implications for future research and policies are discussed in the final section.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Implications for Future Study

The research in this area indicates that facets of corporate culture affect the employment prospects of people with disabilities. We have reviewed a number of areas that deserve further attention, including the influence of an organization's

⁵The idea that established workgroup relationships are important in accommodations is consistent with the finding that injured workers who returned to their pre-injury employers suffered no reduction in average wages when they were accommodated, while those who moved to new employers suffered some wage reductions if they required accommodations (Gunderson & Hyatt, 1996). This differential treatment suggests that returning workers have job skills and established work group relationships that the employer does not want to lose or disrupt, while newcomers with disabilities lack these advantages.

underlying values, explicit policies, and day-to-day practices, as well as supervisor and co-worker attitudes.

A number of methodological points should be considered. First, one of the limitations of prior disability research is that much of it is based on laboratory studies that are assumed to generalize to workplace interactions and situations. While important insights have been gained by these studies, more data should be collected in actual workplace settings to make accurate assessments of the impact of corporate culture on employees with disabilities.

A second point is that, since every method has limitations, multiple methods of analysis should be used. Methodological triangulation, which combines quantitative and qualitative approaches, helps compensate for the limitations of any one method, reveals potential tensions or conflicts among different levels of corporate culture (as suggested by Rousseau, 1990), and provides validity checks. For example, one methodological problem is the tendency for managers to answer surveys in “socially desirable” ways: “the results of management surveys assessing the attitudes toward hiring and retaining employees with disabilities [present] a more positive picture than employment figures or ‘off the record’ anecdotal accounts suggest” (Colella, 1996, p. 409). Standardized management surveys and analysis of corporate mission and policy statements, for instance, should be supplemented with data on the hiring, retention, and promotion rates of employees with disabilities, as well as surveys and in-depth interviews of front line supervisors and employees and job applicants with disabilities.

While cross-sectional studies that provide a “snapshot” of employees with disabilities are useful, longitudinal studies should be conducted to analyze how employees with disabilities progress within corporations over time, and to assess the long-term effects of changes in corporate policies and practices. Such studies are useful in tracking changes in attitudes, shedding light on how attitudes affect the progress of people with disabilities, and raising the interesting question of whether exposure to employees with disabilities corrects information problems and combats negative stereotypes. Another possible research method is the use of network analysis to examine communication patterns within corporations and the extent to which employees with disabilities are integrated in crucial workplace communication networks.⁶

It also would be valuable to compile detailed case studies of companies that have made concerted efforts to increase the hiring, retention, and promotion of employees with disabilities. This would allow comparisons to be made of policies in different corporate settings, help identify “what works” in companies that have been successful in employing individuals with disabilities, and facilitate the development of “best practices” that serve as models for other employers.

Finally, as mentioned in the discussion of PAR above, it is important that people with disabilities be involved in all stages of the research. This not only helps ensure the integrity of the process and the validity of the conclusions, but also increases the likelihood that the findings will be used in ways that increase the hiring, retention, and promotion of people with disabilities.

⁶Network analysis has been used to show how high involvement work practices increase performance by improving communication among co-workers (Rubinstein, 2000).

Implications for Disability and Employment Community

What can companies and members of the disability community do to change corporate culture in ways that improve employment prospects for people with disabilities? While this is a new area of inquiry and further research is needed, it is nonetheless clear that companies benefit in a variety of ways from fully incorporating people with disabilities into organizational life. The material covered in this article suggests a number of steps that organizations and disability organizations can take to further this goal:⁷

1. strong and ongoing commitment by top management, which sets a tone of inclusion and helps change or reinforce corporate norms and managerial/employee behaviors to improve treatment and opportunities for employees with disabilities;
2. implementing training programs for employees that provide information about disability to help modify expectations and combat stereotypes, and provide skills for dealing with people with disabilities that help decrease discomfort and anxiety (especially regarding the most stigmatized disabilities);
3. selecting managers and supervisors committed to incorporating people with disabilities into the workforce and ensuring they have adequate opportunities to advance;
4. putting the treatment of people with disabilities into the evaluation and reward systems for managers, providing resources and incentives for mentoring, training, and efforts to accommodate employees with disabilities;
5. working with unions to ensure that the provisions of collective bargaining agreements allow for accommodating workers and job applicants with disabilities;
6. broadening the company's recruitment strategies to include working with disability organizations, such as Centers for Independent Living, to help identify qualified candidates for employment positions;
7. working with disability organizations, rehabilitation facilities, and local high schools and colleges to develop corporate internships for people with disabilities to increase their job skills and the company's and co-workers' knowledge of their abilities, sponsoring training programs that increase the skills and employability of people with disabilities, and broadening the organization's pool of qualified job candidates with disabilities;
8. ensuring that the achievements of employees with disabilities are recognized throughout the organization to help combat negative stereotypes (while being careful not to reinforce the image of people with disabilities as "saints");
9. encouraging employees with disabilities to form their own networks or caucuses within the company, providing information, support, and an institutional vehicle that can present the concerns of employees with disabilities to management;
10. emphasizing flexibility and personalized attention to the needs of employees, which decreases the saliency of accommodations for employees with disabilities and gives managers freedom to modify job assignments and use non-standard work arrangements such as telecommuting and flextime;

⁷Several of these implications are drawn from the work of Stone and Colella (1996).

11. increasing autonomy so that employees can modify the way they do their jobs, taking advantage of their individual skills and abilities (and decreasing the saliency and “separateness” of accommodations so that coworkers are less likely to react negatively, for instance, through the use of universal workplace design strategies and accessible technologies) (Schartz, Schartz, & Blanck, 2002);
12. reviewing human resource policies, such as job analysis methods and interviewing techniques, to see how they limit the ability of individuals to show they are “qualified” and can meet the essential requirements of a job;
13. ensuring that co-workers have significant contact with employees with disabilities in informal and recreational settings, as well as formal work activities, to dispel stereotypes and build stronger working relationships.

Many of these ideas have potential benefits for all employees, not just those with disabilities. Increased flexibility and personalized attention to employee needs help those with responsibilities for child or elder care, and increased autonomy allows all workers to make better use of their skills and abilities (Blanck, 1997). As such, these ideas are part of a universal accommodation process, helping make organizations responsive to the needs of all their employees.

The idea of a universal accommodation process finds parallels in justifications for diversity programs in general. Many of the factors that account for bias toward people with disabilities in the workplace (such as stereotyping and low performance expectations) apply to other disadvantaged groups, such as women, African-Americans, and Latinos. Likewise, factors that are viewed as contributing to the success of workplace diversity programs in general are similar to many of the ideas listed above: (1) commitment by top management (the recognition that “diversity is not just a legal obligation, but moral and business imperative”); (2) making diversity part of the corporation’s philosophy and not a public relations tool; (3) linking diversity goals to performance evaluations; (4) involving employees at all levels in the program; and (5) on-going education and outreach programs (Gilbert & Ivancevich, 2000).⁸

A recent five-year study of four large corporations supports the idea that the effects of diversity programs depend greatly on the organizational context and the way in which they are implemented (Kochan et al., 2003). The researchers found that racial and gender diversity did not automatically lead to better employee performance and greater business success. Their results, however, “suggest that efforts to create and manage diverse workforces have generally paid off by eliminating many of the potentially negative effects of diversity on group processes and performance. . . . Moreover, there appear to be some conditions under which diversity, if managed well, may even enhance performance” (Kochan et al., 2003, p. 17). Conditions that appear to facilitate success include a cooperative, rather than a competitive, corporate environment and “training programs for managers that

⁸While many of the lessons drawn from other diversity programs also apply to people with disabilities, the situation faced by people with disabilities in the workplace is unique in several respects. Employment laws such as Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibit employers from discriminating against employees and job applicants on the basis of race, sex, color, religion, and national origin, however; the ADA requires more from employers. They are obligated to provide “reasonable accommodations” for qualified employees and job applicants with disabilities. The relevance of findings from research on diversity programs in general is reviewed by Spataro (2005).

develop leadership and group process skills needed to facilitate constructive conflict and effective communication” (Kochan *et al.*, 2003, p. 18).

Closing

This article discusses the influence of corporate culture on the employment of people with disabilities. At a basic level, the values and assumptions of organizations are built on the view that employees are able-bodied. This view shapes personnel practices, the structure of jobs, and the physical and social environment of an organization.

If the employment prospects of people with disabilities are to be improved significantly, attention must be paid to the ways in which corporate culture creates or reinforces obstacles for employees with disabilities, and how those obstacles can be removed or overcome. The removal of architectural and attitudinal barriers has significant benefits not just for people with disabilities, but for other employees and the organization as a whole.

The advantages of a truly accessible organization are well expressed in the following quote:

Accessibility isn't only a disability issue, and accessibility doesn't just happen. The culture of an accessible organization promotes an open environment that encourages, invites, and recognizes creativity and innovation. Accessible organizations are ones in which opportunity is available for all those who want to participate and add value to the organization (Baker & Rivera, 1999, p. 57).

Research and dialogue are needed to understand the crucial intersection of corporate culture and the employment of persons with disabilities. Since studies show that diverse workgroups tend to be creative and innovative, we need to draw on a range of perspectives to make progress. Experts in law, economics, human resources, regulatory compliance, corporate anthropology, employment of persons with disabilities, disability studies and policy, and persons with disabilities themselves need to engage one another to formulate a blueprint for the future study of disability and corporate culture.

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