

A national survey of consumer attitudes towards companies that hire people with disabilities

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Abstract. Employers' negative attitudes and fears have long been a barrier to the employment of individuals with disabilities. Accordingly, attitude literature on the employment of people with disabilities has focused almost exclusively on employers. However, due to their influence over business practices, the successful employment of people with disabilities is also contingent on the views of the consumer. This study extends previous studies that focused on the attitudes of employers, and went directly to the consumer. Consumer attitudes toward companies that hire individuals with disabilities were assessed through a national public survey ($N = 803$). Most of the participants (75%) had direct experience with people with disabilities in a work environment. Moreover, these experiences were positive. All participants responded positively towards companies that are socially responsible, including 92% of consumers who felt more favorable toward those that hire individuals with disabilities. The participants also had strong positive beliefs about the value and benefits of hiring people with disabilities, with 87% specifically agreeing that they would prefer to give their business to companies that hire individuals with disabilities. Implications of consumer support on company hiring practices are discussed.

Keywords: Employment of people with disabilities, consumer attitudes, business and disability

1. Introduction

Since the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was enacted in 1990 to protect individuals with disabilities from being discriminated against in the workplace, the socially appropriate course of action is to support the hiring of individuals with disabilities. However, this support is not represented in recent employment figures. It is estimated that only 19% of American people with disabilities are employed, in comparison with the 77% of non-disabled Americans who are employed [6]. Many studies have been conducted to un-

derstand and explain why this discrepancy exists [15]. However, to date, there has been little movement in narrowing the employment gap. While ADA has raised awareness and provided guidelines for hiring people with disabilities, it has not yet fulfilled its promise.

Through ADA, employers have been encouraged to develop the means to include people with disabilities in the workplace by providing accommodations and appropriate job training. Even prior to ADA, there was some recognition in the business world that people with disabilities should be given the same access to employment as their non-disabled colleagues. Shafer and colleagues [17] found that the top reason stated by employers for hiring a worker with a disability was the belief that people with disabilities deserved an opportunity to work. Ten years later, employers still believed that employees with disabilities should not only have the opportunity to work, but that they actually belonged in

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the work setting [16]. That is, not only do they deserve equal access, but they need equal access. However, this legislation alone has not changed employer hiring practices or their attitudes toward hiring a person with a disability.

In a comprehensive review of the literature, Hernandez et al. [5] found that employers are willing to globally endorse hiring workers with disabilities, but when it comes to their actual hiring practices, they are still more likely to hire a person without a disability. For example, when jobs are available, employers often deem the jobs inappropriate for a person with a disability. In other cases, employers fear that if they hired a person with a disability, he or she will require too much supervision or additional job training, and that the cost of these necessary accommodations will be prohibitive. Even in a recent study, both employers with and without experience in hiring individuals with disabilities reported concern about safety issues arising from hiring these individuals [12]. There is also the fear that once an employee with a disability is hired, there may be no way to terminate them if he/she is not able to perform the required duties [5,10,15].

However, it is employers' fears and negative expectations, rather than the existence of external barriers, that creates obstacles to hiring people with disabilities. For example, while the cost of accommodations is often cited as a reason not to hire a person with a disability, in reality the cost is usually very minimal [15]. Hernandez et al. [5] concluded that the best means for increasing access to employment for individuals with a disability is to "erode these attitudinal barriers and thus ultimately increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities" (p. 11). Employers that have hired an individual with a disability are often more positive about employing a worker with a disability in the future [3,9]. A recent study found that nearly all the employers (97%) who had hired someone with a disability in the past indicated they would hire an individual with a disability again in the future [12]. That is, having successfully gone through the process allowed them to dispel some of their fears and negative expectations. Once hired, employees with disabilities are perceived by employers as more reliable and as having better attendance than non-disabled employees [4].

The question that remains is how do we get employers to act on what they know is morally right and more importantly, recognize the value of employing people with disabilities. In short, how do we motivate businesses to hire people with disabilities? The answer to this question may hinge upon the consumer. Com-

panies value consumers' opinions and view them as a viable factor in determining their practices, which accounts for the multi-billion dollar market research industry dedicated to understanding consumer attitudes and behavior. More specifically, when it comes to the public image of a company, the consumer plays a significant role in defining that image [7]. For example, due to an increasingly diverse customer base, most corporate leaders have begun to recognize that the inclusion of diverse workers is important to the success of their company [3]. Companies also recognize that they can improve their reputation and public image by including people with disabilities in their work force [14]. The successful employment of people with disabilities is not only determined by the views of the employer, but also by the views of the consumer. However to date, attitude literature on the employment of people with disabilities has focused almost exclusively on employers and not the consumer.

This study extends previous studies that focused on the attitudes of employers, and went directly to the consumer. Our goal was to examine consumer attitudes toward the hiring of people with disabilities by answering the following questions: How do consumers feel about people with disabilities in the workplace, and how favorably do consumers view companies that employ people with disabilities?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 803 adults randomly selected for telephone interviews from a national pool through random digit dialing, a method that includes listed and unlisted numbers in the Continental US. Potential respondents were called at home by The Gallup Organization during the week as well as on the weekends. If more than one adult per household was available to participate, the interviewer selected the adult who had the most recent birthday, providing an additional advantage of statistical randomness. The data were statistically adjusted to represent all adults residing in households with a telephone in the Continental US. The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. For results based on samples of this size, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be plus or minus three percentage points.

Table 1
Participant demographic characteristics

	Male <i>n</i> = 407	Female <i>n</i> = 396	TOTAL <i>N</i> = 803
Age			
18–34	28%	27%	27%
35–49	32%	30%	31%
50–64	27%	25%	26%
65+	12%	17%	15%
Education			
H.S. or less	44%	45%	44%
Some College	24%	27%	25%
College Graduate	31%	29%	30%
Employment Status			
Full time	63%	46%	54%
Part time	7%	15%	11%
Not employed	30%	39%	35%

2.2. Instrument

To develop an instrument specific to the objectives of this study, we conducted a thorough review of the many measures that have been used to assess employer attitudes toward hiring people with disabilities [1,2,11,13,14,17]. We also reviewed the literature on consumer attitudes [7,8]. From our review we generated questions that addressed company image and corporate social responsibility. Note: Given that the generic term “disability” is used to refer to all types of disabilities and conditions, we asked respondents what they think the term means – “When you hear the term ‘disability’ what first comes to mind?” This open-ended question was included to better understand the image participants held in mind when answering the survey questions.

To gauge participants’ level of experience with people with disabilities, questions were included that asked about participants’ contact with a person with a disability in a work setting. First, participants were asked whether they had ever worked with a person with a disability, and if so, how they would rate the person’s work performance on a five-point scale, from “a very good job” to “a very poor job”. Second, participants were asked if they had ever received services in a place of business by a person with a disability, and if so, how they would rate their experience, on a five-point scale, from “very satisfied” to “very dissatisfied”.

To assess consumer views toward companies that hire workers with disabilities, questions were included that directly addressed how favorably participants view companies that engage in different social justice practices. This question was asked first, without revealing the purpose of the study, so as not to bias participants’ responses. Specifically, participants were asked

to indicate on a five-point scale, from “much more favorable” to “much less favorable” how they would feel toward companies that engaged in the following practices: “supported a cause you care about”, “hired people with disabilities”, “helped protect the environment”, “stopped doing business with countries known to treat their people badly”, “had a workforce made up of people of different races and ethnic backgrounds”, “employed people in poorer countries who would work for less than American workers”, “offered health insurance to all its workers” and “donated money to disaster relief”.

In addition to assessing their feelings about companies that hire workers with disabilities, participants were asked about the impact hiring workers with disabilities can have on the employee with a disability, the coworkers and the company itself. Participants were asked to indicate on a five-point scale, from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”, how they felt the following six statements applied to companies that hire workers with disabilities: “help people with disabilities lead more productive lives”, “show their customers they care about all workers”, “help other employees have a better understanding of persons with disabilities”, “often take advantage of people with disabilities”, “create problems within their workforce” and “are companies you would prefer to give your business to”.

Finally, participants were asked a series of demographic questions, including questions about their age, gender, ethnicity/race, highest level of education completed, employment status and to further examine their level of contact with people with disabilities, whether they have a family member with any type of disability.

3. Results

3.1. Participants’ perceptions of “disability”

Most of the participants had the image that a person with a disability is someone with physical or sensory limitations. Therefore, when interpreting the results of the subsequent survey questions, we assumed that participants were thinking of a person with a physical or sensory disability. It is important to point out that very few people think of intellectual impairments when they hear the term disability. In fact, intellectual disability was rarely mentioned in comparison with the more visible sensory and physical disabilities (see Table 2). The non-specific category included anything the participants said that could not be fit into one of the other

Table 2
Images associated with “disability”

	n	%
Physical disabilities/Sensory Disabilities	483	60%
Intellectual disabilities	19	2%
Other Disabilities	16	2%
Non-Specific	174	22%

Table 3
Exposure to Individuals with Disabilities

	n	%
Have a family member with a disability	354	44%
Worked with anyone with a disability	565	70%
Been a customer of a person with a disability	592	74%

disability groups. Of the 22% non-specific responses, many participants said “someone who is less able to do everyday functions normally”. Other non-specific responses included: “person unable to work”, “challenged”, or “sick/poor health”. Interestingly, those participants who have a family member with a disability and those who have worked with a person with a disability also primarily thought of a person with a physical impairment.

3.2. Participants’ experience with people with disabilities

Most of the participants have had direct experience with people with disabilities in a work environment. For example, about 75% of the participants have at some point worked directly with someone with a disability and/or received services as a customer by a person with a disability (see Table 3). The high proportion of the participants reporting experience with a person with a disability was generally consistent across gender, age and education.

Of those participants reporting experience working with a person with a disability, almost all (91%) felt that the job performance of their coworker with a disability was “very good” or “good”. Similar to their positive perceptions of job performance of people with disabilities, almost all of the participants (98%) that have been served by an employee with a disability were “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with the services they received.

3.3. Participants’ perception of companies that hire people with disabilities

All of the participants responded positively towards companies that are socially responsible. Again, this question was asked first, before the nature of the study

was revealed to participants, to avoid response bias. As expected, companies that “offer health care to all workers” and “help protect the environment” were viewed very favorably by customers. Of importance to this study is that “hiring people with disabilities” was just behind “providing health insurance” and “protecting the environment” in the favorability ratings. One third of the participants viewed companies as “much more favorable” when they hire people with disabilities (see Table 4). Overall, 92% of the participants were “more favorable” or “much more favorable” toward companies that hire people with disabilities. An extremely important finding was the absence of any regional differences in the participants’ favorability ratings of companies that hire people with disabilities. In fact, across the East, South, Mid-West and West, participants responded similarly to all of the social justice practices that businesses can engage in.

As was expected, females were more positive than males when it comes to their feelings about companies that hire people with disabilities (Chi square = 7.01, $p < 0.01$). This supports much of the attitude research that has overwhelmingly found that females, more than males, tend to have more positive attitudes toward people with disabilities.

3.4. Participants’ perceptions of the benefits of hiring people with disabilities

The participants had strong positive beliefs about the value and benefits of hiring people with disabilities. Most (83%) felt that companies do not take advantage of their workers with disabilities, nor do people with disabilities create problems in the workforce. In fact, most believed that hiring people with disabilities is important for the individual with a disability. Almost all those surveyed (96%) shared the belief that companies who do hire people with disabilities help those individuals lead more productive lives. Almost all of the participants also believed that companies that hire workers with disabilities show that they care about their workers. Further, by including people with disabilities in their workforce, the participants also viewed companies as helping their employees have a better understanding of people with disabilities.

Finally, and most importantly, almost all of the public agreed that they would prefer to give their business to companies that hire people with disabilities. In fact, over one-third of those asked strongly agreed with the statement, “Companies that hire those with disabilities are companies that you would prefer to give your business to”. This finding was consistent across gender, age and level of education (see Table 5).

Table 4
Participants' favorability ratings of companies that demonstrate social responsibility

	Much more favorable	More favorable	Same	Less favorable	Much less favorable
Offer health insurance to all its workers	46%	48%	3%	1%	< 1%
Help protect the environment	36%	56%	6%	2%	0%
Hire people with disabilities	32%	60%	5%	1%	1%
Donate money to disaster relief	31%	56%	7%	4%	1%
Stop doing business with countries known to treat their people badly	31%	44%	5%	14%	6%
Support a cause you care about	29%	60%	9%	2%	< 1%

Table 5
Participants' perceptions of the benefits of employing people with disabilities

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Help people with disabilities lead more productive lives	47%	49%	1%	3%	< 1%
Help other employees have better understanding of persons with disabilities	40%	50%	3%	5%	1%
Show that their customers that they care about all workers	40%	53%	3%	4%	1%
Are companies you would prefer to give your business to	33%	54%	6%	4%	1%
Often take advantage of people with disabilities	5%	14%	4%	51%	22%
Create problems within their workforce	2%	12%	3%	60%	20%

4. Discussion

In the midst of high unemployment among people with disabilities, a large fraction of the public has worked along side coworkers with a disability, as well as been served by people with disabilities. More importantly, the public has had positive experiences with people with disabilities. Because one can assume that the public's positive feelings are drawn from their actual experiences, it is encouraging that, as a coworker, they rate the job performance of people with disabilities as high, and as a customer, they are very satisfied by the services they have received from people with disabilities. Given the public's high exposure to people with disabilities in the workplace and the positive experiences that accompany this exposure, it is no wonder that they look favorably toward companies that hire people with disabilities.

The public, across all ages and education, views companies that hire people with disabilities as favorably as they do companies that provide healthcare to all workers and actively protect the environment. Companies are aware of the public's concern over health and environmental issues. What they need to be more aware of is that hiring people with disabilities falls under the umbrella of corporate social responsibility and is an important building block in creating a reputable image. In addition to the benefits the public perceives for themselves as a customer, they also overwhelmingly acknowledge the value of employment for the person with a disability. The public strongly believes that

companies that hire people with disabilities help them to lead more productive lives, while at the same time show their customers that they care about all workers.

In their review of employer attitude literature, Hernandez et al. [5] found that while most attitude studies have shown that employers hold generally positive attitudes toward people with disabilities, when queried about the actual hiring of people with disabilities, employer attitudes are more negative. Furthermore, even when employers express a willingness to hire applicants with disabilities, they often do not follow through. Taken together, these trends present a formidable challenge. That is, moving employers from their general positive attitudes toward people with disabilities to actually hiring people with disabilities in their company. To date, the best way to break down employers' negative fears and expectations was the positive experience of having a person with a disability employed in the company. Positive experiences lead to positive attitudes.

Although the authors did not highlight this finding, Morgan and Alexander [12] found that companies are aware that consumers do not possess negative attitudes toward employees with disabilities. For example, only 10% of employers who had hired workers with disabilities were concerned with the negative attitudes of consumers when making hiring decisions. Interestingly, this finding was also true for employers who had not hired workers with disabilities. However, it is not just the fact that consumers do not have negative attitudes about employees with disabilities, companies need to

be made aware that consumers are *positive* in their feelings about companies that hire workers with disabilities. The consumers' message is that they are favorable toward companies that hire people with disabilities and companies need to recognize that hiring people with disabilities can contribute significantly to their reputation.

The findings from the present study are encouraging in that they provide support for the notion that the consumer, and their desire that companies be socially responsible, can motivate employers to give people with disabilities a chance. Recently, the importance of corporate reputation in the global economy has been reaffirmed [7]. "Businesses are part of the society in which they operate, and they have to consider the impact their behavior has on these societies" (p. 104). In the global market, it is not enough for companies to have a product that represents quality and value. The companies' "reputation" has become increasingly important. Consumers, more than ever, want their government and the companies they do business with to be socially responsible. The consumer is more often looking beyond the brand name and more closely at the company itself. Furthermore, in the United States, we are witnessing a greater and greater diversification of the customer base of companies, and part of this diversity includes people with disabilities and their families. The results of the present study unequivocally show that the public view hiring a person with a disability as the socially responsible thing to do, as well as a gainful business practice. It is therefore important, given the present findings, that companies not only act expeditiously to hire people with disabilities, but also communicate this practice to the consumer. By so doing, companies will be able to strengthen their workforce with employees that are found to be reliable, committed and hard working while also benefiting from consumer enthusiasm, appreciation and support for their company and its brand.

Kitchen and Laurence [7] describe convincingly that "customers are by far the most important influence on corporate reputation" (p. 110). In the mind of the consumer, the importance, value and benefits of employing people with disabilities are not only extended to the worker with a disability, but also to the company and its workforce. It is our view that the benefits of employing people with disabilities, as voiced by the consumer, can be effectively communicated to business leaders in order to close in on the unemployment gap for people with disabilities.

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