IN FOCUS

Disability and HR Strategy

INTRODUCTION

Finding qualified talent to fill job openings and identifying high potentials to nurture from within the organization are often two of HR's biggest challenges. In this paper, we discuss how a focus on individuals with disabilities both as potential applicants and overlooked high performers with future leadership potential within your organization's existing workforce can help address these and other HR challenges. We outline the key organizational factors that will ensure better success at workplace disability inclusion, and illustrate how these good practices can be applied to neurodiverse individuals, such as those who are autistic.

EXPANDING YOUR TALENT POOL AND DIVERSITY OUTLOOK

Talent acquisition is always a prime area of focus for companies and HR professionals. With an improving economy and labor market, finding the right people for the job and retaining them will be an increasing challenge. Identifying expanded sources of labor to fill this gap is imperative, and individuals with disabilities have historically been overlooked as a source of qualified talent that can address this need. Putting a spotlight on the population of individuals with disabilities as a focus area not only affords a diverse pool of candidates with unique abilities, but also can benefit the overall workplace climate for inclusion. New business opportunities in terms of growth in revenue and market share may also open to reach the very large population of consumers represented by individuals with disabilities, their family members, and caregivers.

People with disabilities are approximately 15 percent of the world's population, or one billion people worldwide,[1] yet remain significantly unemployed or underemployed compared to their nondisabled peers. In the U.S., people with disabilities are employed at less than half the rate of their nondis-abled peers—36 percent compared to 79 percent of people without disabilities.[2] So, understanding how to reach this population and identify qualified candidates can add a whole new dimension to effective recruiting by significantly expanding the talent pool and adding to your company's heightened success in creating a diverse and inclusive workplace.

For select employers, having targeted strategic recruitment and hiring goals are now at the forefront because of recent executive and legislative mandates that prohibit disability discrimination in many aspects of employment in private industry, the government, and third-sector organizations. An example are the requirements of Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act, which impact federal contractors and sub-contractors of $15,000 or more, and require companies to formulate specific plans to increase recruitment, hiring, retention, and promotion opportunities for individuals with disabilities. The regulations establish a nationwide 7 percent utilization goal for qualified individuals with disabilities, which contractors must apply to each of their job groups or to their entire workforce if the contractor has 100 or fewer employees.[3]

NOVEMBER 2018

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Knowing how to effectively reach and attract candidates with disabilities is of increasing interest to many companies and there are a number of proven practices that can heighten the likelihood of successful identification of qualified candidates with disabilities. In a research study where Cornell University partnered with the Society for Human Resource Management, HR professionals were asked whether their organizations had put in place any of 10 policies and practices that facilitate recruitment and hiring of individuals with disabilities.[4] More than half reported including disability in their diversity and inclusion statements (59 percent), requiring sub-contractors/suppliers to adhere to disability nondiscrimination requirements (57 percent), and having relationships with community organizations that promote the hiring of people with disabilities (54 percent). Far fewer reported having explicit organizational goals related to the recruitment and hiring of people with disabilities (25 percent), participating in internships or similar programs that target people with disabilities (19 percent), and having progress toward recruitment or hiring goals for people with disabilities in the performance appraisals of senior man-

agement (18 percent). Approximately two out of five HR respondents reported that their companies actively recruited individuals with disabilities (45 percent) and have senior management that demonstrates a strong commitment to hiring of people with disabilities (38 percent).

It is desirable that a company reports using select HR policies and practices that are known to support workplace disability inclusion, but it's also important to assess whether such efforts are being actively implemented and also whether they are leading to increased employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. Therefore, we also examined whether execution of these policies and practices led to improved employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. A chart showing the relative importance of each of these practices in terms of positive outcomes is shown below.

We found that the more practices a company reported implementing, the more likely that an organization was to have hired an individual with a disability in the past year. In addition, some practices appeared to heighten the probability that this positive outcome occurred. For example, companies that reported having targeted intern-

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RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF RECRUITMENT AND HIRING PRACTICES ON PREDICTING THE HIRING OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES, IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE

Organizational Practices and Characteristics	Relative Importance
Strong senior management commitment	100
Internships for PWDs	83
Reviews accessibility of online job application system	70
PWD in diversity & inclusion plan	54
Explicit PWD organizational goals	54
Advanced notice to applicants about reasonable accommodations in job application process	48
Evaluates pre-employment screenings to ensure they are unbiased	44
Relationships with community organizations	38
Actively recruiting PWD	31
PWD considered in management performance	27

ships were almost six times more likely to have hired a person with a disability in the past year. Companies that had strong senior management commitment for hiring people with disabilities or had explicit organizational goals targeting recruitment of persons with disabilities were approximately five times more likely to have hired a person with a disability in the past year.

Forming partnerships with local employment service providers who focus on sourcing these candidates is another avenue proven very successful. In fact, companies that have relationships with such community organizations were three times more likely to have hired a person with a disability in the past year. Similarly effective are practices such as including persons with disabilities in diversity and inclusion plans and actively recruiting for qualified candidates from this group. Picking a few of these proven successful practices is a very good place to start building your company's disability inclusion strategy.

IDENTIFYING DIVERSE LEADERSHIP TALENT WITHIN YOUR EXISTING WORKFORCE

A diverse workforce brings with it a richness of perspective, problem solving ability, and creativity. Organizations and HR professionals are increasingly aware of this, as evidenced by ever-more-frequent discussions about building a more diverse workforce through affirmative recruitment and hiring, as well as internal efforts to address gender and racial/ethnic gaps in career advancement opportunities. Seldom, however, do companies consider that people with disabilities already within their workforce also have the potential to add the diversity of talent and perspectives that the organization is seeking.

Overlooking the population of people with disabilities within your own workforce as a potential place to diversify your leadership talent is a commonly missed opportunity. Companies have historically not focused their energies in this area when building their human capital pipeline and bringing more diversity into their leadership roles.

Yet, with almost six percent on average of the American workforce identifying on national census surveys as having a disability,[5] we know that the talent is there waiting to be tapped. Identifying individuals with disabilities for successful leadership cultivation among your human capital and using effective practices to bring them into the desired leadership roles is an opportunity waiting to happen.

Recognizing the talent within your organization might be the first challenge to successfully moving ahead, as organizations have historically shied away from capturing demographic information about disability from their applicants and employees. In addition, unless an accommodation was needed, individuals applying for jobs or already in the workforce are often unwilling to disclose a disability for fear of jeopardizing being hired or retaining their positions, or compromising future career growth opportunities. These concerns about disclosure, as well as workplace policies and practices that can mitigate them, were captured in research conducted by Cornell University. In a survey of approximately 600 people with disabilities about what workplace factors would facilitate or impede disability disclosure, we have been

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able to identify some helpful hints for companies.

More than three out of five respondents said that factors that made them hesitant to disclose were:

» Fear of not being hired in the first place or being fired once employed.
» The employer would focus on the disability in the future.
» Apprehension about losing health care or limiting future opportunities.
» Concerns that the supervisor might not be supportive.

In contrast, factors reported by more than half of the respondents as facilitating disability disclosure were:

» A need for an accommodation.
» A supportive supervisor relationship.
» A disability-friendly work environment as evidenced by active disability recruiting and disability in the diversity statement.
» Knowing of successes by others in the organization that had previously disclosed their disability.

Two out of five respondents said that a belief they could access new career opportunities by disclosing was a reason to come forward.[6]

Yet, disparities in equitable access to career advancement opportunities have been documented.[7] People with disabilities tend to experience jobs with less autonomy and decision-making as well as jobs that require less education than people without disabilities with comparable backgrounds. Knowing ways to mitigate disparities, support employees with disabilities, and encourage disability disclosure and requests for accommodations can assist in identifying possibly previously overlooked diverse talent within your organization.

A survey conducted by SHRM in collaboration with Cornell University asked HR professionals whether their organizations had put in place any of eight policies and practices that facilitate career development and retention of individuals with disabilities.[8] Fewer than one in five of the almost 700 HR professionals responding to the survey reported doing the four practices which can facilitate career advancement opportunities, such as:

» Having a structured mentoring program to support employees with disabilities (17 percent);
» Offering special career planning and development tools for employees with disabilities (16 percent);
» Having explicit organizational goals related to retention or advancement of employees with disabilities (13 percent);
» Including progress toward retention or advancement goals for employees with disabilities in the performance appraisals of senior management (9 percent).[8]

Results of this survey suggest that there is quite a bit of work that needs to be done within companies to make strides in the area of career advancement and retention.

The strategies listed above are ones that all employees can benefit from, but might give individuals with disabilities within your workforce a needed advantage to move their career on the desired trajectory. Some of the known benefits of mentoring, for example, include:

» Affording a broadened perspective on the transferability of the person's skills to other positions and settings.
» Becoming aware of future career directions to consider.
» Acquiring the support and motivation to take calculated risks.
» Gaining access to advice on the "politics" of relationships within the organization.
» Getting honest and constructive feedback

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about problem areas in performance.

» Receiving encouragement when needed.

» Gaining access to networking contacts, references, and introductions to key contacts of organizational influence.

Employee/colleague or business resource groups with a "diverse" abilities focus can be another very useful way to both identify previously unidentified diverse talent who are people with disabilities for leadership cultivation within your existing workforce, as well as successfully recruit new applicants with these characteristics for job openings when they occur. Support of activities like this send the message that people with disabilities are desired and valued within the organization and that supports will be available when they need accommodations and chose to come forward and disclose their disabilities.

Companies using employee resource groups/ business resource groups report that tasking them with a "business purpose," such as strategic outreach for new applicants with disabilities or a review of the effectiveness of company accommodation policies and procedures, heighten the likelihood of people being willing to join and vigorously contribute to the group's energy and productive outcomes. In addition, having an existing top leadership champion who is a person who has come forward and disclosed a disability is an added incentive for people to join the group and feel confident that in so doing, affiliation will not lead to a future devaluing of the many talents that they bring to the success of their organization.

PREPARING YOUR WORKPLACE FOR DISABILITY INCLUSION

With 24 percent of American households having a person with a disability, chances are that one in four of your employees are impacted by disability in some way—either the employee themselves might have a disability, or be the caregiver for a spouse, parent, or child who has a disability.[9] Yet, most companies have very few people who are willing to disclose that they have a disability or talk about disability issues at home. Building a workplace organizational structure that supports disability inclusion is the first step toward successful recruitment, as well as retention and engagement of individuals with disabilities and their family members. There are a number of practices that can help to maximize this possibility.

Senior leadership commitment. The likelihood that the organization will embrace disability is immeasurably increased by making proactive recruitment and advancement of people with disabilities a pronounced priority from the top. Research by Cornell University showed that when companies had strong senior management commitment for hiring people with disabilities or had explicit organizational goals targeting recruitment of persons with disabilities, they were approximately five times more likely to have hired a person with a disability in the past year.[4] In line with this, it is important that company leadership demonstrate the sincerity of this pronouncement by mobilizing middle management to support this strategy, placing people with disabilities in leadership positions throughout the orga-
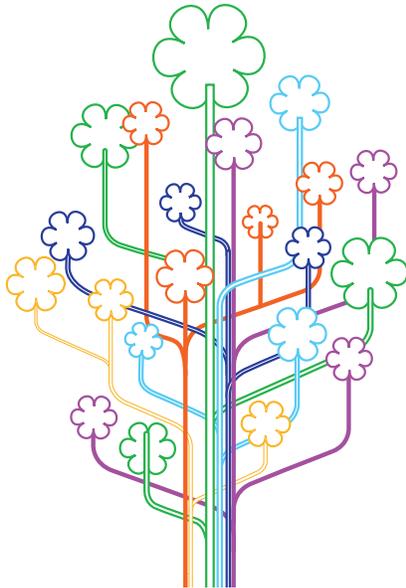
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nization, and creating an internal infrastructure that supports needed next steps. This can include creating and communicating about the accommodation process and appointing a person to ensure that applicants and employees with disabilities get the opportunities and resources that they need to be successful.

Effective communication. Communicating the company's disability inclusion initiatives—both within and external to the organization—is critical. Messaging from the top about disability inclusion being a priority is the first step, but must be more than a one-time statement. This point must be reinforced regularly through continued messaging that communicates specific organizational disability inclusion goals, progress toward these goals, and relevant disability information and resources. Using naturally occurring internal organizational communication company newsletters, brochures, notice boards, email blasts, blogs, and webcast streaming can be most effective.[10]

External communication about disability inclusion as a part of the organization's strategic imperative is also important. Communication in product and service marketing that people with disabilities are a part of the target demographic by having related images positively highlighted in marketing materials, websites, and advertisements is a start in the right direction. Similarly, clearly articulating in recruitment materials that the organization is actively seeking out diverse candidates, including individuals with disabilities will heighten the likelihood of attracting a diverse applicant pool that includes individuals with disabilities.
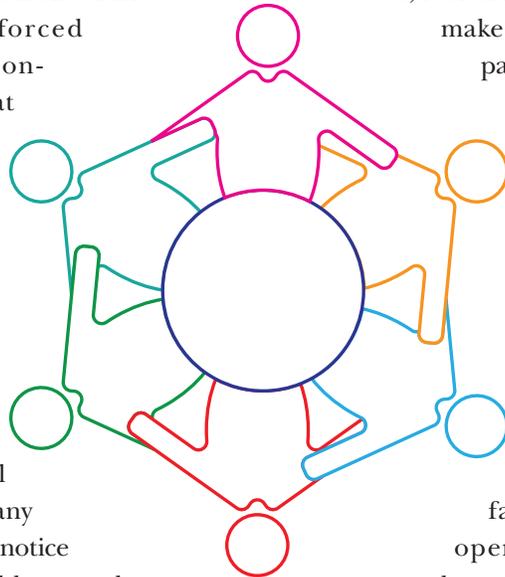
An integrative infrastructure. Another core element to a successful disability inclusion strategy is building an integrative infrastructure that embeds disability considerations throughout the organization's functioning.[10] This means that disability becomes a part of the diversity and inclusion initiative in an integral way, viewed as important a focus as race, gender, and sexual orientation, while also recognizing that individuals with disabilities are a part of each of these other diversity and inclusion special interests as well. As previously noted, recruitment strategies should make clear that disability is a part of the organization's priority in all talent outreach initiatives.

Equally as important and sometimes overlooked, is that there are disability considerations in many other facets of the organization's functioning, such as facilities management, operations, technology, and procurement. This should include an overarching accessibility plan that attends to physical accessibility of facilities such as accessible restrooms, curb cuts, and parking places, as well as technology accessibility for online recruitment processes and professional development opportunities. Such an approach ensures that both applicants and employees can much more readily access the larger organizational resources throughout their employment experience.

Employee Resource or Business Groups (ERGs). ERGs have emerged as one of the central diversity initiatives over the last few decades, and have been shown to be an effective tool for increasing employee

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engagement across different workplace sectors. More recently, ERGs have evolved beyond the support group and social network mentality that characterized their early development and have not only grown in numbers but have expanded their activities. A study on the evolution of ERGs[11] found that in many organizations these groups are functioning as business partners by providing insights into new markets, supporting the development of targeted products and services, acting as brand ambassadors, and contributing to corporate social responsibility efforts. Until fairly recently, disability, for the most part, was left out of the ERG movement, but that is changing.

Numerous companies are now realizing that ERGs with a disability focus can be of assistance in designing a disability-inclusive infrastructure, pointing out needed changes to the company accommodation process, assisting with recruitment of applicants with disabilities, and designing products and services that will appeal to the growing market segment globally that are people with disabilities. ERGs can also assist with messaging around disability disclosure, which is the next disability organizational effectiveness practice discussed here.

Ability to self-identify. Critical to building a disability inclusive workplace is creating a culture where people are comfortable being able to self-identify as a person with a disability. Many people acquire disabilities after being hired, and at some point might need an accommodation to continue to function effectively. Sending the message that individuals with disabilities are actively being solicited to become members of the company's workforce not only increases applicants with disabilities, but also sends the message to current employees that it's okay to self-identify. Creating opportunities for people to self-identify in a variety of ways is also important. This can be as simple as asking about accommodations needed as a part of the application process or by putting disability as a demographic item in the annual company engagement survey.

Data-collection procedures. Data collection, and its subsequent use in developing metrics, is an essential part of the self-assessment process for a successful workplace disability inclusion strategy. To do so, it is important that the organization puts metrics and analytics in place that assist the organization to monitor its related efforts across the employment process. An organization cannot assess an effective disability inclusion strategy without using efficient data-collection procedures and metrics that identify progress through benchmarking on areas that need improvement. The organization's ability, willingness, and comfort to gather disability-related data from employees and, in varying levels of specificity, to measure its progress against its diversity inclusion goals is a necessary part of building an effective disability inclusion strategy.

TARGETING NEURODIVERSITY FOR YOUR TALENT POOL

Finding and keeping top talent is an ongoing challenge, especially in high-tech sectors. The Bureau of Labor Statistics CareerCast site recently reported that in 2018 application software developers will top the list of the ten toughest jobs to fill with more than a quarter of a million vacancies projected by 2026.[12] Companies are increasingly turning to previously unexplored talent pools to help to bridge talent needs, and a growing number of companies are specifically targeting neurodiverse individuals, especially those on the autism spectrum.[13]
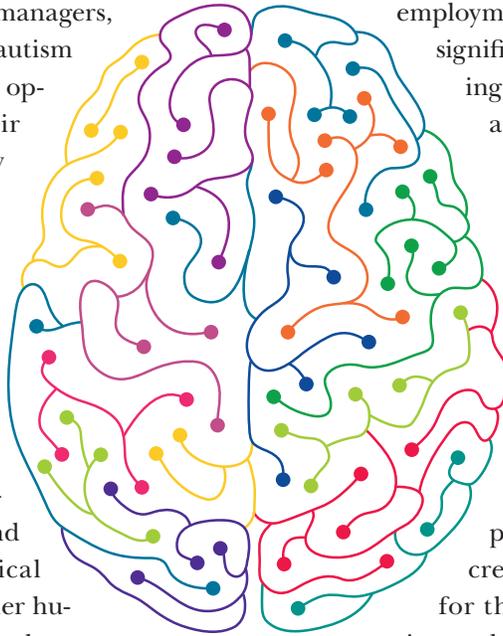
In February 2018, *CBS This Morning* highlighted efforts by companies such as SAP and Microsoft to build workplaces that are more inclusive of autistic individuals, who often have unique talents for focus and pattern recognition that contribute to success in some technical jobs.[14] On *This Morn-*

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ing, company leaders, managers, and individuals with autism who are being offered opportunities to use their skills and creativity discussed the significant benefits of these new talent-sourcing initiatives to both individuals and businesses. These businesses are demonstrating the concept of neurodiversity by recognizing and respecting neurological differences as any other human variation, proving they can be assets in select job functions.

Autism is the most common member of a family called autism spectrum disorders (ASDs), also known as Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDDs). Developmental disabilities such as autism are brain-based, neurological conditions that have more to do with biology than with psychology. Autistic individuals are found in every country, every ethnic group, and every socioeconomic class. Autism affects as many as one and a half million people in the United States alone, and CDC statistics estimate that one in 59 eight-year olds had been diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum in 2014.[15] Compared to their neuro-typical peers, people with autism are unemployed or significantly under-employed despite many having advanced degrees. The majority of young people with autism had neither a job nor plans for education in the two years after high school graduation.[16] These employment disparities are a function of misunderstanding by society, and often a lack of adequate preparation for the workforce and a lack of access to needed workplace supports.

HR professionals touch every part of the employment process and have a significant role to play in helping to make programs such as these successful. The incremental course of identifying the right individual for a job involves every step of the employment process, in order to facilitate the retention of that person and maximize their job satisfaction. HR professionals can help create effective strategies for the recruitment, selection, onboarding, career development, and retention strategies of autistic people and support their supervisors in providing effective performance management and accommodations.[17]

Recruitment, selection, and onboarding. The first challenge for companies wanting to implement Autism at Work programs is to find the right talent: neurodiverse individuals with the training, background, and unique characteristics that lend themselves to the job functions for which the companies are recruiting. HR professionals can identify sources for such candidates within the local community. These sources might include service provider agencies that offer job training and placement, university offices for students with disabilities or career services that refer likely candidates, and even social media sites that specialize in the interests of autistic individuals and their family members.

Once the candidate pool and referral process has been established, the next step in getting people through the door is smoothing the selection and interview processes. Even candidates with excellent training and credentials, with resumes that stand out as desirable recruits with needed

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talent, may not fare well in traditional interview situations. Social awkwardness, failure to make eye contact, and inability to clearly present one's talents and interests have created barriers in this part of the employment process. Therefore, it is essential that HR professionals work with management to design a selection and interview process that prompts recruiters and hiring managers to look beyond these limitations and helps the candidates reveal their aptitudes in unconventional ways. This might include displaying a work portfolio, demonstrating skills in task and team engagement simulations, and other behavioral-oriented approaches that heighten the likelihood that a desired talent match is identified in these previously overlooked applicants.

Career advancement, retention, and performance management. Autistic individuals are no different from other employees in their desire for a chance to use their skills, get recognition for their contributions, and be afforded opportunities for development. HR professionals can assist supervisors in this part of the talent management process by reminding supervisors that all employees, including those who are autistic, desire equitable opportunities for advancement and should be encouraged to take advantage of training and stretch assignments that lead to career growth opportunities. Supervisors may also need support in providing regular candid feedback about any performance issues to autistic employees in a manner that will be heard, considered, and acted on to make corrections.

Communication and climate for inclusion. Finally, the HR professional can play a critical role in creating a climate for inclusion for autistic individuals within the organization. Communication about the Autism at Work program and its role as a part of the strategic business imperative should be evident in both external and internal company messaging. Having company leadership tout these programs as an important part of the business strategy to identify new talent will go a long way to ensuring a positive reception within the company and facilitate wider support. In addition, internal messaging in company newsletters and social media about the successes of autistic employees, and the contributions made by supervisors who have embraced, supported, and championed such programs, builds further interest and buy-in from others within the organization.

The HR professional can also assist with building a climate for inclusion for those who are neurodiverse or autistic through the creation and nurturing of activities that promote further acceptance within the workplace. An example might be an employee or business resource group (ERG) targeting neurodiversity. Such a group provides people who have disclosed that they are autistic or have other neurodiverse characteristics such as learning disabilities, dyslexia, or ADHD a safe place to meet others with similar life experiences. Groups may also support employees with neurodiverse family members. ERGs can also offer a supportive forum for individuals who have not yet disclosed their neurodiversity identity to their employer to explore self-identifying. Resource groups can also serve as a source of referrals for additional neuro-diverse applicants and offer candid feedback about how the organization as a whole is doing in providing an inclusive environment that truly embraces individuals with all kinds of differences, including those with autism.

CONCLUSION
The purpose of this paper has been to raise awareness about the significant and largely untapped labor pool of individuals with disabilities available to organizations to fill

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job openings, as well as serve as recruits from internal talent for next levels of leadership needed within your organization. Integrating disability considerations into HR policies and practices across the employment process assists in creating inclusive pathways for individuals with disabilities to gain access to our respective workplaces as applicants, as well as facilitates inclusive climates where individuals with disabilities can thrive, advance, and maximally contribute to the organization. We hope that these suggestions are useful to support your efforts in building a more disability inclusive workplace.

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