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Diversity in the Federal Workforce: Employing Individuals with Disabilities

The federal government has a long history of supporting diversity employment initiatives. Despite these initiatives, federal employment of minority groups, including individuals with disabilities, remains low relative to the American population.¹

The American workforce is expected to change dramatically over the next decade, as millions of baby boomers enter retirement and minority groups make up an increasingly large share of the workforce. These demographic shifts and the possibility of workforce shortages as millions of workers retire make it important for employers to take proactive steps to ensure the continued resilience and diversity of their labor force.

One strategy to accomplish this is the effort to reengage currently unemployed or underemployed individuals, such as young people, single mothers, part-time workers seeking full time work, older workers interested in working past the typical retirement age, and individuals and veterans with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities, in particular, represent an untapped talent pool that cuts across all demographic groups.¹

This research-to-practice brief discusses the competitive advantages of a diverse workforce and provides recommendations for including disability as one segment of a diverse workforce.

Strategic Advantages of Diversity

Diversity is first and foremost about people. It embraces similarities and differences and the unique perspectives and approaches that employees bring to the workplace. Traditionally, workplace diversity focused on race and gender², but in more recent years this concept has evolved to include a much wider range of attributes³, including disability.⁴ Disability is a unique diversity category that crosses all racial, gender, education, and socioeconomic lines.

While diverse recruiting has distinct advantages as the nation faces retirement-related labor shortages, it also has the potential to be a source of increased productivity regardless of labor supply. Establishing a diverse and inclusive workforce can encourage workers to develop mutual respect, appreciate individual differences, and work effectively as a cohesive team. A multiplicity of perspectives can improve product development and service delivery and ensure a workforce that is familiar with its customer base⁵. This is essential for the federal government, which is charged with serving the broadest range of constituents.

Incorporating disability into diversity programs has strategic human capital advantages for federal agencies, as employing people with disabilities promotes organizational stability.⁵ This process begins with finding, hiring and nurturing talented workers and then extends to the development of inclusive workplace climates that actively teach disability and diversity awareness at all levels.

Workforce Diversity...

- ...allows employers to capitalize on the diverse knowledge-base of workers when relating to different groups.
- ...can help increase innovation and creativity, reduce skill shortages and improve customer service.
- ...can create additional opportunities for external interactions and communications.
- ...demonstrates good social responsibility and provides opportunities for people with disabilities.^{6,7}

Defining Disability

While the definition of “disability” varies depending on context, it is generally accepted that it is a condition that limits an individual's ability to carry out day-to-day activities. Within this definition, the level of disability can range from mild to severe.⁸

The federal government recognizes three categories of disability: reportable, targeted and hidden (also called “non-visible”). The federal focus is most often on individuals with targeted disabilities, with the intention of encouraging hiring, placement, and advancement of individuals with disabilities in affirmative action planning.⁹

Acknowledgement

This research brief is based on Promoting Diversity in the Federal Workforce: Employment of Individuals with Disabilities, a white paper written by the Disability Policy Research Center (DPRC) at West Virginia University.¹ The project was funded by the Office of Disability Employment Policy, U.S. Department of Labor. For more information on this research contact D.J. Hendricks at 304-293-6560 or DJHendricks@mail.wvu.edu.

Federal Disability Types^{1,9}

Reportable

All disabilities officially recognized by the federal government for reporting purposes (using Standard Form 256).

Targeted

Nine disability types specially tracked and targeted for hiring, placement and advancement in the federal government.

- Blindness
- Deafness
- Missing extremities
- Partial paralysis
- Complete paralysis
- Epilepsy
- Severe intellectual disability
- Psychiatric disability
- Dwarfism

Hidden (non-visible)

Disabilities that are not readily apparent.

Examples:

- Diabetes
- Asthma
- Speech, hearing and vision impairments
- Learning disabilities
- Cancer
- Psychiatric disability
- Heart, kidney and pulmonary diseases and disorders

Other Examples of Reportable Disabilities Include:

Spinal Abnormalities, Morbid Obesity and Disfigurement of face, hands or feet.

Federal Disability Diversity Initiatives

The federal government has long supported the employment of individuals with disabilities in the federal workforce and prohibited discrimination, issuing six Executive Orders intended to increase the employment of people with disabilities.¹⁰ The most recent of these Executive Orders was signed in July 2010 and established ambitious targets for recruiting, hiring and retaining employees with disabilities.¹¹ Additional information on Executive Orders 13163 and 13548 is included in the *Disability Is Diversity* brief in this series.

In spite of these efforts, individuals with disabilities only account for seven percent of the federal civilian workforce, and employees with targeted disabilities make up less than one percent.¹²

Permanent Employees with Targeted Disabilities in the Federal Workforce

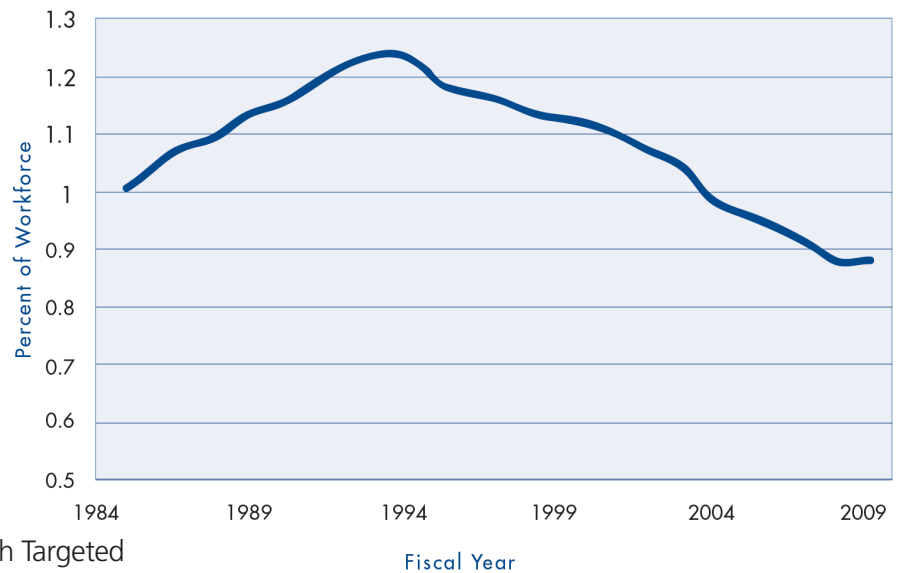


Figure 1.

Permanent Employees with Targeted Disabilities in the Federal Workforce ^{9,12,13}

Achieving Increased Disability Employment

Given the strong executive commitment to disability employment in the federal government, it is imperative that all federal agencies undertake strategies to increase their recruitment, hiring and retention of employees with disabilities. The Disability Policy Research Center at West Virginia University¹ has developed a set of targeted recommendations to guide federal employers in increasing disability employment:

1. **Conduct brainstorming sessions to develop, align, and implement a diversity strategy inclusive of people with disabilities within each federal agency.**

These brainstorming sessions should be led by the designated senior level agency official and should incorporate a wide range of individuals from throughout the agency. Diversity practices will be most effective when they are integrated into the agency's goals and its strategic plan, thus conversations should focus on how diversity can be:

- Aligned with the agency's mission
- Incorporated into the agency's pre-existing objectives

2. **Customize recruitment practices for hiring employees with disabilities from diverse cultures.**

Sourcing and recruiting individuals with disabilities from diverse cultural backgrounds requires a customized approach to advertising job postings, interviewing, screening and testing, reviewing resumes, and responding to applicants. Federal employers should:

- Establish a hiring goal for persons with disabilities and describe how this goal will be distributed across various grades.
- Conduct a thorough review of current recruiting techniques and methods for promoting employment of persons with disabilities.
- Allow recruiters to use several context-changing opportunities to minimize the impact of split-second and implicit associations.

3. **Improve outreach and access to employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities from diverse cultures.** Outreach to diverse groups requires that employers ensure that the outreach message is culturally appropriate, accommodating to language and communications barriers, universally accessible and inclusive of local leaders. To ensure effective outreach, federal agencies should:

- Conduct an assessment of their outreach competencies and inventory outreach practices in order to evaluate future training and development needs.
- Establish collaborative recruiting relationships with community and governmental groups, such as:
 - State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies
 - Department of Veterans Affairs
 - The Job Accommodation Network (JAN)
 - The Workforce Recruitment Program for college students with disabilities (WRP)
 - Employer Assistance and Resource Network (EARN)
 - Employment Networks under Social Security Administration's Ticket to Work Program.

4. **Adapt screening and interviewing processes to facilitate the equal participation of diverse applicants with disabilities.** While interviewing is a commonly used screening technique, an inflexible approach may represent a barrier for some individuals with disabilities. In order to ensure that the interviewing process is appropriate for a wide range of applicants, federal agencies should:

- Use a variety of interview techniques (e.g., verbal, written, etc.).
- Participate in "mock interview" events with local disability organizations in order to improve their "disability competence."
- Conduct or attend job fairs for individuals with disabilities.
- Provide candidates the opportunity to communicate about any interview accommodations they might need.

5. **Consider and adopt strategies for achieving effective career development and retention for workers with disabilities.** Successful employment of individuals with disabilities continues well after hiring and must include strategies to encourage professional development and advancement. Federal employers should:

- Provide individual follow-up and employer-employee dialogue whenever necessary.
- Consider job description revision or job reassignment, if circumstances warrant such a change.
- Provide appropriate accommodations to employees.
- Establish formal or informal mentoring programs for employees with disabilities to provide opportunities for relationship and practical skill development.
- Plan and conduct mandatory training for all management officials to combat myths and stereotypes about the employment of persons with disabilities, especially those with targeted or severe disabilities.
- Assist young workers in developing positive work habits and skills by providing classroom instruction and up-to-date reality-based occupational training.
- Create additional training opportunities for new entrants to the workforce who are deficient in reading and writing to remediate the skill gap.

6. **Adopt the recommendations set forth by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.**⁹

The EEOC has outlined key recommendations for federal employers in achieving equitable employment for individuals with disabilities. Every agency should:

- Establish hiring goals for people with targeted disabilities on an annual basis, and incorporate those goals into the strategic mission of the agency.
- Provide mandatory training on disability for all management officials, including information on the agency's current hiring goals, special hiring authorities, reasonable accommodation processes, and advancement/retention strategies for people with targeted and reportable disabilities.
- Develop procedures for ensuring management accountability and verification that goals are obtained.
- Ensure that a diversity criterion inclusive of disability is included in senior leaders' performance appraisals.
- Increase the utilization of internships, fellowships, and mentoring opportunities for individuals with disabilities.
- Issue a policy statement from the senior-level agency official, emphasizing the agency's policy of providing equal employment opportunity for applicants and employees with disabilities, and encouraging managers to increase their use of special hiring authorities to fill vacancies.

Conclusion

As the American workforce becomes more diverse, all employers must adapt their recruitment, hiring and staff development strategies to ensure they are able to recruit and retain talented employees. In the coming decades, this will mean employing ever-increasing numbers of minority employees, including individuals with disabilities. To ensure the effective inclusion of employees with disabilities in the federal government, adopting policies and practices that support their hiring and retention will be increasingly more necessary and important.

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About this Series

Diversity in the Federal Workforce is part of a series of briefs presenting the practical implications of recent research in disability employment. Each brief focuses on a key issue for employers, presenting background, research findings and key recommendations.



Disclaimer

The National Technical Assistance, Policy, and Research Center for Employers on Employment of People with Disabilities is funded by a cooperative agreement from the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy to Cornell University.

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