



Exploring Employer’s Successful Hiring and Retention Practices of Individuals with Disabilities

People with disabilities (PWD) continue to be less connected to the labor force compared to people without disabilities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). PWD experience additional factors that hinder employment opportunities, such as how they are perceived in terms of work. Negative stigmas, specifically amongst employers, around PWD’s ability to perform job duties and interact with coworkers, or concerns about the misconceptions of additional costs associated with

hiring PWD can negatively impact their employment (Bezyak et al., 2021; Yaghmaian et al., 2019). Therefore, a better understanding of employers’ perspectives on PWD could provide insights into what an employer’s role may be in improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities.

A recent qualitative study developed eight themes about exemplary employers (Strauser et al., 2024).

Table 1
Themes Identified Suggested Practices in Applying Strategies in Work Environments

| Theme | Definition | Example | Suggested Practice |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Empowering Hiring Practices | Considerate effort by senior management to empower hiring managers to effectively meet the needs of their team and/or department. | <i>“It was an open interview thing, and I still try to do this the same way. A group would come in, and I would interview one at a time independently...He was very supportive and let me kind of do that and trusted the process.”</i> | Reinforce a culture that encourages innovative and integrative management of employees, including trying accommodations and other supports to ensure supportive and productive environments. |
| Career Development and Advancement | Employers utilize a strength-based approach and focus on an ongoing acquisition of skills with their employees with disabilities. Employees are empowered to have a trial-and-error approach on skills development. Actively, seek out committees and other opportunities to explore skill development within the organization. | <i>“We also have senior leaders who are...individuals with disabilities...It creates lanes for others as well.”</i> | Reinforce a culture that is accepting and inclusive. Positive cultures have representation at multiple levels. Also, the employer encourages growth and provides that opportunity for all employees. |
| Community Relationships | Employers invest time and resources into collaborations. They also acknowledge that every investment of time and resources does not have to provide something tangible to their organization. They value that collaboration takes time and adapts depending on circumstances and needs. They also stated that the investment of time and resources ultimately always positively contributed to their organization. | <i>“You need outside resources to help yourself be verse with the disability inclusion, and you need to be able to accept when you are wrong and improve upon those challenges”</i> <i>“huge appreciation for what people can do...people with a disability have lived with this their whole life, so they know how to navigate the world better than we can figure out for them”</i> | Invest time and resources into developing collaborative relationships Defer to experts (especially people with disabilities) while also acknowledging that employers don’t need to be experts in disability to employ people with a disability |

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|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Trainings the Go Beyond Awareness | <p>Culture was built on not just disability awareness but on inclusion. Employers wanted to “demystify” disability.</p> <p>Employers cultivated an environment in which employees with disabilities were a part of the team as any other employee. There was value of people with disability as resources and assets to the company.</p> | <p><i>“I think the demystification of what people conceive about individuals with disabilities and that is actually true can be vastly different...I think the thought about awareness and really to help folks understand what coming in. Then once they are on site, making sure that you have folks in play from talent perspective, it’s an accommodation or an adjustment perspective so that they are able to get work as soon as possible.”</i></p> | <p>Giving employees with disabilities a platform, such having them serve in leadership roles within the company. Regular training centered around disability education and awareness, and including those with disabilities in this training. Having such trainings establishes an expectation that all employees will work alongside a person with a disability.</p> |
| Universal Design of Accommodations | <p>A description of the behavior and the most likely setting events, antecedent events, and consequences maintaining the behavior</p> | <p><i>he just needed a little bit of a visual reminder...like a little cheat sheet almost. {It is also a} helpful reminder for anybody who hasn’t worked that station in a while”</i></p> | <p>Encourage creative and flexible solutions including creating labels for items that promote inclusivity and universal design.</p> <p>Ask for input about accommodations from PWD. Utilize group training for all team members to get to know one another and how they work best</p> |
| Responsive Practices | <p>Employers had a quick turnaround on accommodations for persons with disabilities.</p> <p>Evaluating pilot programs and making changes based of feedback from all involved.</p> <p>Multiple people providing input.</p> | <p><i>What I’ll say to both of you is that our response time is 24 hours. If you call for an accommodation or adjustment, that gets escalated immediately, and then the wheels get put in place to start getting that adjustment or accommodation for that individual.</i></p> | <p>Actively and rapidly communicating about accommodation requests;</p> <p>Consistent evaluation of any implemented ideas for continued improvement</p> |
| Disability as Diversity | <p>Employers want a diverse workforce, valuing disability as a main diversity identity, and specifically sought of persons with disabilities for their companies. Employers made an effort to incorporate disability as a diversity into their culture through employing them and having persons with disabilities in leadership roles in the company.</p> | <p><i>“Here when they come in and they go to work, they train with our regular people. You get to know them, you get to talk to them, so it sort of eases them into it instead of having it forced on you...They become a part of the family here.”</i></p> | <p>Incorporating and focusing on disability as a part of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work</p> <p>Incorporating employees with disabilities into all aspects of the company, not excluding them from any piece (e.g., trainings)</p> |
| Confidence to Fail | <p>Employers embraced that failure is okay, as long as there is effort being made in including persons with disabilities into their companies. The expectation is that employers do not need to have everything figured out but there is improvement through experience.</p> <p>Pilot program lowers threshold about fear about failure. Implies that there is room to grow.</p> | <p><i>“I wouldn’t say that every single time I have hired someone it has been a win. I have definitely had some very odd situation kind of blow up in my face, and thing happen that you don’t expect to happen. Again, it’s not really because of their disability.”</i></p> | <p>Organizations were comfortable with failures at multiple levels including failure for an intervention to work, acceptance that not every employee would have tenure within a role</p> <p>Determination to try again even if there was a negative experience</p> <p>Failure of one employee with a disability is not indicative how all employees with disabilities may perform</p> |

SWTCIE partners could use the information provided above to better understand what positive work environments look like from an employer perspective. Professionals also should feel empowered to collaborate with employers and try pilot and other programs that might improve employment outcomes for their clients. Professionals should also feel comfortable providing input and insights based on their expertise to employers. Freely sharing best practices, suggesting modifications, and frequently sharing feedback can improve the work environment for clients (Kersten et al., 2022; Strauser et al., 2024).

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