

Addressing research gaps could help with development of disability-inclusive workplaces

December 11 2018, by Michelle Klampe

Filling key gaps in the research and understanding of the treatment of people with disabilities in the workplace could help improve employee success on the job and develop more disability-inclusive workplaces, a new review of disability research has shown.

People with disabilities make up roughly 15 percent of the world's population but much of the existing research on employment for people with disabilities focuses on [employment status](#), with less attention paid to quality of employment and other context that may influence the work experience of a person with disabilities, said David Baldrige, a professor of management at Oregon State University.

"A lot of good work has been done, but the body of knowledge is still very piece-meal," said Baldrige, who teaches in OSU's College of Business and is an author of the study. "There are so many different potentially disabling conditions and work contexts that it is difficult to obtain data and generalize from one condition to the next."

The findings were published recently in the journal *Human Resource Management*. The lead author is Joy Beatty of the University of Michigan—Dearborn. Co-authors are Stephan Boehm of the University of St. Gallen, Mukta Kulkarni of the Indian Institute of Management -Bangalore, and Adrienne Colella of Tulane University.

Beatty, Baldrige and their co-authors reviewed 88 research studies on the treatment of people with disabilities in the workplace and identified a number of gaps in the research that could help support the development of more inclusive workplaces and improve work opportunities for people with disabilities.

Among the gaps:

- Clear definitions of disability. Researchers often use the term 'person with disability' differently and are sometimes unclear as to which group or groups their findings are applicable.
- Revisiting the meaning of career success. While success is often linked to promotions, people with disabilities may instead decline promotions or seek job duty modifications, employment security, [work-life balance](#), etc. Adopting new ways to accurately measure career success can improve understanding of inclusive human resources policies.
- Over-reliance on limited existing data. Data on people with disabilities in the workplace can be difficult to obtain, so the available data is limited, leading to over-reliance on a few large government data sources.
- Lack of national context in current research, with a disproportionate focus on U.S. populations. The experience of a person with [disabilities](#) in the United States is likely to be different than that of a person living in China or India, but much of the existing research is focused on the U.S.
- Disability overshadows other aspects of a person's identity. Deeper examination of individual differences and identities outside the disability itself is needed.

"Employers may treat disability as a 'master status,' overshadowing other aspects of identity that contribute to diversity," Beatty said. "Disability identities coexist with other identities, creating a tapestry of gender, age,

race, sexual orientation and religious affiliation. Recognizing this tapestry and incorporating a more complex model of identity supports the development of more inclusive organizations."

As people live longer and work later in life, the proportion of people living with a disability is expected to grow exponentially, making disability employment issues relevant to a much larger group of workers and employers, Baldrige said.

"As work becomes more specialized, one issue for consideration should be to focus on what [people](#) can do and not what they can't do," he said. "Gains in specialized technology can help increase the impact of a person's ability or reduce the impact of their disability."

Baldrige is already putting findings from this study into action. He's currently working on a project that examines employee disability through lenses of isolation and integration to see if working in one condition has consequences for an employee's career. He's also looking at the connections between disability, education level and earnings to see how those three factors might relate.

"That's an example of going beyond just a person's employment status and looking more at the quality of their employment," he said.

More information: Joy E. Beatty et al, On the treatment of persons with disabilities in organizations: A review and research agenda, *Human Resource Management* (2018). [DOI: 10.1002/hrm.21940](https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.21940)

Provided by Oregon State University

Citation: Addressing research gaps could help with development of disability-inclusive

workplaces (2018, December 11) retrieved 24 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-12-gaps-disability-inclusive-workplaces.html>

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