

Hiring Individuals with Disabilities

Is it a Benefit or Liability?

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Abstract

Decades ago, diversity was a different ball-game; laws like Affirmative Action were set in motion to clean up what was messed up by derogatory actions and words. Since that time the topic of diversity has gradually evolved; it has a new name and face. Referred to as diversity and inclusion it has its own collection of processes, leadership practices, and in some cases provoke different feelings than that of affirmative action. As a budding branch of its own and contained within the diversity and inclusion family tree disability inclusion has increasingly demonstrated its value to companies and the workforce alike. In light of concerns regarding liability that have been expressed by hiring professionals and other company leaders disability inclusion continues to be on the agenda of stakeholders and customers alike because they want to know that companies understand the challenges of diverse populations. UPS is one of the many companies that embraces disability inclusion and validated its inclusive outlook when it launched a program to specifically hire individuals with disabilities. The data has been clear for some time; people with disabilities are more likely to be jobless, work part-time or be self-employed than those without disabilities. Findings from the research conducted, the feature of one success story and extracts from personal experience that are masterfully interwoven throughout the paper will undoubtedly underscore the argument that the benefits of hiring individuals with disabilities outweighs the liabilities that exist.

Keywords: diversity and inclusion, disability inclusion

Introduction

In an effort to eradicate discrimination against African Americans in the 1960s, Affirmative Action was born to protect their legal rights in the U.S. Constitution (Northouse, 2018, p. 187). Additional laws were sanctioned to ensure equal pay of women and men for their work; to prohibit discrimination; to mandate companies to show their hiring plans regarding Affirmative Action; and to protect workers over the age of forty-years (Northouse, 2018, p. 188). In essence, legal rights had to be established decades ago by the court system to protect certain groups from inequalities and injustices. For all intents and purposes, during the early years diversity was a different ball-game; the concentration was placed on cleaning up the mess or damaging actions and words that others messed up. Nonetheless, the United States is a far more diverse country than it was decades ago, yet far less diverse today than it will be in another decade (Paul, McElroy, Leatherberry, p. 110).

It cannot be denied; compared to other nations the U.S. has made some progress in the area of diversity. These days, regular business leaders are joining the diversity movement by establishing initiatives and programs to foster an inclusive culture and workplace environment. Diversity has taken on a different facet; it is referred to as diversity and inclusion and has its own collection of processes, leadership practices, and in some cases provoke different feelings than that of affirmative action. While diversity and inclusion and affirmative action may intersect in round about ways they are certainly not one-in-the-same. Affirmative Action was a decree issued, a command given, a charge ordered for people to do the right thing; on the other hand, diversity and inclusion is a choice or an option for people or leaders to do the right thing while at the same time improving the company culture.

While the benefits and liabilities of inclusiveness will be expounded upon later disability inclusion is an increasing force of its own and paving the way to empower and strengthen the

voice of individuals with disabilities. As a budding branch of its own, disability inclusion is included within the diversity and inclusion family tree. Research validates that qualified individuals with disabilities add tremendous value to the workforce; for example, companies can leverage the creative and innovative minds that people with disabilities apply daily to overcome obstacles. Yet, at the same time it has been mentioned that “only 17.9 percent of people with a disability nationwide were employed in 2016, compared to 65.3 percent of people without a disability” (Ohikuare, 2017). Perhaps the disparity stems from the notion that larger organizations are more likely to recruit people with disabilities and have formal disability inclusion programs in place to ensure their needs are accommodated in accordance with the American Disabilities Act (Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt, & Brooks, 2017).

Nonetheless, there’s a popular saying that numbers don’t lie. What’s more disheartening is that very few disabled employees self-identify with their employers as having a disability. “In 2016, only 3.2 percent employees self-identified as having a disability. Family and friends of people with disabilities are known to discourage them from disclosing their disability in the work environment” (Sheriben, Kennedy, Jain-Link, & Ihezic, 2017). By the same token, employees with disabilities do not self-identify largely because of reported negative outcomes that others experienced, like feeling forced to quit, excessive work expectations, increased monitoring, invasive questioning, lost opportunities for advancement, and even termination (Cook, n.d.). So herein is an opportunity for change; to turn away the tides of subtle and blatant discrimination towards individuals with disabilities. This paper will explore disability inclusion, the budding branch of diversity and inclusion and different facets of it, while emphasizing the benefits of integrating individuals with disabilities into the workforce.

Diversity and Inclusion and Disability Inclusion

Even though the focus of this research paper is U.S. centric, it is worth noting that diversity is represented in different dynamics and definitions across the globe (Mitchell, Creary, 2009, p. 6-7). “Diversity represents a variety, mixture or difference” (Northouse, 2018, p. 184-185). Wide in scope, diversity can basically represent a group in any sector with members from different ethnic groups, religions, generations, and genders; likewise it can also represent language differences, varied educational experiences, backgrounds or perspectives within a particular group (Northouse, 2018, p. 184-185). In contrast, Northouse (2018) maintains inclusion is the process of integrating different individuals into a team or organization and moreover, it involves creating an environment where people who are different feel they are part of the whole; they feel fully accepted as a team member and employee.

It seems like an oxymoron for a person to want to feel included but at the same time want to be perceived as different or unique. Even so, the basic needs of man is to be included and at the same time be different from others (Northouse, 2018, p. 190). During a recent diversity and inclusion seminar the lecturer portrayed the convergence of diversity and inclusion by disclosing a previous dialogue and encounter with his mentee. The mentee needed to make a decision between three job offers on the table. The lecturer presented only three questions so the mentee could identify her company of choice by process of elimination. “During your internship as a minority with a disability at ABC Company how did you feel?” She replied, “As an intern at ABC Company I felt like an outsider” and she provided specific examples to underscore this feeling. Next she noted, “At DEF Company I always felt like I was invisible” and she gave targeted examples to underscore this feeling as well; and her comments about the third company was preceded with a smile from ear to ear “But GHI Company made me feel comfortable and

much like family. I felt like it was a safe space and I could be myself. I felt valuable” and she shared specific examples to underscore these feelings.

To foster a more inclusive culture an increasing number of Fortune 500 companies are recognizing the need to expand their diversity and inclusion portfolio to focus on disability inclusion. These companies are becoming known as good corporate citizens and model employers as they heighten awareness internally and externally around disability inclusion issues, provide enhanced training to internal recruitment teams, establish disability affinity groups for employees and deliver unconscious biased training to their management teams to name a few. All the same with UPS, a company that employs over 400,000 people globally; raising awareness around disability inclusion is the cornerstone of the company’s diversity and inclusion training program because it is committed to building an inclusive culture. Granting this 110 year Logistics Company has hired individuals with disabilities in professional and manual labor roles and in various locations, and recently launched a program specifically to hire individuals with disabilities at its main hub operations in Louisville, KY which will be highlighted later.

UPS Success Story

In the early 1960s, UPS took a formalized approach to diversity and inclusion and partnered with the National Urban League (NUL) to hire Ken Jarvis, the first African-American UPS driver. Moreover, in the late 1960s, the company launched the Community Internship Program the first program of its kind to immerse a diverse group of leaders into the community so they can be exposed to social and economic challenges faced by all vulnerable groups so they can be equipped to manage and lead diverse employees. A decade later, UPS expanded its reach and formed partnerships with signature organizations in the disability inclusion space which includes, but is not limited to Paralyzed Veterans of America, National Federation of the Blind,

the American Foundation for the Blind, National Organization on Disability and Special Olympics. These legacy partnerships became instrumental in promoting change in UPS by means of helping the company understand the significance of disability inclusion before it became coined as such.

From a recent interview with chief diversity and inclusion officer for UPS, Eduardo Martinez maintains that “Investing in people has always been the cornerstone of UPS; the most powerful assets of the company is the distinct perspectives, experiences and talents of our employees” (E. Martinez, personal interview, September 14, 2017). To underscore his viewpoint leaders of the company recognized the need to go above and beyond the status quo as it relates to hiring individuals with disabilities. As a result, they developed and launched a program specifically to hire individuals with disabilities. In 2014, UPS launched the Transitional Learning Center, affectionately known as TLC at its main hub operations in Louisville, KY which employs over 10,000 people in one location.

Since inception of the TLC program UPS’s Louisville operation has hired nearly 200 individuals and maintained a steady retention rate of 86% which is higher than any other area for the company (S. Gregory, personal interview during TLC’s 2-year anniversary celebration, September 22, 2016). The two-week training program intentionally created for individuals with widespread disabilities like Down syndrome, ADHD, autism, and visual and hearing losses, provide soft skills and simulated training sessions. What’s more, participants are recommended to advance to the customary UPS job application and interviewing process based on proven comprehension levels of the training administered and by successfully passing a practical exam. Once hired as a UPS employee, TLC participants receives the same hourly rate and benefits as non-disabled employees, as well as two additional weeks of on-the-job training which includes being paired with a peer-mentor and gradual immersion into the company culture. Despite the

fact that UPS's formalized disability inclusion program is in its formative years in nature it has received three noteworthy awards in consecutive years: Large Employer of the Year from the Association of People Supporting Employment First, Employer of the Year from the Kentucky Vocational Advisory Council, and the Best in Business award from the Ruderman Family Foundation.

The Liabilities of Hiring Individuals with Disabilities

Hiring individuals with disabilities can yield numerous benefits; all the same it has its share of liabilities. Obstacles and liabilities can be summed up into three words – unawareness (lack of knowledge), costs and fear. Out of these three concerns employers unanimously express their number one concern is the fear of potential litigation that people with disabilities can usher in under the American Disabilities Act (Kaye, Jans, & Jones, 2011). The American Disabilities Act is a “Civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and all public and private places that are open to the general public. The purpose of the ADA law is to ensure that people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as others” (ADA, 2000).

According to Title 1 Employment of ADA “Employers must provide reasonable accommodations to qualified applicants or employees. A reasonable accommodation is any modification or adjustment to a job or the work environment that will enable an applicant or employee with a disability to participate in the application process or to perform essential job functions” (ADA, 2000). Other notable concerns are uncertainties of knowing if a disabled person can actually perform tasks associated with the job; an additional time investment of a supervisor will be required to manage the disabled employee; the team or function will suffer due to increased absenteeism on account of the employee's doctor's appointments; and great uneasiness was expressed that a disabled person cannot perform fundamental job functions or

will not perform as well as a person without a disability which lowers productivity numbers (Kaye, Jans, & Jones, 2011). Ultimately, it is believed that all of the above-mentioned obstacles will eventually require intervention from the human resources team which will result in paperwork and documentation overload and probationary meetings that will eventually morph into a costly disability discrimination lawsuit.

The Benefits of Hiring Individuals with Disabilities

The benefits emphasized in this section are not all-inclusive. The list could go on and on but the observation to consider is that benefits of hiring individuals with disabilities strikingly outweighs the liabilities. Most actively working disabled individuals believe that qualified people with disabilities add very unique benefits to the workforce since they are already spending their lives overcoming discouragement, persisting through setbacks, solving problems and finding creative routes around obstacles. A survey published by the Institute for Corporate Productivity indicates that “75 percent of employers ranked their employees with disabilities as “good” or “very good” on work quality, motivation, engagement, integration with co-workers, dependability and attendance” (Henderson, 2017), which could be an indication of the benefits awaiting companies that will embrace disability inclusion.

Some popular benefits include contributors of valuable ideas, company tax incentives, increased retention, enhancement of inclusive leadership skills and increased morale (Sheriben, Kennedy, Jain-Link, & Ihezic, 2017). One observation worth noting from personal interaction with disabled employees is that their positive attitude becomes contagious and has even been known to spread and transform the negative attitudes of non-disabled employees. What’s more, disabled employees demonstrate love towards their jobs through loyalty, dedication and arriving to work on time. As a final point, the Deloitte Review argues that a benefit of hiring people with disabilities is, “The workforce will reflect characteristics of its customers and communities while

giving also giving the company a competitive edge; customers and communities alike will feel more comfortable doing business with inclusive companies because it shows the company understands their challenges” (Paul, McElroy & Leatherberry, p. 113).

Conclusion

In the course of reading numerous case studies, conducting research and from personal experience as a diversity and inclusion professional who also manages the disability inclusion portfolio for a Fortune 50 company, shifting a workplace environment to an inclusive one can be frustrating and rewarding at the same time. At times the progress seems extensive and arduous, but at the same time the small victories are rewarding when you reflect on the opportunities given to impact lives, transform company culture and change the chronicles of history for an entire organization. There isn't a cookie cutter approach, microwave strategy or immediate answer to all things related to diversity and inclusion and disability inclusion. Many businesses have started their journey of inclusiveness and the indisputable way to get there is to ensure their leaders set the tone for inclusion and hold followers accountable for inclusion practices (Northouse, 2018, p. 194). The data speaks for itself and supports the argument that hiring individuals with disabilities is both a benefit and liability. Nevertheless, the onus is on the leaders to turn the tides from exclusion to inclusion.

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