WEBSITE BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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Abstract

According to recent estimates from the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP, 2015), the unemployment rate for persons with disability (PWDs) is more than double that of persons without disability (11.7% vs. 5.3%), even though two thirds of these PWDs indicate that they are willing and able to work (Canas & Sondack, 2011; Harris Interactive, 2000). The social/structural model used to explain this employment gap emphasizes the negative beliefs, prejudice, and misinformation that prevent PWDs full inclusion and participation in the workplace (Dunn & Burcaw, 2013). The model also identifies extensive structural barriers, examples of which range from missing curb cuts to inaccessible websites.

The World Wide Web enables many people to communicate, participate in civic life, become more educated, and develop a far greater social network. In addition, Internet access and usage has become almost a necessity for job seekers today, as evidenced by the proliferation of websites such as simplyhired.com, indeed.com, monster.com and careerbuilder.com. An increasing number of organization websites permit jobseekers to search available openings and apply online. However, whether due to prejudice, ignorance, or inattention, organizations launch websites that are unwelcoming and technologically inaccessible to people with sensory, mobility, and cognitive impairments. PWDs should have equal ability to complete online job applications or, at the very least, websites should include a statement specifying how a PWD can obtain accommodations for the job application process, if needed. For many persons with disability such barriers can exacerbate existing employment disadvantages relative to other groups.

Organizational websites provide a window to a company's culture and serve as a valuable recruiting tool. It is often here that an individual gets his or her first impression as to a prospective employer's standpoint on diversity and whether the organization supports an inclusive work culture. The decision to apply or not may be influenced by the messages received from the website; talent may be won or lost accordingly. The current study examines the messages that 20 successful companies send through their websites about diversity in general, and specifically, about disability and openness to employing PWDs. Several questions guide the investigation:

1. Is there a diversity appreciation or inclusion statement and if so what impression and company image does it convey?

2. Is "disability" specifically mentioned in any diversity or EOE/EEO statement?

3. Do directions exist for obtaining accommodations for the job application and, if so, is the process accessible and prominently placed?

4. To what extent is there congruence between the messages conveyed about diversity, disability, and the accessibility of job application accommodation information?

5. How do companies ranked as "best places to work" differ from those companies not so designated (in relation to these questions)?

Method

Using a random number generator, a total of 20 websites were selected from the top 100 companies on the *2014 Fortune 500* list and from the *2015 Fortune 100 List of Best Places to Work*. Only the first 100 companies were used for the Fortune 500 sampling frame as there are a total of 100 companies on the best places to work list. Companies in the final sample spanned a variety of industries and varied in size, number of employees, and locations. Ease of locating diversity appreciation/inclusion statements was scored in reference to the navigation distance (measured in mouse clicks) from each company's home page and career home page.

Language choice and the message it conveys distinguished the nature of each site's diversity appreciation content. Also noted was whether disability was specifically referenced. Companies were categorized in terms of the extent to which their statement indicated mere compliance with Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) legislation; diversity commitment, importance, or responsibility; or inclusivity integral to the company's culture, identity, or humanistic values. Statement visibility was also scored, as was the existence and visibility of directions for obtaining accommodations with the job application process. After piloting and revising the scoring method, each co-author scored the twenty websites.

Results

Results revealed a range of diversity appreciation declarations, along with variation in the ease with which these declarations as well as the EEO and accommodation information could be located and accessed. Some sites were extremely difficult to navigate, and in a few cases clicking on "diversity and inclusion" led to expired screens or merely to a photograph of a few smiling employees apparently considered "diverse." The message taken from such website content is that the company does not truly value nor seek diversity; in fact, that its understanding of diversity is limited and outdated. In contrast, several websites presented detailed statistics on their workforce composition and emphasis on diversity. These sites also tended to specifically reference disability and have prominent EEO and accommodation statements. However, in general, attempts at finding accommodation directions were limited and frustrating at best. On some websites no accommodation information could be located; on others, an applicant would need actually to begin the application process before finding out how to obtain application accommodations.

Discussion

Today's highly competitive and dynamic business environments suggest that employers should take advantage of the varied perspectives and experiences of a diverse workforce as well as the increased organizational value that an inclusive environment engenders. Despite their "top company" rankings, many of the organizations examined in this study project an image in which PWDs, and in some cases, it seems, diversity in general, is of limited value, unwelcome, and irrelevant to company success. The structural factors we examine and discuss point to constraints to website job access which in turn can result in an individual's underemployment. This also results in talent under-utilization which provides no benefit to employers' bottom lines.

Key Words: diversity, disability, inclusion, World Wide Web, employment accommodation, equal opportunity

References

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Appendix   A

Company Websites and Fortune Rankings

Fortune 500 (2014)	Fortune 100 Best Workplaces (2015)
Apple	Robert W. Baird
JP Morgan Chase	NuStar Energy
Marathon Petroleum	Kimley Horn & Assoc.
Boeing	Baker Donelson
American International Group	O.C. Tanner
Intel Corporation	Marriott International
Tesoro Corporation	Arnold & Porter
Sears Holding	WellStar Health System
American Express Co.	Adobe Systems
DIRECTV	Accenture