The Role of Safety Professionals in Integrated Disability Management

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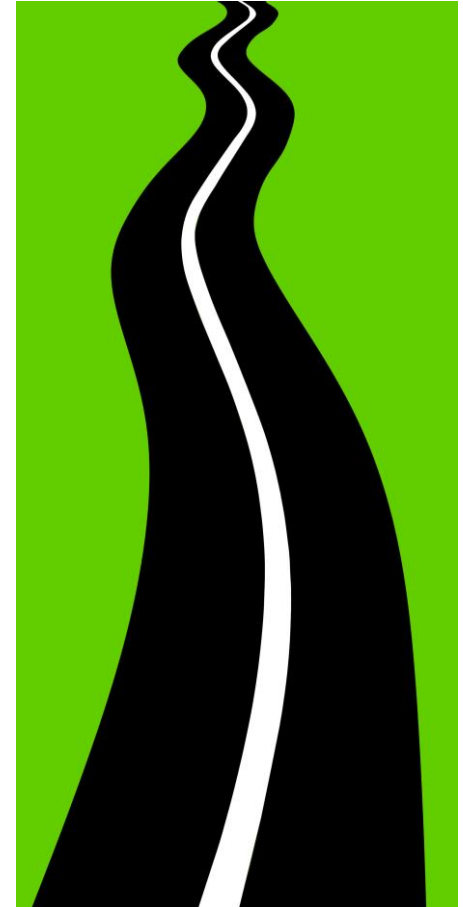
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Overview

- Definitions
- Extent of disability
- Employment of the disabled
- Social Protections
- Business case for hiring disabled
- The role of Safety Professionals
- Accommodations
- Integrated Disability Management
- The road ahead

What is a disability?

- a complex relationship between an individual's health condition, personal factors, and of the external factors represented by the environment in which they live or work.

- understood differently by different cultures, governments, organizations, and individuals.

"persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."

United Nations Article 1 of the WHO Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
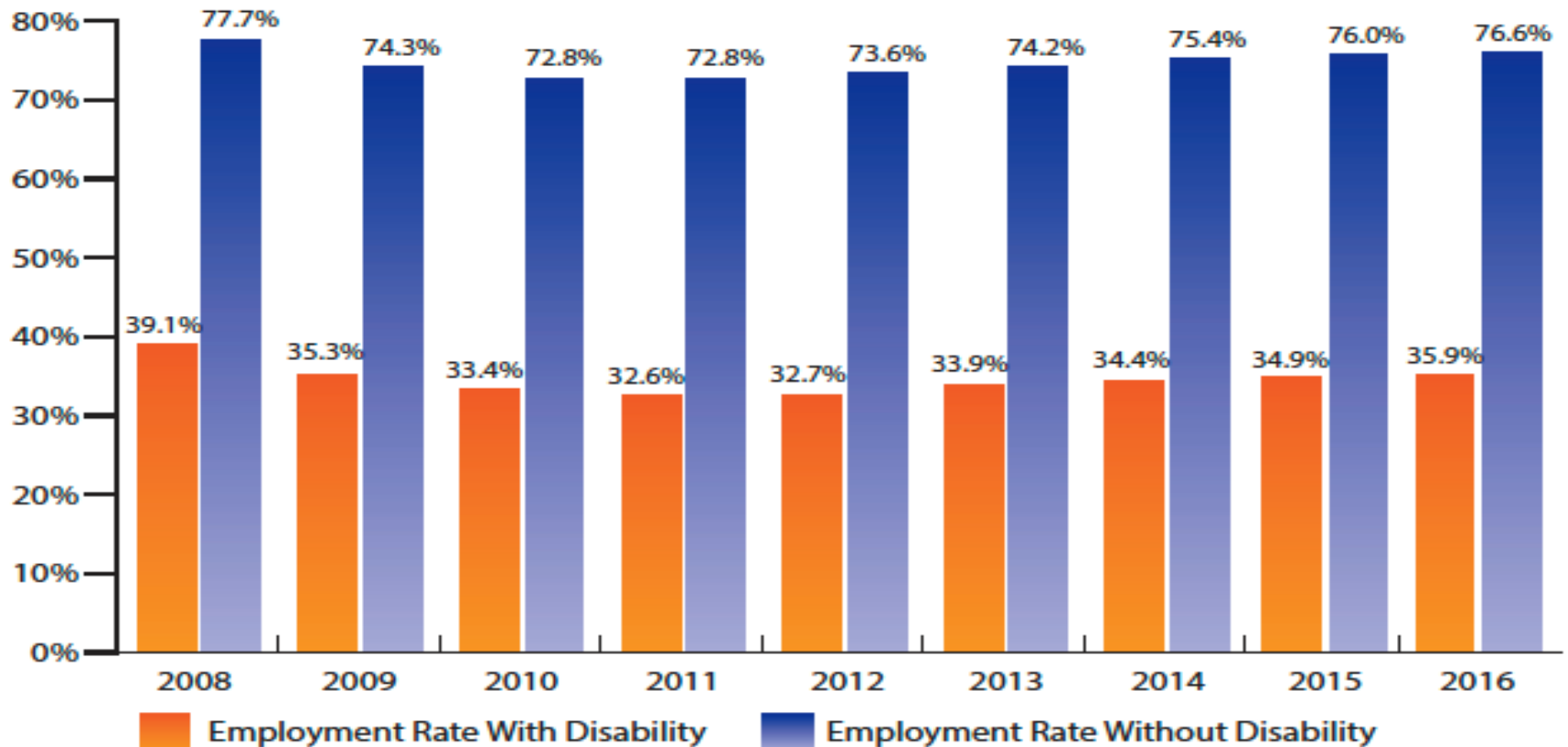
Extent of the Disability

- European Union (EU) ~ 80 million people with some kind of disability (ranging from mild to severe), who are often prevented from fully taking part in society and the economy because of environmental and attitudinal barriers (European Commission 2010).

- United States ~ 53 million adults live with a disability. 12% of the US population (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015).

- Globally ~ One billion people, or 15% of the world's population experience some form of disability. Approximately 110 to 190 million people experience a significant disability. (World Bank, 2021)

Aging Populations

- The workforce in many parts of the world is aging significantly. In the U.S. older workers is one of the fastest growing subsets of the workforce. (Tossi, 2007)

- In a recent survey of workers approaching retirement age in the U.S. (55-64) 27 percent stated that they had plans to postpone retirement. (Rainville, 2009)

- Along with an older workforce comes and ever-increasing number of workers with age-related disabilities. (Bjelland, 2010)

- 10% of adults younger than 40 report a work limiting disability, this grows to 25% of 60 year olds and 66% of 65 year-olds (Stock, 2004)

- By the age of 50, a person's first serious medical problem will occur, with a 25% chance that it will be a life-long condition. (Platt, 2001)

- COIVID-19 Long Haulers will have significant long term health effects for decades

Employment of the Disabled

Disabled people are constrained in occupational choices by a range of structural and attitudinal barriers. (Wilton, 2004)

U.S. Employment Rates

Kraus, L., Lauer, E., Coleman, R., and Houtenville, A. (2018). 2017 Disability Statistics Annual Report. Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire.

Consequences to disabled people who cannot work

- Disabled people who cannot work lose freedom, become dependent on society.

- Disabled people have a difficult time in society in general, and the workplace specifically. (Kitchin, 1998)

- Disabled people are excluded from the workplace for a variety of functional, cognitive, and social reasons. (Barnes, 2005)(Vickers, 2013)

Disabled people tend to;

- Be underemployed
- Suffer increased levels of poverty
- Have greater dependence on public social service systems
- Hold lower status jobs and earn lower wages
- Work fewer hours
- Encounter more workplace discrimination and injustice
- Suffer food insecurity
- Lack internet access
- Have lower educational attainment
- Suffer higher mortality rates, poorer general health, and poorer mental health

Societal costs of not hiring disabled workers

- Despite general conceptions by businesses and society, disabled people are very productive and dedicated workers. (Mori, 2018).(Lysaght, 2011)

- By creating useful employment for the disabled there is less burden on social systems and increased productivity of business and governments

Value of disabled worker protections

Regulatory protections are as numerous as governments. Some nations have realized that having disabled people in the labor force can be a good thing for the following reasons;

- They add to the labor force where additional support is needed
- They often take jobs that other workers may not like to do, and that are difficult to fill
- Working disabled reduce the burden on other social, insurance, and welfare systems
- Working disabled add positively to the social fabric of a diverse community
- The disabled workers themselves benefit from increased freedoms from dependence, and personal autonomy

Disabled worker protections

- In the European Union employers must provide reasonable accommodations for disabled workers by removing barriers to jobs, ensuring equal participation in workplace activities, and equal performance capabilities through job design or accommodation. (Mallender, 2015)

Disabled worker protections

Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). 42 USC §§ 12111–12117 (ADA Title I). Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)

"No covered entity shall discriminate against a qualified individual with a disability because of the disability of such individual in regard to job application procedures, the hiring, advancement, or discharge of employees, employee compensation, job training, and other terms, conditions, and privileges of employment."

Business value and incentives for hiring disabled workers

- Disabled workers represent a valuable human resource commodity in terms of experience, dedication, and institutional memory that is critical for the continued effectiveness of business organizations (Silverstein, 2008)

- Businesses can support aging workers as a means to secure talented workers and minimize turnover in the years to come.

Business responses to disability

- Use the growing aging labor pool as a means to support their operational needs. (Baumgartner, 2014)

- Rather than finding ways to discriminate against disabled workers, find ways to broaden and increase inclusion of this diverse segment of the workforce.

- Management systems, policies, and programs should promote inclusion.

- Businesses should learn how to help disabled workers keep their jobs, rather than be trying to push them out the door. (Gelfand, 2005)

The Role of Safety Professionals

- the fundamental responsibility of employers to provide safe workplaces.

- Employers also have a duty to ensure that workers can stay on, or return to their jobs after an injury or illness

- As occupational safety and health professionals, it is our jobs to ensure that workers do not become disabled, but if they do, we need to play an active role in assisting them back into the workforce safely.

Workplace Accommodations

- There is often a misconception by managers that accommodations are expensive and reduce profits, in fact nearly 50% do not cost anything. (Kulkarni, 2016) (Johnson 2003)

- The average expense associated with accommodations is around $500

- Few accommodations cost more than $1,200

- Many permanent accommodations are a one-time expense and remain as a part of the facility to be used by other disabled workers (eg. ramps, special toilets, lighting, alarms)

Available Workplace Accommodations

- Vary dramatically, depending on the specific workplace and the individual.

- Evaluation is a continual and organic process of matching the job to the worker's capabilities, similar to Ergonomics

- This is an underutilized domain where Occupational Hygienists could apply their knowledge and capabilities to broaden the work landscape for workers with disabilities.

- Workers with disabilities are often under tremendous psychological pressure to keep their disabilities as hidden as possible, and not to pursue special accommodations,

- Non-disabled workers often interpret disabled counterparts as either 'problem workers' who do not meet organizational standards or individuals receiving accommodation as 'special treatment'. (Collinson, 1994)

Workplace Accommodations

- Alterations to office furniture
- Process changes (reduced weights, slower speeds)
- Additional training time
- Telephone amplification equipment
- Flexible work schedules.
- Changes to lighting
- Special reading devices or computer software
- Creation of access ramps, widening doors
- Meet the needs of a disabled employee
  (Johnson 2003)

Integrated Disability Management (IDM)

A multidimensional interdisciplinary approach to employee health and well-being. It is built upon three fundamental principles; (Akabas, 1992)(Rieth, 1995)

1) Prevent disabilities from occurring from workplace exposures or accidents

2) Minimize the extent, impact, and costs associated with disabilities

3) Promote and encourage the ongoing inclusion of disabled workers through an organizational commitment to continued employment

Integrated Disability Management

- Efficiencies lead to significant cost savings.

- Communications between organizations and departments improve services provided to workers. (Calkins, 2000)

- Focused safety and prevention activities lead to better employee health, improved disease identification and management, and reduced absenteeism and turnover. (Angeloni, 2013)(Marinescu, 2007)

IDM Team Members

- Physicians,
- Safety engineers,
- Occupational health physicians,
- Occupational hygienists,
- Occupational health nurses,
- Ergonomists,

- Physiotherapists,
- Counselors,
- Occupational therapists,
- Work organization specialists,
- Psychologists,
- Academic researchers, and other specialists (Whitaker & Baranski, 2001).

Needs Moving Forward

- Expanding awareness of disabilities in order to address the various accommodations that may be provided

- Seeing disability as a form of diversity, and embracing it

- Including disability topics in university curricula

- Expanded legislative protections for disabled workers

- Providing occupational hygiene and safety for disabled workers

- Including workers with disabilities in executive and management roles

Forward-thinking organizations will;

- Identify jobs at their worksites that are difficult to fill, and that various types of disabled workers are good at, and target hiring practices specifically at those types of disabled workers

Lastly;

Are Occupational Hygienists leaders?

- This is an area lagging in the protection of this growing and valuable set of workers,

- Occupational Hygienists need to become informed about disability, and take leadership responsibility in their organizations to creatively move disability management forward.

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