



Professional Development and Advancement of Employees with Disabilities

As the composition of the American workforce continues to change, it is imperative that all employers' human resource practices evolve in order to retain and advance top talent. One component of this shift must include strategies to attract and retain employees with disabilities, especially in light of the increased likelihood of disability with age and the "graying" of the workforce.

This research-to-practice brief discusses key workforce trends and common workplace barriers, and provides recommendations for fully incorporating employees with disabilities into career development and advancement programs.

The Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN) is a resource for employers seeking to recruit, hire, retain and advance qualified employees with disabilities. It is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy under a cooperative agreement with The Viscardi Center. For more information, visit AskEARN.org.

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Workforce Trends

The total size of the U.S. workforce is growing, but is doing so unevenly. While the proportion of the workforce under the age of 44 has been declining steadily over the last several decades, the proportion over the age of 45 has steadily increased (see Figure 1).

The aging of the workforce is an especially important consideration for employers, given the increased likelihood of workers acquiring disabilities as they age (see Figure 2). Employers will be challenged to address disability-related workplace concerns in order to retain and attract highly-skilled workers.

In addition to these demographic trends, the behavior of workers in general has changed in recent decades. In particular, workers are increasingly willing to seek career advancement opportunities outside their current employer and are less likely to stay with a single employer to climb the traditional “career ladder,” making the recruitment of qualified employees more competitive in many fields. Many individuals are also opting to work longer, creating a workforce that now spans four generations.

These workforce trends have direct bearing on the work of the human resource professionals tasked with recruiting, hiring and retaining the most highly qualified talent available to their organizations. Employers and agencies that invest in training, development, and career advancement opportunities for all employees can greatly increase their chances of attracting and retaining highly valued employees, and employers that are proactive in their approach to employees with disabilities have an added advantage.

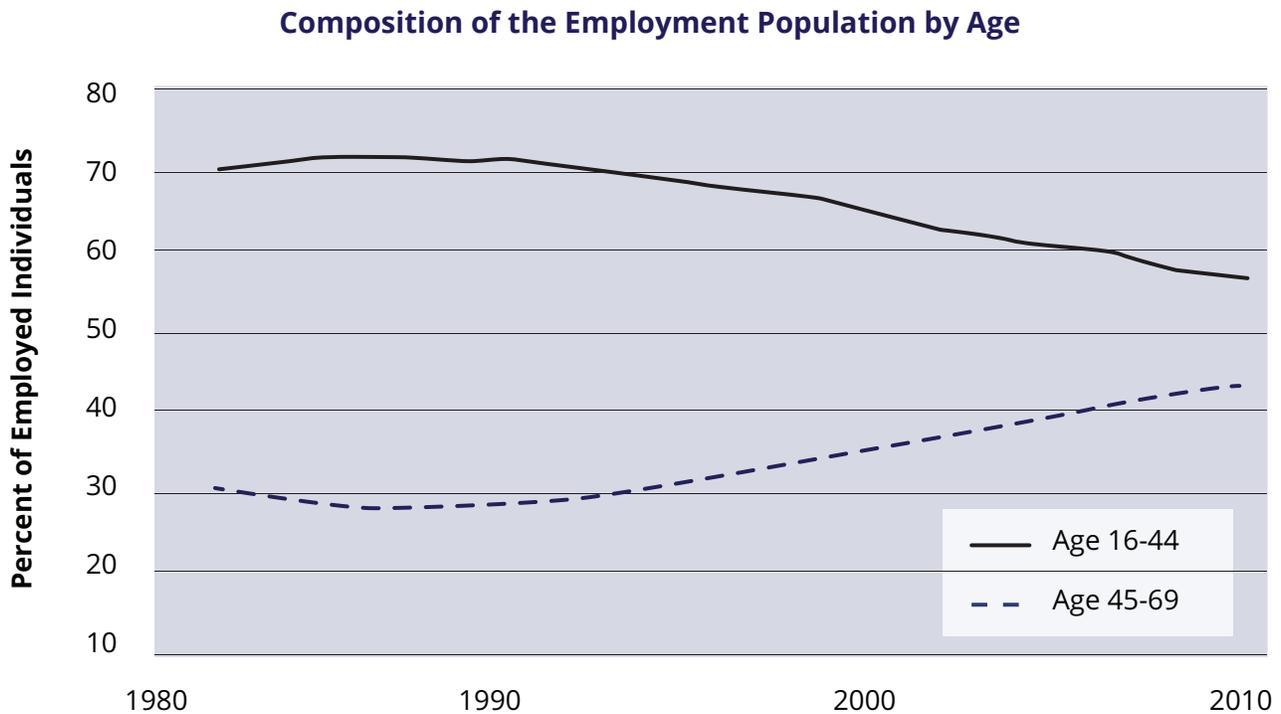


Figure 1. Composition of the Employed Population, by age.²

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Organizational Barriers to Employing People with Disabilities

While many employers recognize the importance of diversity and affirmative action initiatives in increasing their ability to tap into diverse labor pools, less attention has been paid to recruiting individuals with disabilities and to retention and advancement strategies for these employees. Even federal employers and federal contractors, who are required to meet disability recruiting obligations, have made little progress in this arena.^{4,5} Nondiscrimination requirements that apply to all employers and all aspects of employment, including opportunities for advancement, make it critical that employers ensure that employees with disabilities are provided with equal opportunity for career development and advancement.

Traditionally, employment of individuals with disabilities has been thought to present a particular challenge for employers because of assumed personal barriers among this population. Recent research, however, suggests that many of these challenges may be created by human resource departments themselves.^{4,5} Examples of such practices that may unnecessarily limit recruitment and employment of qualified employees, including individuals with disabilities, include: creating jobs that are excessively specialized or which have very narrowly defined qualifications; and failing to effectively identify, select and retain the best performing employees.⁶

In addition, there are workplace practices and attitudes that create barriers for employees with disabilities.

These include:

- Limited HR and manager knowledge of how to make a reasonable accommodation, or lack of responsiveness to employee accommodation requests
- Company and application websites that are not accessible to individuals with disabilities
- Negative supervisor and co-worker attitudes toward employing people with disabilities
- Lack of employee training opportunities⁷

Facts about Employing People with Disabilities⁸

- Workers with disabilities have similar attendance to workers without disabilities
- Most accommodations are free or cost less than \$600
- Workers with disabilities adjust to workplaces just like those without disabilities
- Workers compensation rates will not increase
- Medical insurance rates will not increase
- Training for employees with disabilities is not significantly more difficult or expensive
- Supervising an employee with a disability is not more difficult
- Workers with disabilities perform as well as employees without disabilities
- Fair salaries are the same for employees with and without disabilities
- Termination of an employee with a disability should be done in the same way as with any employee

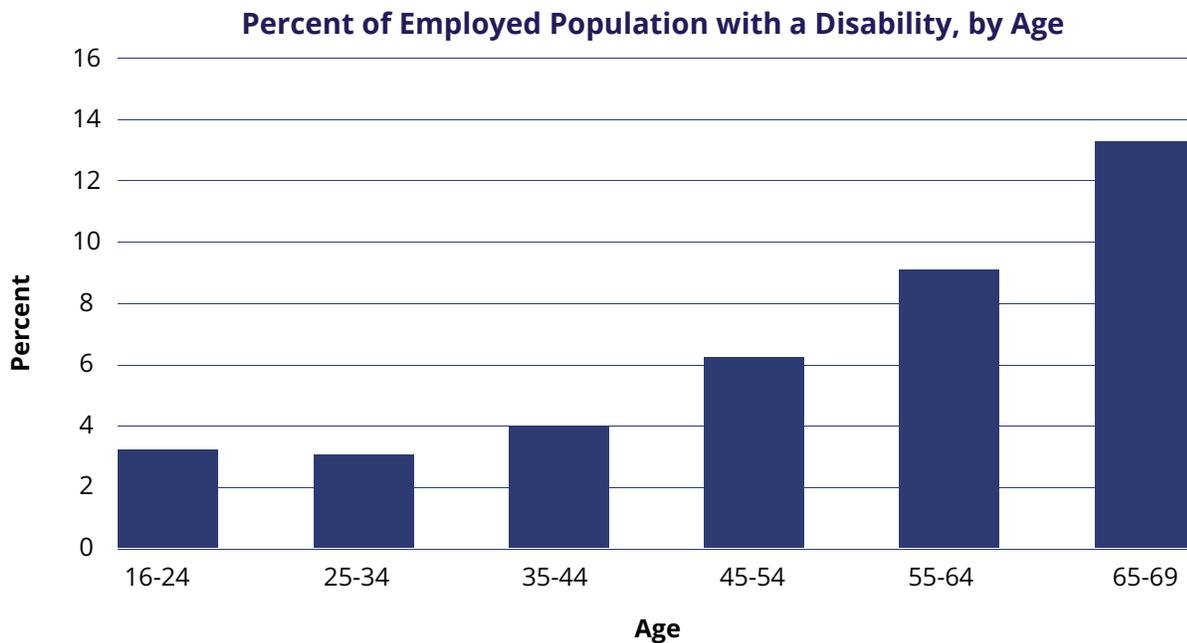


Figure 2. Percent of the Employed Population with a Disability, by age. ^{1,3,4}

Successful Retention and Advancement Strategies

There are a multitude of programs intended to encourage professional development and advancement among all employees. These same programs can and should be open to employees with disabilities.

Career Ladder Programs

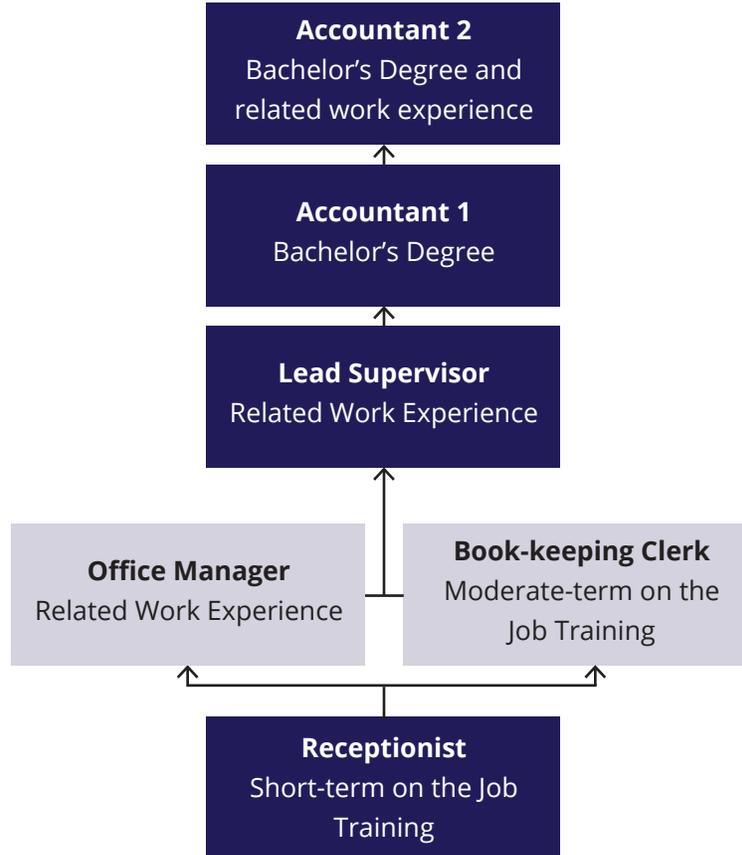
Career ladder programs create a defined path- way for employees interested in advancement. Within these programs organizations define “rungs” based on levels of experience and education. As employees acquire skills and training, they advance up the ladder until they retire, reach the highest level, leave the organization or opt not to progress further.

Career ladder programs can provide incentives and motivation for employees to stay with their employer and can be useful for organizations’ succession planning.

Merit Pay

In merit pay systems employees undergo performance evaluations periodically and salary increases are granted (or not) based on performance. Merit pay systems allow employers to reward individual employees for their effort, contributions and professional growth. These systems incentivize high performance and communicate clearly to low performers that their work is below expectations.

In the federal government merit systems are referred to as Performance-Based Pay Systems (PPS). PPS demonstration projects have shown that they require significantly more effort than longevity systems, but as performance management improves, ability to recruit and retain high quality workers increases and pay and performance are more closely linked.¹¹

Example Career Ladder⁹**Training and Development**

Training and development opportunities are key to employee advancement and simultaneously create a larger pool of qualified candidates for internal recruitment efforts. Continual job training expands employee knowledge, improves job performance and helps companies adapt better to rapid changes in technology, the economy and the composition of the workforce.¹

Mentoring and Coaching Programs

Mentoring and coaching have become common practices at many organizations and can have a broad impact on employees at all levels as well as on organizations' bottom line. Some of the impacts of these programs include:

- Projection of strong and positive employer brand
- Advancement of talented employees
- Greater employee loyalty
- Increased retention
- Promotion of underrepresented candidates¹²

Rotational Assignments

Rotational assignment systems help employees gain additional skills and knowledge by allowing them to perform various jobs within the organization. These programs can help prepare employees for lateral moves, which can be especially useful for employers unable to advance all employees through a traditional career ladder.

Tuition Assistance, Corporate Universities and E-Learning

Tuition assistance allows employees to return to school and obtain the new skills necessary for advancement. In this way, employers are able to fill vacancies internally and retain employees with institutional knowledge. In addition, tuition assistance programs can be more cost-effective than external recruiting.^{13,14}

Some organizations opt to offer classes directly to their employees on topics necessary for career advancement as an alternative to tuition assistance.¹⁴ E-learning strategies can be especially convenient for employers to offer training to employees.

Professional Associations and Organizations

Involvement with professional organizations can assist employees in career development and in staying current on topics relevant to their field by providing resources, training, conferences and support. Many employers encourage or require that their employees become members of professional associations or organizations.

Ensuring Opportunities are Open to Employees with Disabilities

Access to Programs

Successful retention and advancement strategies are the same for all employees regardless of disability status, but it is important that employers ensure that employees with disabilities also have equal access to these opportunities. Some innovative practices that have been adopted to ensure access include:

- Formation of a task force to:
 - Analyze processes and essential functions of positions
 - Develop recommendations on effectively attracting and integrating people with disabilities into the workforce
- Use of resources to help eliminate fears or discomfort employees may have about working with people with disabilities
- Rewards for supervisors and managers for implementing management practices that support diversity, including hiring and mentoring people with disabilities
- Use of assistive technologies for meetings, including real-time captioning and video conferencing
- Offering or requiring disability awareness training as a portion of human resource management training
- Establishing Employee Resource Groups (e.g., Affinity Groups)

Making Accommodations

The provision of reasonable accommodations is an ongoing rather than a one-time occurrence and is especially critical to the career advancement of employees with disabilities. To permit participation in training opportunities necessary for a promotion, accommodations may be required. The same is true when an employee is assigned to a new position.

Employers often accommodate workers with and without disabilities in order to build a loyal, dedicated, and productive workforce.¹⁵

Common accommodations include:

- Flexible work schedules
- Training materials in alternative formats or in accessible locations
- Software to allow efficient manipulation of data
- Ergonomic chairs to alleviate back pain
- Wrist supports to reduce the effects of repetitive stress disorders
- Telecommuting to reduce stress or other issues associated with commuting to work

Conclusion

As the composition of the American workforce continues to change, it is imperative that human resource practices evolve in order to retain and advance top talent. One component of this shift must include strategies to advance and retain employees with disabilities, especially in light of the increased likelihood of acquiring a disability with age and the “graying” of the workforce. While strategies for ensuring professional development are similar for all employees, employers must educate themselves on issues of access and accommodation for employees with disabilities in order to best capitalize on the employment of this population.

About this Series

Professional Development and Advancement of Employees with Disabilities is part of a series of briefs presenting the practical implications of recent research in disability employment. Each brief focuses on a key issue for employers, presenting background, research findings and key recommendations.

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