



## Online Recruitment of and Outreach to People with Disabilities: Research-Based Practices

Effective recruitment and outreach is necessary to improve an organization's pipeline of qualified applicants with disabilities. EARN's evaluation of the research literature uncovered important implications in a number of areas, including: online messaging, outreach and recruitment, application processes and accessibility, and establishing partnerships to broaden talent pools.

The following is a summary of research-based practices and elements of online outreach that increase the likelihood of attracting individuals with disabilities during the job application process.

### Online Messaging

Website features and approaches to online recruitment play an important role in influencing job seekers. Often, a company's website may be the first step to forming perceptions of person-organization fit.<sup>1</sup> Website messaging can affect how job candidates perceive and respond to online application/selection tools such as personality tests, work samples, and situational judgment tests.<sup>2</sup> The perception of bias can even dissuade applicants with disabilities from applying to positions.<sup>3</sup> Early-stage reactions to a company's disability messaging can also influence employee decisions to disclose their disability to the employer. Their comfort-level in doing so can serve as an informal indicator of an employer's success in achieving a supportive and inclusive workplace culture.<sup>4</sup>

Applicant reactions can include perceptions of fairness and justice, feelings of anxiety, levels of motivation, and a range of other experiences. Increasingly, researchers have been applying a justice lens to applicant reactions, looking at how interaction with online application/selection processes influence factors like employer attractiveness, applicant intention to accept the position, and whether an applicant would recommend the employer to others.<sup>5</sup> There is growing evidence of additional relationships between applicant reactions and hiring outcomes, including acceptance of job offers, performance on selection tests, and possibly even job performance.<sup>6</sup>

A content analysis of 34 corporate social responsibility reports from organizations nationally recognized for their disability inclusion efforts found that four practices were commonly used to promote disability inclusion efforts:<sup>7</sup>

- ✓ Diversity and inclusion statements
- ✓ Employee resource groups
- ✓ Supplier diversity initiatives
- ✓ Targeted hiring and recruitment plans

Corporate social responsibility plans, in themselves, often highlight publicly desirable organizational practices, and are used frequently for the purpose of marketing and recruiting talent.<sup>8</sup>

A study that analyzed the web content of 30 randomly selected Fortune 500 and Fortune 100 companies rating them for perceived openness to employing people with disabilities reported that several companies exhibited:<sup>9</sup>

- ✓ Message inconsistency
- ✓ A lack of disability awareness
- ✓ Weakly navigable, inaccessible websites
- ✓ Difficult to locate accommodations information and diversity statements
- ✓ Web-based recruiting constraints that exclude or alienate potential applicants with disabilities

## Outreach & Recruitment

Disability-focused recruitment plans play an important role in advancing workplace inclusion and overcoming discrimination or bias in the job application process.<sup>10</sup> Recommendations from the literature focused on developing more sophisticated career websites that highlight the organization's hiring goals, include employee testimonials, and give potential recruits deeper insight into the company's values and policies.

Researchers suggest personalizing recruitment processes by allowing candidates to build personal accounts on the website that go beyond an application form or procedure, and engaging in applicant tracking that involves recruiters and other collaborators, rather than relying solely on algorithmic filters.<sup>11</sup>

Recruitment practices, corporate advertising, and firm reputation all have direct effects on applicant pool quantity and quality. Organizations with comparatively high existing levels of advertising and reputation, such as more detailed recruitment ads and employee testimonials, are more impactful at broadening applicant talent pools.<sup>12</sup>

Technological practices, such as social media recruiting, can also limit talent pools by filtering out qualified candidates with disabilities. In one study of job seekers with disabilities, 50 percent of respondents reported using social media as part of their job search process, but of those, 40 percent experienced accessibility or usability issues, such as features they could not access at all or that were not user-friendly.<sup>13</sup>

Research also shows that organizations benefit from frequently auditing their hiring practices for continuous improvement and inclusivity, but this practice does not often occur.<sup>14</sup>

## Application Processes & Accessibility

One assessment of job seekers with disabilities' experiences using eRecruiting tools found that 46 percent of respondents rated their last experience applying for a job online as "difficult to impossible." Common challenges included complex navigation features, timeout restrictions, confusing or inconsistent instructions, and a wide range of general accessibility issues. Here are some of the things that made eRecruiting tools difficult to use:<sup>15</sup>

- ✓ Reliance on text embedded within graphics to convey directions or important information
- ✓ Lack of alt text
- ✓ Applications requiring mouse input
- ✓ Lack of closed captioning
- ✓ Inaccessible CAPTCHA
- ✓ Inaccessible upload features
- ✓ Lack of information on how to request an accommodation

Experts recommended that employers approach accessibility from both a usability and a compliance standpoint. They also acknowledged barriers in the areas of technology, logistics, cost, and complexity or unwillingness to approach accessibility challenges beyond the job application form itself. Ideally, accessibility improvements should include processes related to job sourcing, pre-employment testing, digital interviews, and the need to improve or modify the accessibility features of off-the-shelf technology platforms. Read EARN's [Checklist for Employers: Facilitating the Hiring of People with Disabilities Through the Use of eRecruiting Screening Systems, Including AI](#) to learn more about evaluating the effectiveness and accessibility of online recruiting efforts. EARN's [Disability Outreach and Inclusion Messaging: Assessment Checklist for Career Pages](#) is a useful tool to assess your organization's career page(s) to ensure they appeal to candidates with disabilities and highlight disability inclusion.

## Establishing Partnerships to Broaden Talent Pools

A survey of 6,530 supervisors at private, nonprofit, and governmental organizations across U.S. industries identified several employer practices that supervisors perceive to be highly effective for recruiting and hiring people with disabilities.<sup>16</sup> The study indicated that establishing partnerships with disability organizations is a highly effective means of identifying qualified candidates, yet only 28.5 percent of organizations had implemented this practice as a means of recruiting employees with disabilities. Despite the few organizations utilizing this strategy, 75 percent of supervisors reported that this practice would be feasible to implement.

Because HR professionals often play an important role in developing the recruitment pipeline and online recruitment strategies, they should be aware of community agencies that can provide qualified candidates. By collaborating with vocational rehabilitation service providers and local job placement specialists, employers can tailor placement efforts, develop conduits for new talent, and enhance organizational education and knowledge on disability hiring practices.<sup>17</sup>

This can take the form of more formal linkage agreements and long-term partnerships, or simply posting on online recruitment boards/resources aimed specifically at job candidates with disabilities. The following page on AskEARN.org contains a list of disability-focused recruitment resources: <https://askearn.org/topics/recruitment-hiring/finding-candidates-with-disabilities/>.

## Endnotes

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