

Unconscious Bias Towards People with Disabilities in the Workplace

What is Unconscious Bias?

Every day all of us make countless decisions without even realizing we are doing it. At any given moment, we can be assaulted with 11 million pieces of information. Because our brains can only process about 40 items efficiently, we need to rely on shortcuts and past knowledge or experiences to make safe assumptions. This creates what we call 'unconscious bias'.

(Wilson, Timothy *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious*. Harvard University Press, 2004)

Statistics:

- Despite substantial progress, disabled people remain significantly less likely to be in employment than non-disabled people.
- Over a third (36%) of people tend to think of disabled people as not as productive as everyone else.
- Unconscious bias against disabled people appeared to be higher than any other social group.
- Over one in three people show an unconscious bias against those with a disability, higher than levels of bias on the basis of gender or race.
(*Disability: A Research Study on Unconscious Bias*. ENEI 2014, www.enei.org Accessed 3.11.17)
- In 2015, 34.9% of people with disabilities in the US ages 18-64 living in the community were employed compared to 76.0% for people without disabilities – a gap of 41.1 percentage points.
- Employment rates vary by type of disability. Employment rates are highest for people with hearing (51.0%) and vision disabilities (41.8%) and lowest for people with self-care (15.6%) and independent living disabilities (16.4%).

- According to 2015 data, the median earnings of US civilians with disabilities ages 16 and over was \$21,572, about two-thirds of the median earnings of people without disabilities (\$31,874).
- An earnings disparity of over \$10,000 in median earnings between those with and without disabilities has existed since at least 2008. The disparity has increased in magnitude since 2013.
(Kraus, Lewis. (2017). 2016 Disability Statistics Annual Report. Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire)

Tools:

Build Awareness

- Trainings, Seminars, Podcasts, etc.- Go online and do some digging. There is a lot of information out there. Ask questions and find what works for your group.
- Story Sharing- everyone knows someone with a disability. Be open to really listening to co-workers.
- Group Community Activity- Go to a day program, cancer ward, or a place that translates text to audio or braille. Find out what is going on in your own backyard. Assign different team members to create a project each month, 6 months, or what works for your team

Sparking Conversation

- Person Centered Approach- Be open to looking at each and every individual in your group. What can help each person, regardless of disability or not, do their best job?
- Ask The Team- Find out how your team would approach a situation. Ask, don't tell, them how to help their co-workers get beyond something perceived as a barrier.
- Hear From Clients/Customers- Ask customers for their take on having someone with a disability work with them or for you. Be willing to listen and make adjustments. Have they had better or worse service? Did they wait longer? Have they even noticed? Perhaps it makes your company even more favorable in your customer's eyes. One thing is certain, you won't know unless you ask.

Taking Action

- Interior Design- It can be as easy as moving a few chairs, lowering a light switch or making a plug more accessible. It's really about productivity and less about the cost. Again, ask. People with disabilities are just like everyone else: individuals. And being so, there is no 'set solution'.
- Involve IT- could your accommodation be technology related? Chances are each person will already use technology and working with their devices may enhance their job performance. You've heard the expression 'There's an App for that', be willing to explore. You may come across a solution you weren't even looking for.
- Job Share- Could you block out tasks to create or make more useful positions? Does it take each sales person 15 minutes each week to shred documents taking time away from calls or emails? Could shredding be added to a position? Do you have multiple locations? Or do you know other business owners who complain about one skill taking away from another? Could shredding become a job? This is very simplified, but creativity can be your guide. Just because 'it's always been like that' doesn't mean it has to stay like that.

Proven Strategies for Addressing Unconscious Bias in the Workplace CDO Insights 2008, Volume 2 Issue cookcross.com Accessed 3.11.17

Links:

[U.S. Small Business Administration](#)

[ODEP Office of Disability Employment Policy](#)

[ADA Americans with Disabilities Act](#)

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