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Connecting Practices to Outcomes: Lessons from the Federal
Sector Workplace

Preliminary Findings from the Federal Employee Focus Groups

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Federal Employee Focus Groups

Employment inequity for Americans with disabilities remains a significant problem. To explore and remedy this inequality, the Cornell University Yang-Tan Institute on Employment and Disability, in partnership with key federal partners, is working on a three-year project entitled, “Connecting Practices to Outcomes: Lessons from the Federal Sector Workplace.” This project uses federal sector secondary data and qualitative focus groups to assess the impact of employer practice adoption on the retention, advancement, separation, and the workplace perceptions of individuals with disabilities.

Project **objectives** are to: 1) Develop a thorough knowledge base of how diversity practice adoption impacts outcomes, such as disability representation, hiring, and advancement; 2) Reveal whether diversity practice adoption moderates differential employee experiences and attitudes of individuals with disabilities and whether employee experiences and attitudes explain relationships between practice adoption and outcomes; 3) Enhance our understanding of findings and increase relevance to our target audience of employers through focus groups of employer representatives and employees; and 4) Broadly share our findings.

This report focuses on the methodology of our third objective. The focus group findings are intended to add qualitative perspective to the quantitative findings. The purpose of this report is to share the focus group methodology, including the approach to recruitment, the study sample, and the approach to data analysis. Limited results are presented as they will be shared in manuscripts focused on Objectives 1 and 2.

Focus Group Methodology

Our first two objectives focus on analysis of secondary data; the focus group study is a qualitative follow-up to evaluate and interpret the quantitative results uncovered through our analyses. Data collected from these focus groups will support interpretation, help us understand unexpected results, and provide recommendations for disseminating findings effectively. We encouraged participants to provide examples from their experiences that either support or refute our findings.

The objective of the focus groups was to talk with Federal employees about the study and its findings to:

- Better understand the context and possible interpretation of the study results;
- Raise additional questions that that can be addressed with further analysis;
- Improve our translation of knowledge, to learn what is most relevant and useful, and how to conduct outreach to federal and other employers.

Recruitment

We offered a series of webinars and presentations during the project to provide preliminary results. These webinars were advertised among members of the Federal Exchange on Employment & Disability (FEED) group, via lists from the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and Office of Personnel Management (OPM), via the Yang-Tan Institute employers list, and other relevant groups. During each presentation we included a slide describing the opportunity to participate in the focus group. An example of the recruitment slide is included in the Appendix.

The focus group participants were recruited at three main events:

- 1) May 19, 2020 webinar entitled, *Connecting Agency Practices to Federal Disability Discrimination Complaints*.
- 2) February 24, 2020, at the Federal Exchange on Employment & Disability (FEED) meeting and via a [Qualtrics](#) survey sent to FEED members.
- 3) September 11, 2019 webinar entitled, *Connecting Practices to Outcomes: Lessons from the Federal Sector*.

Focus Group Protocol

We collected qualitative data through focus groups using Zoom, an online meeting tool. Online focus groups allow individuals to participate via the Internet, phone or mobile devices and are increasingly being used to conduct qualitative research with hard-to-reach and geographically dispersed populations (Sweet, 2001). We sent out consent and a short demographic survey prior to the focus group meeting (see Appendix). We provided assurances of confidentiality consistent with established human subject protocols governed by the Cornell University's Institutional Review Board. If all participants consented, our focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. Each focus group lasted between 1 and 1.25 hours.

Using a carefully designed focus group protocol, we asked questions about participants' confirmations and disagreements with our interpretations, their thoughts regarding further research questions, and key insights that we may have missed. At the start of each focus group, we shared an abbreviated version of the presentation to remind participants of the research findings. We then reviewed the results together and used the following questions to facilitate discussion.

- Was there anything in the presentation that you found particularly interesting or surprising?
- Do you have personal/professional experiences that support these findings? Please provide examples from your own experiences that either support or refute our findings.
- What are possible explanations for why we might observe this relationship?
- What questions do you have that might be addressed with these data sources?
- What are other groups of federal employees who may offer insights into these findings?
- Who do you think would be most interested in these findings? What is the best way to share these findings with this group (i.e., formats and dissemination outlets)?

Participants

As noted above, participants were recruited at presentations of preliminary findings, Table 1 presents the relevant meetings and the focus group recruits. The presentation description and/or agenda are included in the Appendix. A total of 12 focus groups/interviews were conducted via Zoom. Across focus groups there were 25 participants, with a range of 1-4 people on each Zoom call. The participants represented 20 different agencies or sub-agencies.

Table 1 Focus Group Recruitment

Event title	Event date	Study objectives covered	Webinar/Meeting attendees	Focus group dates	Focus group participants
Webinar 1 - <i>Connecting Practices to Outcomes: Lessons from the Federal Sector*</i>	9/11/19	Objective 1,2	281 participants	10/7/19 12/12/19 1/7/20 1/8/20	8
FEED Meeting - <i>Building Understanding of Disability Employment in Federal Agencies</i>	2/25/20	Objective 1,2	150 participants	3/9/20 3/11/20 3/16/20 3/23/20	10
Webinar 2- <i>Connecting Agency Practices to Federal Disability Discrimination Complaints**</i>	5/19/20	Objective 1,3	410 participants	6/4/20 6/9/20 6/25/20	7

*http://ytimedia.org/view/0_qnmj1ejn

**https://ytimedia.org/view/0_yqm1zlpb

Table 2 Focus Group Participant, Agency and Individual Characteristics

	Number of Participants	Mean or Percent
Agency size		
Large (>=10,000 employees)	13	52%
Medium (1,000-9999)	8	32%
Small (<999)	4	16%
Cabinet agency (Is your agency a cabinet agency?)	13	52%
Average tenure (Number of years of federal tenure)		14.3 years
Agency representative (Are you a federal agency representative? *)	14	56%
Disability (Are you a person with a disability?)	16	64%
Military experience (Do you have US military service experience?)	5	20%
Supervisor (Are you a supervisor/manager/senior leader?)	6	24%
Minority (Are you a member of a racial/ethnic minority group?)	10	40%
Female (What is your sex?)	18	72%

*The following roles were listed as an example: Selective Placement Program Coordinator, Special Emphasis Program Manager, Reasonable Accommodation Coordinator, Diversity and Inclusion Program Manager, Accessibility Coordinator, or Disability Program Manager

Analysis

Because we are seeking to better understand our findings and their interpretations, we conducted a conventional content analysis of data gathered in our focus groups (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). We began by carefully reading all transcripts and/or notes to become immersed in the data. Using qualitative analysis software, Dedoose, the coder coded the data and then categorized into meaningful clusters

(Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). These data were summarized into this report and will inform further qualitative analyses, support the development of interpretations, and provide additional insight into how and why practices and policies impact outcomes.

Selected Findings

Our focus group findings will be integrated into manuscripts presenting findings related to Objectives 1 and 2. Therefore, a more robust analysis of the focus group data will be done specific to the context of the research questions for Objectives 1 and 2; full results are not presented below. However, a few areas of discussion that came up across focus groups are presented below.

EEO Complaint Process

There was significant discussion from both agency representatives and employees with disabilities about EEO complaints. Employees with disabilities highlighted that EEO complaint process was the only way to get the attention of the agency, but it had significant ramifications for how they were treated. Agency representatives likewise highlighted that addressing conflict prior to an EEO complaint was preferred as the EEO process is long and often adversarial.

Select focus group quotations:

- I've had to file EEO complaints in order to get their attention to communicate with me. Because they don't want to communicate with you.
- [The] EEO process is regressive and adversarial, it is not a collaborative, progressive process. As soon as you file an EEO complaint-- in my experience, the system kind of locks up and it becomes you versus the government.
- Well, there are so very, very, very few actual findings of discrimination against agencies because the bar is incredibly high. So, I put more stock into whether a lot of complaints are filed. Granted, I do not conclude that anything is necessarily going wrong from a discrimination standpoint, but perhaps not a necessarily good management standpoint instead. There's a very, very large gap existing right now in options that employees have to resolve workplace issues. Everyone opts for EEO because it's kind of the only game in town.
- If we can avoid going through a formal process, that is always going to be preferable. It is always going to be preferable to avoid going through a formalized process if people could just have a conversation and treat one another like adults, everyone prefers to be treated with dignity and respect.

Challenges of the EEO Specialist Role

It was discussed by many agency representatives that the role of EEO specialist is broad and complex, few are able to do it all. Often, roles like placement program coordinators are collateral positions, that is, roles that are not in their job description and do not include additional compensation. Having the capacity to be proactive related to EEO was a concern. Agency representatives talked about challenges of managing EEO complaints or other responsibilities, and that often there was little time for more proactive efforts like conducting and using trend analysis.

Select focus group quotations:

- Because EEO isn't easy. It's like some days you're pushing water uphill with your hands and you're the only one doing it. So, you not only believe in what you do, but you have to convince other people. You have to persuade other people, "Hey. This is the right thing to do," because

they don't care if it's the law. I mean, really, they don't. You can say it's the law all day long. But you have to persuade people.

- When you're a generalist, I mean, we have disability issues you're trying to attack at, you're trying to accommodate, and then you're trying to work the plan with management to ensure that the things are in place to increase our numbers or to expand our reach, whatever the goal may be. It may be a little difficult to fully focus on that when other priorities pull more of your time, your resources.
- It is very rare to find people who have experience in every aspect of federal sector EEO. So, it's one of those job series that I know OPM is working on with EEOC to actually create subsets of. I think that's going to help agencies do more trend analysis and know more about their workforce and know more about things that are going on in their agencies from a personnel standpoint.
- Each one is one of those disciplines, one of those professions where there are many different subcategories of specialty. Reasonable accommodation is one, barrier analysis is one, complaints processing is one, decision writing is one. And it's very, very difficult to target just the skills that you need.

Concerns about Data Quality

Several agency representatives talked about the data collection related to the agency practices, specifically Part G of the MD -715. Many were not confident that the data accurately reflected the actual practices in place within their agencies. A few examples of concerns are listed below.

Select focus group quotations:

- There's sort of a few different strategies. But one strategy is just to highlight the accomplishments from the previous year, "Oh, yeah. We've got sufficient staffing. We've got awesome people. We've got budget. We've got resources." Right? The other strategy is to say, "We really need your help and this is the way we're going to establish a business case." Just understand that there's this communication effort that's part of writing an MD-715 that may or may not actually reflect reality.
- The person who's completing the report could be a GS 11 to a GS 13 or 14. That plan, a report, is going to be signed off on by the EEO director and in some cases, the HR director, so there's some pressure there. You're not always going to be 100% accurate with how you answer it because it has to be reviewed and approved by management and they're not going to want the true assessment of their agency out there.
- I don't put a lot of stock into the MD-715 reporting. I've done them for at least two different agencies so far. And then I've been a compliance professional with oversight over agencies so I know how people think when they answer these types of self-assessment questions because you could have an EO director in the room for one meeting and they're going check yes on that box, right? But that's not what we mean. We don't mean did you attend one meeting out of the year. Are you involved? Are you invited? Are you a part of the decision-making process?

The main data source used in Objective 2 is the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS). Some focus group participants noted that they were concerned that federal employees may not believe that the results of the FEVS are confidential, that is, they are concerned that their responses may be available to agency leadership or their supervisor. There may be other barriers as described below that may limit access to the FEVS.

Select focus group quotation:

- I think one of the realities is that people with disabilities are not well captured in some of the data for a variety of reasons. One of them is I know at my workplace two employees with cognitive disabilities do not take the FEVS surveys. They don't have computer access so I suspect that that's not uncommon in my agency that there is a distinction perhaps that people with disabilities are not necessarily participating in that survey.

Other Areas

Another area of robust discussion included accommodation, specifically the effectiveness of the accommodation process from the perspective of agency representatives and employees with disabilities who had requested accommodations, training available on the accommodation process, the importance of flexibility in accommodation, and concerns that included little follow-up on accommodations and inadequate access to accommodations for professional development opportunities like trainings.

Hiring was common topic of discussion. There was discussion that given competing priorities, disability hiring was not always a focus. Many talked about the successful use of veteran hiring authorities. However, Schedule A, a process for appointing people with disabilities to federal jobs non-competitively, seemed to be far less frequently used.

Select focus group quotations:

- The federal government has strict preference. That is the veteran's preference law that gives strict hiring preference for veterans. And veterans are very well protected in the federal sector by virtue of that law. And it's very-- I've heard complaints from hiring officials, managers, supervisors, HR folks who have stated that it's very difficult for hiring officials to not select, to not hire a veteran who, on paper and their paper application, appears qualified for the job.
- [Use of Veteran hiring authorities] takes you away from some of the other hiring authorities. Such as Schedule A, except we know that nobody knows about Schedule A, which is too bad.

Other areas discussed included leadership, organizational messaging, agency culture, opportunities for advancement for employees with disabilities, and why employees with disabilities may have lower workplace perceptions than their counterparts. Analysis in all of these will continue as we attempt to add context to the quantitative findings of the study.

Conclusion

A qualitative follow-up to a primarily quantitative inquiry can add great value, in particular, adding depth of understanding to quantitative findings (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006; Morgan 1998). Our sequential mixed method approach allowed us to engage both employees with disabilities and employer representatives to support interpretations of quantitative findings, inform the research activities, and better understand the context of why and how employer practices/policies impact outcomes. The focus group study is not without limitations. We were only able to talk to a limited number of federal employee volunteers, therefore likely not reflective of all federal employees. However, the discussions included representatives of 20 different agencies or sub agencies did often bring up the same issues, but also highlighted the diversity of experiences and perceptions of federal employees and the agencies they work in.

Appendix

Recruitment slide

K. Lisa Yang and Hock E. Tan
Institute on Employment and Disability



Focus Groups with Federal Employees

- Are you interested in participating?
 - Gather with colleagues, learn about our findings, and share your perspectives.
 - Online or possible limited in-person events
 - If you are interested in participating, please send a chat message with your name and email or contact Katherine MacDowell: kkm74@cornell.edu

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Demographics Sheet

Short survey sent to participants with consent form.

Please tell us about your agency and role.

YOUR AGENCY

Agency Size (Please circle one response)

- Small (<999 employees)
- Medium (1,000-9,999)
- Large (>=10,000)

Is your agency a cabinet agency?

- Yes
- No

YOU and YOUR ROLE

Number of years of federal tenure _____

Number of years with your agency _____

Do you have US military service experience?

- Yes
- No

Are you a supervisor/manager/senior leader?

- Yes
- No

Are you a person with a disability?

- Yes
- No

Are you a member of a racial/ethnic minority group?

- Yes
- No

What is your sex?

- Male
- Female
- Other

Focus Group Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study designed to better understand effective diversity practices in the federal sector. We are conducting analyses of federal sector data and would like to talk with individuals working in federal agencies about our findings.

Specifically, we would like to talk with you in order to:

- Better understand the context and possible interpretation of the study results;
- Raise additional questions that that can be addressed with further analysis;
- Improve our translation of knowledge, to learn what is most relevant and useful, and how to conduct outreach to federal and other employers.

If you agree to participate in the study, we will ask you to:

- Attend a webinar where we present study findings (You have likely already done this);
- Complete and return this consent form to Kate MacDowell kkm74@cornell.edu;
- Complete and return a short demographic survey to Kate MacDowell kkm74@cornell.edu
- Attend a 1 – 1.25-hour focus group interview via Zoom (an online meeting platform).

The focus group interview poses no risks greater than those encountered in day-to-day life. All of your responses will be kept confidential and reporting of results will be done in aggregate form only. The focus group interview will be recorded so that our team does not have to take as many notes on the conversation. We will create a transcript of the focus group that will be used for analysis; it will be stored on a password protected computer and the recording will be destroyed after transcription.

In order to keep the information confidential, it is important that participants in the group interview do not share information discussed with others outside of the focus group interview. The focus group interview will take up to 1.25 hours. You have the right to not to answer a question or end your participation at any point. Please note: there are no “right” or “wrong” answers to any of the questions. You can choose whether to participate in the focus group, and you may stop at any time during the course of the study.

If you have any questions about the study, you may contact the principal investigator, Sarah von Schrader (sv282@cornell.edu, 607-254-8088) at any time. You will receive her contact information again at the end of the focus group interview.

Signature: _____

Print Name: _____

Email: _____

Date: _____

By signing above, you indicate that you have read and understood the content of this form, and that you agree to participate in the focus group interview under the circumstances described.

Webinar/Event Descriptions

Connecting Practices to Outcomes: Lessons from the Federal Sector Workplace

Presenters: Hassan Enayati and Sarah von Schrader

Webinar

September 11, 2019

2:00-3:00pm EDT

Employer policies and practices that reduce discrimination and improve inclusion are essential pathways to the full employment of individuals with disabilities. This webinar will focus on evidence of effective employer practices from the federal government. Disability related data collection in federal agencies allow the research community to carefully examine the relationship between the employment of individuals with disabilities and employer policies and practices. Findings from the federal workforce are of interest beyond the federal sector given the relative share of the total US workforce, diversity in occupational representation, and regulatory requirements regarding disability employment.

In this webinar, we introduce a new NIDILRR-funded study focused on the federal sector. We will begin with a description of the level, trends, and types of employment observed for employees with disabilities in the federal workforce. We then identify lessons learned from the federal workforce using a range of data sources. We will present results on how specific practices described in EEO Management Directive 715 relate to observed employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. We will then present an analysis of the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey summarizing where disparities exist in federal workplace experience and perspectives by disability status, and early findings on how agency practices may moderate these disparities. Our next steps include gathering qualitative feedback from federal employees with and without disabilities to help add context to our findings.

Building Understanding of Disability Employment in Federal Agencies

Presenter: Sarah von Schrader

FEED Meeting

February 25, 2020

1:00 – 3:00 EST

Meeting Presentation Agenda

- Introducing the context and objectives of the study
- Building understanding of disability employment in federal agencies:
 - Agency practices and the representation of people with disabilities across occupations and grades (Objective 1)
 - Differential work experiences and attitudes of employees with disabilities in the federal workforce (Objective 2)

Connecting Agency Practices to Federal Disability Discrimination Complaints

Presenters: Hassan Enayati and Sarah von Schrader

Webinar

May 19, 2020

3:00-4:00pm Eastern

Employer policies and practices that reduce discrimination and improve inclusion are essential pathways to the full employment of individuals with disabilities. This webinar will focus on evidence of effective employer practices from the federal government. Disability related data collection in federal agencies allow the research community to carefully examine the relationship between the employment of individuals with disabilities and employer policies and practices. Findings from the federal workforce are of interest beyond the federal sector given the relative share of the total US workforce, diversity in occupational representation, and regulatory requirements regarding disability employment.

In this webinar, we present new findings from a NIDILRR-funded study focused on the federal sector. Specifically, we will:

- Document the levels and trends in disability discrimination complaints as recorded in the EEOC Form 462.
- Present results on how scales built from specific practices described in EEOC's Management Directive 715 relate to observed disability discrimination complaints.

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