Research Brief

Employer Practices and Policies Regarding the Employment of Persons with Disabilities
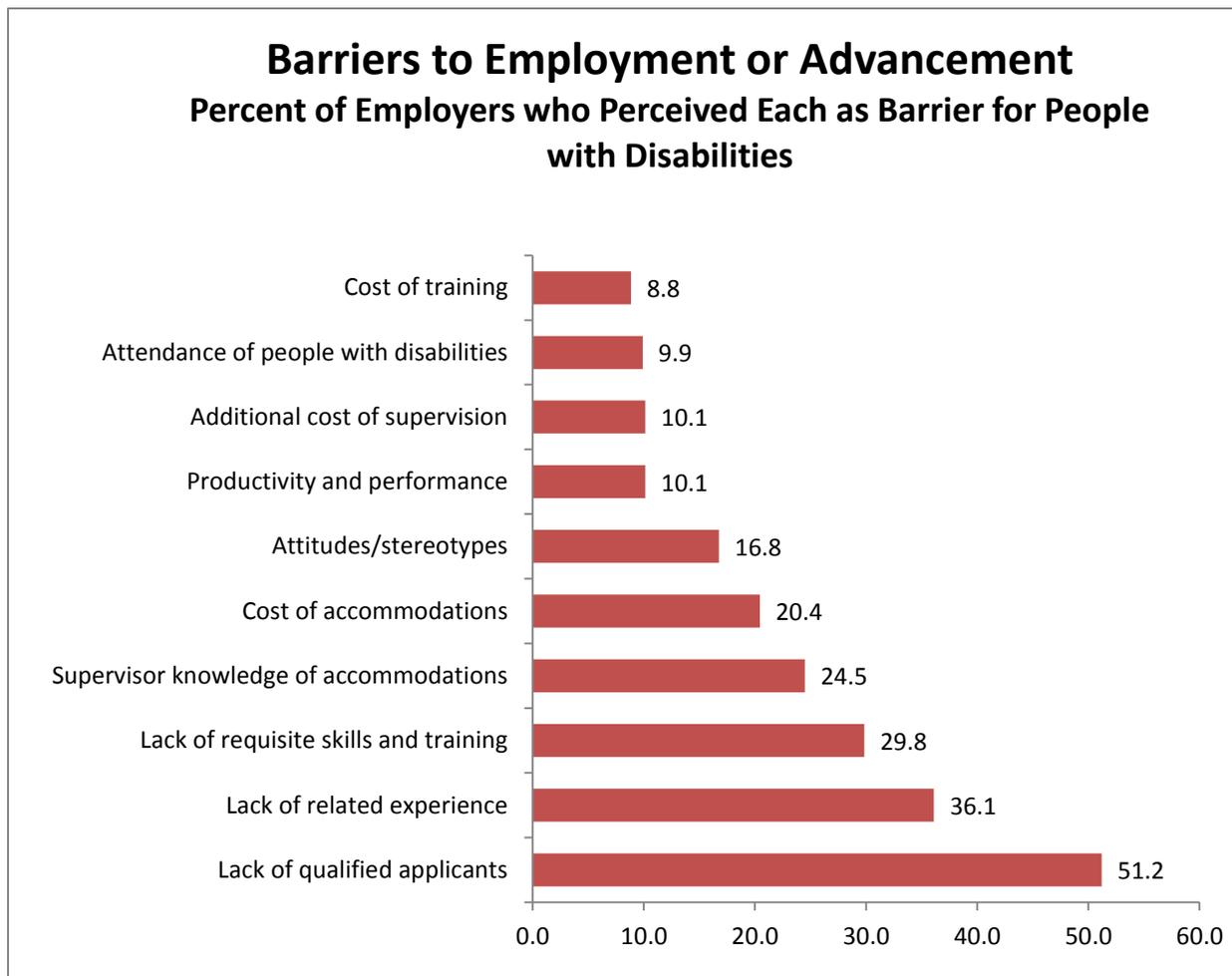
Overview

Employer practices and policies can have important implications for the hiring and retention of employees with disabilities. The employment rate for individuals with disabilities is less than half that of their non-disabled peers,[1] which makes it vital that we gain a better understanding of the potential barriers to employment that they face, as well as the employer policies and practices that can improve opportunities for them.

In the fall of 2011, Cornell University's Employment and Disability Institute collaborated with the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) on a survey of SHRM's private employer membership. SHRM is the world's largest association devoted to HR management, with over quarter of a million members worldwide, of whom 125,000 are U.S private employer members. The survey was designed to assess human resource (HR) professionals' perceptions of barriers to the employment of individuals with disabilities as well as to measure the level of implementation of disability inclusive practices and policies in their workplaces.

In total, 675 SHRM human resource members responded to the survey, a response rate of 23%. This brief summarizes the results and presents implications for employers.

Employer Perceptions of Barriers

The survey asked about ten specific potential barriers to the hiring and advancement of persons with disabilities. The three most often cited barriers reported by HR professionals related to skills and experience needed by applicants with disabilities. These included the perception of a lack of qualified applicants (51.2%), lack of skills and training on the part of individuals with disabilities (36%) and lack of related experience (29.8%). Two other often cited barriers were lack of supervisor knowledge about accommodations and attitudes and stereotypes of those in the workplace. See the chart below for employer perspectives on the other barriers. When compared to a Cornell survey of SHRM members conducted 15 years ago, fewer employers reported barriers to hiring and advancing individuals with disabilities.

Barriers to Employment or Advancement
Percent of Employers who Perceived Each as Barrier for People with Disabilities

Barrier	Percent
Cost of training	8.8
Attendance of people with disabilities	9.9
Additional cost of supervision	10.1
Productivity and performance	10.1
Attitudes/stereotypes	16.8
Cost of accommodations	20.4
Supervisor knowledge of accommodations	24.5
Lack of requisite skills and training	29.8
Lack of related experience	36.1
Lack of qualified applicants	51.2

Disability Inclusive Practices and Policies

Barriers such as those identified can be addressed with inclusive HR policies and practices. The figures below present a list of disability inclusive policies and practices and show the percentage of the responding organizations who have implemented each.
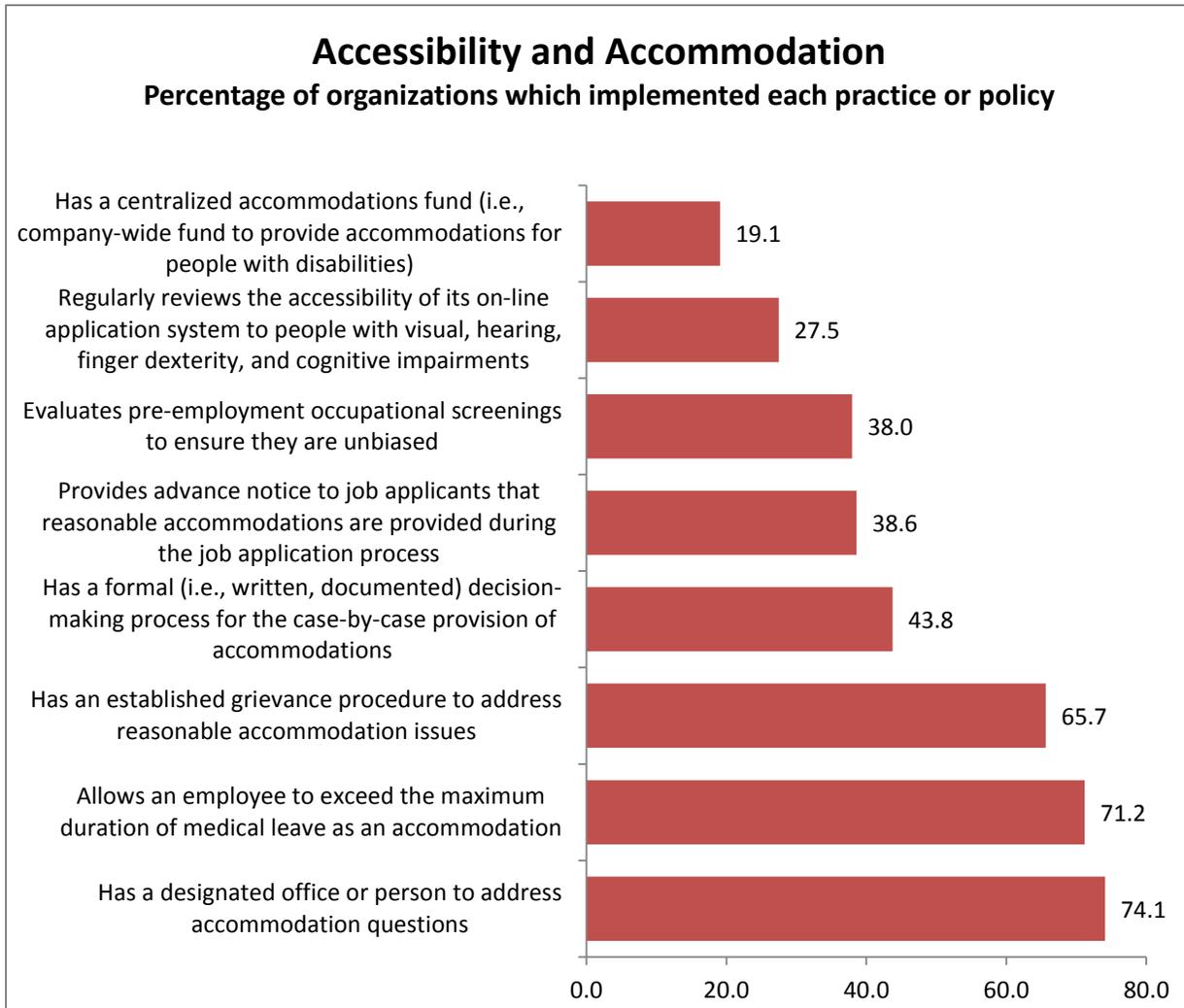
The policies and practices are arranged into parts of the employment process: 1) hiring and recruitment, 2) accommodation and accessibility and 3) retention and advancement. Respondents who had implemented these practices were further asked about their effectiveness.[2] Nearly all practices were viewed as effective or very effective by the majority of employers.

Recruitment and Hiring

Percentage of organizations which implemented each practice or policy

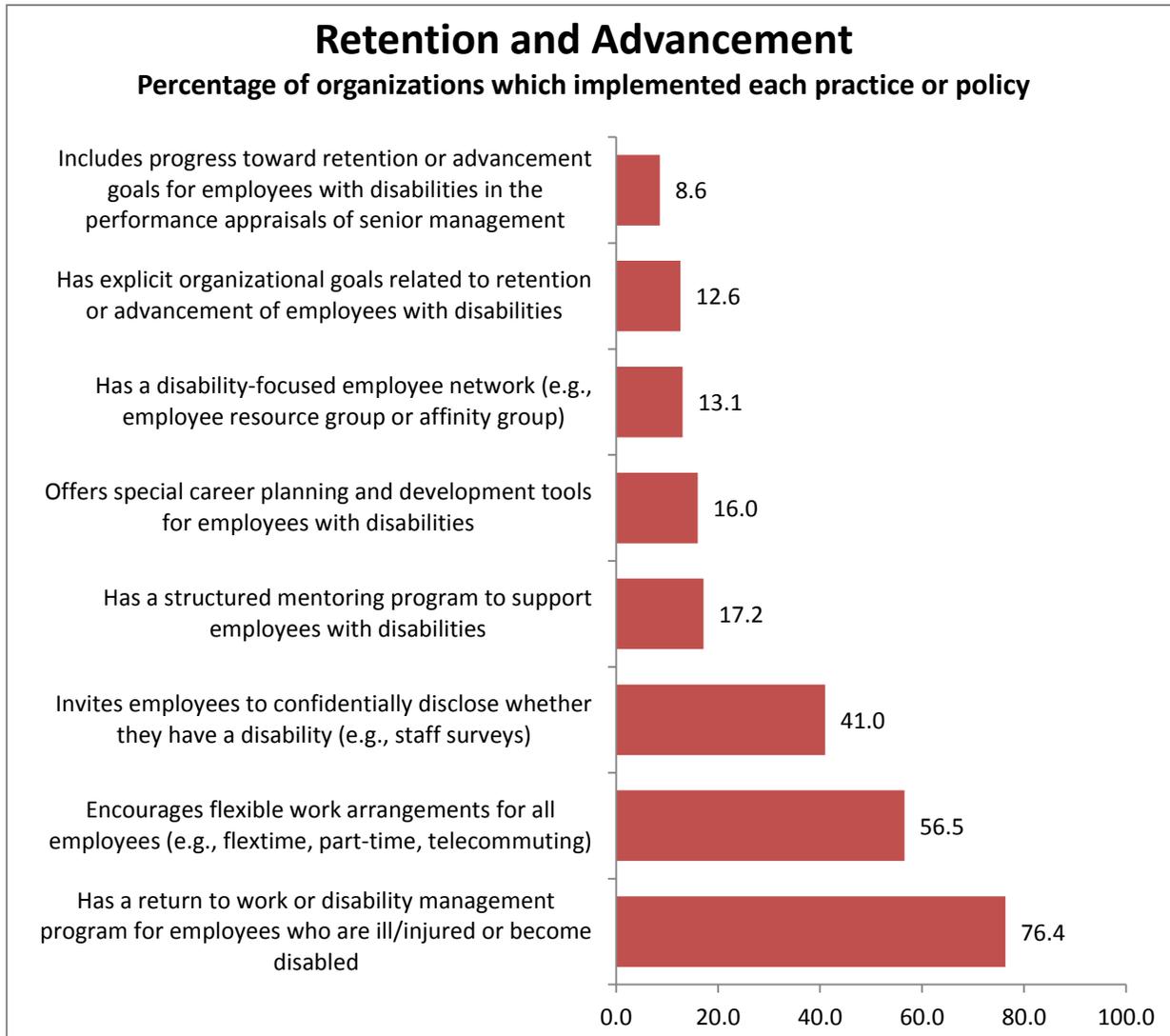| Practice or Policy	Percentage
Includes progress toward recruitment or hiring goals for people with disabilities in the performance…	16.7
Participates in internships or similar programs that target people with disabilities	19.4
Has explicit organizational goals related to the recruitment or hiring of people with disabilities	25.4
Takes advantage of tax incentives for hiring people with disabilities	27.2
Has senior management that demonstrates a strong commitment to disability recruitment and hiring	37.7
Actively recruits people with disabilities	44.6
Has relationships with community organizations that promote the employment of people with disabilities	53.9
Requires sub-contractors/suppliers to adhere to disability nondiscrimination requirements	57.2
Includes people with disabilities explicitly in its diversity and inclusion plan	58.8

Recruitment and Hiring

More than half of respondents noted that their organization includes people with disabilities in their diversity statement (58.8%), requires subcontractors to adhere to non-discrimination requirements (57.2%), and has relationships with community organizations that promote the employment of people with disabilities (53.9%).

Of special interest is that respondents whose companies had hired persons with disabilities at their location in the past 12 months were 2-3 times more likely to report that their company had each practice/policy in place when compared to those who had not hired a person with a disability.

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Accessibility and Accommodation
Percentage of organizations which implemented each practice or policy

Practice or Policy	Percentage
Has a centralized accommodations fund (i.e., company-wide fund to provide accommodations for people with disabilities)	19.1
Regularly reviews the accessibility of its on-line application system to people with visual, hearing, finger dexterity, and cognitive impairments	27.5
Evaluates pre-employment occupational screenings to ensure they are unbiased	38.0
Provides advance notice to job applicants that reasonable accommodations are provided during the job application process	38.6
Has a formal (i.e., written, documented) decision-making process for the case-by-case provision of accommodations	43.8
Has an established grievance procedure to address reasonable accommodation issues	65.7
Allows an employee to exceed the maximum duration of medical leave as an accommodation	71.2
Has a designated office or person to address accommodation questions	74.1

Accessibility and Accommodation

Nearly three quarters of employers had a designated office or person to address accommodation issues. About two-thirds had a grievance procedure and allowed employees to exceed the maximum medical leave duration as an accommodation. Slightly less than half (43.8%) had a formal decision-making process for accommodations. Results are shown in the chart above.

Retention and Advancement

Percentage of organizations which implemented each practice or policy

Practice or Policy	Percentage
Includes progress toward retention or advancement goals for employees with disabilities in the performance appraisals of senior management	8.6
Has explicit organizational goals related to retention or advancement of employees with disabilities	12.6
Has a disability-focused employee network (e.g., employee resource group or affinity group)	13.1
Offers special career planning and development tools for employees with disabilities	16.0
Has a structured mentoring program to support employees with disabilities	17.2
Invites employees to confidentially disclose whether they have a disability (e.g., staff surveys)	41.0
Encourages flexible work arrangements for all employees (e.g., flextime, part-time, telecommuting)	56.5
Has a return to work or disability management program for employees who are ill/injured or become disabled	76.4

Retention and Advancement

Respondents were asked about eight specific retention and advancement policies and practices. Slightly over half encouraged flexible work arrangements (e.g., flextime, part-time, telecommuting) for all employees. About two in five invited employees to confidentially disclose whether they have a disability. The remaining practices were implemented by less than one in five organizations. The results are shown in the chart above.

Conclusion

Fewer employers are reporting barriers to the employment of persons with disabilities in their organization than 15 years ago. However, still over half the employers surveyed reported lack of qualified applicants as a barrier, and a quarter reported lack of supervisor knowledge of accommodations as a barrier.

Many organizations have implemented some of the promising employment practices included in the survey. Of the employers that have implemented the various practices/policies, the vast majority found each to be either effective or very effective. However, a large proportion -- in many cases a majority -- of employers surveyed have not done so. There is clearly a lot of progress still to be made in this area.

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[1] Erickson, W., Lee, C., & von Schrader, S. (2012). *2011 Disability Status Report: United States*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Employment and Disability Institute.

[2] An "effective practice or policy" was defined as: "one that leads to improved recruitment, hiring, retention, engagement, workplace climate and/or advancement of people with disabilities." Ratings were: not effective, somewhat effective, very effective.

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