Needs of human resource professionals in implicit bias and disability inclusion training: A focus group study

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Abstract

BACKGROUND: Research investigating the implicit bias of employers towards individuals with disabilities emphasizes the importance of increased attention to implicit bias in the workplace. Previous research supports the use of trainings to promote awareness and education of implicit and explicit bias toward people with disabilities among employers.

OBJECTIVE: The purpose of the current study was to better understand employers' stigmatizing attitudes toward individuals with disabilities and develop effective strategies to increase awareness and knowledge related to these negative attitudes.

METHODS: Two focus groups of HR professionals were conducted to investigate guidelines and content areas that should be included in training. Data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis (QCA) methodology.

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RESULTS: Researchers identified four major themes regarding guidelines for training development: 1) educational information on implicit and explicit bias, 2) disability inclusion information and strategies, 3) consideration of multiple learning modalities, and 4) case studies.

CONCLUSION: Training interventions incorporating these needs and preferences of HR professionals may more effectively increase awareness of implicit bias in the workplace. Sharing evidence regarding implicit and explicit bias, along with current information on disability inclusion, while using varied instructional strategies may lead to a reduction in disability-related stigma and discrimination in the workplace.

Keywords

1. Introduction

People with disabilities are one of the most marginalized groups in society, and having a disability significantly increases the likelihood of unemployment, underemployment, and poverty (Yaghmaian et al., 2019). In 2014, the United States Congress passed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) mandating state vocational rehabilitation agencies to accentuate their capacity for local labor market analysis, employer engagement, customized training, and postsecondary education to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Despite this legislation, the employment rate of people with disabilities is still unacceptably low. Employment statistics indicated the employment-to-population ratio for people with disabilities was 38.3% in November 2023, which is significantly lower than the 75.3% employment rate of people without disabilities (Kessler Foundation, 2023). Employers' reluctance to hire individuals with disabilities is significantly influenced by longstanding, negative stereotypes of people with disabilities (Bezyak et al., 2021; Yaghmaian et al., 2019).

Ambivalence related to recruiting, hiring, and retaining persons with disabilities is supported by various demand-side employment studies, which highlight the impact of negative stigma on full participation of individuals with disabilities in the workforce. For example, a focus group study with employers in 13 major metropolitan areas representing a range of businesses and company sizes identified major reasons employers are not hiring people with disabilities (Grizzard, 2005). The most common response was employers needed more accurate information to dispel preconceptions about work behavior of people with disabilities. Domzal et al. (2008) completed a large-scale employer survey following the focus group study by conducting telephone surveys with a sample of senior executives representing 12 industries. Approximately 73% of the companies in their study indicated a major challenge to hiring people with disabilities is that they believe individuals with disabilities cannot effectively perform the nature of the work required.

Additional focus group investigations with employers documented as not hiring individuals with disabilities provided more detailed information (Kaye et al., 2011). They identified three themes for not hiring people with disabilities: (a) lack of awareness of disability and accommodation issues, (b) concern over costs, and (c) fear of legal liability. Similarly,

several focus groups conducted with employers in Chicago and Milwaukee identified six disability employment stigmas: 1) people with disabilities often require extra time to learn new job tasks, 2) people with disabilities require accommodations to do the job, 3) people with disabilities have trouble getting their work done on time and often need help from others, 4) co-workers are uncomfortable, 5) people with disabilities tend to call in sick more, and 6) people with disabilities have trouble getting along with others on the job (Amir et al., 2009).

This evidence documenting stigma towards individuals with disabilities in the workplace is contrary to employers' reported beliefs about people with disabilities when explicitly asked in various survey research studies (Hernandez et al., 2000). This obvious disconnect between employers' reported attitudes and hiring behaviors is related to the direct measurement of attitudes, which means participants are aware that their attitudes are being measures and alter responses to be more socially desirable (Antonak & Livneh, 1995; Pruett & Chan, 2006). An alternative to direct measurement of attitudes is the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which was developed by Greenwald and colleagues (1998). The IAT is based on attribution theory, which focuses on the controllability of perceptions (Kelley, 1967), and it measures implicit cognition, which is bias that may be present even if negative attitudes are not overtly expressed (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Greenwald et al., 2002).

Research investigating the implicit bias of employers towards individuals with disabilities further highlights the importance of increased attention to implicit bias in the workplace. There is strong research evidence to support the use of the IAT to measure implicit bias toward people with disabilities (Bezyak et al., 2020; Pruett & Chan, 2006). Additional investigations expose the negative impact of implicit bias on individuals with disabilities. For example, employers were found to have strongly negative implicit attitudes about the competence of people who are blind (McDonnall & Antonelli, 2019). Similar negative implicit attitudes of employers towards individuals with depression and individuals with physical disabilities have been uncovered (Dovidio et al, 2011.; Florence & Marc, 2021).

In addition to evidence documenting implicit bias toward individuals with disabilities in the workplace, research supports efforts to promote awareness and education of implicit bias toward people with disabilities among employers. Specific training for employers addressing implicit and explicit bias has been identified as effective tools to combat the negative impact of stigma (Dolce & Bates, 2018; Florence & Marc, 2021; McDonnall & Antonelli, 2022). In fact, a recent meta-analysis which documented moderately negative implicit bias toward people with disabilities suggests strategies to shift bias are essential (Antonopoulos et al., 2023).

1.1. Purpose of the study

In an effort to develop a specific tool to combat implicit bias in employment settings, the current study served as an initial step in a multi-stage investigation of explicit and implicit bias towards individuals with disabilities in employment settings. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to better understand employers' stigmatizing attitudes toward individuals with disabilities and develop effective strategies to increase awareness and knowledge related to these negative attitudes. The following research question was addressed:

1.   What guidelines and content areas should be included in training to benefit individuals with disabilities and key stakeholder groups?

2.   Methods

2.1.   Participants

The current study used a qualitative approach, which included contributions from two focus groups. The sample consisted of HR professionals interested in providing feedback on the implicit bias and disability inclusion training and sharing their experience related to the role of bias in employment of individuals with disabilities. Participants in the focus group meetings received and responded to email invitations sent through ten human resource (HR) professional organizations in Colorado. Each organization emailed the invitation to members, and interested individuals contacted the researchers directly. A total of 16 individuals participated in the two focus group meetings lasting one hour each, and three of the participants were male (18.7%) and 13 were female (81.3%). The mean age of participants at the time of the study was 44. The majority of the participants identified as white ($n = 14$; 87.5%), and the remaining did not wish to answer that question ($n = 2$; 12.5%). Seven participants (43.8%) identified as having a disability with categories including psychiatric disability and ongoing chronic health condition. Participants reported a wide range of experience supervising and/or working alongside people with disabilities, and job titles ranged from HR Specialist to HR Director to ADA Coordinator.

2.2.   Instrumentation

Focus group data were collected using a semi-structured interviewing format, which allowed the researchers to ask additional follow-up questions. The questions inquired about potential improvements to the implicit bias and disability inclusion training, knowledge or skills gained as a result of the training, and perspectives on how to mitigate implicit bias towards individuals with disabilities based on professional experience. Follow-up questions developed as the discussion evolved in each focus group meeting.

2.3.   Procedure

The research team used a qualitative content analysis approach to analyze focus group data to determine guidelines and content areas that should be included in the implicit bias and disability inclusion training to help HR managers to promote higher levels of awareness of their unconscious bias against people with disabilities in the workplace. The goal is to change HR managers from gatekeepers to enablers of disability employment. A set of 11 open-ended questions (e.g., "How would you change the content of the implicit bias training to be more useful to HR professionals when interacting with people with disabilities regarding employment opportunities?") was prepared to facilitate the focus group process, and two focus groups ($n_1 = 10$ and $n_2 = 6$) were conducted to achieve saturation.

2.4.   Data analysis

Both focus groups were audio recorded, and transcriptions were created through a third-party transcription service. Transcriptions were verified for accuracy by the researchers, as participants were unavailable to crosscheck the transcripts. Following verification, data was

analyzed using qualitative content analysis (QCA) methodology. QCA is a research method for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context, with the purpose of providing knowledge, new insights, a representation of facts and a practical guide to action (Krippendorff, 1980). QCA allows researchers to understand the meanings of data by refining responses into concepts and examining relationships among the concepts to identify major themes that summarize the narrative data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). QCA is a qualitative inquiry approach frequently used by rehabilitation counseling researchers (Bezyak et al., 2018; Dutta et al., 2016; Fitzgerald et al., 2017).

3. Results

A team of seven disability-employment researchers analyzed the focus group data using the qualitative methodology outlined above and identified concepts that underlie four major themes: 1) educational information on implicit and explicit bias, 2) disability inclusion information and strategies, 3) consideration of multiple learning modalities, and 4) case studies.

3.1. Educational information on implicit and explicit bias

The first theme highlighted the impact of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination against people with disabilities on community participation and employment opportunities. HR professionals emphasized the importance of instilling educational, research, and intervention information on implicit biases in disability bias training to promote self-awareness that disability biases can affect decisions to interview, hire, retain, and promote people with disabilities in the workplace. Participants' responses included: "*Stereotypes are very real and are limitations and obstacles for people with disabilities. There is a need for education and information on implicit and explicit biases to increase awareness and help us understand a little bit more about people and how they think and where people come from.*"

Participants further elaborated on the specific type of information needed to provide education regarding these biases: "*We need examples… sharing examples at work where people with disabilities have been discriminated against or not given a chance or those opportunities. It's that real life of understanding how people make assumptions or jump to conclusions and not even realize their biases.*" Participants also indicated training should include: "*What works? Why does it work? What to improve? How to improve?*"

3.2. Disability inclusion policies and practices

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement, employers are pledging to change their hiring practices to promote employment opportunities for minority groups including people with disabilities. the largest minority group in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC]. 2023). Many companies adopted formal disability inclusion policies and practices, which leads to a higher representation of people with disabilities in their workforces (Chan et al., 2021). The second focus group theme pointed to the need for information on disability inclusion policies and practices in implicit bias training for HR managers. Participants responses included: "*Executive leadership wants to see data, facts, and how it's going to save them money. They need information on benefits*

of disability inclusion in the workplace." Participants also indicated: "*It's important to have equity training, diversity, and inclusion training … We can celebrate and promote success stories as a strategy to help combat stereotypes.*" Participants further reported the need to communicate: "*Research on disability employment outcomes, benefits of hiring people with disabilities, and the effectiveness of disability inclusion policies.*"

3.3. Consideration of multiple learning modalities

The third theme deviates slightly from the previously discussed findings and focuses more closely on how to effectively present this information in training. HR managers in the current study specifically identified the importance of considering visual learners when creating implicit bias and disability inclusion training. Participants indicated: "*For visual learners, I think having more, like, pictures … to help anchor people's learning.*" Others reinforced this idea by stating: "*More charts and videos … Must have more videos rather than photos, like reenactments.*"

3.4. Case studies

Similar to the need to attend to various learning modalities when developing training, the final theme from the current study emphasizes the usefulness of case studies in implicit bias and disability inclusion training. HR professionals emphasized the importance of real-life examples when developing training. Participants requested: "*Need case studies. Case studies, I think, are huge in maybe helping us remember some of the material and concepts.*" Participants further emphasized: "*Concrete examples, case studies, those are pieces that kind of jump out to you all as particularly important for HR professionals. People like to see examples and scenarios.*" Other participants explained the use of case studies to initiate other learning strategies: "*Maybe an opportunity for … real-life role plays or, again, connect it back to a real-life example with some of these biases and things like that.*" One participant pointed to specific companies successfully using case studies: "*Like U-Haul, for example, does a lot of success stories, of real people, real disabilities in the workplace thriving … *"

4. Discussion

4.1. Educational information on implicit and explicit bias

As detailed in the results, participants openly acknowledge the prevalence of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination towards individuals with disabilities, and they communicated an understanding of the significant barriers present in employment because of these biases. Findings also suggest that clear examples of bias in employment settings, along with strategies to interrupt implicit biases towards individuals with disabilities, are key concepts to be communicated in training.

Concepts in this theme are consistent with findings of previous disability bias research studies. For example, the United States Department of Labor's (USDOL) Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) conducted a focus group study with employers in 13 major metropolitan areas representing a range of industries, company sizes, and for-profit and not-for-profit organizations to examine factors that prevent employers from hiring people with disabilities (Grizzard, 2005). The most common answer given by employers was

their concerns about the job performance of people with disabilities, followed by the need for more accurate and practical information to dispel preconceptions and concerns about hiring and retaining people with disabilities (Grizzard, 2005). In addition, a focus group study conducted by Kaye et al. (2011) identified the principal barriers to employing workers with disabilities are lack of awareness of disability and accommodation issues, concern over costs, and fear of legal liability.

Results from the current study are also consistent with a systematic review of the employer bias literature, which identified seven major employer biases against people with disabilities in the workplace (Amir et al., 2009). Bezyak and colleagues (2021) developed the *Employers' Stigmatizing Attitudes toward People with Disabilities Scale* using these seven major employer biases as items and validated the measure in a sample of 140 HR managers. They found that employers' disability biases were associated with negative attitudes toward disability, insignificant support of recruitment efforts, and lower willingness to hire people with disabilities. Findings of these explicit and implicit bias studies should be incorporated as contents in implicit bias and disability inclusion training for HR and other hiring managers and for onboarding of new employees to combat the negative effects of bias on individuals with disabilities in employment settings.

4.2. Disability inclusion policies and practices

The second theme points to the usefulness of disability inclusion policies and procedures in addressing bias in the workplace. The role of senior management in the adoption of disability inclusion policies influences the commitment to disability inclusion across the organization. Using training opportunities to educate HR professionals and other hiring managers on the importance of disability inclusion can lead to a larger number of employees with disabilities in these organizations. Recent research supports the development and implementation of disability inclusion policies. Specifically, a study conducted by Accenture, a Fortune Global 500 company specializing in information technology services and consulting, indicates American businesses that hired and supported workers with disabilities observed improved performance and productivity with 28% higher revenue and 30% higher profit margins (Disability:IN, 2019), which clearly supports including people with disabilities in the workplace.

Results from the current study are also consistent with research examining characteristics of companies that hire and accommodate people with disabilities. Gilbride et al. (2003) found companies committed to disability inclusion were characterized by normative beliefs across all levels of the company and a strong commitment at the senior management/executive level to include employees with disabilities in the organization's workforce. Similar results from Chan and colleagues (2010) found companies that included disability in their diversity, equity, and inclusion policies had a higher representation of people with disabilities in their workforce. Fraser and colleagues (2011) conducted an employer study to evaluate predictors of hiring intention of persons with disabilities. They reported a company's climate of inclusion is influenced by the normative beliefs of executive/senior management, and their beliefs will either support or hinder the hiring and retaining of people with disabilities (Fraser et al., 2010). Bezyak et al. (2020) also identified seven disability inclusion

strategies (i.e., internship programs, trial employment, special interviewing process, for-profit job placement, disability inclusion and diversity policies, and working with state vocational rehabilitation agencies and community-based rehabilitation organizations to build a disability-inclusive talent pipeline) that were associated with employment of people with disabilities in the workplace, which further emphasizes the importance of disability inclusion strategies in disability bias training.

Chan and colleagues (2021) conducted a systematic literature review of the disability-employment literature, a focus group with employers, and a follow-up Delphi study with members of the focus group and identified 33 disability inclusion policy items. Results indicated disability inclusion policies and practices can be grouped into two major domains: (a) leadership/executive management level disability inclusion policies and practices (Level 1) and (b) middle-managers, supervisors, and staff level disability inclusion practices (Level 2). Level 1 practices represent leadership/executive's commitments and efforts to influence down and across the organization to drive behavior change by communicating their strongest commitments and provide the infrastructure and resources needed to foster a disability inclusion workplace culture. Conversely, Level 2 practices have a focus on the implementation of disability inclusion policies and practices by mid-level managers and staff to increase employment rates of people with disabilities. Practices include collecting data and reporting progress toward hiring persons with disabilities to senior management, establishing a paid internship program for high school and college students with disabilities, partnering with state vocational rehabilitation agencies and community-based rehabilitation and health organizations to recruit qualified individuals with disabilities, developing strategies to include persons with disabilities in the company's talent pipeline, and including disability inclusion training in the new employees onboarding process. Chan et al.'s (2021) study represents the most exhaustive set of empirically supported disability inclusion policies and practices and is consistent with the current findings highlighting the importance of disability inclusion strategies in disability bias training for HR managers.

4.3. Consideration of multiple learning modalities

With the transition to the digital world of work and the rise of social media technologies, content developers of implicit bias and disability inclusion training must earnestly consider the learning styles of HR managers. Findings included in the third theme specifically point to the need of visual learners. Visual learners are the most common type of learners, making up 65% of the people in the United States. They absorb information best when they can visualize ideas and relationships, and maps, charts, diagrams, photographs, animation, and videos work well for visual learners (Digital Humans, 2023).

Previous research in the field of cognitive psychology further supports these findings from the current study. Specifically, research highlights the instructional benefits of interactive videos as compared to non-interactive instruction. The use of interactive videos allows learners to acquire knowledge and skills at a faster pace than non-interactive learning strategies (Ho et al., 2023; Schwan & Riempp, 2004). Similar research reported the benefits of visualizations when presenting new information. Participants were able to generate more conclusions from information presented using visualization, as compared to text-only

instructional methods (Kuhl et al., 2011). As a result of the strong overlap between the current findings and previous research, training developers may benefit from incorporating different visual aids into implicit bias and disability inclusion training for HR managers.

4.4. Case studies

The case study training method involves giving an employee a scenario that is a typical work situation or problem. Employees then analyze the case, either as a group or independently, and develop the appropriate solution. Employees then become able to recognize these situations in the workplace and quickly work to identify and implement possible solutions. This results in employees who are better prepared to handle complex situations by applying knowledge and skills outlined in the case study. In designing the curriculum for the implicit bias and disability inclusion training case study examples include: role-playing a HR manager working cooperatively with an employee with a disability (e.g., spinal cord injury) to solve a job accommodation issue, showing a brief video of how disability bias can affect the employment outcome of an applicant with a hidden disability (e.g., epilepsy), or a scenario of how a supervisor helps an employee with a disability to improve job performance.

The use of case studies as an effective instructional strategy extends across disciplines and time. In fact, Harvard Business School pioneered the use of case studies to successfully teach management techniques in 1921 (Nohria, 2021). The case study method teaches students how to apply theory in practice, how to induce theory from practice, and cultivates the capacity for critical analysis, judgment, decision-making, and action (Nohria, 2021). Recent research points to the usefulness of case studies in health professional programs. Students report instruction that incorporates case studies enhances learning, and instructors find it to be an engaging and motivating teaching method (Thistlethwaite et al., 2012). More recent research further supports findings from the current study, as nursing students report positive effects of teaching effectiveness when instruction involved case studies (Mohamed & Abdulrahman, 2020). Case studies are incredibly effective and relevant and often the best training method for developing problem-solving and analytical skills. As a result, incorporating the use of multiple case studies into implicit bias and disability inclusion training may contribute to improved outcomes regarding the impact of implicit bias on individuals with disabilities.

5.   Conclusion

The current study investigated strategies to improve implicit bias and disability inclusion training for HR professionals with attention to individuals with disabilities. Two focus groups of HR professionals were conducted, and the data was analyzed using consensual qualitative research methodology. Findings point to four themes in the data which provide clear guidelines for the development of implicit bias and disability inclusion training toward people with disabilities. Specifically, HR professionals indicated the need for 1) educational information on implicit and explicit bias, 2) disability inclusion information and strategies, 3) consideration of multiple learning modalities, and 4) case studies when designing implicit bias training. With attention to these four themes, training can be

developed with the needs and preferences of HR professionals as a guiding framework. In order to more effectively increase awareness of implicit bias and reduce the impact of stigma on employment opportunities for people with disabilities, training interventions must be developed with careful attention to the findings from the current study. Sharing evidence regarding implicit and explicit bias, along with current information on disability inclusion, while using varied instructional strategies may lead to a reduction in disability-related stigma and discrimination in the workplace.

Acknowledgments

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