Steps For Success:

Hiring, On-Boarding, And Retaining People Who Are Blind Or Have Low Vision

Supporting & Retaining Talent

AFB American Foundation® for the Blind

Technology and Accommodations in the Workplace: Insights & Recommendations for Human Resources and Hiring Managers

Introduction

Research has demonstrated that many hiring managers and Human Resources (HR) professionals are not well-prepared to recruit, hire, and retain employees who are blind or have low vision. The recruiting, interviewing, and hiring of blind persons may appear as a daunting undertaking to human resources and other hiring managers. Many hiring managers simply do not know how blind and low-vision employees use computers or office equipment, for example [1]. Workplace technology can also present barriers to inclusion during the recruitment, application, interviewing, onboarding, accommodation, and retention stages of employment.

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AFB conducted the Workplace Technology Study (WTS) to better understand and document the technology-related experiences of American workers who are blind or have low vision. In 2021, AFB conducted a survey of 323 blind and low-vision individuals who were employed in a variety of sectors. This report combines the original research findings with policy guidance and recommendations from technical assistance resources on inclusive employment practices. For each stage of the employment cycle, we present a summary of requirements and best practices, findings from the report, and recommendations specifically geared for HR staff and hiring managers to ensure full inclusion of blind and low-vision employees.

Key Definitions

- **Reasonable Accommodations:** Under Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), reasonable accommodations are changes to the place where work is performed or the way in which the work is performed that allow people with disabilities equal opportunities in employment while also not causing "undue hardship" on the employer [2]. Three categories of reasonable accommodations are outlined in the ADA: modifications or adjustments to the job application process, modifications or adjustments to the environment, manner, or circumstances that enable the employee with a disability to perform the essential functions of the job, and modifications or adjustments that allow for equal benefits and privileges of employment [3].

- **Undue Hardship:** Undue hardship as outlined in the ADA is an accommodation that would be overly financially burdensome or difficult for an organization to execute. Undue hardship can be determined by a number of factors including cost, financial resources of the organization, and size, number of employees, and type of operation of the organization [3]. This is rarely awarded to employers, as the threshold is set quite high. [4] In US Airways, Inc. v. Barnett, 535 U.S., 122 S. Ct. 1516 (2002), the Supreme Court found that an employee only needs to show that an accommodation seems reasonable, after which the burden of proof shifts to the employer to be specific about why the accommodation would create undue hardship [3]. With the burden of proof weighing so heavily on the employer, undue hardship is rarely granted.

- **Disability:** The ADA defines disability in legal terms rather than medical. Someone is considered to have a disability if they are a "person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment." [5]

- **Artificial Intelligence:** Congress defines artificial intelligence as "machine-based system that can, for a given set of human-defined objectives, make predictions, recommendations or decisions influencing real or virtual environments" [6]. In HR, this can take the form of systems that leverage big data to predict the applicants' success during the recruitment and screening phases of employment.

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Retaining talent is a sign of success for an organization. Companies whose employees stay with them long term save both time and money. Understanding the importance of retaining talent and strategies to use can help your business enhance its productivity with more expert employees.

Studies show companies with inclusive cultures have higher employee retention rates and less trouble recruiting new employees than companies without inclusivity. Turnover rates skyrocket when employees have vastly different experiences from their peers, or they sense unfairness. However, for persons with disabilities, inclusion begins with the application process, is nurtured during onboarding, and continues during their employment. It does not end once employees are hired and complete onboarding. Findings from the WTS reveal significant gaps in access to technology on the job, as well as access to timely, effective training on newly adopted technologies.

Actions You Can Take:

- **Implement** an accessibility policy that requires all documents, tools, procedures, and procurement to be accessible, usable, and compatible with assistive technology.

- **Seek feedback** from employees with disabilities on the accessibility of new procedures and tools.

- **Create** a disability-focused Employee Resource Group, an Assistive Technology Users Group, or other discussion groups as appropriate.

- **Collaborat**e with IT staff and outside assistive technology experts to test accessibility of new workplace technologies.

- **Create a culture of inclusion** so employees are comfortable requesting new accommodations if needed over the course of their employment.
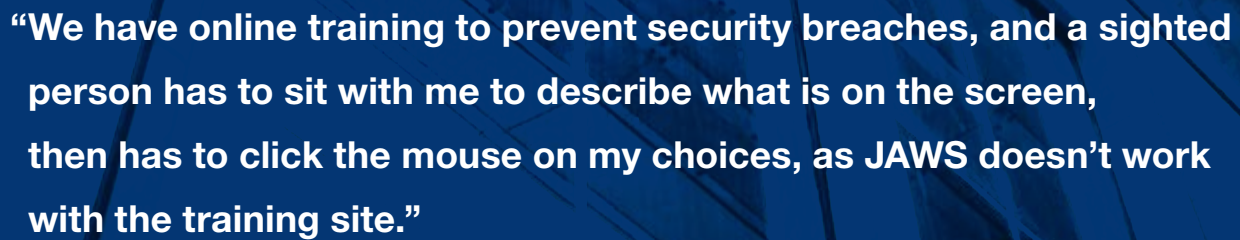
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Significance of Our Research

The WTS study identifies the need for accessibility considerations when adopting new technologies and training employees on their use, seeking appropriate input from employees with disabilities, adopting clear organization-wide accessibility policies, and ensuring all staff are trained on disability awareness and inclusion.

- **Seeking Appropriate Input From Employees with Disabilities:** In the WTS, only about half of the participants indicated that their employer's I.T. staff are knowledgeable about their assistive technology needs. Participants who experienced accessibility challenges often reported that I.T. staff did not know how to resolve their difficulties and that they were expected to shoulder much of the responsibility of identifying solutions, which sometimes interfered with their productivity. Engaging outside accessibility experts and employee resource groups can reduce this burden on blind and low-vision employees to resolve their own accessibility issues at work.

- **Procurement and Training on New Technology:** Half of the WTS participants reported that their employer had adopted new technology which was not accessible or usable for them. Furthermore, despite the requirement to provide employees with disabilities access to the same training as employees without disabilities, significant gaps remain as documented in the WTS. Specifically, when asked what happens when their company adopts new technology that requires training, 39% of the participants reported that their employer either did not provide timely training or that the training was timely but not effective for their specific accommodation needs. The lack of timely and effective training led to reduced productivity and/or experiences of being perceived as less capable by colleagues. HR may play a critical role in collaborating with IT to plan how training will be rolled out, and to speak up during the planning stages about the types of accessibility currently required across the company's teams. While experiences of employees who are blind or have low vision varied, some room exists for improvement in ensuring that accessibility is at the forefront of technology procurement and training.

- **Disability Awareness and Inclusion:** WTS participants described challenges with accessing shared documents and employer-required training. Regarding document sharing, participants called out PowerPoint presentations as often being inaccessible because of the visual nature of the tool, a lack of description of the slides, and not having access to the information prior to the presentation. If PowerPoint is used, sharing slides ahead of time allows employees to view the slides using AT before the slides are presented to the full group. Any images in PowerPoint slides should be labeled with alt tags.

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In addition to PowerPoint presentations, some participants had difficulties when sighted colleagues would share documents that were not properly formatted for accessibility. Shared document editing may require screen reader users to walk through extra rounds of transferring documents into more accessible formats in order to be read. Such changes can also impact the ease of navigation, formatting, and other features. Creating organizational accessibility policies that specify accessible formats for sharing documents is important to ensuring a productive environment for all employees.

As was described in the previous section, some WTS participants reported difficulties accessing employer-provided training, including self-paced online training. Improved consistency is needed with ensuring training accessibility for all employees with disabilities. For example, WTS participants noted difficulty accessing material containing unlabeled graphics and buttons. it is important for organizations to have a process for reporting inaccessibility and taking action to correct it. Some participants reported that their organization's solution to inaccessibility was to have a sighted employee sit with them and explain the components of the training. This is not an effective, long-term solution that honors the confidentiality of the employee with a disability. One WTS participant explained: "We have online training to prevent security breaches, and a sighted person has to sit with me to describe what is on the screen, then has to click the mouse on my choices, as JAWS doesn't work with the training site."

- **Changes in Visual Abilities:** Changes in disability such as vision loss may affect the need for accommodation. Although the majority of WTS participants (65%) acquired their visual impairment before the age of 2, among the general population vision and hearing disabilities often begin during adulthood. Furthermore, people born with progressive causes of vision loss may experience significant decreases in usable vision during their working lives. In the WTS, 57 (55.9%) of 102 participants experienced a decrease in the ability to read print over the previous 5 years, with thirty-two (51.5%) of those respondents requesting new accommodations.

These accommodations included braille displays, closed-circuit televisions, screen reader software, changes in lighting, and sighted assistance. People who are blind or have low vision may also have changes to accommodation needs based on other conditions as indicated by the 23 out of 278 (8.3%) of participants who requested a new accommodation when experiencing a change in another disability or health condition.

Promising Practices

- **Seeking Appropriate Input From Employees with Disabilities:** To confirm that products are accessible, organizations will need to test products. Some organizations ask employees with disabilities within the company to take on the extra duty of trying out products that are being considered for adoption. While some employees with disabilities may want to be part of the procurement process, others may feel that it draws them away from their primary work tasks. The opportunity can be offered without pressure or the expectation to perform the accessibility testing.

Outside testers of accessibility may be able to provide a more balanced assessment than internal employees. Additionally, testers can be recruited with specialized knowledge of accessibility promising practices. Organizations can hire consultants to test the accessibility of hardware and software. Organizations can also work with vendors to ensure artificial intelligence technology is developed with diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility at its core.

Organizations can also seek input from employees with disabilities on procurement of AT and other disability-related issues through employee resource groups (ERGs) and Assistive Technology Users Groups. ERGs are groups of employees who share similar interests. Such groups can form around disability identification. Encouraging the formation of ERGs related to disability shows employees that the organization cares about that group of employees and seeks to give a voice to those traditionally marginalized identities.

Members of Assistive Technology Users Groups can share information, troubleshoot, and support one another in the use of AT in the workplace. ERGs and Assistive Technology Users Groups for people with disabilities can grow by informing new hires about the ERG and getting them set up with a point of contact if they are interested in joining the group. HR managers can facilitate the success of these groups by maintaining lists and information about the company's existing groups and by being available to sponsor an ERG if needed.

- **Procurement and Training on New Technology:** Accessibility starts before an organization purchases new hardware or software. Procurement of technology is an important part of making sure accessibility is honored [14]. Prior to purchasing new technology, vendors should provide proof that their product is able to be used in an easy, productive manner by all employees. HR departments can make a difference by asking vendors about product accessibility, selecting the most accessible product that meets the need (even if it wouldn't be the first choice), committing to advocate for employees with disabilities when problems arise, and working with IT departments to make accessibility a true priority for procurement.

Procurement is only one part of ensuring the adoption of new technology is accessible. Training in technology must also be organized so that all employees are able to access the core information relevant to their use of the hardware and software.

- **Disability Awareness and Inclusion:** Accessibility requires forethought. All participants in meetings (e.g., hosts, trainers, attendees) should be aware of accommodations. These may include maintaining a fragrance-free environment or the correct way to format documents [15] that will be shared. Slides and documents should be sent out ahead of time so that all employees have time to follow along in their most accessible format. All staff need to be trained in diversity and disability awareness as well as making communications and work-related information accessible. Accommodations should be made in face-to-face meetings, virtual meetings, communications, and physical space. Meetings and trainings also need to be accessible from the outset and organized with accessibility in mind.

If the meeting or training is to be held virtually, video conferencing platforms should be vetted for accessibility. Trainers should be aware that screen reader users can be distracted by robust chat discussions, so information should be communicated orally instead of in chat when possible. Trainers and presenters should announce keystrokes for muting/unmuting and raising hand for screen reader users. Documents should be generated and shared in text form rather than in image form. Activating automated captions and providing opportunities to request an interpreter may be helpful to people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Trainers should give descriptions of any props, videos, and slides during the presentation. Organizations such as Disability:IN can help employers develop better inclusion practices [16].

• **Changes in Visual Abilities:** As with initial accommodation requests, the sole responsibility for knowing what accommodation to use should not be on the employee with a disability. Sometimes, an employee knows what works for them, and it makes sense to listen to their expertise. Other times, though, an employee may identify an accessibility barrier but may still be learning a new process within the company and feel unsure of how to modify it to improve accessibility.
In cases where the employee doesn't have a recommended solution, HR managers can seek information on various types of accommodations from such agencies as PEAT, JAN, and EARN.

Organizations should also consider extending return to work programs that were traditionally aimed at employees returning from workplace injuries to people who have other disability needs such as a sudden loss in vision unrelated to the workplace [17]. Those employees may need additional training to accommodate their new visual abilities such as orientation and mobility (cane travel), targeted assistive technology skills, or braille instruction. They can benefit from time off to immerse themselves in training specific to blindness or low vision.

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