

Disabilities and the E-Clusive Workspace

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INTRODUCTION

The use and deployment of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the public and private sectors has opened an array of options, best practices and implementation approaches for workplace (or workspace) operation. The increasingly widespread adoption of these ICTs, while often an efficient means of delivering services, encouraging communication, and facilitating transactions, still excludes sizeable portions of the population (Baker & Fairchild, 2005; Baker & Ward, 2005). Much of the focus of discussions on ICT adoption has assumed that patchy use of ICTs relates principally to socioeconomic variables. A consequence of these kinds of analyses is the omission, in formulating policies that seek to incorporate ICTs into the workplace, of a key group of people with functional limitations that go beyond relatively remediable conditions (e.g., economic, educational, location)—people with disabilities. Some 15 years after the 1990 implementation of the U.S. Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the employment rate of U.S. persons with disabilities is only about 30% (Weathers, 2005). This represents significant and underutilized resource and societal costs for unemployed persons with disabilities ranging from \$78 billion to \$200 billion annually (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; Worksupports.com, 2000). A similar situation exists in Europe. Dupré and Karjalainen (2003) report that, according to the preliminary results of the “ad hoc module on employment of disabled people of the Spring 2002 round of the Labor Force Survey”, “78% of the severely disabled aged 16-64 are outside of the labor force as compared to 27% for those without” long-standing health problems or disabilities (p. 1).

While policymakers generally recognize that the availability of ICTs allow telework to be a realistic work option and a reasonable workplace accommodation for people with disabilities, focused, comprehensive programs targeted at advancing these applications of ICTs for people with disabilities have yet to be developed. Aside from a few token programs such as the interagency website on teleworking, telework.gov, and a handful of laws “encouraging” telework, requiring reporting to the U.S. Congress

or establishing telework coordinators (e.g., Public Law 108-447, § 622 (2004), Public Law 108-199, § 627 (2004) and Public Law 106-346, § 359 (2000)), little real attention seems paid to this work modality.

A possible downside to the e-clusive “virtual workspace” is the potential for the inadvertent marginalization and stigmatization of people with disabilities from the employment community. While using ICTs facilitates may increase accessibility to employment and function as reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities, they may also act to decrease (or at least alter) the kinds of social networks that disabled people have within their occupations. This is an important consideration given that limitation of workplace contact (either in terms of degree or attenuation), can increase the likelihood that people with disabilities will occupy positions of inferior power (they will be more dependent) within the work environment. Such a restriction of power affects the ability to affect positive changes in the workplace. Moreover, as noted by Schur, Shields, Kruse, and Schriener (2002), voting “has been found to be strongly and positively related to ... employment and union membership which can represent recruitment and mobilization networks” (p. 169). Thus, the failure to integrate people with disabilities into the workplace can also have a significant impact on their ability to exercise political power and influence. It is within this context that this article identifies some of the principal workplace accessibility issues faced by people with disabilities and discusses the use of teleworking as a reasonable workplace accommodation for people with disabilities.

BACKGROUND

People with Disabilities: Employment and the Workplace

Using data from the 2001 and 2004 American Community Surveys (ACS), the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Demographics and Statistics at Cornell University (2005) reports that the “employment gap between the

employment rates of working-age people with and without sensory, physical, mental, and/or self-care disabilities increased from 37.3 percentage points in 2001 to 38.9 percentage points in 2004, in the US” (p. 4). Since almost 67% of unemployed persons with disabilities state that they would like to work (NOD/Harris Poll—National Organization on Disability/Harris Poll, 2000), persons with disabilities are a significant “hidden labor pool” (Anderson, Bricout, & West, 2001). With just over 14.5 million unemployed 16 to 64 year old Americans having some sort of disability, the societal cost for unemployed persons with disabilities range from \$78 billion to \$200 billion annually. These costs include lost productivity, Social Security payments and public funds spent on health care and medical services (Worksupports.com, 2000). The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s (EEOC) proclamation that telework may be a potential accommodation for persons with disabilities defined by the ADA opens an additional avenue for the employment of U.S. persons with disabilities (Anderson, et al., 2001). As an alternative work arrangement, telework shifts the workplace from a centralized location to which all workers must physically travel to a geographically remote space, potentially miles away from the boss and work colleagues—a workplace at the employee’s home, a satellite location, a hotel room (Fetzner, 2003; Peters, Tijdens & Wetzels, 2004; Stanworth, 1997; Sullivan, 2003). As Bricout (2004) writes, for “workers with disabilities home-based telework offers the possibility of ready access to employment unhampered by consideration of distance, fatigue or interpersonal demands” (p. 147).

Bias and discrimination are often significant barriers to employment for persons with disabilities. Employment is highest among persons with sensory disabilities and lowest among persons with mobility and mental impairments (Schur, 2002). The employment of persons with severe disabilities tends to be less than the employment of persons with less severe disabilities (NOD/Harris Poll—National Organization on Disability/Harris Poll, 2000; Bricout, 2004). Kennedy and Olney found an employment rate of 58% amongst persons with disabilities who had experienced discrimination, and a strong correlation of job discrimination and the severity of (disability-based) work limitation. Employers’ perceptions of persons with disabilities may affect, unconsciously or consciously, their hiring decisions. For example, employers may fear an increased number of accidents and absences related to disabilities, even though research suggests that employees with disabilities typically have lower accrued compensation costs—\$82 vs. \$1,564 for employees without disabilities (Graffam, Smith, Shinkfield, & Polzin, 2002). However, it may also be the case that employers are accommodating employees with those disabilities that least affect productivity, or whose disability (or disabili-

ties) is the easiest and least expensive to accommodate (Blanck, Schur, Kruse, Schwochau, & Song, 2003). A 1999 Job Accommodation Network (JAN) survey on workplace accommodations reported that since 1992, 71% of workplace accommodations have cost \$500 or less with 20% of those costing nothing (Wireless RERC, 2003).

Schur (2002) found that employment reduces the social isolation experienced by persons with disabilities, as well as increasing the “overall life satisfaction and ... feeling of being useful and needed” (p. 344). However, employed persons with disabilities still perceive themselves as both physically and socially isolated in their workplace. In fact, it is common for persons with disabilities to consider their work location as a “dumping ground” for people who cannot otherwise fit into the mainstream workplace, and feel themselves to be victims of harassment in the workplace (Robert, 2003). Compared to employees without disabilities, employees with disabilities tend to receive lower hourly and annual earnings. Moreover, employed persons with disabilities are less likely to be involved in decision making and making a presentation at work (Schur, 2002). On the plus side, employed persons with disabilities frequently report improved self-esteem, and increased social contact and personal satisfaction (Graffam et al., 2002).

The ADA requires U.S. employers to provide “reasonable accommodations” for persons with disabilities. Commonly occurring reasonable accommodations include employer provision of extra supervisory or co-worker attention (68%), establishment of flexible work hours (51%), and provision of a job coach (46%) (Olson, Cioffi, Yovanoff, & Mank, 2001). According to Loprest and Maag, typical environmental workplace accommodations for persons with disabilities include: parking or public transit stops (19%), elevators (17%), work stations (15%), work hours or job restructuring (12%), handrails or ramps (10.4%), Braille, enlarged print, lighting, audio tape and voice synthesizer, technical device or interpreter (2.5%) (Loprest & Maag, 2001). Eighty-two percent (82%) of employers who made accommodations for persons with disabilities provided a facility-accessibility accommodation (Bruyere, 2000).

Telework: Not Just “Phoning In”

Telework, as an alternative work arrangement, shifts the workplace from a spatially and geographically centralized place of group activity, to a technologically connected albeit remote space, potentially miles away from managers and work colleagues—a workspace at the employee’s home, a satellite location, or even a coffee shop (Fetzner, 2003; Peters, Tijdens & Wetzels, 2004; Stanworth, 1997; Sullivan, 2003). In contrast with the more traditional expression, “telecommuting,” telework refers specifically

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