

The Debilitating Effects of Discrimination: A Case Study on Disability in the Workplace

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For years, people living with disabilities have faced daily stigmas. Their public and professional lives can often be unsupported and unsafe, which can lead to discrimination, particularly in the workplace. This research represents six months of on-site observation at Boca Raton's Habilitation Center for the Handicapped, one of South Florida's largest employers of people with disabilities, and discusses how they are working internally to empower their employees and clients by moving beyond the continued stigmas. While focusing on what the discriminations towards individuals with special needs in the workplace are, why they exist, and what is being done to facilitate change, this study will also observe the difficulty of inclusion while emphasizing its importance.



Whether it is cognitive or physical, those living with disabilities face daily prejudice. While great progress has been achieved for the rights of people with disabilities, there are still multiple issues that must be addressed. One such issue is that of employment and the stigmatization that exists in the workplace. An increasing number of businesses and organizations are working not only to assist with the employment rates of people with special needs, but also to provide them with the proper conditions conducive to a healthy working environment. South Florida's Habilitation Center represents a powerful case study for workplace disability advocacy in that they create a very necessary, yet isolated safe space where those with varying disabilities can work. While working internally to assist in the empowerment and local employment rates of people with disabilities, their work can help to understand

disability advocacy in a larger context. This research will observe what the Habilitation Center is doing to facilitate change, how they work to empower their demographic in a controlled atmosphere within a climate of continued prejudice and discrimination, and why the stigmas associated with the under-employment, under-utilization, and undervaluing of people with disabilities exist.

In terms of employment, disability advocacy gained momentum when Congress passed the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) in 1990. Enforced by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), this act addressed their rights and needs and prohibited discrimination both in the workplace and in public. Decades before the ADA however, people with disabilities, their families, and supporters were challenging the societal barriers that excluded them from their communities.

Many of them fought for individual rights and for the establishment of the independent living movement, which fought against the preconceived notion that people with disabilities should be institutionalized (Mayerson, 1). Without these efforts, Equal Employment Opportunity would not include the support of people with special needs.

South Florida's Habilitation Center, more commonly known as the HabCenter, is a non-profit organization who acted as a pioneer in the fight for workplace advocacy of people with both cognitive and physical limitations. In 1978, their services became available to adults with all forms of developmental and intellectual disabilities and since then, they have become one of Florida's leading disability advocates. They offer vocational and job training programs, supported employment, as well as employment opportunities on location. More importantly, they do this in an isolated, safe environment, free from the stereotypes and exclusions some individuals may face in public. To some however, this may exacerbate the idea of keeping people with disabilities "invisible" to the public eye. While this happens to be a popular strategy utilized by many businesses and organizations, it can present challenges.

Mainstreaming refers to the public process of supporting programs to find ways of responding to the multiple needs of people with disabilities and involves the inclusion and integration of those with special needs among those without. In most cases, the idea of mainstreaming relates to education and employment, where it presents both advantages and disadvantages. Regarding the social and professional aspects, mainstreaming allows individuals to interact and engage side-by-side with their non-disabled peers. This can lead to the development of skills that may not have otherwise been acquired. It also allows for the promotion of tolerance: those without disabilities would not have the opportunities to interact with and learn more about people with disabilities

without immersion programs and inclusion. Yet, the same disadvantages exist in the workplace. There have been instances where people with disabilities have dealt with embarrassment and self-esteem issues stemming from mockery and a lack of understanding from their coworkers. The HabCenter understands that these disadvantages can lead to discrimination. This seems to be the reason for their ideology when it comes to the privacy of their clients and employees. What the organization does is necessary and for decades they have continued to provide advocacy for disabilities, but is it possible that their reclusive nature and a lack of a push for mainstreaming their organization is detrimental to the expansion of their cause?

A majority of what the HabCenter does for disability advocacy is achieved internally. While many other companies run social media campaigns and attempt to network and branch outwards, the HabCenter, for the most part, attempts to change perceptions from the inside. By providing individuals with the necessary skills to become independent and productive members of society, they are taking the necessary steps for mainstreaming in the workplace. By working on motor skill function, improving cognitive abilities, and focusing on social interaction, the HabCenter prepares their clients by furthering their assets to the best of their abilities. And while their work towards disability advocacy in the workplace is immeasurable, in terms of public immersion and awareness, the HabCenter remains relatively quiet. While they do hold annual benefits and charities, they are not often present at advocacy events or disability expositions promoting their cause. It is difficult for them to spread their message to a broader audience and advocate on a larger scale due to the tensions between the idea of the visible and invisible. The visible, being outward advocacy of those with disabilities, and the invisible being a protective separating from society. Should those with

disabilities be exposed to elements that may cause displeasure, or should those elements be made more accommodating towards those with disabilities? The lack of general social acceptance that the majority exhibits towards people with disabilities makes this a difficult task, and forces organizations such as the HabCenter to operate in the shadows.

In the early years of the HabCenter ranging from the mid to late 1980's, the percentage of people in the United States diagnosed with a disability was approximately 3.4%. According to a 2015 study conducted by the Center for Disease Control, the rate has increased to an estimated 22%. This includes cognitive and neurological disorders, cardiovascular conditions, respiratory problems, musculoskeletal issues, sensory processing disorders, speech delay and non-verbal diagnoses, and an increase of addition medical complexities. Out of the 22% of people with disabilities, only 13% have mobility issues and 10.5% have cognitive impairments, while another 6.5% have trouble living independently, and 3.6% have self-care impairments (Center for Disease Control). This indicates that more than half of people with disabilities are cognitively and physically able. In Florida, 12.8% of the state's population suffer from some type of disability, where 31.3% of that population is employed and only 19.1% of those employed are working full-time (Flexer). Compared to the national level, 17.5% of people with disabilities are employed and almost one-third of those employees are part-time. Many of these individuals tend to work more in production, transportation, and material moving occupations and less in management, professional, and related occupations (U.S. Bureau of Labor). These employment problems suggest that disabled individuals do not have adequate opportunities to experience satisfying careers or achieve their potentials in a professional setting.

Workers with disabilities tend to report lower levels of satisfaction with their jobs as compared to

non-disabled worker. This can be attributed to working conditions, discrimination, poor interpersonal relationships, harassment, and low pay. On average, people with disabilities make \$9,000 less than those without a disability (Uppal, 337). Considering that the cost of living for someone with disabilities is considerably higher than those without, this can be devastating. And while people with disabilities might receive stipends from the government, they are typically not enough to cover basic living expenses. A report in 2015 by the Bureau of Labor and Statistics claimed the average monthly disability benefit is \$1,165 for unemployed adults with disabilities (U.S. Bureau of Labor). This is barely above the poverty line, and again, because the cost of living with a disability is so high, these numbers can be detrimental to the quality of life.

The HabCenter attempts to accommodate all the needs of individuals living with any debilitating conditions. While many companies are advocates for the employment of people with disabilities such as Publix, Walmart, Target, and numerous fast-food chains, in most cases their employees do not have access to disability training. Much of the success of the HabCenter relies on the training of their clients and employees to prepare them for their integration into the "real world". Several companies fail to prepare their employees for the integration of workers with disabilities and it results not only in potential lawsuits, but in a lowered quality of life. Whereas places like the Habilitation Center specialize in the hiring, training, and habilitating of people with disabilities. This training assists in an elevated quality of life, a higher income, and stronger interpersonal skills that are often demanded of people in a professional environment.

The occupational services provided by the HabCenter allow for the clients and employees to feel a great sense of accomplishment, pride, and connectivity to not only themselves but to their

community in a professional sense. In a social sense, they are somewhat secluded from the community due to the stigmas surrounding both the business and residential world. The fact that their employees possess cognitive and physical disabilities is readily available information, however this is not broadcasted or advertised on a large scale. Again, falling victim to this idea of the visible and invisible. With internal knowledge of the organization, one can observe the scale of its achievements and notice that great change is implemented from within, however to the outside world little is known or perceived of the HabCenter, their clients, or their employees. Considering the quiet nature of the organization, their impact on the community is larger than expected, however with implementations of programs that increase disability awareness, and a stronger external campaign, their organization could make an even larger, more imperative impact.

The stigmatization that occurs towards individuals with disabilities in the workplace lies within the employers' stereotypes, discriminations, and biases. Unfortunately, there are some companies that view people with disabilities as disadvantages, with many of the biggest complaints being a lack of speed and productivity. In a time of instant gratification and satisfaction, those who cannot meet specific expectations tend to get left behind. Many employers refuse to commit the extra, yet necessary time to accommodate those with special needs. Additionally, employers also express concerns with updates in accommodations to infrastructure, such as building, access ramps, and the learning of new technologies. Some employers worry about the health risks associated with certain conditions and the missed workdays as a result. These concerns are often misinformed opinions due to a lack of information about the disabled demographic. Studies show that workers with disabilities miss the same, if not fewer days than their non-disabled coworkers,

and in many cases, due to a higher focus on safety precautions, they often have higher safety records (Stone, 353). Additionally, many individuals with disabilities excel with regards to technology, typically from being acquainted at an early age.

Another issue is the lack of social acceptance displayed by non-disabled people. This is often a reason why people with disabilities fail to stay employed for extended periods of time (Vornholt, 471). Whether it is direct or indirect insults, harassment, abuse, staring, isolation, or a general lack of understanding, people tend to make the daily lives of those with disabilities difficult, particularly in confined working environments.

The attitudes of people without disabilities towards their disabled co-workers can be attributed to several reasons. Primarily, there are the notions of performance and independence. One study showed that the better the performance of an employee, the more they were accepted by coworkers and management, regardless of his or her disability. The same was true for individuals with physical limitations or mental impairments that could work independently. The more independently someone could work, the greater the level of acceptance (Thibodeaux). Despite this, the lack of sensitivity training and disability awareness in the workplace remains problematic for most of those living with a disability. Several companies also maintain the perception that hiring someone with a disability will cost more money than someone without. Studies show that the costs of adjusting to accommodate employees who are disabled are quite low. Most structural changes such as wheelchair ramps and other accommodations are generally required by law and are of no extra cost to employers. The most common argument for the cost of hiring someone with a disability is the time it costs to train. Again, studies have shown that some non-disabled workers may take equal, or even longer amounts of time to train. The HabCenter allows

for the pre-training of individuals which eliminates this concern, and with a greater number of companies who specialize in this service, other organizations would find an easier time with the acclamation of already trained employees.

The importance of employment is not only for financial gain, but it fulfills numerous basic human needs. Some of those needs being activity, social contact, status, time, structure and a collective purpose (Vornholt, 470). This is what the HabCenter achieves through their programs, not only by producing a sense of productivity, but also by preparing people to integrate themselves into the community in ways that may otherwise not be available to them. Opportunities such as the Supported Employment Program allow them to find jobs in their community, and their on-site manufacturing company, HabCo Manufacturing, allows job training in turnkey style products such as circuit board and cable assembly, product testing, cell phone repair, wire harnessing, and various other job options. In 2015, HabCo Manufacturing won South Florida Manufacturer of the Year, offering numerous services to companies nationwide. Despite this recognition, the public perception of the efficiency and productivity of employees with disabilities is underwhelming.

Dedicating time to ensure the comfort of those with disabilities is crucial in making sure discrimination does not occur in the workplace. Quality control is a key factor in HabCo's success. While every company maintains quality control to accommodate the needs of those with disabilities, at HabCo, sometimes quality control checks must be performed more than once. That is, when a task is completed, sometimes the work must be checked multiple times to maintain quality of the products, whereas other companies may only have to do these tasks once or twice. While there are extra steps involved, these are small and reasonable accommodations that several companies could make without a large sacrifice.

Large corporations such as Walmart, Ikea, Goodwill, and McDonalds launch annual campaigns to spread disability awareness. Walgreens promotes disability inclusion on their website in addition to annual campaigns. Target not only employs those with special needs, but they have begun to use people with disabilities in their advertisements. Unlike the HabCenter however, these companies promote disability awareness externally through campaigns, but often when it comes to the internal practices, they lack the experience and knowledge to conduct proper training sessions. The HabCenter's business model could be mutually beneficial to both the employee and employer if it is to be followed. This is not to discredit the outwards promotion of disability awareness. Contrarily, the HabCenter could benefit a great deal from external promotion. More importantly, the disabled community could benefit from organizational expansion with companies like HabCo and programs offered by the HabCenter itself. Without the external promotion of their missions, the HabCenter will struggle to expand. Thus, only a limited number of services will be available to those in need. It will take both the internal and external accomplishments of these organizations to change the perceptions towards disabilities.

Many people with special needs struggle with the difficulties of daily living skills, sometimes with the most basic tasks. Whether it is health and well-being, financial needs, or the necessity to learn and develop skills, there are many avenues in which these can be achieved. Enabling access to mainstreaming systems will be necessary to involve people with disabilities and to increase public awareness and understanding. This can be gained through improved and more widely supported research on disabilities. On a national scale, adopting a disability strategy and plan of action would be beneficial to both individual and business (World Health Organization, 265).

The concept of “disability” is fraught with stigma, bias, and discrimination, which results in both social and work life being unsafe and unsupported. Ultimately it is up to us as human beings to learn and spread awareness about disabilities. People tend to fear what they do not understand, and they are often apprehensive towards the unfamiliar. As with any other prejudice, it is crucial that we alter the existing beliefs about the individual and introduce more accurate and factual beliefs. The Habilitation Center provides an impressive internal business model that if followed on a greater scale, can provide those with disabilities the support they need to feel

less discriminated against in the workplace. Despite their private nature, the HabCenter works to circumnavigate the turbulent world by preparing those with disabilities for an inclusive life in a professional, relaxed, and safe atmosphere. With an increase in organizations and businesses like the Habilitation Center, access to mainstreaming, improved human resources, involvement, and increased public awareness, the stigmas that exist towards those with disabilities can be challenged. As history has shown, knowledge leads to understanding and that is a vital part to the betterment of the lives of those with special needs.

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