



11 September 2020

## State of Disaster: The Impact of COVID-19 on People with Disabilities in the Workplace

The struggle to find and retain employment is a reality for many people during the current COVID-19 pandemic. The situation is far more dire for people with disabilities (PWD), for whom the options of working remotely are not always feasible. And while as a society, this is a conversation we should not need to be having, the sad reality is that it is even more relevant today.

Unfortunately, the general perception is that the cost to accommodate people with disabilities (PWD) do not outweigh the benefits to companies. This perception means that the due processes and procedures to accommodate PWD are often not put in place. Under exceptional circumstances, such as a pandemic, companies are still required to accommodate people with disabilities to ensure they remain productive contributors. We can use the lessons learnt from this pandemic to ensure we are prepared for future disasters. Companies without progressive employment policies lack a comprehensive understanding of the important role people with disabilities can play in their organisations.

Increasing the representation of PWD in organisations is not only a moral and ethical issue, it also makes sound business sense for both companies and the overall economy. Hiring managers often express concerns that workers with disabilities have lower job performance and greater incidences of lateness or absenteeism. However, the latest empirical evidence suggests otherwise. Workers with disabilities are often more productive, they are less absent from work and job retention rates are often higher than their colleagues without disabilities.<sup>[1]</sup>

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<sup>[1]</sup> Bonaccio, S., Connelly, C.E., Gellatly, I.R., Jetha, A., & Ginis, C.A.M (2020): The Participation of People with Disabilities in the Workplace Across the Employment Cycle: Employer Concerns and Research Evidence. *Journal of Business Psychology*, 35, 135–158 (2020). Available: [https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10869-018-9602-5?error=cookies\\_not\\_supported](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10869-018-9602-5?error=cookies_not_supported)

In addition, employing PWD is good for the overall economy, increasing productivity and reducing government spend on disability-related benefits.<sup>[2]</sup> And very importantly, most workplace accommodations are simple and relatively inexpensive. The difficulty is, how do we transfer these measures to home offices under the current scenario of working remotely?

As a global phenomenon, the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and the impact on PWD are no different. With the new reality of working remotely, PWD individuals may have certain co-morbidities that prevent them from going into the office. Furthermore, accommodations that allowed PWD to work at the office are not always adaptable or cost-effective to implement at home.

As we recover from COVID-19, building back better provides an opportunity for business to mend the aspects of the social contract that are fundamentally broken. In the case of inclusion of PWD in the workplace, this is a unique opportunity for business to move beyond inclusion of disabilities and implement responses and policies that incorporate proper disaster management planning.

Essentially, the key lesson is how to move beyond compliance to ensure economic inclusion in a State of Disaster, as well as to ensure we are prepared for future scenarios. This makes it more essential than ever to understand how COVID-19 is impacting PWD, as well as what companies can do to retain this important labour resource.

To address both these needs concurrently, The University of Stellenbosch Business School is inviting NBI Members to participate in a study provisionally titled: *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace*. This study forms part of a series related to the impact of COVID-19 and the employment experiences of people with disabilities (PWD). The intended benefit of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of the inclusion of PWD in the workplace during disasters.

The research may be of benefit to your organisation as the findings could inform the policies that you adopt with respect to accommodations to improve the integration and inclusion of PWD in the workplace. The findings may also be useful to PWD in identifying the challenges their employers experience in coordinating responses to disasters.

Please note that participation is voluntary. Even after having started, participants may withdraw without any consequences. For the research to be beneficial however, a good response rate is required. The survey is completely anonymous and should not take more than 15 minutes to complete. Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the research process. This study has been supported by the **National Business Initiative (NBI)** and approved by the University of Stellenbosch Business School Departmental Ethics Screening Committee and will be conducted according to accepted ethics guidelines and principles. The data will only be available to the research team.

The NBI encourages our members and business networks to take this opportunity to participate in this important study. This is not only a key opportunity to reflect on our interdependence as a society but to determine together how to mend the current social contract through more inclusive economic models and ways of doing business.

To complete the questionnaire please [click here](#).

**If you have any queries regarding the study, please feel free to contact the lead investigator Dr Armand Bam at [armandb@usb.ac.za](mailto:armandb@usb.ac.za)**

<sup>[1]</sup> Bonaccio, S., Connelly, C.E., Gellatly, I.R., Jetha, A., & Ginis, C.A.M (2020): The Participation of People with Disabilities in the Workplace Across the Employment Cycle: Employer Concerns and Research Evidence. *Journal of Business Psychology*, 35, 135–158 (2020). Available: [https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10869-018-9602-5?error=cookies\\_not\\_supported](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10869-018-9602-5?error=cookies_not_supported)

<sup>[2]</sup> Pulrang, A., “How To Make Workplaces More Welcoming For Employees With Disabilities”, *Forbes Magazine*, 4 November 2019. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewpulrang/2019/11/04/how-to-make-workplaces-more-welcoming-for-employees-with-disabilities/#6392239053d8>

<sup>[2]</sup> Pulrang, A., “How To Make Workplaces More Welcoming For Employees With Disabilities”, *Forbes Magazine*, 4 November 2019. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewpulrang/2019/11/04/how-to-make-workplaces-more-welcoming-for-employees-with-disabilities/#6392239053d8>



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