Disability and Unemployment: An Overview of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Concerns of Employers

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Introduction:

Several organizations are working towards solving relevant organizational issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace. Organizations have taken a variety of techniques to manage diversity to increase and retain workforce heterogeneity, this includes emphasis on targeted recruitment, education and training, career development, and mentorship programs Organizations use these approaches and strategies to get diverse social groups, including those with impairments, onboard. Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protects against discrimination based on disability. It is the most important piece of federal legislation barring discrimination against people with disabilities as employees(Aoun and Appelbaum 2019).

In Lebanon, the Lebanese Law 2000/220 eliminated all discriminatory sections in existing laws and replaced them with a set of penalties and incentives for hiring individuals with disabilities (Wehbi and El-Lahib 2007). However, despite these laws protecting people with disability, over time, people with disability are said to have been faced with unjustified discrimination and segregation in the workplace, thus leading to a high rate of unemployment among persons with disabilities (Santuzzi and Waltz 2016). The number of people living with disabilities is rapidly rising. This is attributable to a variety of factors, including changing demographics and an increase in chronic health issues. According to the (World Health Organization. and World Bank. 2011) "Over 1 billion people live with some form of disability, and almost everyone is likely to experience some form of disability temporary or permanently at some point in life". This means that there are an increasing number of persons with disabilities moving into the labour market. There is a huge talent pool of persons with disabilities that are available in the labour market but are yet to be considered by employers.

There has been a lack of provisions for resources, rights and services for persons with disabilities in Lebanon, as a result of inaction by the government. Hence, persons with disabilities experience boundless exclusion, discrimination, marginalization, and even violence under the custody of a wide range of state and non-state institutions and individuals. Therefore, it is paramount that the diversity and inclusion issues and challenges preventing persons with disabilities to be fully integrated into the workplace should be tackled and well-studied in order to devise ways to promote inclusive employment to persons with disabilities, companies and society. The focus of this paper is directed towards understanding the subjective perceptions of employers regarding persons with disabilities in the workplace by exploring the diversity, equity, and inclusion concerns of Employers. This paper is extremely important and timely, particularly given the high rate of unemployment prevalent among persons with disabilities in Lebanon, MENA, and worldwide.

Global Outlook on Disability and Persons with Disabilities

Disability, according to the Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS), is defined as the additional social barriers imposed by a society that is intolerant of individuals with disabilities. Following that, UPIAS' focus on physical conditions was broadened to include all impairments, such as users and survivors of mental-health systems and persons with learning disabilities. According to (Einar 2014)disability is a social expression of mental or physical

restriction, or a discrepancy between a person's capacities and the constraints placed on them by their physical and social surroundings. The terms "impairment" and "disability" are conceptually distinguished in a significant way by UPIAS. Impairment is defined as 'lacking part of or all of the limb, having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body', while disability is defined as "the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities"(Retief and Letšosa 2018).

The World Health Organization (WHO) expanded the concept of disability in 2001 to include activity constraints, environmental factors, impairments, and participation restrictions (World Health Organization. and World Bank). Several barriers have been identified which contribute to limited employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities, including discrimination, structural barriers to accessibility, and severity of impairment (Santuzzi and Waltz, 1117).

Diversity and Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities

According to (Larkey 1996) Diversity is defined as differences in perspectives that can lead to behavioural differences among cultural groups as well as identification distinctions amongst group members regarding other groups. It is "any dimension that can be used to differentiate groups and people from one another"(Giovannini 2004). From an organizational perspective, diversity is used to describe the diverse makeup of organizations or workforces(Roberson, 2006.). Inclusion in the workplace is defined as the extent to which individuals can access information and resources, are involved in workgroups, and can influence decision-making processes (Roberson 2006). It has been used to describe workers' active participation and empowerment in different contexts. Inclusion is focused on the degree to which individuals feel a part of a critical organizational process(Mor-Barak and Cherin 1998). According to (Nafukho, Roessler, & Kacirek 2010) inclusion of persons with disabilities in the workplace refers to the need to make them feel treasured, respected, supported, and appreciated for their contributions.

Without the provision of necessary accommodations for persons with disabilities in the workplace, it is natural that organizations might experience a backlash from persons with disabilities. These individuals, i.e. persons with disabilities, might feel they are not treated as part of the organization hence, they will revolt against their employers and might leave their jobs, thus leading to a high turnover rate of employees with disabilities. This is because people with disabilities frequently face multiple forms of inequality in the workplace. As a result of this, Nafukho et al (2010) in their research suggested that human resource management solutions in the form of assistive technology, job modifications, and schedule alterations can create a more welcoming workplace that enables people with disabilities to not only be more productive and valuable to their employers but also to believe that they are being treated fairly with the ensuing commitment to do their best as employees.

Divergent perception of employers regarding employees with disabilities

The transition from dependent to independent living for people with disabilities requires their active inclusion in the labour market. This has positive effects on both the individuals as socially significant units through a dramatic improvement in their quality of life, as well as on their coworkers and employers(Papakonstantinou and Papadopoulos 2020). It is worthy of note that despite the effort of organizations to create a diverse workforce environment, most employers hold a stereotypical belief against employees with disabilities. Most managers assume that employees with disabilities are less productive than their abled counterparts (Bonaccio et al. 2020). For instance, In Lebanon, persons with disabilities are being excluded from mainstream

education and employment due to the Lebanese community's perception of people with disabilities as helpless (Wehbi and El-Lahib 2007). Employers' hesitation to hire people with disabilities stems from a variety of fears and concerns, the majority of which are related to misinformation about what hiring people with disabilities entails, or perhaps due to their ignorance of disabilities and the abilities and skills that these people possess. However, (Papakonstantinou and Papadopoulos 2020) also further noted that employers with previous experience in working with persons with disabilities do not seem to confirm the above fears or concerns, they appear to hold a positive view toward them, in case of a previously satisfactory working experience.

On the other hand, many disability scholars argued that persons with disabilities can perform many of the same jobs persons without disabilities perform given that they are presented with the necessary accommodations.

Perceived costs of accommodating employees with disabilities

Many laws around the world, such as the American Disability Act in the USA, state that failing to offer reasonable accommodations is illegal, especially if employees reveal disabilities by requesting accommodations. Likewise, The Lebanese public law 2000/220 protecting employees with disabilities requires companies to make working environments more accessible by eliminating physical barriers to people with disabilities joining mainstream employment, but these laws are yet to be implemented and adhered to due to financial constraints (Wehbi and El-Lahib 2006). However, managers' perceptions and fears about lodging at very high costs while accommodating persons with disabilities are typically exaggerated. (Papakonstantinou and Papadopoulos 2020) also noted that Employers are as well concerned that employees with impairments will reduce productivity and that hiring people with disabilities will cost them money. These are negative stereotypical beliefs held by most employers due to misinformation about what hiring persons with disabilities entails.

Conversely, Lockwood and Tardi (2014) posited that the costs of excluding persons with disabilities significantly outweigh the expenses of including them. (Sabat et al. 2014) also asserted that the cost of accommodating employees with disabilities is no more than the cost of accommodating abled employees. This is to argue that the cost of accommodation associated with employing and retaining persons with disabilities is the best for most employers. Meanwhile, in the real sense, the expense of accommodating and retaining persons with disabilities is comparable to that of accommodating and retaining employees without disabilities. Therefore, while some employers try their best to see that they establish a much more diverse and inclusive work environment for every employee, most employers get too carried away with the cost implication of including persons with disabilities (Lockwood and Tardi 2014).

In addition to the cost of accommodating persons with disabilities, employers may be concerned that employees with disabilities pose a safety risk to the firm or are more likely to be injured than employees without disabilities (Sabat et al. 2014). But Bonaccio et al (2020) put forward that according to their studies, these fears are baseless, as workers with disabilities are no more likely than those without disabilities to injure themselves or others.

The inclusion rate of persons with disabilities in the workplace

The literature shows that the inclusion rate of persons with disabilities in the workplace has deteriorated over the years. Employers' perceptions of persons with disabilities have led to their exclusion in an organizational critical decision-making process (Schur & Blanck 2005). When there's a lack of successful integration, individuals with disabilities often experience rejection from their colleagues due to the latter's personal biases. These biases lead to the actual abilities of people with disabilities being overlooked and overshadowed by their perceived limitations (Shenoy 2011).

Therefore, it is necessary to build effective corporate structures between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in local, national, and regional settings and other partners to ensure that people with disabilities are not excluded from the workplace (Lockwood and Tardi 2014). Furthermore, understanding which HR practices are (and will be) utilized to properly manage and support persons with disabilities across the job life cycle is crucial for promoting workplace inclusion for persons with disabilities (Schloemer-Jarvis, et al 2022). It is also important that employers uphold strongly shared values and beliefs that will promote the successful inclusiveness of persons with disabilities in the workplace. This helps illustrate why supporting people with disabilities in the workplace requires a positive and inclusive organizational culture.

Methodology

Given the goal of this study, which is to gain a deeper understanding of employers' subjective perceptions of employees with disabilities in the workplace, qualitative data on the subjective perceptions of employers was obtained via a semi-structured interview. Since it would be unrealistic to identify the number of employers with persons with disabilities who are currently working within Lebanon, I decided to pass through a contact organization that serves as an intermediary between persons with disabilities and employers in Lebanon. I made available my contact information to the contact organization who then further shared it with their beneficiaries. Participants who were willing to get involved in the studies further reached out to me. A sample size of 10 employers and subsequently 6 employees with disabilities were recruited from organizations across Lebanon.

Data Analysis Method

In line with the purpose of this study which seeks to fully understand how employers perceive persons with disabilities in the workplace, After the textual data was obtained from transcribing the interviews, The generated data was then subjected to a content analysis technique.

Also, given that the study utilized an in-depth interview as its preferred data collection tool, it generated an enormous amount of textual data, which necessitated the use of template analysis to critically identify the participants' opinions and perceptions of persons with disabilities in the Lebanese workplace.

The data analysis in this study leveraged coding as a procedure for organizing the texts in order to discover significant patterns that are necessary to understand employers' attitudes, opinions and perceptions towards persons with disabilities. The coding technique was suitable for the large textual data that was derived from this study.

Findings

At first glance, distinct groupings among the interview subjects appear once the textual data has been transcribed and coded. Data attained from the participants were classified into two groups. The first group has to do with the employers' perception of persons with disabilities working in their organizations. On the other hand, the second category of the data is related to the lived experiences5 of persons with disabilities themselves as to how their employers equip them with the necessary tools and support needed for them to thrive in the workplace. But before delving into talking about the subjective perceptions, I explored the organizational values and culture of each of these organizations. Below, an in-depth analysis of these data was provided utilizing the codes and themes that emerged while carrying out the inductive coding (Nvivo) coding strategy.

Organizational Values

Backed by my findings, this section will dig into the subjective organizational values held by the organizations. The section will further go a long way in exploring the extent to which this organizational culture, values, norms and practices promote diversity and inclusion as well as how it shapes employers' perceptions of persons with disabilities.

I Leadership

Leadership trait Is now a common attribute employer and HR is looking out for in potential candidates to steer the affairs of their organization. Participants attested to the importance of leadership traits in their employees as this is a held core value of their organizations.

Below are direct quotes from the participants that connote how leadership was a key ingredient of their organizational value system.

"If you want, most important is leadership, uh, because leadership is a whole combination of sub-values, for example, resilience, for example, the fact that you can coach others and help them grow"   (Pt1)

From the above quote, it is apparent that leadership attributes are key to identifying bonafide employees who align with the company's value system. Many of the employers interviewed pointed out key traits that align with leadership attributes as their core organizational values.

II Hard work

Productivity is at the core of any organizational process. Most organizations aim to make huge profits from their businesses. Therefore, organizations nowadays are keen on employing candidates who are up to the task and capable of fulfilling that purpose. Therefore, most of the participants asserted that hard work is a key attribute that they are seeking out in their employees. The reason why it is held as one of their organizational core values.

Below are some of the direct quotes from the participants that imply that hard work is a key organizational value in their organizations.

"We do not have the mindset of you just completing your hours and going back home. You should have the passion to complete your task properly and even beyond, maybe to take your task and then reformulate it into something new. You have the space, just think outside the box and just do whatever you want. We give that freedom as long as the person is hard working."

(Pt 1)

The quote above connotes that employees are expected to be hardworking and creative at the same time. Employees must be willing to contribute extra to the organization as they are granted the leeway to do as they deem wish for as long it will add value to the organization.

Inclusion

Diversity and inclusion have been a hot topic of debate and discussion amongst managers in the past couple of years. Inclusion is a state of being valued, respected and supported. In most cases, it is founded on organizational culture, managerial techniques, and interpersonal interactions that encourage the full utilization of a diverse workforce at all levels (Giovannini 2004). Many of the participants involved in this research testified that inclusion is a key organizational value that they hold very dear to their hearts. Below are some of the direct quotes uttered by the participants who took part in this study.

"We have in our manufacturing industry employees who are maybe operators, they do not have access to emails because their job is different and do not require them to use computers. However, we make sure to reach out to them as we reached out to other employees. For example, we make sure our communication is in English and Arabic so everyone can understand the communication." (Pt 1)

From the above quotes, it can be observed that inclusion is a paramount aspect of the participant's organizational values. The quote implies that the voices of every employee mater regards less of their social and economic status.

Perception of Persons with Disabilities by Employers

The perception of persons with disabilities by employers can vary widely depending on the employer's attitudes, beliefs, and experiences. Unfortunately, many employers still hold negative perceptions and stereotypes about people with disabilities, which can lead to discrimination and exclusion in the workplace. As seen in the literature review section, it is apparent that Some employers may view individuals with disabilities as less capable, less productive, or more difficult to accommodate than their non-disabled peers. These beliefs can lead to a reluctance to hire people with disabilities or to provide them with equal opportunities for advancement and training.

1. Productive

Research has shown that the costs associated with employing people with disabilities are minimal and employing them helped create an overall positive impact on the economy. People with impairments tend to be more productive than their non-disabled peers and have lower absenteeism rates at work (Aichner 2021). When given the chance and the right accommodations, people with disabilities can be highly productive employees.

"People who have certain disability tend to do their work and give double you know."
(Pt1)

The above statements showcase that the employer does not see disability as a weakness. This implies that persons with disability are likely to perform as much as their colleagues who do not have any form of disability.

2. Inspiration

According to a growing body of research, employing people with disabilities may improve workplace culture and motivate other workers. Further, a vast range of research has asserted that employees who work with disabled coworkers are more likely to grow in their understanding of diversity and inclusion and to see their workplace as a more nurturing and caring environment (Lindsay et al. 2018a).

"They appreciate even more, and, on the job, they listen attentively to what they do. And actually, they impact people around them" (Pt 1)

The above statement implies that persons with disabilities are very dedicated to their various jobs. And thus inspire their colleagues around them.

3. Loyalty

According to research, people with impairments frequently have strong employer loyalty. This loyalty may be caused by a variety of things, such as the difficulties and barriers that many people with disabilities encounter when trying to find and keep a job, as well as the importance that these people attach to the social connections, benefits, and financial security that a job can bring (Lindsay et al. 2018b)

> "Due to the economic crisis in Lebanon, there is a high turnover in all sectors. Youth generations are travelling outside to work and make more money. But with us, we didn't lose any employee having special needs from the starting point till now because they are dedicated to working with us."
>> (Pt2)

From the above quotes, it is very apparent that persons with disabilities take their jobs very seriously. Even in the face of adverse situations like that of the Lebanese economic crisis which saw a high number of employees leaving their various jobs, persons with disabilities still stick to their organization. Hence, organizations that have persons with disabilities as employees do not have to worry about the fear of losing them to other employers.

4. Enhance Diversity

Employing people with disabilities has frequently been found to considerably boost the workforce's diversity (Lindsay et al. 2018b). Organizations can diversify the backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints represented in their workforce by actively seeking out and hiring people with disabilities. The distinctive experiences and perspectives that people with disabilities bring to the workplace are significant ways that they contribute to diversity there.

> "Their presence between these teams makes their colleagues open more, they adapt more to this diversity"

> (Pt 1)

The quote above showcases the extent to which persons with disabilities add tremendous value to the creative activities of any team that is fortunate to have them as a member. These employers who happen to have persons with disabilities working for their organizations have attested to the fact that persons with disabilities embody creative attributes that sparks the light of creativity among other employees around them.

Perception of Employers by persons with disabilities

According to research, employees who are disabled could view their companies differently than those who are not. These perceptions can be influenced by several elements, such as the employer's level of accommodation and assistance, the culture of the workplace as a whole, and the degree of inclusion and respect that people with disabilities experience inside the company. One key factor that shapes the perception of employers by individuals with disabilities is the level of accommodation and support provided in the workplace. Accommodations such as accessible technology, flexible work arrangements, and physical modifications to the workplace can significantly impact the experience of individuals with disabilities and can contribute to a more positive perception of the employer.

1. Supportive

Supporting people with disabilities at work can offer a variety of advantages for both the people with disabilities and the companies that hire them, according to research. Supporting people with disabilities in the workplace has many advantages, some of which are higher productivity, better job satisfaction, and higher retention rates.

> "They were kind enough to allow the use of alternative devices because They have a company policy of using company-based devices like they require the notes would be entered on company-based laptops" (Pt A)

It can be observed from the quote above that the employers in these organizations who have persons with disabilities working within them take into consideration the necessary accommodations to enable these persons to perform their jobs effectively.

2. Limited Accommodation

The degree to which accommodations offered by companies allow workers with disabilities to execute their occupations effectively and efficiently is implied by this theme. According to research, effective accommodations can have a major positive impact on both persons with disabilities and organizations.

"They have a company policy of using company-based devices like they require the notes would be entered on company-based laptops, for example, or company based, let's say, mobile phones, smartphones. And, of course, their laptops are not at all prepared with assistive technology, they don't have that whatsoever. They don't even have a budget for it. Because they are very, you know, like they, they're very organized in terms of budgeting." (Pt A)

The direct quote by this participant implies that even though the company he was working with were kind enough to have allowed him to make use of his assistive technologies, the accommodation provided by the company was not effective enough for him to carry out his job successfully.

3. Communication /transparency asymmetry

The creation of an inclusive work environment for individuals with disabilities requires open and honest communication. While transparency in policies and processes can help to foster a more dependable and encouraging working culture, effective communication between employers and employees can help to ensure that employees' accommodation needs are satisfied.

"So, yeah, there were a lot of assumptions made That I would not be able to see certain facial gestures or actions, or there were a lot of assumptions about things I would not be able to hear. But obviously, I would be hearing everything very, very well. Yeah, that part was not pleasant. And the part that related to me having to announce to everybody, hey, I have a disability, here are how you can help me was not pleasant" (Pt A)

The quote above connotes that there are some preconceived beliefs held by employers against persons with certain disability. In the scenario above, his employer and colleagues assume that he might not be able to hear well due to his disability. However, in the real sense that is not the case as he can listen and understand every single thing being said.

Recommendations

<u>Provide Disability Awareness Training for all Employees, Managers and Executives</u>

This training can help raise awareness and understanding of disability issues, help employees learn how to interact with people with disabilities and address misconceptions and stereotypes that may exist. The training should cover a variety of topics, such as disability etiquette, communication strategies, accessibility, and accommodations.

By providing this training, employers can create a more inclusive workplace where all employees feel valued and supported. Employees who receive disability awareness and inclusion training are more likely to feel confident interacting with their colleagues with disabilities, and less likely to hold negative stereotypes or misconceptions about people with disabilities.

<u>Prioritize accessibility in the workplace</u>

Providing accommodation such as assistive technology and accessible facilities, to ensure equal opportunities for employees with disabilities is very paramount. Employers have a responsibility to ensure that their workplaces are accessible and that employees with disabilities have the tools and resources they need to perform their jobs effectively. Employers should work with disability experts to identify the specific needs of employees with disabilities and determine the appropriate accommodation. These accommodations may include assistive technology such as screen readers, magnifiers, or speech recognition software, as well as physical modifications such as ramps, accessible restrooms, or designated parking spaces.

<u>Foster a culture of inclusion by promoting diversity</u>

Fostering a culture of inclusion is critical in creating an environment where all employees, including those with disabilities, feel valued and respected. To achieve this goal, companies should prioritize diversity and inclusion initiatives and ensure that they are integrated into the company's mission, vision, and values.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research highlights the need for employers to address their perceptions of employees with disabilities and the impact these perceptions have on the workplace. Employers should strive to create a more inclusive environment where employees with disabilities can feel valued, and respected, and have equal opportunities for success. This requires a shift in mindset and a commitment to implementing changes that prioritize accessibility, inclusive hiring practices and fostering a culture of inclusion.

It is important to recognize that addressing these issues will not happen overnight, and it requires a collaborative effort from all members of the workplace. Employers must work closely with employees with disabilities to identify and address any barriers to inclusion and to ensure that their needs are being met. By doing so, employers can create a workplace that is not only inclusive of employees with disabilities but one that is also more diverse, equitable, and productive.

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