Managing Diverse Employees with DisAbilities

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Introduction

This research paper will focus on the possible management issues and the potential resolutions that management executives may have to consider when setting about to manage diverse employees with disabilities. Accomplishing such a chore will require the exploration of theories, concepts, and practices (strategies) from the multi-dimensional perspective of numerous sources, both from printed and electronic mediums. Moreover, Hagner and DiLeo (1993) have implied that the term diversity is a synonymous reflection of the initiatives and objectives of affirmative action policies. The concept of diversity in the workplace actually refers to the differences embodied by the workforce members at large (Barnartt & Altman, 2001). The differences between all employees in the workforce can be equated to those employees of different or diverse ethnic origin, racial descent, gender, sexual orientation, chronological maturity, and ability; in effect minorities (Szymanski & Parker, 1996).

As our societies and workplaces have changed from that of industrial to informational, personal computers, telecommunication devices, and other high-level technologies have become the dominant component of our national culture and economic system. This has also changed the employees from industrial workers (skilled laborer) to knowledge workers. The result of this change is that people with disabilities now have more career options (National Council on Disability [NCD], 2001).

Problem Statement

One of the greatest challenges facing American businesses and managers is the task of maintaining a qualified workforce. This is primarily because of the change from an industrial workforce to a knowledge workforce and because the baby boomers have only had about half as many children as their parents. As a result the number of 20 to 24 year olds entering the workforce continues to fall. This critical shortage has forced employers to rethink their recruitment strategies
and look towards targeting chronological mature people, and people with disabilities (varying abilities) (NCD, 2001). It is important to recognize that people with disabilities are the largest minority group, they cross all ethnic, racial, gender, chronological groups, and number at around 54 million Americans and growing (U.S. Department of Labor [USDOL], 2002). Out of the 29 million working age adults with disabilities in the U.S. about two thirds are unemployed and nearly 80 percent of that two thirds would like to work but have not had the opportunity to do so (USDOL, 2002). While people with disabilities may have the desire to work, they still may have to overcome the formidable attributes of the cultural barrier or innate characteristics of a disenabling mental, physical, or emotional barrier.

To overcome the disenabling effects of mental, physical, or emotional barriers employers have looked towards the advantages of assistive technologies for assistance. The reality of the matter is that while assistive can help to overcome many mental, physical, and emotional barriers it cannot and will not ever possess the ability to overcome the reigning number one barriers confronting employees with disabilities. The reigning number one barrier has been created by society and is referred to as the cultural barriers. Cultural barriers embody numerous complex, dynamic, and diverse challenges to be overcome. These challenges are related to but are not limited to organizational, management, and worker cultures (Hagner & DiLeo, 1993).

Theories, Concepts, and/or Practices

There are many theories, concepts, and practices associated to the effective management of such a diverse group, as employees with disabilities (Swanson & Fouad, 1999). Szymanski and Parker (1996) have theorized that to a certain degree that the application of diversity factors from current theories, concepts, and practices may be capable of providing a sturdy framework to the management of employees with disabilities.

In retrospect, the post World War I theory or concept of disability was perceived as a medical condition (mental, physical, or emotional) that lead to the inability of a person to conduct work, which is commonly referred to as the medical model (Heldrick, 1999). The medical model concept was perceived and widely accepted as the most accurate definition up until the 1990’s. In the 1990’s, the medical model concept (old paradigm) started to shift ever so slightly to what is nowadays known as the disability paradigm (new paradigm). This shift in paradigm has lead to the rethinking of many related theories, concepts, and practices from those that viewed disabilities under the medical model paradigm to what is now considered to be that of a social model (the disability paradigm) (Barnatt & Altman, 2001). Some of the most popular are the theory of work adjustment, organizational career theory, Super’s theory, and the role theory (Szymanski & Parker, 1996).
The workplace concepts for people with disabilities include the concept of workplace accommodations, assistive technology concept, organizational concept of culture, and the concept of establishing solid management functions. Presently, business policies are not well defined and are for the most part dictated by federal and state laws or regulations (Barnatt & Altman, 2001; Hagner & DiLeo, 1993; Swanson & Fouad, 1999; Szymanski & Parker, 1996).

The theory of work adjustment was developed in the 1960s by the state of Minnesota and for all intensive purposes the theory of work adjustment is a person-environment theory model (Hagner & DiLeo, 1993). In accordance with the work of Szymanski and Parker (1996), the relationship between the employee and the workplace environment can be a source of unfathomed strength or profound confusion. Nonetheless, Szymanski and Parker (1996) have stated that the person-environment theory model is based on the following paraphrased assumptions (p. 83):

- Individuals seek out and create environments that offer possibilities of leadership such that they are in charge.
- Degree of fit between the person and environment is associated with significant outcomes that can substantially affect the performance, productivity, satisfaction, turnover, and stress.
- The process of person and environment fit is reciprocal.

The major presumption in the theory of work adjustment is that employees seek to maintain a positive relationship with their workplace environment. Employees therefore bring their individual and/or team requirements to the workplace environment, and the workplace environment brings its requirements to the individual employees or the team (Barnatt & Altman, 2001). The implication is that for work adjustment to take place the employee and the workplace environment must achieve some degree of incontrovertible symmetry. In simplistic terms the employee and the workplace environment are in effect tethered to each other. The theory of work adjustment does not only apply to individuals with disabilities, it actually applies to all employees (Swanson & Fouad, 1999).

When the organizational career theory was first conceived it was perceived as an economic based theory and did not include employees with disabilities. This is because the medical model of disability was still widely accepted and a person with a disability was not thought of as needing or desiring a career, for he or she was unable to work (Swanson & Fouad, 1999). The organizational career theory is more of a theoretical method that can be used by employers in the development of career planning strategies or to meet company objectives and as a strategic career management tool for employees. The purpose of this theory is to match the skills and abilities of an employee to the best career fit within the
organization (Szymanski & Parker, 1996). The organizational career theory favors the established hierarchical bureaucracy of an enterprise as the idea and most efficient method of deployment. Hence, it is the responsibility of the employer to seek the best career fit to meet required organizational personnel objective, in doing so the employee will subsequently profit (Swanson & Fouad, 1999).

Super’s Theory is a developmental theory that predicates the notion that there exist a fundamental correlation between the differences of people and occupations. These differences can be summed up in terms of abilities and personality traits. In theory, to achieve the most benevolent outcome it is feasibly possible for employers to translate such differences into occupational suitability factors for people with disabilities (Swanson & Fouad, 1999). As stated in the work of Szymanski and Parker (1996), the Super’s theory encompasses fourteen propositions, of which only three have practical application to the management of employees with disabilities (p. 87-89):

- People differ in their abilities and personalities, needs, values, interests, traits, and self-concepts.
- People are qualified, by virtue of these characteristics, each for a number of occupations.
- Each occupation requires a characteristic pattern of ability and personality traits, with tolerances wide enough to allow both some variety of occupation.

Since Super’s theory is a developmental theory it is relevant to make note that employees progress through seven different stages of career priority. This progression is most often associated to an employee’s age. For example, at age 18 an employee may be on a journey of self-discovery or exploration for the career. The progression of stages continues from the exploratory stage, to basic training, to early career, to mid-career, to late career, to disengagement of career focus, to the final stage of retirement (Hagner & DiLeo, 1993). However, for employees with disabilities this progression stages most often becomes stuck for an extended time somewhere in between the early to mid-career stages (Swanson & Fouad, 1999). As indicated by Barnartt and Altman (2001), it is important for a manager to recognize such a condition and take action in the advancement of an employee to the next career stage.

In reference to the role theory, employees fit into a particular career role and as such they are expected to assume the perceived characteristics of that role. The career role may be permanent or temporary and will dictate how each person or employee’ will be perceived by the employer and society. Under the medical model, a person with a disability is perceived by society as unable to work. Thus, it is very hard for some people (employers, managers, etc.) to understand why someone with a disability would desire to work (Barnartt & Altman, 2001).
The role theory is a sociological theory composed of multiple role concepts. Barnartt and Altman (2001) have listed several of these role concepts. They are, “role salience, role set, role discontinuity, role strain, role conflict, role ambiguity and role synchrony” (p. 85).

As per the concept of workplace accommodations employers with 15 employees or more must make reasonable workplace accommodations for employees with disabilities. Reasonable accommodations will include those structural and technological modifications that do not impose an undue hardship on the employer. The phrases ‘reasonable accommodations’ and ‘undue hardship’ have not been distinctly defined. However, each can be gauged by the size, revenue, and nature of the company. For those employers or managers desiring more detail, they can refer the guidelines outlined by the Americans with Disabilities Act 1990 and current amendments via the Disability Rights Section website (United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Disability Rights Section [USDOJ], 2002).

From the perspective of the manager some disabilities or impairment may be hidden or just not obvious. Furthermore, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, precludes the employer from inquiring about a disability or impairment. It is therefore the obligation of the employee to furnish the manager or employer with enough selective information to demonstrate that an employee has a disability or impairment that limits or restricts his or her ability to perform what is referred to as major life activities (USDOJ, 2002). Per the National Council on Disability (2001) a major life activity is the impairment in the performance of manual task, walking, learning, concentrating, thinking, speaking, breathing, sleeping, hearing, seeing, interacting with others, or caring for oneself.

The website of the United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Disability Rights Section, Section 504 was amended in 2002 to the Americans with Act of 1990, as such a person with an disclosed disability or impairment may ask for accommodations to include, modification of facilities, assistive equipment or devices, part-time work schedule, modified work schedule, time away for treatment, unpaid leave of absence, job restructuring, additional education, modification of policy, or transfer to a vacant position for which the employee is qualified to fill. However, the United States Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (2002) has legislated that the requesting employee must also be willing to participate in the process of researching, determining, developing, and implementing a reasonable accommodation. If the employee does not fully participate he or she may lose their right to such a reasonable accommodation. In the context of participation, the employee may voluntarily submit to a medical or psychological examination, as the resulting documentation may be needed to determine if the employee has a temporary or permanent disability. As per the United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division,
Disability Rights Section website, a temporary disability may not warrant an accommodation via the aegis of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and if the disability is deemed as permanent the documentation may help to identify the perimeters for the most efficacious accommodation (USDOJ, 2002).

The concept of assistive technology refers to the belief that assistive technologies can dissolve the barriers most disability issues. In truth, assistive technologies are only effective when accompanied by the proper legislation, policies, and an equitable cultural paradigm in the workplace (Flippo, Inge, & Barcus, 1995). Assistive technologies can be an electronic device, a piece of software or a hardware component used to assist the employee (United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division [USDOJ], 1998). Assistive technology theories and concepts predicate the tenet philosophy that universal design is tethered directly to the universal access of all technologies, electronic or not (USDOJ, 2002).

As per Flippo, Inge, & Barcus (1995), the fundamental development of assistive technologies foundations have been dictated by legislation and federal policy. The aforementioned legislation and policies have also set the stage for standards associated to the application of communication technologies, sensory impairment technologies, mobility, and strategies for the workplace and schools. As implied by Heldrick (1999), the employment of assistive technologies within companies has also created a multitude of developmental staffing and creative financing issues.

The organizational concept of culture is the cultural paradigm that exists within the workplace of every company or enterprise. As coined on the Department of Labor’s website, the organizational concept is sometimes referred to as the “Social Theory of Disability” (USDOL, 2002). An example of this would be the dissimilar social ranking between management and employees.

The organizational culture is a set of learned attitudes, behaviors, and the other factoids that comprise a way of conducting business life with co-workers and management within an organization. While, it is unlikely that any one employee or manager will share his or her personal culture with all their co-workers. It is however very likely that he or she will choose to share their personal culture with at least one co-worker, both within the organization and outside of the organizational confines. With different organizational groups a varied level of comfort is achieved. The practice of establishing a desired level of comfort is known by most employees as networking and can be an effective reconnaissance tool for employees and managers alike (Szymanski & Parker, 1996).

The concept of management functions is a broad plan of attack for managers on how to influence the organization and employees through effective planning,
organizing, directing, controlling, employee selection, employee support, employee training and development, and management style (Hagner & DiLeo, 1993). There are many practices that management could feasible employ to determine what management functions are best suited to influence diverse employees with disabilities (Szymanski & Parker, 1996). The overpowering objective of the theories and concepts as related to the management functions of employees with disabilities is to promote or invoke a paradigm shift within the organization, management ranks, and the workers cultural from the current damning cultural to one that recognizes the potential abilities of a person (NCD, 2001).

Resolutions

In order for employers to capitalize on the ability differences of employees with disabilities in the workforce they have sought out solutions from many sources. Some of the solutions are complex and other are simple, they may require a shift in the workplace paradigm, the use of assistive technologies, the development of management strategies, or a change in work location philosophies. The overwhelming justification is that it is the most beneficial, ethical and humane thing to do (Hagner & DiLeo, 1993).

The work of authors such as Szymanski and Parker (1996) have alluded to the fact that before people with disabilities could not be fully integrated into the workplace until the culture of the workplace becomes more welcoming. This is because the medical model did not perceive people with disabilities as potential workforce asset. Hence, not much emphasize had been placed on resolving the workplace barriers. The shift of paradigms from that of the medical model to the disability model has fostered a change in the perceptions of society and the workplace culture. Additionally, the National Council on Disability believes that the only way to shift the culture is to establish legislation (NCD, 2001). Still Hagner and DiLeo (1993) advocate a middle ground approach.

Workplace strategies can vary from company to company and can potentially consist of thousands of concepts or notions. The basic objective of workplace strategies as applied to differently abled employees is to promote productivity (Hagner & DiLeo, 1993). There are many strategies available to ponder from many sources (Hagner & DiLeo, 1993; Heldrick, 1999; Szymanski & Parker, 1996; United States Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy [USDOL/ODEP], 2002; USDOL, 2002; NCD, 2001). Hagner and DiLeo (1993) have suggested a few strategies that managers can implement or modified to make the workplace culture more positive, nurturing, and accommodating to people with disabilities or new employees. Managers could reexamine or modify their leadership style to include, but not limited to their tone of interaction, vary gathering (meeting) places, celebrate special events, educate the staff on disability, form a disability support group, keep in touch with employees, create
pride by reinforcing the company image, and standardize required task (USDOL/ODEP, 2002). A required task could be as simple as standardizing the location of a stapler for the vision impaired or as complicated as the standardization of a password authentication system (Hagner & DiLeo, 1993).

Effective planning strategies for diverse employees with disabilities may consist of a detailed strategic business plan for the near and distant future. The plan must be accurate, timely, easy to find, identify information sources, communicate with other employees who do similar work, talk to the employee, examine job descriptions, or call the Job Accommodation Network at 800-JAN-7234 (USDOJ, 2002). Plans are frequently threatened with obsolescence of technology changes and economic turbulence before the ink on the paper is even dries. The reality is that even the best-laid business plan may still go astray, especially as managers try to predict a company's technology requirements, staffing needs, and work processes (Szymanski & Parker, 1996).

Nonetheless, a good business plan can effectively communicate the company's vision, provide direction, establish time management procedures and facilitate methods of control to all employees, whether disabled or not.

For additional examples, the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 refers to strategies, as principles of which there are seven (Heldrick, 1999). From the seven principles, there are only two that apply to diverse employees with disabilities (p. 6):

- Services must be streamlined by coordinating multiple employments and training programs, must be accessible to people with disabilities.
- The system should empower individuals with the information and resources they need to manage their own careers.

There are many types of assistive technologies available for many types of disabilities. Flippo, Inge, & Barcus (1995) have authored a book that details the many different types of assistive technologies available to employers and people with disabilities. They have proceeded to outline adaptation strategies for the workplace, such as career planning, education, redesign, mobility assistance, universal design of low-tech and high-tech devices, to name a few. The use or deployment of assistive technologies is not just a feasible resolution strategy. It may be also allow the employer to remain in compliance with rehabilitation and assistive technology legislation of the past century. For example the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1918, Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), to include the 2002 amendment of Section 508 to the ADA (USDOJ, 2002). The assistive technologies of today can help people with visual impairments or blindness, hearing impairments or deafness, mobility impairment or paralyze, or a combination of multiple impairments at varying levels of severity (Flippo, Inge, & Barcus, 1995).
It has been recommended via the United States Department of Labor website that managers become familiar with the various type of assistive technologies that are available for people with disabilities. Here is a brief list of possible assistive technologies (USDOL, 2002):

- **Vision (sight)** – screen readers, speech synthesizers, Braille systems, scanner systems, TeleBraille, and large format displays.
- **Hearing/speech** – visual redundancy systems, telecommunication device for the deaf (TDD), speech amplification device, telephone signaling device, and caption systems.
- **Mobility** – keyboard macros, sequential keystroke input, alternative keyboards, infrared pointing device, and a speech recognition system.

Telecommuting, which is sometimes referred to as teleworking, can be a highly effective and extremely flexible solution for employees of all ability levels. For those employees who cannot easily make it into the traditional workplace because of physical disabilities, as telecommuting eliminates the need to commute and may be the only viable alternative (Joice, n.d.). As stated in a report from the United States Department of Labor (2002, July 26), “telecommuting can be useful in solving business problems by decreasing certain overhead costs, satisfying fluctuating demands for additional office and parking space, and increasing employees’ loyalty, productivity, and retention by helping them balance work and family demands” (p. 43).
References


