



## **The Federal Government as a Model Employer of People with Disabilities: Research-Based Practices and Strategies**

The Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN) is a resource for employers seeking to recruit, hire, retain and advance qualified employees with disabilities. It is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy under a cooperative agreement with Cornell University. For more information, visit [AskEARN.org](https://www.assume.org). Preparation of this item was fully funded by the United States Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy in the amount of \$8,000,000 (four-year total grant amount) under Cooperative Agreement No. OD-33975-19-75-4-36. This document does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Labor, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

The Federal Government has long sought to become a model employer of people with disabilities. This goal is framed by several mandates extending back to the passage of the Rehabilitation Act in 1973. The Rehabilitation Act was followed by a [series of federal actions](#) aimed at improving representation of people with disabilities in the federal workforce, including the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's (EEOC) Management Directive 715 (MD-715), Executive Order 13548, and most notably the 2017 final rule amending federal agencies affirmative action [requirements under section 501](#) of the Act. In order to achieve this goal, it is important to consider which employment practices are most impactful to recruit, hire, retain, and advance qualified people with disabilities.

## LEVERAGING HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICES

Results from research at Cornell University's Yang Tan Institute on Employment and Disability revealed how to improve existing workforce practices in the Federal Government.<sup>i</sup> Using data on agency practices and outcomes reported to the EEOC on MD-715, researchers found 3 of 13 disability-related practices held a statistically significant association with higher percentages of people with disabilities in the workforce:

- 1. Centralized provision of accommodations.** Agencies with a centralized program for providing accommodations had an average representation of employees with disabilities *1.1 percentage points higher than other agencies.*
- 2. Analysis of trends in compensation.** Agencies that regularly analyze compensation trends by employee disability status, and sought to correct inequities, had an average representation of employees with disabilities *1.2 percentage points higher than other agencies.*
- 3. Analysis of trends of the effects of management.** Agencies that had systems of accountability for evaluating manager effectiveness regarding workforce disability employment goals had an average representation of employees with disabilities *1.2 percentage points higher than other agencies.*



## GOOD TO KNOW:

Cornell researchers noted that large agencies and those with a greater proportion of employees in higher pay grades were more likely to have practices associated with improved outcomes. This finding has implications for smaller agencies, which may need to ensure their practices are reflective of those found in larger agencies.

## INCLUSION AND ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS

The study also looked at dimensions of inclusion and engagement via analysis of data from the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey.<sup>ii</sup> They discovered that disability status impacted employee experiences and attitudes. Employees with disabilities expressed lower satisfaction in the areas of:

- Quality of supervisor relationship
- Professional development opportunity
- Fairness in rewards and recognition
- Procedural justice
- Job resources and demands
- Trust in senior leadership
- Task significance
- Job satisfaction

These results provide areas for examination by federal employers implementing disability employment initiatives designed to retain and advance employees with disabilities.

Researchers also found that other employee characteristics impacted job satisfaction. For example, those with both military experience and a disability expressed greater satisfaction than people with disabilities who lacked military experience. In addition, women with disabilities rated their federal work experiences lower in all areas. These findings imply that:

- » It appears military veterans with disabilities experience their work environment differently from other employees with disabilities. Finding out why may lead to practices that can improve inclusion efforts across the board.
- » Federal agencies should examine why women with disabilities are typically more unhappy in their federal jobs and determine if it should collect more data in this area.



### GOOD TO KNOW:

Researchers have found overrepresentation of people with disabilities in low-grade, lower paying positions across the sector, in all size agencies.

## IMPROVING REPRESENTATION OF PEOPLE WITH TARGETED DISABILITIES

Affirmative action rules under Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act require a goal of 2 percent representation for people who have targeted disabilities such as:

- Blindness
- Deafness
- Dwarfism
- Epilepsy
- Missing Extremities
- Partial or Complete Paralysis
- Psychiatric Disability
- Severe Intellectual Disability
- Significant Mobility Impairment

A 2018 report by the RAND Corporation<sup>iii</sup> on barriers to employing and retaining employees with targeted disabilities in the Federal Government found several areas in which practices could be improved or enhanced to create better outcomes for candidates and employees with these specific disability types. Notably, researchers found that job applicants with disabilities in Department of Defense agencies have equivalent qualifications to their non-disabled peers, and that people with targeted disabilities generally apply for the same type of jobs as other candidates, but again found that these employees were disproportionately employed in lower pay grades.

The report recommends several strategies to increase representation of people with targeted disabilities in the federal sector:

**Increase the candidate pipeline with more effective outreach to college students.** Proactively use DOL’s Office of Disability Employment Policy and the Department of Defense Workforce Recruitment Program,<sup>iv</sup> and build stronger relationships with campus student disability services offices or disability advocacy organizations.

**Eliminate bias in promotion efforts.** Survey respondents indicated the perception of bias among leadership could impact opportunities for employees with targeted disabilities. Steps must be taken to educate the workforce about employees with disabilities, and to highlight the accomplishments of employees in targeted disability categories.

**Consistently use the Schedule A hiring authority.** Ensure that all managers have a solid understanding of the Schedule A process to eliminate misinformation about its use. Some agencies implemented a process automatically referring qualified Schedule A applicants for job openings.

**Provide accurate information and resources regarding accommodations.** The misperception that employees with disabilities are difficult and expensive to accommodate can create unwillingness among managers to hire and promote them. Reasonable accommodation training, and centralized accommodations funding/ processes can mitigate this barrier and create more universally inclusive work environments.



### GOOD TO KNOW:

According to the RAND report, 53 percent of Military Veterans with a disability rating of 30 percent or higher do not report their disability type upon hire. This may have implications for accurate reporting of affirmative action goals for targeted disabilities, and indicates the need for further informational outreach to this group.

For more information and resources on  
employing people with disabilities in the Federal Government,  
visit AskEARN.org:

<https://askearn.org/topics/federal-state-government-employment/federal-government-employment/>

<sup>i</sup> Enayati, H., von Schrader, S., Erikson, W., Bruyere, S.M. (2019). Minimizing discrimination and maximizing inclusion: lessons learned from the federal workforce and federal subcontractors. In employment and disability: issues, innovations and opportunity. Labor and Employment Relations Association, Champaign, IL. Susanne M. Bruyere.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iii</sup> Matthews, Miriam, David Schulker, Kimberly Curry Hall, Abigail Haddad, and Nelson Lim, Representation of Persons with Targeted Disabilities: An Analysis of Barriers to Employment in the Department of Defense Civilian Workforce. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2297.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2297.html)

<sup>iv</sup> The Workforce Recruitment Program for College Students with Disabilities (WRP) is a recruitment and referral program that connects federal and private sector employers nationwide with highly motivated college students and recent graduates with disabilities who are eager to prove their abilities in the workplace through summer or permanent jobs. <https://www.wrp.gov/wrp>