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Factors Influencing Inclusion of People with Disabilities at Workplace: The Unheard Voices

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Abstract

In recent times, workforce diversity is gaining momentum in the organizational research. However, inclusion of people with disabilities as diverse workforce has received less attention than other categories such as gender or race. The aim of this research is to explore the factors influencing inclusion of people with disabilities at workplace. Using 31 semi-structured interviews of people with disabilities, various factors that facilitate their successful inclusion at workplace were found. Data was analyzed thematically and resulted in identification of four themes. Key influencers identified were inclusive pathways that encourage participation of people with disabilities in terms of organizational culture reflective of top management support for developing and implementing policies, practices. People with disabilities' need for due accommodation, adequate job-fit and the integral role of other stakeholders in supporting them were considered to influence their inclusion at workplace. The insights gained from the study hold importance for several stakeholders for designing and implementing strategies, interventions and policies to facilitate effective inclusion of underrepresented diverse workforce.

Keywords: Diversity, Inclusion, Organization, People with disabilities, Workforce

1. Introduction

Workforce diversity is gaining recognition as a core management concept. The growing literature demonstrates that diverse individuals are productive sources of organizational value creation (Kulkarni *et al.*, 2016) bringing compendium of competencies and skills that are difficult to imitate. The term “workforce diversity” recognizes that individuals differ on account of several ways, such as age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, disability (Kossek *et al.*, 2005). Recent research provides evidence on inclusion of diverse workforce with worldwide success in case of gender equality (Shen *et al.*, 2009), race in western context (Joshi and Roh, 2007) yet, people with disabilities, one of the highest demographic minorities continue to be under represented in organizations till date (Kulkarni and Rodrigues, 2014).

The present paper outlines organizational factors that influence inclusion of people with disabilities. More specifically, through in-depth interviews with 31 employees with disabilities across the State of Jammu and Kashmir in India, which has disability rate higher than that of national

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average (Census, 2011). This study seeks to contribute to the existing literature on disability inclusion by investigating the factors that influence the inclusion of people with disabilities at their workplace through the following ways. Firstly, previous research is centered around ascertaining employers' perspective towards hiring people with disabilities (Zissi *et al.*, 2007). Secondly, this study aims to address the call on field research in disability literature as majority of the studies are laboratory based (Colella, 1996). Thirdly, research on workforce diversity has mainly focused on western context (Cooke and Saini, 2012). As a leading emerging market, India is also facing increasing diversity and inclusion issues (Cooke and Saini, 2012; Kulkarni *et al.*, 2016). Till date, to our knowledge there are limited studies on disability and inclusion in Indian context (Kulkarni *et al.*, 2016). Finally, the paper also contributes to the literature on diversity and inclusion by noting how employees with disabilities experience inclusion, a topic having implications for both employers and human resource practitioners. Thus, the focus of this study is on identification of factors that facilitate their organizational inclusion.

2. Literature Review

Diversity management found its origin as a human resource intervention owing to demographic change (Mor Barak, 2005) and equal opportunity management to add business value. Theoretical work on disability as component of diversity may have increased after passage of laws protecting people with disabilities against discrimination, but research evidence is somewhat sparse (Shore *et al.*, 2009). Despite several interventions aiming at employment integration for people with disabilities, they continue to be overlooked and underutilized in the global economy (Lengnick-Hall *et al.*, 2008). Literature suggests that on attaining employment, many employees with disabilities do not reach their potential or feel included (Kulkarni and Rodrigues, 2014) in organizations. This points out to the incongruity between what people with disabilities need for effective integration at workplace and what is offered to them in the organizations.

3. Disability as Diversity in Indian Context

There are over 21 million people with disabilities in India (Census, 2011) and only 34 percent are employed. To include this underutilized talent pool, the Government of India has undertaken several steps such as reservation of 3% in vacancies in identified posts within governmental organizations including several public sector organizations and incentives for private sector organizations to encourage hiring of people with disabilities. Disability is defined as 'an impairment caused by some bodily functioning' (Confederation of Indian Industry, 2009). The same source highlights that despite these initiatives, the organizations in India do not have understanding about the utilization of people with disabilities and the terms of inclusion in employment. Therefore, it becomes imperative to understand how do people with disabilities experience inclusion on entry in the labor market.

Inclusion from an individual's perspective focuses on perceptions and feelings of acceptance amongst diverse workforce. Inclusion has been defined as the 'degree to which an employee is accepted and treated as an insider by others in a work system' (Pelled *et al.*, 1999). Kulkarni and Rodrigues (2014) found how top 100 organizations in India communicated their engagement with disability through the annual reports, which showed though, public sector organizations hire people with disabilities out of institutional pressure (Robert and Harlan, 1996) but private sector organizations preferred engaging with disability issues in the form of corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities. A comparative study on India and China explored the initiatives undertaken by multinational organizations to increase workplace inclusion of people with disabilities (Kulkarni *et al.*, 2016). It resulted in findings that employers included people with disabilities for harnessing diversity and multi-stakeholder engagement including top management, employee groups and other non-governmental organizations. Therefore, previous studies in India, though limited in

number, have focused on employers' perspective towards people with disabilities in multinational organizations, yet the studies on employees' perspective on inclusion and influences remain unexplored. Hence, the study has been undertaken to explore the perceptions and experiences of people with disabilities regarding inclusion in their workplace.

4. Methods

A descriptive study was undertaken using qualitative study. The experience of inclusion in organizations by people with disabilities was explored through semi-structured interviews. Purposive and convenience sampling was used to select respondents that allowed adequate representation and in depth focus on each category, and data was collected until saturation was reached in responses (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The final sample consisted of thirty one respondents of which nineteen were males and eleven were females. These respondents from twenty two organizations had full time working experience across six industries. Specifically, seven respondents were from education sector, six from hospitality sector, five from health sector, five from manufacturing, four from telecommunications and two from wholesale trade. Thirty of those interviewed had held more than one job and only one did not have any previous experience of work. Seventeen respondents were in the age range 21-40 years and fourteen respondents were aged 41-60. Fifteen respondents were presently employed in public sector and sixteen respondents were employed in private sector. Seventeen respondents had locomotor disability, twelve had visual impairment and two suffered from intellectual disability.

5. Data Analysis

Data was transcribed verbatim and examined using thematic analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Both the researchers independently read the transcriptions several times and coded the data line-by-line to identify emerging concepts. These concepts were identified as they emerged from the existing data and were not preconceived or restricted. These concepts eventually led to categorization of themes that are discussed below. The thematic analysis was done using spreadsheet taking into consideration the small qualitative data set (Kulkarni, 2013).

6. Findings

Respondents participating in this study identified several factors that facilitated their inclusion in their respective workplaces. The findings demonstrate their inclusion experiences through data excerpts on organizational factors that their inclusion in a manner that increases personal and organizational success.

Organizational Culture

Findings indicated that top management commitment is vital for an organizational culture that recognizes diversity, and entrusts resources to implement diversity policies. Majority of the respondents explained the importance of top management commitment for ensuring a work environment of acceptance and respect for people with disabilities. This complements the prior research where the human resource practitioners lay emphasis on top management commitment for communication of inclusive work environment (Kulkarni *et al.*, 2016). In line, one respondent quoted, 'You know..if the people at the top do not believe in us then the message of non-acceptance flows from business head to the manager.. to supervisor.. to peon..We will never feel like we belong here...always out of place..always different..always at mercy'.

While attempting to integrate as one amongst the organizational members, some respondents perceived employers attitude as one of the most important factors for belonging to an organization. One respondent when referring to positive employer attitude stated that '*[Employer]*

Sir treats me like I am no different from [Co-worker] which makes me feel good in contrast to my previous organization where I was often given the “other” treatment..you know like I was a burden or something’.

Therefore, organizational practices have outcomes or consequences for people with disabilities. Another respondent illustrated evidence of this by stating, ‘[Organization] has written policies for hiring people with disabilities and another one for non discrimination...so the acceptance for people like us is high here as compared to other organizations where we, disabled face barrier in gaining entry in organizations..let alone inclusion’.

Accommodation

The interviews excerpts indicate that accommodation in terms of workplace accessibility, built-in environment, assistive technologies and flexible work schedules has emerged as a critical factor. Some of them have shared instances when they could not take up certain employment or even had to quit a job because of lack of accommodation in their organization. There are several positive instances that have resulted in their successful workplace inclusion. For example, one respondent with a physical impairment quoted, *‘Because of my limitation, I cannot climb stairs. My manager ensured that my work station is on the ground floor ..also I can access the washrooms easily’.*

The findings suggest that accommodation needs vary according to type of disability and ‘one size fits all’ approach cannot be applied across different disability types. While people with physical or mobility impairments prefer open workspaces but the same may pose problems for people with visual impairments. A respondent with a visual impairment relied on the technical assistance [software] in the bank to perform his job who was quoted saying, *‘Honestly, I feel lucky that [organization] has taken the initiative of not just hiring but also accommodating people with visual impairment.....’.*

Particular examples of flexible work schedules came from respondents with severe mobility impairments which included the facility of working part-time when needed, reduced hours of work, leave benefits.

Support Network

Interestingly, respondents highlighted the importance of support from their supervisors, co-workers or human resource officials for inclusive work environment. Reflecting from their personal accounts, respondents seek support depending on their needs with specific work tasks, accessing workplace facilities, accommodation requests, socialization activities. For example respondents quoted, ‘I was scared to even try going to social events thinking people would make fun of me. But my team members encouraged me to go with them and gradually that fear disappeared.. Now, I feel like.. I am one of them’.

[Co-worker] often helps in getting signature on the file [work] knowing my mobility limitation. He never says no..He might say, I will get it done later but never refuses’.

For some of the respondents the quality of relationship with their immediate supervisor was instrumental in feeling inclusion at workplace. One respondent quoted, ‘When I work harder than the others and the supervisor appreciates the effort I have put in by sharing it as a success story..I feel proud, respected and an equal member in the organization’. It was found that employees working in organizations with dedicated human resource function appeared to feel they had someone they could easily approach in case of any problem. One respondent recounted, ‘... Initially, I felt so lost here..then I spoke to the HR Manager and I realized she is someone I can approach in case of any problem, big or small’.

Table 1: Organizational Factors Influencing Inclusion of People with Disabilities

Theme	Sub-Themes	N	Description
Organizational Culture	Top Management Attitude	25	- Positive employer attitude and commitment towards inclusion
	Fair Treatment	17	- Equality and non discrimination in terms of recruitment and benefits
	Policies & Practices	15	- Designed formal policies for recruitment and development
	Values & Ethos	08	- Acceptance of diversity & disability friendly language
Accommodation	Workplace Accessibility	22	- Transport and location of workstation and basic amenities
	Built-in Environment	12	- Ergonomic design of the organization
	Assistive Technologies	04	- Adjustments or investing in equipments or software
	Flexible Work Schedules	04	- Work timings & leave
Support Network	Role of Co-worker	19	- Help in job tasks and socialization
	Role of Supervisor	15	- Formal and informal support; tolerance and caring
	Human Resource & Personnel	03	- Guidance and handling concerns
Job Fit	Matching Skills	15	- Focus on their capability over disability and provide job
	Training & Career Development	08	- Training for further career development
	Flexibility In Job	02	- Allowing for job change after entry or training

Job Fit

While people with disabilities share an equal desire for job as people without disabilities but they are more hesitant in looking for a job due to fear of not finding a suitable job (Ali *et al.*, 2011). This is reflective of the recognition that job expectations vary depending on the employee's skill set, education and training. Some of the respondents expressed satisfaction due to organizational efforts on matching their skills with that of jobs available. One respondent stated, 'I was hired under quota and given a job, I did not specialize in. I have expertise in teaching Urdu language but my job required me to teach science and maths to primary school students..I was glad I had a government job..but later when there was a vacancy there..My senior official addressed the formal request and I started teaching Urdu which I enjoy the most'. This indicates how employees were allowed to switch their jobs after recruitment to utilize the available talent effectively. Respondents who developed disability during employment preferred flexibility in their jobs. A respondent with a muscular-skeletal impairment quoted, 'I developed disability on the job 4 years ago but the organization ensured that I did not quit my job because of my disability. I was given a sitting job of database management in place of my old job of floor supervisor'.

Participation in training programs or equal promotional opportunities appeared critical to many respondents for sense of belongingness and inclusion in organization. A respondent cited a specific example: ‘...there was a workshop on culinary skills in [place] and only two respondents were allowed from each organization. I was sure I would not be considered due to my disability but the moment Mr.[Manager] said..[Respondent’s Name] ..I think you should go.. That is the best appreciation I could have received’.

Overall, organizational factors comprised of specific variables such as top management support in formulation and implementation of inclusive policies pertaining to recruitment, inclusive culture reflective of acceptance and harnessing diversity, accommodation adjustments in the form of workplace accessibility, support network and adequate job matching affect inclusion of people with disabilities at workplace.

7. Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the organization specific factors that influence the inclusion of people with disabilities at workplace. The literature suggests that long term consequences of disability inclusion can eventually lead to business success (Kulkarni *et al.*, 2016), understanding the factors that influence their inclusion in organizations is important to design successful interventions and strategies that facilitate their effective integration. Most notably, the results in this study confirm the integral role of top management support in building a healthy corporate culture and accommodating the needs of support in terms of building relationships or workplace accessibility for their adequate inclusion. Other theme that emerged from the study was the need for enhancing individual work related outcomes through job matching or training for further career development. Therefore, diversity is leveraged through inclusion, which requires employees to feel valued and included by an organization.

8. Limitations and Implications for Future Research

The limitations of the study must be noted while interpreting the findings. First, the interviews were conducted only in the State of Jammu & Kashmir in India, and the sample is relatively small in size. The sample did not include those with hearing or speech impairment owing to researchers’ limited communication ability in their language. Further, the focus was only on organization-specific factors that help in experiencing inclusion overlooking other individual related dimensions. Also, in future, researchers may collect quantitative data to empirically test the findings of this study and consequences of inclusion for organizations. This study has implications for India considering the high disability rate of 2.1 percent and higher disability incidence of 2.87 percent in the State of Jammu and Kashmir (Census, 2011). These findings offer opportunities to researchers, policy makers and management practitioners about the impact of organizational factors on individual’s inclusion experiences. Therefore, factors such as disability inclusive culture, support from organizational members and adequate accommodation and job fit approach influence the inclusion of people with disabilities at workplace.

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