CHANGING ATTITUDES AND POLICY:
EXPANDING EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

A RESEARCH PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTERS OF ARTS
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BALL STATE UNIVERSITY
MUNCIE, INDIANA
DECEMBER 2011
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The history of America includes many social and civil rights struggles and conflicts, seeded mostly in lack of knowledge and centuries-old stereotypes. One fight for equality that has not received as much public attention as others through the years is the movement for disability rights. Today, people with disabilities remain at the lower end of the social class ladder, perhaps most significantly because misperceptions limit the possibilities and opportunities presented to them during their younger years. While sometimes unintentional, the labeling of people with disabilities continues, and they are pushed into certain career fields with limited earning potential, such as teaching and social services. People with disabilities are underrepresented in higher paying fields, such as science and engineering, and they struggle to find employment that pays a living wage (National Science Foundation 10). To close the gap in earning potential between people with disabilities and the population as a whole, sweeping changes need to occur both in public perception and in public policy.

In order to address what changes should be made for full integration of people with disabilities into the American workforce, this paper will first explore the history of the disability movement in the United States, then review former and current policy relevant to the discussion, most prominently the Americans with Disabilities Act, followed by an examination of trends in education and employment for people with disabilities. Next, public attitudes and perceptions that influence where and in what fields people with disabilities are employed will be analyzed, and lastly, steps to effect change will be identified.
According to the University of California, Berkeley, a pioneering and leading educational institution in the field of disability studies, the disability rights movement emphasizes that "people with disabilities are human beings with inalienable rights and that these rights can only be secured through collective political action" ("Introduction"). Comparisons are often made with other civil rights struggles, particularly those of the last century, by those who have been denied equality, independence, autonomy, and full access to society (The Disability Rights Movement).

Over the course of American history, like other minority groups, people with disabilities have been demoralized, feared, mocked, institutionalized, and pitied ("Introduction"). Legally sanctioned and publicly acceptable oppression has prevented children with disabilities from being able to attend public schools, while adults with disabilities have experienced discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations. Less than four decades ago, sterilizing people with disabilities without their consent was legal in some states, many of which also prohibited people with certain disabilities from going out in public or getting married. The judgment was worse for women, racial and sexual minorities with disabilities. For example, Barbara Mandell Altman wrote that women with disabilities experienced "a compounding of the dependent identity already associated with the female role" (75). A sweeping, organized and multi-group effort would be needed in order to move society toward equality for people with disabilities.

There is not academic consensus regarding when the disability movement began. The literature indicates that individual disability rights advocates are known to have been present as early as the 1800s, with some increased yet relatively undocumented organized
activity during the Great Depression (Longmore and Goldberger 888). However, most scholars agree that coordinated disability rights action truly began in the late 1960s, when the civil rights and women’s rights movements provided encouragement and a model for success. Author David Pfeiffer wrote that people with disabilities routinely have their civil rights violated because others see them as “abnormal” and unlike them (179). As Paul Longmore, one of the nation’s first disability history scholars once noted, the disability movement was born when people realized that, “whatever the social setting and whatever the disability, people with disabilities share a common experience of social oppression” similar to that of other minority groups (“Introduction”).

Following the lead of other social equality efforts, the disability rights movement gained traction when advocates began to challenge the broadly accepted misconceptions that people with disabilities are unintelligent, incapable of working or caring for themselves, and that they have nothing to contribute to society. As journalist Joseph Shapiro wrote, “They would challenge the notion that they led tragic or lesser lives. And they would proudly call themselves ‘disabled,’” (“The New Civil Rights”). Something else the disability movement had in its favor was the fact that people with disabilities represent a minority group that anyone can join at any time, often without prediction (Martin). Fewer than six percent of Americans with disabilities were born with their disabilities (Shapiro, “The New Civil Rights”). Correspondingly, prominent disability expert and attorney Gregory Fehribach writes, “Maybe it’s an aging baby boomer in need of a joint replacement, a child with autism, or a life forever changed by an unforeseen accident. A disability is simply not a condition of a select few.”
Roberta Ann Johnson argues that a change in the way Americans think was pivotal to the success of the disability movement, including de-stigmatization and increased feelings of self worth among people with disabilities. She notes that the government forced people with disabilities to struggle, and when the struggle became public, it created a new consciousness (40). Longmore agrees, saying that it was society, not people with disabilities, that needed repairing (Shapiro, “Paul Longmore”).

Because of their movement’s advances over the past several decades, people with disabilities are today a federally protected class. The first legislation relating specifically to people with disabilities was enacted after World War I, before what might be considered the modern disability movement, to help wounded soldiers who were returning home. It was amended after World War II, the Korean War, and again after the Vietnam War, to correspond with the public support for those who had fought and with the advancements in health care that made new treatments available (Welch and Palames). Later, a significant piece of legislation, the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, would include civil rights language and receive less than universal support. Section 504 under Title V of the bill read, “No otherwise qualified handicapped individual in the United States, shall solely by reason of his handicap, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” Although President Richard Nixon vetoed it twice, the bill was eventually signed after the same diverse civil rights groups and social justice organizations that provided the inspiration for the disability movement started to champion the cause (Jmorgant). Those providing support included labor organizations, the Salvation Army, the Black Panthers, gay rights groups, and a Latino
civil rights group. In addition, it is important to note that the news media’s interest and sensitivity in reporting helped to win the support of political heavyweights and other influential leaders of the time (Shapiro, *No Pity* 40).

The partnerships that formed during the disability movement’s early years remained intact as new organizations supporting the rights of people with disabilities were created (Pfeiffer 165). For example, many that advocated for the rights of the blind, deaf, paralyzed, and paraplegic as singular organizations joined forces to create the American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities. Many of the leaders of the new coalition had experience organizing in the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, the anti-war movement, and in politics. While the organization no longer exists today, it was the first known all-disabilities inclusive group of its kind.

Ultimately, according to Joseph Shapiro’s article “The New Civil Rights,” the definitive manifestation of the diversity movement and what he calls the “independent-living philosophy” is the Americans with Disabilities Act, known commonly as the ADA. The ADA is a comprehensive piece of legislation passed in 1990, most of which went into effect starting in 1992, that prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in employment, transportation, public accommodation, communications, and governmental activities (“Americans with Disabilities Act”). Shapiro notes that former United States Congressman Anthony Coelho, who also is former chairman of the President’s Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, credits the ADA being passed to the “hidden armies” of people in powerful positions who have had their own personal experience with disability (“The New Civil Rights”).
The ADA considers a disability to be “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity,” or, “if you have a history of such a disability, or if an employer believes that you have such a disability, even if you don’t” (Livermore and Goodman 21). One of the goals in developing the ADA was to reduce some of the barriers to employment for people with disabilities and those who are associated with people with disabilities, such as family members. The ADA applies to all aspects of employment, such as hiring, firing, benefits, pay, and promotion, and requires that employers make reasonable accommodations for employees with disabilities. However, according to the report by Gina Livermore and Nanette Goodman, the ADA does allow for exceptions. If cost prohibits the employer from making the accommodations, the change is not required. An employer can also refuse to hire a person with a disability if the nature of the disability will not allow the person to perform the essential duties of the position (21).

According to the World Institute on Disability, “Disability policy experts and people with disabilities agree that even as the ADA has leveled the playing field in areas such as voting, education and activities of daily living, the rate of employment and economic participation of people with disabilities has not budged” (“Employment and Economic Growth”). Since the implementation of this legislation nearly 20 years ago, there have been numerous assessments on how it has changed employment for people with disabilities. These studies have been both qualitative and quantitative, and they find mixed evidence regarding its impact (Livermore and Goodman 21-3). In 2007, the National Council on Disability released the findings of a study that included the review of publicly available documents and information, stakeholder interviews and focus groups,
and analyses of survey data to assess changes in perceptions and attitudes over time.

According to Livermore and Goodman, the intent of the legislation has not yet been fully realized:

The report concludes there is evidence that people with disabilities are experiencing less discrimination and greater accommodation on the job, but they do not appear to be experiencing increases in hiring. The report also notes that many people with disabilities, employers, and businesses still do not understand major provisions of the ADA, particularly the employment provisions, and that this lack of understanding is reducing the effectiveness of the legislation. (23)

While the ADA exists to provide protection under the law, the American Psychological Association reports that people with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed and live in poverty than the population as a whole. It is estimated that two thirds of people with disabilities want to work, yet they experience one of their greatest challenges in securing employment. According to Tony Pugh, current conditions are especially tough. Pugh identifies increased competition from non-disabled workers, discrimination, and the economy’s negative impact on the available number of jobs as creating one of recent history’s bleakest employment climates for people with disabilities. Pugh also notes that the number of people with disabilities who are currently working has fallen from approximately 35 percent in the early 1980s to just 21 percent today.

Furthermore, the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2006 American Community Survey reveals significant disparities between incomes for people with and without disabilities. Median earnings for people with no disability are more than $28,000 compared to the
$17,000 median income reported for individuals with a disability. For individuals who are visually impaired, unemployment rates exceed 70 percent (American Psychological Association). The U.S. Department of Labor reports that only one quarter of employers have at least one employee with a disability, and 20 percent of employers say the reason they have not hired more people with disabilities is their “own discrimination, prejudice, or reluctance” (32). Data also show that some of the nation’s largest employers do not place importance on inclusiveness for people with disabilities. An examination of Fortune 100 companies determined that people with disabilities are not valued in some of America’s most successful businesses, with only three of those companies including people with disabilities in their discussion of diversity in their annual reports (U.S. Dept. of Labor 18).

Multiple studies confirm that employer attitudes contribute to the high unemployment rate for people with disabilities. In one example, employers report having preconceived ideas about what people with disabilities are capable of doing and the costs associated with making accommodations (Hernandez and McDonald). Similarly, an online survey of human resources professionals representing companies of all sizes reveals that 58 percent say that their organizations employ people with disabilities, but only 19 percent say they actively recruit people with disabilities. In this same survey, organizations report that to meet the needs of people with disabilities, the most common accommodations they make are providing special parking or transportation access, restructuring jobs, and modifying the work environment. The least common accommodations they make are acquiring or modifying training materials, providing qualified readers or interpreters, and changing how people are supervised (U.S. Dept. of
Another research team, which conducted a survey of human resources and project managers about their perceptions of hiring persons with disabilities, found that this group of professionals holds negative perceptions related to the “productivity, social maturity, interpersonal skills, and psychological adjustment of persons with disabilities” (American Psychological Association).

Along these lines, it is also important to examine what type of corporate culture is most conducive to hiring and retaining people with disabilities. Corporate culture is reflected in the tone of an organization, which includes both formal and informal policies and practices, and a culture can have a positive or negative impact on employment, advancement prospects, and the day-to-day experience in the workplace for people with and without disabilities. The cultures most conducive to the employment of people with disabilities might include an environment that has flexible workspaces and work hours, a budget that allocates funding for accommodations, or a leadership team that recognizes and embraces the value of each employee’s differences (U.S. Dept. of Labor 19).

While businesses must watch their bottom lines, the literature reveals that attitudes and culture are what truly prevents progress in employing people with disabilities. A study of Chicago-area employers found that while employer misperceptions often make it difficult for people with disabilities to obtain employment, the costs associated with accommodations for workers with disabilities are often minimal, averaging $313, and that the cost is considered “well worth the expense.” The same study found that employees with disabilities from the health care, retail and hospitality sectors were “just as dependable and productive as employees without disabilities” and that
employees with disabilities had nearly identical job performance ratings as employees without disabilities (Hernandez and McDonald).

Although this and other studies indicate that employees with disabilities perform equally to employees without disabilities and do not cause financial strain on employers, job opportunities remain scarce and people with disabilities remain at the low end of the socioeconomic ladder, which is measured as a combination of education, income, and occupation (American Psychological Association). In America, the poverty rate among people with disabilities is nearly twice that of those without disabilities (Martin). Ed Roberts, one of the leaders of the disability movement and longtime advocate for disability rights once said, “We can only really be free and take our place in this society if we have economic freedom, which means careers” (“Employment and Economic Growth”). Yet, the careers that would most likely contribute to financial independence and the accumulation of wealth are not common ones for people with disabilities because society has a low expectation of people with disabilities (Shapiro, “The New Civil Rights”). Anecdotally, it is noted that well-meaning individuals often put people with disabilities in a silo of jobs that seem to be most relevant, including social work, teaching, and non-profit work (Newman); however, these careers are not typically associated with high salaries. People with disabilities are underrepresented in many high-earning career fields, including those in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, all of which are also known to be challenging academically (Burgstahler, Moore, and Crawford 1).

Education is a basic component in future career choice and, ultimately, success. However, inequalities for people with disabilities remain in this country’s education system. In particular, significant disparities exist between those achieving higher degrees.
According to the 2006 U.S. Census, approximately 6 percent of people with disabilities between the ages of 16 and 64 have obtained a bachelors degree or higher, while 17 percent of individuals in the same age category with no disability have attained the same educational status (American Psychological Association). Perhaps this is due to the many obstacles students with disabilities encounter throughout the course of their education. A longitudinal research study conducted at the University of Washington reports that these obstacles include lack of access to adaptive software or hardware, absence of mentors, and lack of involvement in extracurricular science, technology, engineering, and mathematics service groups, clubs, or other related activities (Burgstahler, Moore, and Crawford 2).

Still, even if all the aforementioned inequities, obstacles and challenges were remedied and people with disabilities were treated as equals in employment and education, one great barrier to accumulating wealth would remain. Federal law limits the amount of income a person with a disability can earn and still receive the government assistance that pays for things such as life-dependent equipment; for example, a ventilator needed for breathing assistance (Shapiro, “Paul Longmore”). Jessica Martin writes that the rules that govern Supplemental Security Income, food stamps and Medicaid programs severely limit the amount of assets a person can have without losing their benefits. These income and asset limitations are work disincentives and contribute to the high unemployment rate of people with disabilities (Shapiro, “Paul Longmore”). In addition, people are confused by the law. A 2005-published study of workers with disabilities indicates that it is unclear to them how the rules of these government programs work, and therefore the people may not seek employment out of fear of losing their benefits.
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(Hartnett). But, they are not the only ones confused by the system. Many providers of services, family members, tax preparers, and employers have asked for education and training so that they can provide the best counsel to those who are working or want to work but still need some level of public support. On top of the work disincentives, other barriers to wealth include the stereotype that people with disabilities are not smart enough to know how to manage money, environmental barriers that limit physical access to banks and other financial services providers, and public services such as accessible transportation to those institutions (Martin).

While America has come a long way, changes still need to occur, both in public perception and in public policy, in order for people with disabilities to see more broad employment opportunities, full integration in the American workforce, and opportunities for economic advancement. The progress legislators have made in shaping policy to date has been fragmented and, in many cases, counterproductive to promoting self-sufficiency. In *Dismantling the Poverty Trap: Disability Policy for the 21st Century* it is further argued that, “To make significant progress, it will be necessary to develop and implement system-wide reforms that fundamentally change support policies by replacing today’s obsolete policies that promote program dependence with policies that promote economic self-sufficiency” (Stapleton et al. 3).

If employment opportunities for people with disabilities are to be expanded, the real goal must be economic security. Educational programming must be enhanced, employers must be engaged, and federal disability policy must be significantly “transformed … to honor work and asset growth and full participation for all” (Hartnett). The approach must be holistic and policy reforms must address work disincentives.
Perhaps most importantly, though, reform must first address the public perception that people with disabilities simply are not capable of working (Stapleton et al. 3).

Accordingly, the initial step should be the implementation of an extensive, well-coordinated, measurable national public awareness campaign, conducted in order to garner public support for changes in policy and to work toward eliminating the long-lived stereotypes (Stapleton et al. 5). It should be far reaching, focusing on the capabilities of people with disabilities and utilizing different phases and components for the multiple, diverse audiences. These audiences include, to name just a few, the general public, business leaders, government leaders at the federal, state and local levels, key interest groups, colleges and universities, K-12 schools, and the social rights organizations that historically helped to propel the disability movement forward.

As part of this campaign, corporate public relations staff should be engaged nationwide through professional and accrediting organizations such as the Public Relations Society of America and the International Association of Business Communicators. These communication professionals would be encouraged to learn about and publicize their company’s practices in employing people with disabilities, both as part of the campaign and as part of their standard operations going forward. However, before going public, these companies must first get their own houses in order, ensuring that they include people with disabilities in their own diversity plans, and that they are using people-first language in all corporate materials. Then, strategies could include the placement of articles in the business sections of newspapers, magazines, and other publications, as well as on business-specific television and radio programs. Social media campaigns could also be effective if done well. The communications teams should work
to best position stories for the metro, news, and business sections rather than the softer health and lifestyle sections. Best practice examples of inclusiveness in corporate public relations strategy include FedEx-Kinko’s and Motorola (U.S. Dept. of Labor 14-5).

In addition, the national public awareness campaign should include messaging specifically for the business audience. Companies use data to make decisions, so their leaders need to be presented data that show stock prices are influenced by the public perception of a company’s social responsibility practices. They should also be provided with short case studies, taken from the existing literature, that demonstrate how people with disabilities bring innovation to workplaces and how the entire employee pool benefits from it (U.S. Dept. of Labor 54). While this describes only a brief overview of what a large awareness campaign might look like, it would require extensive planning and preparation. It should also include pre and post measurements to determine the efficacy and identify areas for future modification.

Best practices in education must also be replicated across the country if people with disabilities are to be more widely included in the American workforce. The educational paths students with disabilities are presented as options must be diversified and expanded to include fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), and other fields not normally suggested for people with disabilities. For example, a proven program at the University of Washington known as DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology) serves “to increase the successful participation of individuals with disabilities in challenging academic programs” (Burgstahler, Moore, and Crawford 4). Since 1992, DO-IT has worked to increase the success of people with disabilities in college and careers, including the
AccessSTEM and AccessComputing projects, which focus on increasing the number of people with disabilities who have degrees and careers in the STEM and computing fields. Published studies of the program suggest that DO-IT increases the overall perception of career options for participants, particularly girls, and that it promotes interest in STEM among students who did not initially have any interest in those fields (Burgstahler, Moore, and Crawford 2). Data also suggest that the DO-IT program may be filling the gap between the number of youth with disabilities and those without who study the STEM fields. In addition, many program participants who ultimately pursued non-STEM careers such as accounting, education, journalism, or law, benefited from the STEM knowledge and encouragement they gained through DO-IT activities (Burgstahler, Moore, and Crawford 3). It has also been documented through evaluation and research that DO-IT interventions have improved high school and college graduation rates and career participation for people with disabilities. Funding for DO-IT is primarily provided by the National Science Foundation, the State of Washington, and the U.S. Department of Education (Burgstahler, Moore, and Crawford 4).

While the DO-IT program is just one example, it is replicable as a whole or in part. Programs such as this, which have been studied and have demonstrated that they impact outcomes, should be more widely utilized. Knowing that today’s youth embrace diversity and generally support a more progressive social agenda (“Millennials”), community opportunities should be developed for students from all socioeconomic groups to work together, including students with disabilities. This would establish relationships between youth with disabilities and youth without disabilities, forming
bonds and encouraging the future leaders of this country to be inclusive in programming and policy making (American Psychological Association).

In addition to enhancements through the nation’s institutions of education, in order to change what employment opportunities exists for people with disabilities, employers must be deeply engaged in the discussion and acknowledge their part in the solution. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, human resources practitioners have the ability to positively impact the perception of employees with disabilities by sharing the available data on recruiting and employing people with disabilities (17). If educated themselves, they can be champions of change. The major human resources professional organizations, such as the Society for Human Resource Management with more than 255,000 members worldwide (SHRM), should supply information to their members about research findings. This might include indicating to members that for employees with disabilities, accommodations, job assignment flexibility, absenteeism, and safety are not the problems employers think they are (U.S. Dept. of Labor 17). Human resources professionals should also develop and encourage disability sensitivity training in their workplaces.

Furthermore, research indicates that employers feel they do not have enough experience to know how to find, hire and retain employees with disabilities, and that even if they wanted to hire more people with disabilities, they would not know where to look or how to effectively interview them, including how to ask about needs for accommodation (U.S. Dept. of Labor 33-4). Organizations like the Society for Human Resource Management should ensure professional development opportunities for their members exist and are promoted to address these important needs.
Employers should also make early efforts to provide support to new employees with disabilities, or those returning or continuing to work after the onset of a disability. It has been noted that this kind of onboarding support will likely lead to successful entry, or re-entry, into the workplace (Stapleton et al. 3). Employers can also provide early support through the provision of meaningful internships and work experiences to students with disabilities before employment. One successful model has been designed and funded by Microsoft (“Federal Internship Program”). The program is administered by the American Association of People with Disabilities and provides paid internships at federal government agencies for students with disabilities. The internships provide real work experience and enable students to enhance their skills in information technology. An added benefit of this program is that, according to Mariana Nork of the American Association of People with Disabilities, “It also opens the eyes of employers who may not realize that they are overlooking a largely untapped pool of talented workers” (“Federal Internship Program”). Through the program, interns receive a stipend, housing, transportation, any necessary accommodations, and career advice and mentoring from Microsoft employees with disabilities. This public-private partnership is an example of how innovative models can help shape both perceptions and employment practices.

There is no question that the government plays a significant role in the employment of people with disabilities via legislation and programs, but perhaps another way government can have a significant impact is by serving as a model employer (U.S. Dept. of Labor 9). For example, the Social Security Administration is the top federal employer of people with disabilities, which the U.S Department of Labor notes that is successful for many reasons. These include top down support and leadership buy-in, a
strategic plan that links to employment inclusion, managers and supervisors are educated about the benefits of employing people with disabilities, an aggressive recruitment strategy utilizing specific marketing tactics is used, there is a clear understanding of hiring flexibilities, and an accountability system is in place to track and measure the results of employment initiatives (51).

This model can be extended to other government agencies, and not necessarily just at the federal level. For example, Wishard Health Services is the public hospital for Marion County, Indiana. Its parent organization, the Health and Hospital Corporation of Marion County, is a municipal corporation established by Indiana Code 16-22-8 and operates Wishard, the Marion County Public Health Department, and Indianapolis Emergency Medical Services. Wishard is one of Indiana’s largest employers, with more than 4,000 staff members, and the hospital’s local economic impact is $1.2 billion annually (Wishard Facts). A champion for the underserved by mission, Wishard has demonstrated a strong commitment to diversity as part of the organization’s core values, and could replicate many of the Social Security Administration’s employment practices. Furthermore, Wishard’s funding comes from many sources, including local property tax collections. In hiring people with disabilities who might not otherwise be employed, Wishard is not only getting an innovative employee, but also creating a taxpayer. With employment in high paying health care jobs, such as coding or information technology, employees with disabilities may also purchase homes and pay property taxes, essentially giving the money Wishard receives to operate back to the county.

Wishard could also consider developing a robust internship program for students with disabilities, similar to the one at Microsoft. A teaching hospital, Wishard has
existing partnerships with more than 40 academic institutions and programs. With a new facility set for completion in December 2013, the main Wishard campus will be ADA compliant, providing less physical barriers for interns with disabilities, and state-of-the-art space in which to learn (Wishard Facts). In one recent anecdote, an actuarial science intern with a disability thrived during his time at Wishard, and the staff who worked with him report having a rich experience and changed attitudes about working alongside people with disabilities (Brown). A formalized partnership with Ball State University, another of Indiana’s historic institutions, would allow for the placement of more students with disabilities in meaningful internships and job shadowing opportunities at Wishard. In some cases, this might provide undecided students with a look at career options in health care that they had not previously considered, similar to the DO-IT program. While funding might be the greatest challenge to implementation, the partnership could seek grant or philanthropic support from Indianapolis-based corporations that share a commitment to people with disabilities, the State of Indiana, the federal government, and private foundations. It is possible that, through combining the best practices of others with what is already working well at Wishard, the partnership could be a national model with Wishard becoming one of the country’s foremost employers and internship providers for people with disabilities.

In addition to demonstrating leadership in hiring people with disabilities and providing internship opportunities for students with disabilities, government at all levels can serve as a role model by establishing standards for the inclusion of people with disabilities in their requirements for contracts for goods and services (U.S. Dept. of Labor 52). While it would not likely be without conflict due to limited supply, goals for
contracting, such as those often used to ensure the involvement of minority, women, and veteran owned businesses, should be expanded to include a category for businesses owned by people with disabilities. To best position this idea for success, minority, women, and veteran contractors should be approached first with an appeal for support. The history of camaraderie and solidarity among these oppressed groups could be used once again to bring about this change, even if the contract goal for businesses owned by people with disabilities starts out at one percent. In a $100 million project, one percent would be a contract worth $1 million.

Furthermore, the government can advance employment opportunities for people with disabilities by ensuring this issue is part of the national research agenda. The U.S. Department of Labor reports that, through its research institutions, the federal government conducts long-term investigations, such as the Framingham Heart Study, a longitudinal research study on cardiovascular disease that began in 1948 and continues today. The issues people with disabilities face must be studied over time to identify progress. The government, at least at the federal level, also has the infrastructure and resources to perform an accurate census of people with disabilities, which is essential to fully understanding the needs of the American people (52).

Potential research the federal government could fund that would be helpful in developing programs and policy to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities include the societal barriers experienced by persons with disabilities and how those barriers impact employment. In addition, a review of the literature produces very little research on organizational culture as it relates to disabilities. Much of the culture research focuses on disability culture itself. The U.S. Department of Labor notes that,
“Organizational culture, a root cause of poor employment prospects for people with disabilities, is wide open for research on the inclusion of people with disabilities into organizations” (30). The American Psychological Association asserts that all research should measure, report, and control for socioeconomic status so that as time progresses, any changes in socioeconomic status for people with disabilities can be identified and correlations made. A strong message should also be sent to all who conduct social research that people with disabilities and their family members should be included, no matter what they are studying, so that people with disabilities are represented (U.S. Dept. of Labor 50).

However, none of what is suggested throughout this paper will make any difference if sweeping policy changes are not made. First and foremost, the disincentives to work for people with disabilities must be reformed. The federal programs that provide assistance to people with disabilities include Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Medicare and Medicaid. The SSDI and Medicare programs are insurance, while SSI and Medicaid are needs-based and available for individuals with limited income and resources. The needs-based programs continue to structure benefits based on earnings. For example, if a person with a disability qualifies for a needs-based program but earns too much income by working, he or she risks losing the benefits, such as the power wheelchair that is too expensive to maintain without the added support and is what allows the person to leave the confines of his or her home (Sheldon). As Stapleton and Burkhauser write, “The message these programs send to people with disabilities who can work is that ‘we will help you as long as you don’t help yourself’” (400). These rules force people with disabilities into a true dilemma. Paul
Longmore suggests that in the federal government’s attempt to be efficient in determining disability and administering benefits, they have used a clinical model, which cannot appropriately address the nuances and complexities of disability. He also argues that policy makers are so worried about fraud that they abandon the needs of the people the policies are supposed to help (Why I Burned My Book 239-40).

Nonetheless, some small victories in the form of policy reform have been realized in the past decade. It was Paul Longmore himself who brought attention to the fact that people with disabilities were penalized for earning money through education, fellowships and grants. To make his point, in front of the Social Security Administration’s Los Angeles office, he burned the book it took him 10 years to write. Subsequently, in what became known as the Longmore Amendment, the law was changed to allow disabled authors to count publishing royalties as earned income (Itelson). Other reforms have included the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999, along with other regulatory changes, which provide support in the way of increased health care coverage and choices available to people with disabilities who work or want to work. It will be necessary to further study these reforms in order to know their impact to date. And, as importantly, if the reforms are to be passed, future improvement proposals must include elements that are generally supported by voters, such as “personal responsibility for one’s own actions and well-being, efficient use of public resources, and equitable distribution of benefits” (Stapleton et al. 3).

In conclusion, there is more to be done. Work is a fundamental part of life. Working is what allows people to exercise consumer choice and to do many of the things that bring them joy. Most of the time, working is the principal source of income, and
sometimes it means vital health insurance coverage. A person’s income also determines his or her social class and what opportunities will be available (Noble). Often times, work also introduces social interaction, which can serve as the foundation for lasting friendships and support. Still, not everyone in America experiences the freedom to work. To effect change, knowing the history of the disability movement in the United States is essential. It is crucial to understand where people with disabilities have been and what they’ve experienced. It is also imperative to recognize the implications and unintended consequences of relevant former and current policy, especially the Americans with Disabilities Act and the more recent reforms, to bring about thriving modifications. Legislators, educators, and employers need to know what public attitudes and perceptions continue to prevent progress for people with disabilities, and they must engage in partnerships built on best practices that encourage people with disabilities to work in diverse fields. Lastly, policy changes must address the disincentives to work that limit people with disabilities and prevent them from rising out of poverty.

People with disabilities emphasize that there is nothing tragic or pitiable in having a disability. Judith Heumann, Special Advisor for International Disability Rights at the U.S. Department of State says, “Disability only becomes a tragedy for us when society fails to provide the things we need to lead our lives – job opportunities or barrier-free buildings, for example” (Shapiro, “The New Civil Rights”). Current policy in this country prevents people with disabilities from being able to exercise an entrepreneurial spirit, the same spirit that is the backbone of America. Increasing the financial power of people with disabilities will allow them to move further in education, participate in home ownership, open small businesses, and themselves invest in assistive technology and the
environmental modifications they need (Martin); in other words, to be full participants
and contributors to our economy and our society. There seems like no better time than the
present to get going.
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