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ABILITIES, OPPORTUNITIES AND THE FUTURE OF WORK

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Inaugural Speakers

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John Hollenbeck
Michigan State University

Jerlando F. L. Jackson
Michigan State University

Keynote Speakers

Stephanie Beckhorn
Michigan Department of Labor
and Economic Opportunity

Brian Calley
Small Business
Administration of Michigan

Kathy West Evans
Council of State Administrators
of Vocational Rehabilitation

Kevin Fritz
Gusto, Inc.

James Reid
Honigman LLP

Keith Sonderling
Equal Employment
Opportunities Commission

James Thurston
ATOS

Gregg Vanderheiden
University of Maryland

Panelists

Jason Allen
Auto Club Group

Sam Bills
U.S. Equal Employment
Opportunity Commission

Diana Domenech
Disability:IN

Ethan Idzior
Dell Computers

Robin Jones
Great Lakes ADA Center

John Katona
General Motors

Bill Krieger
VFW National Home

Alison Sutton Levy
U.S. Access Board

Kristian Ridley
Blue Cross Blue Shield

Melissa Samaan
CVS Health

Lisa Webb Sharpe
Peckham Inc.

Wes Tyler
SourceAmerica

Jennifer Zuniga
Michigan Career and
Technical Institute

Conference Planning Committee

Alexandra Bergeron
Michigan State University

Nacsha Ealy
Michigan Rehabilitation Services

Sarah George
Peckham, Inc.

Beth Hammond
Michigan State University

Aryn Hillman
Michigan State University

Stacy Hickox
Michigan State University

Farnoosh Khodakarami
San Deigo State University

Hung Jen Kuo
Michigan State University

Sriram Narayanan
Michigan State University

Jenny Piatt
Michigan Rehabilitation Services

Connie Sung
Michigan State University

Principal Investigators and Key Collaborators (Order of Last Names)

Nacsha Ealy, Business Relations Consultant, Michigan Rehabilitation Services, Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity

Sarah George, Director of Mission Initiatives, Peckham Inc.

Beth Hammond, Managing Director, Center for Ethical & Socially Responsible Leadership, Michigan State University

Stacy Hickox, Instructor, Michigan State University, Department of Human Resources & Labor Relations, Co-Principal Investigator.

Farnoosh Khodakarami, Assistant Professor, San Diego State University, Department of Marketing, Co-Principal Investigator.

Hung Jen Kuo, Assistant Professor, Michigan State University, Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology, & Special Education

Sriram Narayanan, Eli Broad Endowed Professor of Supply Chain Management, Michigan State University – Principal Investigator

Jenny Piatt, Director - Business Network Division, Michigan Rehabilitation Services, Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity

Connie Sung, Professor, Michigan State University, Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology, & Special Education, Co-Principal Investigator.

Contact Information for questions:

Nacsha Ealy, Business Relations Consultant, Michigan Rehabilitation Services, Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity. ealyn1@michigan.gov

Sarah George, Director of Mission Initiatives, Peckham Inc. sgeorge@peckham.org

Sriram Narayanan, Eli Broad Endowed Professor of Supply Chain Management, sriram@msu.edu

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Executive Summary

There is a substantial shortfall in employment of individuals with disabilities. With more than 12% of the population having some form of disabilities, only 23.1% of the individuals with disabilities participated in the labor force in 2022 compared to 67.8% of individuals without; Similarly, unemployment rates for individuals with disabilities was 7.6% compared to 3.5% for those without. Finally, individuals with disabilities are also underemployed with 30% of them working part-time, compared to 16% for individuals without disabilities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Further, disability employment is also deeply connected to veterans in the nation. Out of the 18,592,457 veterans in 2023, veterans with service-connected disabilities numbered 5,417,012, more than 29% of the individual disabilities are service-related. In an environment where employment rates are constrained, making jobs more inclusive is a key element of expanding the productive labor pool. State vocational rehabilitation agencies have a key goal of helping businesses access the talent pool of individuals with disabilities. Accessing this talent pool not only serves economic development but also national security concerns.

At the heart of any truly accessible organization is a culture where people understand and respect the needs of individuals with disabilities in a manner that starts before individuals with disabilities are hired, to supporting them through their entire duration of stay and cultivating rewarding career opportunities. Supporting an individual across the entire life cycle of their stay within an organization requires an integrated and cross functional perspective that sees the employees first and is supported by effective integration of the different functional units within the organization. There are several stakeholders that are also a key part of the national support infrastructure for individuals with disabilities that include state vocational rehabilitation units, and other community rehabilitation partners that continue to work towards improving the employment footprint of individuals with disabilities in the community.

The first **Abilities, Opportunities and the Future of Work conference** was intended to highlight ideas, issues, and best practices with regard to disability employment that captured the key views of multiple organizational functional units, state vocational rehab organizations, and other nonprofits that support individuals with disabilities in a significant manner. This report summarizes the key deliberations of the conference. The conference was held at Michigan State University on the 17th and 18th of August. The conference was organized with a multi-stakeholder interdisciplinary perspective with tie in into organizations that directly employ and/or serve individuals with disabilities as its primary focus. The organizing partners include the *Center for Ethical and Socially Responsible Leadership (CESRL) at Broad College of Business*, Michigan State University; the *STRIDE (Services, Training, and Research for Independence and Desired Employment) Center at the College of Education*, Michigan State University, *Michigan Rehabilitation Services, Labor and Employment Opportunities*, and *Peckham Inc*. Approximately 108 individuals from about 60 organizational units participated in the conference over one and a half days to discuss

the different ideas and issues. The types of organizations ranged from for profit to non-profit, governmental organizations to privately owned small businesses, universities to local zoological organizations. These issues were divided into three sub-parts that mirror different organizational functional units that that work with employees, and also reflect an understanding of the economic rationale for employing individual with disabilities. These functional units are: (a) Human Resource Management; (b) Vocational Rehabilitation Services; and (c) Operations. Further, the conference explored the Return-on-Investment Imperative from disability employment.

The key takeaways from the conference were that a multi-disciplinary, multi-stakeholder perspective is critical in promoting ideas around disability employment. Overall, organizations need to create a culture of inclusion and psychological safety and normalize disability inclusion. The management needs to set the tone for such efforts. Openness and creativity in managing accommodations are a key to making individuals with disabilities succeed in their roles. Furthermore, organizations should pay close attention to accessibility, and universal design across both their physical and digital spaces. With specific reference to human resource practices, organizations need to carefully consider accommodations in pre-interview, during interview and post-interview onboarding activities. To make individuals successful within their roles, organizations need to not only consider importance of accommodations, but also carefully detail out individual job descriptions, focus on collaborations across internal organizational units (e.g., human resources, vocational rehabilitation, operations), and also external units (e.g., state vocational rehab agencies and specialized non-profits that can help support employees). Furthermore, leveraging assistive technology solutions, remote work, and formal upward mobility programs for individuals with disabilities help not only normalize inclusion, but also allow them to succeed and thrive in the organization. When inclusion is done right, it is likely that organizations can not only gain superior returns in terms of more customer engagement and willingness to pay, but they may also improve products and services.

Conference website: www.aofow.org.

Conference testimonial video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rDcDnTrTmU

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1. Introduction

Over the last few years, organizations of all types and sizes have stepped up their efforts to prioritize diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) in their hiring practices, policies, and workplace culture. Most people are familiar with DEIA as it relates to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Unfortunately, the 61 million Americans (1 in 4 Americans) who live with a disability, are often left out of the conversation (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023; Zurn et al., 2022). While unemployment rates recently have held to below 4% and the overall labor participation rate is at 63%, individuals with disabilities continue to experience significantly lower labor force participation, at 37.2% in September 2023. To build a more equitable and inclusive society, accessibility also needs to be prioritized by organizations that value DEIA. Further, serving individuals with disabilities may also help the broader workforce, as seen in the Curb Cut effect (Blackwell, 2017). A more inclusive climate is essential because it is often associated with several important job attitudes and behaviors. More specifically, an inclusive climate is connected with higher job satisfaction, and employee engagement, and performance (Kocman et al., 2018). Overall, increased diversity in the workplace often leads to greater creativity, a better learning environment, increased attention to customer needs, and increased quality of service and goods provided (Herring et al., 2009). Furthermore, employers also derive indirect benefits from provision of accommodations, including improved employee interaction, as well as increased overall morale and productivity (Solovieva et al., 2011, Schartz et al., 2006).[2]

At the heart of any truly accessible organization is a culture where people understand and respect the needs of individuals with disabilities in a manner that starts before individuals with disabilities are hired, to supporting them through their entire duration of stay to provide rewarding career opportunities. Supporting an individual across the entire life cycle of their stay within an organization requires an integrated and cross functional perspective that sees the employees first and being supported by effective integration of the different functional units within the organization. There are several stakeholders that are also a key part of the national support infrastructure for individuals with disabilities that include state vocational rehabilitation units, and other community rehabilitation partners that continue to work towards improving the employment footprint of individuals with disabilities in the community.

The first **Abilities, Opportunities and the Future of Work conference** was intended to highlight ideas, issues, and best practices with regard to disability employment that captured the key views of multiple organizational functional units, state vocational rehab organizations, and other nonprofits that support individuals with disabilities in a significant manner. This white paper summarizes the key deliberations

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[2] In this report, we use employers and businesses synonymously. They could be for-profit, non-profit or government entities.

of the conference. The conference, held at the Michigan State University on the 17th and 18th of August, was sponsored by the National Science Foundation vide Award Number # 2154547. The conference was organized with a multi-stakeholder interdisciplinary perspective with tie in into organizations that directly employ individuals with disabilities as its primary focus. The organizing partners include the *Center for Ethical and Socially Responsible Leadership (CESRL) at Eli Broad College of Business*, Michigan State University; the *Center for Services, Training, and Research for Independence and Desired Employment (STRIDE) at College of Education*, Michigan State University, *Michigan Rehabilitation Services, Department of Labor and Economic Opportunities* at State of Michigan, and *Peckham Inc*. About 60 different organizations (See Appendix A) participated in the conference over one and a half days to discuss the different ideas and issues that are a key part of this white paper.

2. Conference Design

The conference was designed in a *unique participatory* format that blended keynote speakers, expert panelists, and pre-designed participant break-out sessions and report-outs to ensure maximum engagement between attendees and panelists. The organization of the conference over one and a half days was set up in a way that the keynote speakers provided the landscape of employment, and the importance of disability inclusion from a diverse range of perspectives. These include the *employment/policy landscape perspective* (Ms. Stephanie Beckhorn, Director in Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity, State of Michigan), *legal perspective* (Mr. James Reid, Honigman), *a lived experience perspective* (Mr. Kevin Fritz, Employment Counsel, Gusto), *an academic institution perspective* (Dr. Jerlando L. Jackson, Dean, College of Education and Dr. John Hollenbeck, Associate Dean for Research, Eli Broad College of Business); *a non-profit perspective* (Lisa Webb-Sharpe, Chief Operating Officer, Peckham Inc), *a technology accessibility perspective* (Dr. Gregg Vanderheiden; University of Maryland and Mr. James Thurston, ATOS), *a regulatory perspective* (Keith Sonderling, Commissioner at U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) and *a national vocational rehabilitation perspective* (Ms. Kathy West-Evans, Director of Business Relations, CSAVR). These perspectives were then blended with three panels where individuals were chosen to represent non-profits, businesses, government, academia, and individuals with lived experience of a disability. The spirit of stakeholder selection reflects the "dual customer" perspective advocated by the vocational rehabilitation discipline (Haines et al., 2018).

2.1   Keynote Selections

The objective of the opening keynotes was to set the stage for the broader conference. Dean Jerlando Jackson (College of Education at Michigan State University) and Associate Dean John Hollenbeck (Eli Broad College of Business at Michigan State University) described the importance of Academic involvement in research and supporting practice with respect to disability employment initiatives, and its alignment to the mission of Michigan State University. Ms. Stephanie Beckhorn (Director, Employment & Training, Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity at State of Michigan), set the stage by discussing the disability employment imperative; and Ms. Kathy West-Evans (Director of Business Relations at the Council of State Association of Vocational Rehabilitation; CSAVR) who discussed the service model for the council of state vocational rehabilitation agencies. CSAVR is composed of the chief members who are administrators of agencies across the 50 states, and the District of Columbia. The council members collectively supervise rehabilitation services provision for about 1.2 million individuals with disabilities. The CSAVR also operates the National Employment Team (NET). The NET makes coordination with businesses easier by being a single point of contact allowing organizations to contact qualified applicants.

The other keynote on the first day focused on accessibility technology. Specifically, Dr. Gregg Vanderheiden at the University of Maryland presented the importance of

accessibility technology focusing on Morphic[3] - a technology that is increasingly being adopted in many organizations to help make computers more accessible to individuals. Dr. Vanderheiden provided a demo of Morphic software (assistive technology on demand) during the conference and emphasized the importance of off-the-shelf technology accessibility where individuals can work across machines and carry their individual settings on the software.

Mr. Kevin Fritz at Gusto provided a lived experience on disability inspiring the audience to focus on the abilities of the individual and shared his perspectives as a disability employment attorney. Commissioner Keith Sonderling emphasized the importance of disability employment at the regulatory role of U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in creating inclusive organizations.

Mr. James Thurston at ATOS Inc. and Mr. James Read at Honigman tackled their keynote in a question-and-answer format covering wide range of issues that included the challenges in disability employment, the importance of accessibility at large focused on both small businesses and large businesses. The specific questions they covered were:

- What are the most common issues or challenges you see in disability employment?
- What are employers doing well, or not well in the current disability environment?
- Accessibility? What are the responsibilities that companies need to take to make their environments accessible?
- Do you feel businesses understand their obligations? If not, why?
- What are the advantages that small vs large businesses have in employing disability employment?
- What infrastructure can be set up to help small vs large businesses? What are sources of support available to businesses?
- How can one determine return on investment (ROI) and approaches to thinking about disability employment?

The conference concluded with a closing remark by Mr. Brian Calley, President and CEO of the Small Business Administration in Michigan. Brian emphasized the importance of disability inclusion for the state and provided the perspective of his journey. We now briefly describe the panels and the questions that were deliberated in the panel discussions.

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[3] Morphic is a software managed by a non-profit raising-the-floor and its development was funded by Grant # H421A150006 from the Rehabilitation Services Administration of the U.S. Dept. of Education and Grant # 90RE5027 from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research, Administration for Community Living, U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services

2.2   Panel Selections and Discussion Questions

In addition to keynotes, the conference was organized in three panels.

- Panel 1: Human Resource Management/Vocational Rehabilitation in Disability Employment
- Panel 2: Operational Considerations in Employing Workforce with Disabilities
- Panel 3: All In - Disability Employment and Corporate Social Responsibility

The panels were reflective of three key functional domains within organizations (for profit or non-profit) that work with individuals with a disability on a daily basis. The focus of the *Human Resource Management/Vocational Rehabilitation in Disability Employment* panel was on addressing issues with regard recruitment, retention and creating a cultural environment where employees with disabilities succeed. The specific questions that panelists answered were the following:

- What are some ways to facilitate recruitment, interviewing, and selection/decision-making process to ensure equity in hiring individuals with disabilities?
- What are some strategies to provide a smooth onboarding process for employees with disabilities?
- What are some ways to better understand employees' needs and alternatives available to provide cost-effective accommodation?
- What are some strategies to manage existing accommodations and implications for employee productivity while providing ongoing employee support?
- What are some ways to maintain a culture of support for employees with disabilities who work remotely?

The second panel on *Operational Considerations in Employing Workforce with Disabilities* was designed to focus on challenges of implementing accommodations and to explore options for helping employees with disabilities perform better on the job and focus on career progression – across manufacturing and service settings. Implementing such accommodations needs effective collaboration across operations, human resource management and vocational rehabilitation. The specific questions that were discussed in this panel were:

- What are some of the enablers and barriers in better using accommodations to help individuals succeed in employment settings?
- What are the key challenges faced by employees daily on work environments and how can design of operations and systems mitigate these challenges? How do these differ across visible vs invisible disabilities?
- How can human resource management and vocational rehabilitation groups collaborate with operations to help employees with disabilities succeed and eliminate their day-to-day work challenges?
- What is the role that technology plays in operational settings where workers with disabilities are employed?

- What are strategies and best practices to scaffold and carve jobs to help in upward mobility?

The third panel on *All In - Disability Employment and Corporate Social Responsibility* was designed to focus on the emerging societal consciousness around corporate social responsibility, and its newer variant - Environment, Social and Governance (ESG). Specifically, the session was intended to assess the idea of the market impact of supporting individuals with disabilities. The specific questions that were discussed as part of the session were:

- How can employers best promote positive interactions between employees with disabilities and customers, clients, and coworkers?
- How does the development and delivery of products or services benefit from the employment and involvement of individuals with disabilities?
- How can organizations benefit reputationally by employing individuals with disabilities?
- How can employers gain other advantages by investing in support for employees with disabilities?

Collectively, the three topics were focused on better understanding how businesses can gain superior return on investment to support individuals.

2.3   Participant Invitations and Attendance

The conference was set up as *invited only* and invitations were sent to targeted organizations that had a history of supporting individuals with disabilities. This was primarily on account of the experimental nature of the conference format and allow keeping the size of the conference more manageable to allow participation from every attendee. Specifically, the design was such that each panel session was followed up with a roundtable discussion of the key questions that were detailed in the panel above. In the roundtable, the invited participants shared their views in addition to the panelists' views. Each Table also had a volunteer scribe (Graduate Students, Attending Faculty, and MRS Consultants) who took notes on Table deliberations. Finally, key highlights of each of the sessions were compiled. In addition to capturing these deliberations from the roundtables, we also used the transcripts of every keynote presentation and panel, and our own notes from participant questions across the duration of the conference as the baseline data for compilation of the white paper. Key themes from the panels and keynotes were identified, and then compiled into this white paper.

Overall, the conference featured 108 attendees who came from more than 60 organizations (the organizations are listed in the Appendices). The types of organizations ranged from for-profit to non-profit, governmental organizations to privately owned small businesses, universities to local zoological organizations. This wide range of participation demonstrates the interest in promoting disability employment across the spectrum of organizations within the community. The sections

below integrate many of the insights and present the collective deliberations under the broader heading of the three panels.

3. Key Highlights of the Conference

The panels and keynotes spurred many discussions and ideas and laid some foundations for what companies might do to improve disability employment footprint. Typically, the three functional areas that interface with the individual to help them succeed in operational settings are human resources, vocational rehabilitation, and operations – where an individual works on an everyday basis. Furthermore, disability employment also has a market-facing side where there are increasing opportunities for organizations to accrue market benefits. Collectively, the return on investment (ROI) imperative should examine all of these aspects. In this spirit, the market environment of pursuing disability employment on scale is equally relevant.

The rest of this white paper is organized on the foundation described in the previous paragraph. Specifically, in the rest of this white paper, we first focus on the imperative for disability employment (Section 3.1) and the role of state agencies (Section 3.2) – issues that were highlighted at the conference. In particular, the role of state VR agencies as partners in improving the disability employment environment is a key highlight of the conference. These partnerships are critical for many organizations in creating an environment that is conducive to having individuals with disabilities succeed.

Next, we discuss the major integrative themes (Section 3.3) that organizations must focus on, irrespective of the functional units that employees' interface with. Finally, we focus on some additional specific discussions that emerged within three functional areas focused on (a) Human Resource Management and Vocational Rehabilitation (Section 3.4); (b) Operational Considerations in Employing Workforce with Disabilities (Section 3.5); and (c) Market Considerations (Section 3.6) before concluding the white paper. Where possible, we have included academic work in the citations.

3.1   Disability employment imperative

There is a substantial shortfall in the employment of individuals with disabilities. With more than 12% of the population having some form of disabilities, only 23.1% of the individuals with disabilities participated in the labor force in 2022 compared to 67.8% of individuals without; Similarly, unemployment rates for individuals with disabilities was 7.6% compared to 3.5% for those without. Finally, individuals with disabilities are also under-employed with 30% of them working part-time, compared to 16% for individuals without disabilities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Further, disability employment is also deeply connected to veterans in the nation. Out of the 18,592,457 veterans in 2023, veterans with service-connected disabilities numbered 5,417,012, more than 29% of the individual disabilities are service-related. In an environment where employment rates are constrained, making jobs more inclusive is a key element of expanding the productive labor pool. State VR agencies have a key goal of helping businesses access the talent pool of individuals with disabilities. The abovementioned numbers are reflective of the challenges that lay ahead in the broader disability employment settings and require a concerted multi-disciplinary and multi-

stakeholder effort to make our collective society more inclusive and better reflective of individuals across the spectrum of society. Finally, while these are key challenges, addressing these challenges not only presents an opportunity to improve economic development and national security environment within the country, but also a market opportunity for many organizations. Many of these are discussed in this white paper.

3.2   State Vocational Rehabilitation, Disability Employment and Dual Customer

Passage of the federal Smith-Fess Act in 1920 is considered the beginning of the public vocational rehabilitation (VR) program for individuals with disabilities. Over the years, several amendments to this act have strengthened the program. Each state's VR system can play a critical role in assisting individuals with disabilities to enter the workforce. The state VR program is grounded and authorized by federal statute, Title I of the Rehabilitation Act, as amended by Title IV of WIOA (29 U.S.C. § 720 et seq.). The year of 2023 marks the 50th Anniversary for the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The purpose of the law is for each State to assist in operating a statewide comprehensive, coordinated, effective, efficient, and accountable State program as an integral part of a statewide workforce development system; and to assess, plan, and provide VR services to individuals with disabilities so that those individuals may prepare for and engage in competitive integrated employment consistent with their unique strengths, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities, interests, and informed choice (Department of Education, 2020).

State VR agencies provide a wide variety of services to individuals with disabilities, including career counseling, work-based learning experiences (e.g., internships, apprenticeships, and short-term employment), financial support for vocational training and postsecondary education, rehabilitation technology and training in its use, transition and pre-employment transition services, supported employment services, transportation, and other services and/or supports necessary for individuals with disabilities to achieve employment and career pathways. State VR agencies are also charged to build relationships with business to create opportunities for jobs and careers for VR customers with disabilities. This aspect of their role has also made businesses a customer of VR, in addition to individuals with disabilities as customers. The need to includes both the needs of business-customer and the individual with disabilities as customer is referred to as "the dual customer approach" (Haines et al., 2018; Moore et al., 2018). This requires state VR agencies to build a network of strong partnerships with key stakeholders, including community rehabilitation providers that provide support to employees with significant disabilities and facilitate their independent living. Many corporations can leverage these benefits partnering with state VR agencies.

The state VR agencies are supported by the Council of State Association of Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies. The National Employment Team in CSAVR coordinates the delivery of services across 78 agencies that span all 50 states, and offers several programs that include veterans' readiness and employment for close to 80 American

Indian Rehabilitation program that operate on or near Native American Reservations. This approach to a national strategy for disability employment that takes into account business needs and facilitates the coordination of direct needs of individuals with disabilities to reach federal goals is especially unique to the United States. The approach to a dual customer – that is an essential component of the vocational rehabilitation agencies is also reflective of voice of the disability community with the powerful mantra of "nothing about us without us" that facilitates co-creation and co-production of services for the individuals with disabilities.

3.3   Major Themes

We now focus on describing the major themes before delving into functional themes, the basis for the organization of the different panels.

3.3.1   Organizational culture and normalizing disability inclusion

A key highlight and theme of the conference was the repeated reference to creating an organizational culture of acceptability around disability inclusion. Creating an appropriate culture of inclusion within an organization to create a welcoming environment for individuals with disabilities and their growth within the organization was one of the key factors that was cited. A culture of inclusion is important to attract and retain diverse talent; facilitate their success in everyday work, and upward mobility, and finally promote success stories within the organization to customers that can help the organization in the marketplace. Further, the creation of a culture of inclusion requires the direct engagement of the leadership and the commitment of management to the successful pursuit of disability inclusion. A culture of disability inclusion normalizes the presence of individuals with disabilities, an issue critical for both policymakers and organizations. An effective culture of disability inclusion can be incorporated in several ways. These include:

3.3.2   Promoting an environment of psychological safety

Organizational culture should also include a setting where new ideas and approaches to the inclusion of individuals are promoted in a psychologically safe environment. Such a culture can encourage creativity and experimentation in finding accommodations, and making accommodations work, an issue critical for individuals with disabilities to succeed (Narayanan et al., 2019). Psychological safety also promotes open dialogue between supervisors and employees, encourages individuals to share stories, and identifies with challenges. Such a culture can increase employee belongingness and identification with the company mission as well.

3.3.3   Training and education

Training around biases frequently found in disability inclusion, awareness of accommodations, and accessibility should help employers culturally attuned the inclusion of individuals with disabilities. Participants felt that the training programs should not only be extended to employees with disabilities to help navigate the various

employment stages, but also targeted towards employees without disabilities to allow them to demystify biases surrounding disability employment. Institutionalizing training programs tackles the perception of imposition that individuals may feel the presence of individuals with disabilities, teaching self-advocacy skills, and the idea that reasonable accommodations should be normalized within the organization. Training can also be focused on other elements of normalization of individuals with disabilities including accessibility, representation, self-disclosure, peer mentoring, and accommodations, all discussed herein. These training programs are better if they are targeted earlier in the employee's tenure. An example of this is the youth jobs programs where high school students are targeted for training and recruitment at an early age.

3.3.4 Representation programs

Visible representation of individuals with disabilities within the organization can help in providing additional normalcy to the inclusion of individuals with disabilities and reducing imposition perception.

3.3.5 Self-disclosure

Creating an effective self-disclosure program for individuals with disabilities is an important step toward normalizing the inclusion of individuals with disabilities within work settings. According to a study conducted by Disability:IN, 92% of organizations surveyed encouraged employees with disabilities to self-identify. Further, the study notes that 95% of the employees have a confidential reporting process to facilitate self-identification. Yet, the study also noted that only 3.7% of the participants self-identified. Such disparities likely exist because disabilities are not normalized.

3.3.6 Peer mentoring and employee resource groups

Review studies have suggested that peer mentoring is helpful in several contexts. Hayes and Balcazar (2008) in their review suggested that peer mentoring was useful in corporate settings, hospital and community settings. Their study suggests that peer mentoring is useful and powerful. Similarly, recent work by Cole et al. (2022) suggests that teams that have a leader with a disability outperform other teams that do not have a leader with a disability especially when the number of individuals with disabilities is larger. Similarly, employee resource groups are also a key resource in addition to peer mentoring groups. For example, Disability:IN has resources for best practices with specific regard to the creation of affinity groups for employees with disabilities. The creation of effective empowered affinity groups, in addition to peer mentoring, can facilitate further normalization, and inclusion of individuals with disabilities. Finally, mentorship programs can also target employees who have not advocated for themselves in the past.

3.3.7 Openness and creativity to managing accommodations

Prior research has suggested that the benefits of accommodation include greater

dedication by employees, better identification of qualified candidates for promotion by employers, fewer insurance claims, reduced postinjury rehabilitation costs, and an improved corporate culture (Waterstone et al., 2008). Individuals with disabilities and reasonable accommodations are an integral part of the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990). While employees have the right to request reasonable accommodations, conference participants emphasized accommodations across all stages – starting from pre-interview engagement, interviews, onboarding, and through the tenure of the employee with the company. The debate on costs of accommodations was also discussed extensively across all phases of an individual's engagement with the firm. In particular, participants noted misconceptions around the cost of accommodations – that they are expensive when most accommodations are inexpensive (Schur et al. 2014). Specifically, in many cases, accommodations may relate to policies and procedures, rather than expensive gadgets or assistive technologies. A culture of openness to accommodations is also critical since effective accommodations that work are arrived at through an interactive process between the employee and the organization where employees themselves may not know their needs immediately. This requires a cultural environment of listening, empathy, and two-way communication that can get buy-in of employees. More recently, research has called for more off-the-shelf accommodations, ideas that are closely tied to making facilities accessible, and moving beyond the concept of reasonable accommodations (Gilbride, 2022).

Lisa Webb Sharpe, Chief Operating Officer at Peckham, and conference panelist aptly summarized: "*I think it starts with an organization's culture and whether or not you are a learning organization, open to new ideas, open to new and different ways of achieving your objectives. That openness will cause you to ask questions, to engage with those who may need accommodation, to listen and learn. And think about inclusion, not just integration. You can integrate by inviting a person who has differing abilities, but they may be isolated within your organization. Think about what it's like to be included, to truly belong, and build that into your process and culture.*"

3.3.8 Accessibility

Organizations need internal programs around increasing accessibility for employees. These include accessibility of "everyday work" that includes meetings, support services, and training programs. Accessibility can be related to physical and digital accessibility. With regard to accessibility, selecting and implementing technology systems that prioritize accessibility is important. Accessibility checklists can be useful in this regard. For example, the A11Y project provides an effective accessibility checklist for website accessibility. Large organizations like Microsoft have made accessibility a priority (Smith, 2021). Creating effective accessibility checklists can be relevant and useful. Accessibility can also be ensured proactively through Gilbride (2022) provides several examples of technology accessibility that allow for universal design. It is also likely that effective accessibility strategies may require substantial changes in the organization. Participants noted that large changes to the organization may be necessary within the organization to increase accessibility and remove barriers that can be challenging to implement. Some organizations like General Motors have a dedicated senior position

(Chief Engineer of Accessibility) to elevate the idea of accessibility throughout the organization. This can also have benefits for both product and process design, an issue that will be discussed in this white paper.

3.4 Human resource management and vocational rehabilitation perspective

A key goal of disability employment from the perspective of human resource management is that organizations hire and retain talent creating a diverse workforce. A diverse workforce brings many benefits, discussed below. Further, supporting individuals with disabilities requires careful consideration of their specific needs as well. For individuals with disabilities who have faced barriers to employment, this support includes a focus on the accessibility of and absence of disparate treatment and impact in the hiring process, that ultimately can create a truly integrative, and competitive, workforce.

Accommodations are also an important piece to inclusion in the hiring process and the workforce after hire. Studies suggest that applicants and employees with disabilities are reluctant to request accommodations because of the risk of being exposed to the stigma and stereotypes associated with their disability (Kate et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2011). For people with psychiatric disabilities in particular, the revelation of their disability can trigger an employer's reluctance to hire or retain them as employees (Kaminer, 2016; Stuart, 2006). Institutional support for disclosure of a disability can include both symbolic and instrumental support, which can be enhanced by the presence of others with a similar stigmatized characteristic (Belle, 2008). Employers and human resources professionals can help reduce stigma and improve employment outcomes for people with mental health challenges by supporting awareness and education campaigns across the organization, sharing mental health experiences openly (especially powerful from leadership), and utilizing best practices for accommodating employees with mental illness. Specifically, the impact of mental illness in the workplace could be reduced by facilitating early intervention that encourages help-seeking and supports recovery through reasonable work accommodation. A factor that can facilitate professional help-seeking is that someone else suggests it, such as a co-worker or manager. Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training is one way to promote early help-seeking, by equipping participants with the knowledge and skills to provide the initial help to someone developing a mental health problem or experiencing a mental health crisis before appropriate professional help is found. MHFA courses have been well-evaluated and consistently demonstrate an association with improved knowledge, decreased stigmatizing attitudes and increased helping behaviors (Bovopoulos et al., 2016).[4]

Accommodation for applicants with disabilities enable them to complete the application

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[4] Example courses can be found in organizations like National Council for Mental Well Being Mental Health First Aid - National Council for Mental Wellbeing (thenationalcouncil.org)

process expected by the employer. Moreover, employers should ensure that screening tools are directly related to the job duties so that applicants with disabilities are not unnecessarily screened out, considerations which are particularly important as employers rely more heavily on artificial intelligence to screen applicants. The EEOC recently created an Artificial Intelligence and Algorithmic fairness initiative in this regard.[5]

Benefits of accommodation for employees with disabilities include greater dedication by employees, better identification of qualified candidates for promotion by employers, fewer insurance claims, and reduced post-injury rehabilitation costs, and an improved corporate culture (Waterstone et al., 2008). To enjoy these benefits, employers must make the accommodation process for both applicants and employees accessible and ensure that retaliation will not occur (Isabella et al., 2011):

For employers, hiring individuals with disabilities adds to the diversity, productivity, and creativity of a workforce, leading to a more loyal and dedicated group of employees. To realize these gains, employers need to understand how to attract applicants with disabilities, provide employees with accommodations to make them successful, and maintain a work environment that makes employees feel welcome and included. In particular, we divide the activities into pre-interview, recruitment, and selection process, and also post-interview communication activities.

3.4.1 Pre-interview activities

For both job-seekers and employers, the accessibility and structure of the initial hiring process is vital. By considering the following recommendations, employers can attract diverse talent, and encourage those potential applicants to participate in the hiring process to present their best selves to employers. Best practices in this domain include: (a) *Accommodations Prior to Interviews*: Ensure that accommodations are offered in a clear way before interviews and other selection processes. This can include providing interview questions ahead of time to create a more level playing field. (b) *Provision of Resume Template*: Develop a nationwide resume template to help candidates, especially those from trade schools, create resumes. (c) *Disclosure Etiquette Training*: Train organizations on how to handle disability disclosure and encourage candidates to research company culture.

3.4.2 Process for recruitment, interviewing, and selection/decision making process

When employers rely on interviews as a significant part of the hiring process, both standards and flexibility must be built into the interview process. Such interview processes should focus on providing opportunities for: (a) *Different Types of Interviews*: Consider using different types of interviews to accommodate individuals with

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[5] Artificial Intelligence and Algorithmic Fairness Initiative | U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (eeoc.gov) – Accessed on December 2nd 2022.

disabilities. (b) *Be Open to Different Interviewing Styles*: Employers should be open to diverse interviewing styles and not expect everyone to fit the same mold. (c) *Training for Interviewers:* Provide training for interviewers to ensure they are prepared to interact with candidates with disabilities. This might include showing videos of successful employees who had disabilities, and *Accessibility Awareness* training.

Employers must ensure the accessibility of other selection processes, especially the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in screening applicants. In addition, users of AI selection tools must ensure that the tool is based on data that does not result in discrimination against applicants with disabilities.

3.4.3   Post-selection operations

After the initial hiring process, employers will only attract and retain diverse, qualified applicants by supporting their success in the workplace. This support includes the physical workspace, providing accommodations to ensure accessibility and employee comfort, contributing to productivity and a sense of inclusion. Other accommodations and attention to creating a welcoming community will further increase inclusivity as well as productivity. With appropriate support, employees with disabilities have higher job satisfaction, loyalty, and lower turnover rates in organizations with corporate cultures, i.e., embedded values, attitudes, and norms, that are responsive to the needs of all employees (Kirsh & Gewurtz, 2011). Best practices in employee post-selection also start before employees are onboarded. These include: (a) *Pre-Onboarding Engagement* where employees visit the workplace and know their environment to alleviate anxiety and set expectations; availability of accessible onboarding materials across physical and digital formats that include ideas such as text-to-speech and speech-to-text tools for onboarding and training materials; (b) *Managing the Onboarding Process* by spreading out the process to ensure that new employees have time to learn, ask questions, and feel comfortable in their new roles. (c) *Post-onboarding Inclusion* by paying attention to accessibility and accommodations after employees are onboarded (Several aspects of accommodations are addressed in the preamble section, and in the discussion on Panel # 2); Implement active supervision and feedback mechanisms to ensure that employees are effectively onboarded**;** peer mentoring in the onboarding process to help employees learn job tasks, understand social dynamics, and establish peer networks; and engage employees in reviewing the onboarding process to gain new perspectives and insights on making onboarding frictionless.

Finally, *continuous learning and improvement* is an important aspect of onboarding processes, and can be a powerful tool to improve inclusion. All of the key issues discussed above can be subject to continuous improvement. Efforts to continuously improve these could include processes to evaluate onboarding periodically and improve them, engaging employees and employee resource groups (ERG) in active continuous improvement teams, and organizing training programs that challenge biases against employees with disabilities. All of these also help strengthen the "culture" of inclusion within the organization.

3.5   Panel 2: Operational Considerations in Disability Employment

The conference also focused on operational challenges regarding disability employment and explored collaborative opportunities that can be created between functional units such as vocational rehabilitation, operations, and human resources that support individuals with disabilities. These insights are summarized below:

3.5.1   Accommodations

Participants also noted the importance of accommodation processes and transparency of accommodation processes. Creating awareness with regard to accommodation processes is a critical feature of inclusion of individuals with disabilities, and normalizing inclusion. A few key features of accommodations also need to be noted. These include: (a) educating about accommodations early in an employee's tenure in the organization; (b) creating greater awareness of the accommodation process; (c) providing employees the opportunity to provide feedback and access to training for accommodations, and (d) creating an individualized approach to managing accommodations. With specific regard to accommodation processes, internal assistive technology groups can also be an asset. When inside AT teams are not available, collaborating with state vocational rehabilitation agencies can also be an approach to gaining access to information about assistive technologies available for individuals to use. Finally, participants also noted that accommodations may not work for everyone. Creating a culture of inclusion and experimentation allows organizations to be cognizant of limitations that accommodations can bring so they can be customized to a particular individual to serve their disabilities. Organizations can also consider the cost of not providing accommodations. In this regard, Robin Jones, Director of the Great Lakes ADA Center noted "*When you become disabled nobody gives you a manual. As a person with a disability, you have to figure it out. If a person recently acquired their disability and has not lived with their disability very long, they may not know exactly what accommodation to ask for. They may need to figure it out with you in the context of this job and this environment, so that is why the interactive process is so important. This is not the place to become autocratic. This is the place to have that dialog, that discussion, and that back and forth. And don't be afraid to try some things and see if it works. It's not going to be 100% perfect the first time you do it. Discuss what the options might be, throw out some scenarios, and pull in expertise when you need to. You don't have to come up with all the answers on your own*".

3.5.2   Job descriptions and task-oriented focus

At the operational level, organizations can review job descriptions periodically for the accuracy of skills needed. Further, on a daily basis, it is critical to concentrate on essential job functions and job accomplishments rather than how work is traditionally done. In this regard, every job needs to have a careful focus on its purpose, and output requirement. Further, job descriptions should also create opportunities for upward mobility of individuals with disabilities.

3.5.3   Within organization collaborations

Participants felt that human resources professionals need to be engaged as collaboration partners. Specifically, human resources should be an active listener, rather than focused on avoiding legal issues. In this regard, the vocational rehabilitation groups can bridge the gap between human resource management and the operations function, wherein education regarding accommodations needs to be directed towards operational staff to better work with individuals with challenges on a daily basis. Further, peer mentoring of staff on the job can help them learn tasks better, manage social dynamics, and establish a peer network to help employees succeed. These mentoring opportunities can be better organized through Employee Resource Groups. Finally, direct communication of different functional units with employees is key to their performance.

3.5.4   Across organization collaborations

Organizations should partner with established public resources such as the state VR agencies. These are especially useful for small businesses that lack expertise in managing accommodations in order to meet the needs of employees with disabilities. As Kathy West-Evans, Director of Business Relations, CSAVR (Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation) said: "*Livable wages. Independence. That's what individuals with disabilities are asking for. We understood early on that we need to look at careers, not jobs, and that we need to bring business to the table to achieve that. What we offer to businesses is that we can support the largest talent pool of applicants with disabilities in the country. And that happens because we have partners. We can deliver through a team of experts.*"

3.5.5   Technology solutions

Assistive technologies play a critical role in promoting individualized solutions for individuals with disabilities by providing workers with disabilities the tools and resources they need to overcome specific challenges. This promotes inclusivity within the organization. For example, one of the key solutions discussed at the conference by the keynote speaker was the Morphic software which was a customized software that adapted to the needs of a specific user. Further, larger organizations can invest in accessibility and assistive technology personnel who can help provide technology support for individuals with disabilities. Technology solutions can also be implemented to bridge communication gaps between individuals with disabilities, human resource management and vocational rehabilitation. In addition to collaboration, technology can also help provide various learning modalities for employees to accommodate different learning styles, in addition to providing real-time data and performance tracking. Implementing more broad-based technology solutions also can bring benefits to all employees within the company who may not have recognized the need for such technology, and not just those with disabilities.

With specific regard to technology, organizations should also focus on eliminating technological barriers. These barriers include technology familiarity, lack of user

consultation and usability, eliminating differences among employees in access, and proficiency in the use of available technologies. In particular, recognizing that there are substantial disparities in awareness of ICT knowledge and technical abilities across an employee base is important. For example, technologies such as Artificial Intelligence may help bridge gaps between diverse employee abilities, yet any AI-driven solution in the workplace needs to be implemented with care considering all ethical perspectives.

Overall, technology serves as a critical tool in addressing workplace challenges for individuals with disabilities while also presenting opportunities for inclusivity and productivity. However, it is essential to consider usability, accessibility, and ethical considerations when implementing technology solutions in operational settings.

3.5.6   Remote work

Remote work emerged as a key opportunity for individuals with disability, particularly for those with transportation barriers, personal care needs, compromised immune systems, sensory sensitivity, etc. Participants noted that it is important to ensure remote employees have the tools they need for equal performance potential (accommodations, customized equipment for their home office, accessible technology). For remote workers to succeed the key approaches that they must follow are: (a) adapt to the unique needs of remote workers by offering flexible working arrangements, job carving, and tailored accommodations. A special caveat is that because a person is working from home one should not assume that they have the work accommodations they need; (b) ensure that remote communication and meetings are accessible through features like closed captioning and written communication in accessible formats; (c) regular, purposeful check-ins with remote employees help ensure they feel connected and supported; (d) foster connections with coworkers (all remote or blended teams) through regular communication and virtual social activities to strengthen working relationships and team bonds; (e) in project settings, consider implementing agile methodologies, such as daily scrum meetings, to keep all remote workers informed about project updates and maintain a sense of teamwork; (f) when organizing hybrid meetings it is important to effectively engage both in-person and virtual attendees; and (g) consider screen breaks and other accommodations to support remote workers' well-being.

Ethan Idzior, a Software Developer at Dell who shared their lived experience noted "*I have been working remotely at Dell since last summer. One of the important things I found for creating a culture of support is the fact that things that help somebody with disabilities could have broader practice for the company as a whole. For example, I have issues with migraines. Sometimes I'm not able to work a regular 9-5 day, and since I work remotely, I have people on my team all over the world. There are people in all different time zones, and we have meetings really at all hours of the day. So Dell is giving me flexibility to work outside a traditional schedule, and I give the flexibility back. And it works out better for both of us than if I had been constrained to a 9-to-5*

shift when it doesn't line up well with other people who are on my team."

3.5.7 Creating upward mobility programs

A key element of inclusion of individuals with disabilities in employment settings is to effectively have strategies for creating upward mobility programs. Strategies for upward mobility programs can include: (a) job carving and job scaffolding to help ramp up employee responsibilities; (b) implementation of technologies to help improve job performance and augment employees productivity; (c) planning for job roles using the strength-based approach to allocating tasks; (d) regular check-in of all employees; € facilitating goal setting to enhance career prospects and goals; (f) inclusion of upward mobility of individuals with disabilities in yearly goals to develop employees; (g) modifying job descriptions to accommodate employee strengths; (h) promote programs for skill development; and (i) recognize that upward mobility can take substantial time and experience on behalf of both the employer and individuals with disabilities.

3.6 Disability Employment and Market Perspective

The conference also debated and revealed several aspects of disability employment from a market perspective that organizations may find beneficial to consider with regard to supporting disability employment. Specifically, the employment of individuals with disabilities can provide significant business opportunities for organizations as these individuals represent an untapped pool of labor with unique talents. The customers' support for disability employment can further improve business outcomes by increasing customer engagement with the organization and fostering community support (Khodakarami et al., 2023; Patrick & Hollenbeck, 2021). On a larger scale, employment of individuals with disabilities can help boost the economy, as estimated in the Accenture report (2018). Therefore, the societal impact of disability employment goes beyond directly benefiting the employees and organizations that hire them. The panel discussed several topics related to the business and the societal impact of disability employment. These discussions could be broadly categorized into customer engagement, community engagement, and ROI of inclusivity. Key ideas discussed in the panel are:

3.6.1 Improved customer engagement and sales

Creating a supportive environment for individuals with disabilities enhances the overall customer experience. Customers often appreciate and support businesses that prioritize social responsibility. Customers support such businesses through repeat purchases and positive word of mouth (Khodakarami et al., 2023; Patrick & Hollenbeck, 2021). Embracing disability employment ensures employees reflect the diversity of the customer base to create a more relatable and welcoming environment and further contributes to a positive corperate social responsibility image. In addition, positive experiences with employees with disabilities can lead to word-of-mouth recommendations, and people often purchase from businesses that align with their values of inclusion and support.

3.6.2   Better community engagement

Accessibility improvements often have broader positive impacts. Organizations can boost and benefit from their inclusive work environment through community engagement and catering to the local community more effectively. Demonstrating a commitment to supporting individuals with disabilities can serve as a powerful marketing tool. Customers, employees with disabilities, and their families are influential advocates for the business and can help spread positive word of mouth and foster community support for the business. This is especially critical for small, local businesses with limited marketing resources. Overall, the panel emphasized that by genuinely supporting individuals with disabilities in the workplace, organizations can enhance their reputation, attract a diverse workforce, and create a positive impact through word-of-mouth recommendations and community support.

3.6.3   Marketing and public relations

Advertisements and marketing materials should reflect diversity, including individuals with disabilities. Organizations should actively promote diversity and inclusion within and outside the organization to expand the perception of disability-friendly practices. Organizations could showcase employees with disabilities in promotional materials and as role models to customers and coworkers. This not only broadens the appeal of the products but also showcases the authenticity of individuals with disabilities and the company's commitment to diversity and inclusion.

3.6.4   Product and service development

Participants also noted that involving individuals with disabilities in product teams enhances the product development process. Individuals with disabilities often exhibit strong and unique problem-solving skills, which align with business needs and foster innovative solutions. Further, incorporating disability knowledge in product development ensures that products are desirable and usable by diverse users. By involving individuals with disabilities in product development and services, organizations can create more inclusive and marketable offerings that benefit a broader user base while yielding positive business outcomes.

3.6.5   Return on investment perspective

Organizations need to pursue disability employment initiatives holistically to realize full benefits from a return on investments perspective. Companies that actively engage with individuals with disabilities in their workforce are more likely to innovate in ways that benefit a broader customer base. Diverse perspectives often lead to creative solutions that can improve products and services for everyone. With regard to the organizational impact of disability employment, three main topics emerged from the panel's discussions. First, demonstrating a commitment to supporting individuals with disabilities can serve as a powerful marketing tool. Second, the employment of individuals with disabilities helps to diversify thoughts and perspectives on the product

teams and can enhance product and program development. Third, the employment of individuals with disabilities impacts the organizations' bottom-line profitability.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, an inclusive work environment is not just morally right but also good for business. Companies championing individuals with disabilities can yield higher returns. Hiring and supporting employees with disabilities can lead to higher revenue and profit, less turnover, and a unique perspective on problem-solving. Investing in support for employees with disabilities not only benefits individuals but also enhances workplace culture, innovation, and overall organizational success. Retention of employees reduces hiring and training costs and is essential for addressing and shaping the organizational culture. Overall, the conference accomplished the key goals we set out to undertake. These goals included:

(a) Creating a larger stakeholder community that comprises government, non-profit, for-profit, state, and national VR organizations that can take an integrative view of the key support structures necessary for individuals with disabilities to find appropriate opportunities and succeed. This bringing together of the larger stakeholder group is reflective of the United Nations, 2019 call that declares "It is up to us – leaders from government, business, civil society, organizations of persons with disabilities, international organizations and others – to turn this situation around" when referring to disability inclusion (United Nations, 2019). In future, more of these types of events should spur additional conversations in truly making a mark in the employment numbers with regard to individuals with disabilities.

(b) Furthermore, from a business vantage point, a strong "ROI" imperative for the employment of individuals with disabilities should integrate the individual viewpoints with functional viewpoints with regard to human resources, vocational rehabilitation; operations process design, accessibility, and the broader community of consumers that include individuals with disabilities. This perspective is critical in designing programs and services that facilitate competitive integrative employment, a critical call of the Workforce Innovation Opportunities Act (WIOA).

4.1   Future Plans

The conference committee has plans to continue the plans for the conference in the future. This conclusion is based on the extremely positive feedback that we received from participating individuals. Of the 22 participants that took the survey, all of them were satisfied to very satisfied with the variety of topics covered, the selection of speakers, and overall conference arrangements. Conference participants also provided thoughts on future topics that can be covered and summarized below:

- The impact of artificial intelligence on the workplace is going to be a key concern and issue for the government, policymakers, and individuals with disabilities.
- Data collection/sharing between state agencies on persons with disabilities. employment data statistics for Michigan.
- Future of work and how jobs are changing in the context of disability inclusion.
- Accommodation and training best practices.
- Intersectionality of disability and other diversity types: Examples include veterans, disabilities among women, and minority groups.
- The role and needs of caregivers and allies in disability employment.
- Employer fears and legal steps for recruiting.
- ADA coordinator roles and challenges and additional training resources.
- Purposeful marketing and targeting of business leaders to attend the conference.
- Bring speakers with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities.

The conference video testimonial was produced and can be found at the following link:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rDcDnTrTmU

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Appendix A: Attending Organizations

AJM Packaging Corporation	Michigan Division on Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing
ASE	Michigan Rehabilitation Services
Atos	Midland Public Schools
Auburn University	National Employment Team (NET) at the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation
BEST Essential Services	Oakland University
Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan	Office of the Executive Vice President of Administration, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)
Broad College of Business, Executive Development Programs	Peckham Inc.
Business Network Division, State of Michigan	Potter Park Zoo
City of Detroit's Office of Disability Affairs	Project STEMM-Up
Corewell Health	Riverview Community School District
CVS Pharmacy	Rocket Mortgage
Dart Container Corporation	Schupan Recycling
Dell Corporation	Southeastern Michigan Construction Academy (SEMCA)
Detroit Institute of Arts	Services to Enhance Potential (STEP) Vocational Services
Detroit Zoological Society	Sklarczyk Seed Farm
DisabilityIN	Small Business Association of Michigan
Equal Employment Opportunities Commission	SourceAmerica
General Motors	State of Michigan
Goodwill Industries of Mid-Michigan	Steelcase
Great Lakes ADA Center	Teach Access
Hannahville Indian Community	The Auto Club Group – AAA
Honigman LLP	The Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeship (PIA)
Incompass Michigan	Three Talents
Infrastructure Planning and Facilities, Michigan State University	Trilogy Health Services
Ken's Krew LLC.	U.S. Access Board
Labor and Employment Opportunity, State of Michigan	University of Maryland
Life Support Training Institute/Superior Ambulance	University of South Carolina
Michigan Economic Development Corporation	Urban Alliance
Meijer Inc.	Veteran Affairs
Michigan Community Services	VFW National Home
Michigan Department of Economic Opportunity	YMCA of Lansing
Michigan Dept of Education - Low Incidence Outreach	

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