PHYSICAL DISABILITY INCLUSION IN THE WORKPLACE: AN INDIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

Background: When organizations consider diversity and inclusion, physical disability as a group is often neglected. It is neither well organized nor recognized in the private sector in India despite support from international conventions and disability laws. Disability perception in the workplace is a complex issue with many layers. It is a function of intra-individual, interpersonal, social and organizational interactions and experiences. Empirical research on disability inclusion reveals a huge gap between knowledge and practice.

Purpose: This research paper aims to investigate the factors that affect physical disability inclusion in private organizations in India, understand stakeholder attitudes towards persons with physical disabilities, and recommend a generic framework to organizations from the lens of an HR, to build an inclusive workplace. It also attempts to open new avenues of research to organizational practices by sharing an integrated approach to disability inclusion.

Methods: The researcher has used content analysis to organize and elicit meaning from the data collected and draw conclusions and recommendations from it. 30-35 journal articles related to the topic were included in the study on the basis of keyword searches considering disability in the workplace from a social, legal, anthropological, and organizational perspective in India and the globe. Accordingly, meanings, concepts, definitions, theories, interpretations, applications and empirical referents were extracted after reviewing the resources. Corporate cases were also cited as examples, using the help of five companies, each representing a different industry, but exhibiting good practices in the field of disability inclusion in India.

Findings: The study suggests that integrated HR practices comprising of inclusive recruitment and on-boarding, a supportive workplace, sensitized work culture and environment, up-to date technology and infrastructure, and career development are the major factors affecting disability inclusion and acceptance in the workplace. The research analysis also indicates limited progress in the field of career mapping and development for persons with physical disabilities in the workplace..

Key words: physical disability, inclusion, employment, equal opportunity

Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) recognizes certain rights of persons with disabilities to lead a life of dignity, self-sufficiency and non-discrimination in all walks of life. One of the core substantive rights in the Convention discussed at length, relates to employment of persons with disabilities. (Lord, 2010). It is only when the work environment, be it physical, digital or social becomes inclusionary in nature to persons with different types of disabilities, will opportunities be created for differently abled people to effectively participate in the workplace at an equal footing without being marginalised. Accordingly, the Convention expressly recognizes the rights of such people to work as an equal with equality of opportunity to earn a living by work freely chosen or accepted (Article 27). Moreover, they should have the availability of a "labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to them". (Lord, 2010). To achieve this objective, it is important to eliminate barriers or obstacles that generally tend to interfere with their recruitment and selection, career progression and cultural assimilation within the organization. These barriers can be broadly categorised as self-created, attitudinal on the part of employees and institutional or organisational barriers. (Lengnick-Hall, 2014).

Self-created barriers arise when employees internalize the negative attitude towards disability and experience feelings of shame or embarrassment about their impairment which leads to low self-esteem and devaluation of themselves (Earnshaw, 2012). Attitudinal barriers, from a co-worker standpoint, is the disability identity they associate with the individual. It lies in the eye of the beholder, who conveys through behavior and social interaction his/her perception, comfort and acceptance of the differently abled individual (Reeve, 2004). Workplace inclusion, after all, as explained by Wehman, is the interaction of persons with disabilities with their colleagues and supervisors (Wehman, 2003) and as such they have an influence over the individual's employment experiences. (Colella, 1996). Institutional barriers consider the overall environment, rules and procedures which determine how an organization chooses to represent itself externally and internally to its target audience and how its beliefs, practices, infrastructure and communication technology are designed to acquire and manage talent for diversity and inclusion. For the purpose of this research paper, the main focus is on dealing with institutional barriers to disability inclusion and bringing about a cultural change in the mindset of its members.

.Objective:

The prime objective of the research is the following:

1. To conduct a content analysis and identify HR best practices towards physical disability inclusion initiatives in India.

2. To prepare a business case in support of mainstreaming disability hiring in the workplace.

Methodology

The present study aims to build upon the limited literature on disability inclusion in India by exploring the factors that influence disability participation and organizational inclusion of people with physical disabilities in the workplace. The researcher has used online research databases such as Google Scholar, EBSCO Host, Sage Journal Database, Jstor Database, Research Gate, etc. to look into the benefits and challenges of disability inclusion from an organizational perspective, analyze the changing attitude and mindset of stakeholders, whether it be the individual, society or the organization as a whole. This research paper also analyzes legal and compliance matters pertaining to disability inclusion for private establishments to understand whether they impact disability participation in the workplace. In other words, it attempts to study the socio-legal perspective of disability inclusion, both conceptually and contextually by analyzing provisions in Indian laws which relate to disability hiring and inclusion for private establishments. The study also focuses on identifying common patterns of the best practices followed across industries in general, whether global or local, that organizations can take cues from or increase their awareness of to create basic strategies for themselves and strive for a more unified work culture and environment. The research material is gathered using a combination of secondary data such as official company websites, company disability handbooks and guidebooks, online news articles, books, magazines and journals, etc.

This research paper also focuses on domestic disability inclusive practices by highlighting the success stories of Indian companies across five different sectors, namely, hospitality, consumer goods, IT, BPO and finance. The researcher has identified a company from each sector for study using a meta-synthesis approach to combine the results found from different sources. The companies were randomly selected by conducting preliminary research by visiting their websites and going through online publications and news articles that had referred to them positively in light of physical disability inclusion. Preference was given to Indian origin companies where there were two or more companies representing good practices in any industry. The companies chosen had also made visibly conscious efforts to showcase themselves and be recognised as industry benchmarks to pave the way for others to follow suit. The researcher has used exploratory research and empirical evidence to gather information about disability integration, and make recommendations and suggestions accordingly.

Literature Review

The topic of disability in a social milieu fails to grab as much attention as other developmental issues like gender, caste, religion, poverty etc. which dominate. There is a pressing need to understand the importance of disability in the workplace because it transcends all the above-mentioned categories (Vikash Kumar, 2017). Although it may seem like an uncomfortable truth, we cannot disregard the fact that disability is not just something we may be born with, but includes physical and mental conditions we may develop over time. As such, it is "something that touches not just a minority, but can affect anyone, as illness, injury, or simply aging can occur across all human life". (Angeloni, 2013). Disability incidence is increasing at a global level. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2018), 15% of the world's population suffers from some form of disability. In India alone, as per 2011 census, 2.21% of the total population is documented to have a disability (MOSPI, 2016); however, the figures could be much higher. In India, most people are uncomfortable around persons with disabilities because they are not aware of how to behave around them, and end up either pitying them or glorifying them when they perform basic or daily tasks, and as a result, give them a sense of inferiority by viewing their disability as a 'suffering' or an abnormality and questioning their mental faculties too. (Dalal, 2006)

Defining Disability and the Law

The UNCRPD defines disability as an evolving concept, and provides a framework for creating rules and provisions for the same. It has made progressive contributions to both international disability rights as well as to human rights in general with its liberal interpretation of disability (Lord, 2010). The social model of disability has seen a dynamic shift in this concept which clearly distinguishes between impairments and disability by clarifying that "the degree of disability is a function of societal barriers" (Oliver M, 1990). As such, it perceives disability from the lens of accommodation requirements to enable persons with disabilities in carrying out their respective tasks rather than considering it as an inability to do something. When India ratified the UNCRPD in 2007, (Manecksha, 2010) we made a commitment to make substantial changes to our domestic laws to be in increased conformity with the Convention guidelines. Since then there has been a strong demand to shift focus in our disability laws from a "welfare approach" to a "rights based approach" i.e. rather than being treated as objects of charity, persons with disability need to be empowered with equality and autonomy as active members of society to fulfill basic needs and lead a life of dignity. (Chopra, 2013). As a result, perceptions about disability underwent a radical change in India and the Disability Act 1995 was repealed and replaced with the Right of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016 (abbreviated as RPWDA 2016). It has vested certain rights on employees with disabilities and imposed certain obligations on employers. The new Act has also expanded the scope of disabilities to include 21 categories as specified in its Schedule as compared to the 7 categories mentioned in the earlier Disability Act 1995 (under Section 2(i)).

The salient features of the RPWDA 2016 in the context of employment includes mandating all establishments to create an equal opportunity policy as per Section 21, in accordance with Chapter IV, Rule 8 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Rules, 2017 (abbreviated as RPWD Rules, 2017) which lays down the content of the policy and manner of publication. It also directs all establishments to create an environment that is both physically and digitally inclusive of persons with disabilities. This would include making structural changes to existing buildings to enable barrier-free movement in the workplace, as well as ergonomically designing the work area and providing assistive devices to facilitate smooth functioning of work.

"Despite being the world's largest minority whose rights are protected through legislations, persons with a disability continue to face overt and subtle workplace discrimination" (Baldridge, 2017). While legislation is a starting point to encourage organizational commitment to affirmative action by providing incentives, they are rudimentary for the private sector in India. The RPWDA 2016 along with the RPWD Rules, 2017 sets out guidelines and procedures for compliance related to disability inclusion for employers, however, it does not put a mandate on private establishments to recruit a certain percentage of the workforce with disabilities. What this means for us is that in the absence of hard laws, private establishments have to believe in the cause of disability inclusion from a business perspective and be proactive in championing their cause.

The Business Case

Disability inclusive practices in the Indian context is still at a nascent stage, undertaken by very few organizations. Many still view it as a liability or an unnecessary expense. Hughes explains the concept of diversity intelligence as the ability to recognize the value in those who may be undervalued (Hughes, 2016). Diversity and inclusion have a competitive advantage only when firms identify this value in persons with disabilities and use this recognition to tap this potential resource for opening up new possibilities to enhance thinking and behavior in equity and leadership (Burton, 2018). The role of corporate culture is of paramount importance in this to realize this objective to determine the quality of interaction amongst its organizational members (Appelbaum, 2008).

Disability inclusion has found support in the theory of resource based competitive advantage (Barney, 1991) and social exchange theory (R. Cropanzano, 2005) The former states that competitive advantage can be gained through tapping of underutilized resources. Kalargyrou (2014), in line with this theory, has reported the use of the resource-based approach by the successful implementation of disability inclusion strategy resulting in competitive advantage in terms of increased loyalty, attendance, increased productivity and organization reputation. The social exchange theory on the other hand, argues that rules of economic or socio-emotional exchange is the prime factor for relationships to evolve over time into trust, commitment and loyalty (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). It can be presumed that although both approaches are distinct and fundamentally different from each other, yet are interrelated and complementary to one another which defines the tangible organizational outcomes by influencing work motivation and behaviour.

Many organizations which began with disability inclusion as a CSR initiative have started mainstreaming this practice based upon proven business success. There has been an emerging body of information substantiating this claim. Hiring persons with disabilities has shown benefits to organizations as they make good, dependable employees who are highly motivated with comparable or better productivity, lower attrition, lower accident rates and a higher level of satisfaction as compared to the general workforce. People who develop disability on the job or during the course of employment, whether on duty or off duty, have valuable skills and experiences which cannot be undermined. From a Company perspective too, disability representation is a great way to promote a Company's brand and image to its customers, staff and the community as a whole. (ILO, 2010)

Inclusive Workplace Practices

Inclusion has been defined as "the degree to which an employee is accepted and treated as an insider by others in a work system" (Pelled, 1999). Since inclusion is an umbrella term it would not be possible to have an overarching solution to address all concerns of all industries in a uniform manner. However, there could be a general framework around which strategies could be designed to incorporate good practices in the workplace. Initiatives adopted by each organization would depend on the integration of the company's goals with their broader culture, vision and values. A precursor to devising a strategy for disability inclusion would be identifying factors for decision making. (Heera, 2019). Based upon the available literature, it would be a fair presumption to broadly categorize these factors into five key areas which serve as an opportunity as well as a challenge to disability inclusion. They are:

1.   Recruitment & On-boarding practices: Many companies are adopting various approaches to mainstream disability inclusion in their hiring practices as part of their corporate agenda and have initiated special recruitment drives for hiring persons with disabilities. This could include having targeted customized sourcing tie-ups with organizations/NGOs that specifically deal with persons with disabilities. Some of these NGOs provide assistance in the onboarding and induction phase as well (Kulkarni, 2014) As part of the new hire strategy, personal assistance and training on workplace accommodation can also be provided. Some organizations also adopt a buddy/mentor system along with external coaches to help the individual settle in the new environment and role. (Friedner, 2013)

2.   Supportive Workplace: This would include having dedicated HR policies and practices, whether written or unwritten, formal or informal, to help persons with disabilities rehabilitate from any physical or emotional distress and provide them with the necessary support to deal with any hardship. For example, some

organizations have health and wellness programs to focus on areas such as pain management, psychological support, food and nutrition, social connectedness, yoga and spirituality. (Snook, 2015). It is also a common practice among organizations that invest in support facilities to use paid assistance while providing wheelchair accommodation as a next step. (D.R. McNeal, 1999) Some organizations modify work or allow for reduction or flexibility in working hours.

3.   *Inclusive Culture*: An organization's corporate culture plays an important role in both disability discrimination and acceptance in the workplace (Schur, 2005). It is necessary to sensitize employees through diversity training around legal, ethical and moral considerations as well as business outcomes to highlight the holistic importance of disability inclusion to the firm. (Ferdman, 1996). Organizations should also conduct focused sensitization programs and workshops to build empathy and spread awareness on the needs and expectations in disability accommodation to understand different working styles of such persons. The training programs should also guide employees on their attitudes and behaviors which should be exhibited as a good practice to create a supportive environment. (Phillips, 2015). While an organization can have systems and processes in place, the extent to which they are followed and executed depends greatly upon the leadership commitment to the cause. Business leaders are the key drivers of any integration strategy by not only providing direction, but also actively participating as behavioral role models for employees. (Kulkarni M. B., 2016) In the practical sense, managers, supervisors and business leaders play a key role in employee socialization and culture assimilation by their direct behaviour towards persons with disabilities and indirectly through their influence on co-workers and subordinates. (Kulkarni. M, 2011)

4.   *Unique technology & Infrastructure:* This is a legal mandate on all establishments under the RPWDA, 2016 to enable barrier free entry and movement to the facility, within the facility and around the facility based upon concepts of reasonable accommodation and universal design. Reasonable accommodation under Section 2(y) would mean making appropriate modifications without placing an undue burden on either party while the principle of universal design under Section 2(ze) can be defined as "usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for further modification or adaptation". It includes the use of assistive devices or technology into products and workspaces, allowing room for individualized accommodations. (Zolna, 2008).

5.   *Career Development:* Organizations which chalk out a roadmap for employees with disabilities to allow upward mobility in their career path have a higher chance of gaining employee satisfaction among their workforce with disabilities. This should also be coupled with encouraging participation in boot camps or training programs to harness their leadership capabilities or personality development. Some companies also invest in retraining employees for a new career in case they are completely unable to return to their traditional work function on account of injuries sustained in or outside the workplace. Companies which have a myopic view of limiting career opportunities to either entry level positions or keeping disability as a consideration tend to overlook qualifications and objectivity while considering the candidate's job fitment. (Kumar, 2014). Organizations need to provide challenging assignments, give emotional support and performance feedback, and ensure that persons with disabilities feel valued, to create the kind of environment that directly facilitates organizational integration. (Kulkarni. M, 2011)

It should be noted that while it is important to create integration strategies to accommodate employees with disabilities, it should be effective and proportionate to the objective sought, of enabling the worker to be at par with everyone else. It should also be transparent and perceived as fair and necessary by others in the organization. One threat to having a disability inclusion strategy is that the management might go overboard with their categorizations resulting in an unintended consequence of exclusion of the rest, which might face resistance and backlash from other employees (Dahl, 2014). The purpose of creating an inclusive strategy is to build an inclusive environment and influence work related self-esteem, motivation, loyalty and the willingness to go beyond the limitations of their traditional job roles. (Cottrill, 2014)

.Case Study Examples:

This final section shares good practices that some medium and large size organizations of Indian origin as well as multi national corporations (MNCs) in India are following. The organizations range across multiple industries such as manufacturing, hospitality, IT, finance and the BPO sector who have become equal opportunity employers. They have also successfully embraced disability inclusion in their strategic plan to capitalize on the unique skill-sets of persons with disabilities.

ITC- A multi-national conglomerate having a diversified presence in FMCG, hospitality and agri-business, ITC has shared its lessons and success stories on working with persons with disabilities which lies in having formal and documented policies, procedures and practices that HR personnel and line managers refer to on all matters related to an employee's life cycle. ITC has a robust and well thought out selection process. Job descriptions and person specifications are frequently reviewed to check their relevance and also to ensure that they are not discriminatory or exclusionary in nature. For example, a requirement for making customer visits would be advertised as willingness to travel rather than mandating a candidate to have a driver's licence. Job responsibilities are also ranked in order of importance to facilitate reassignment in case of any accommodation requirements. Recruitment drives are also focused on attracting target disability audience through accessible advertising as well as encouraging statements to increase their visibility as an equal opportunity employer. ITC's experiences also emphasize on making adjustments for interviewing candidates if they have declared any disability in the application form. Another lesson imparted is the usefulness of training interviewers on communicating confidently with job applicants with disabilities and providing them with a fair chance to showcase their skills and competencies (ITC).

Titan Company Limited (Titan)- It is a joint venture of Tata Group, dealing in consumer goods and is India's leading producer of watches and other accessories. Titan has a non-discrimination policy and a work environment ergonomically designed to empower persons with disabilities. Their showrooms too have all the necessary slopes and ramps to ease accessibility for their customers with disabilities. Titan uses its outreach program to source candidates with physical disabilities from lower socio-economic strata through NGO tie-ups such as Enable or V-shesh for job tasks requiring minimal physical movement, such as polishing watch cases or assembling parts or for basic technical competencies. They offer counselling sessions to their employees to deal with personal or professional issues. Their employee engagement strategy encourages employees to participate in cultural programs at an organizational level and they also fund state level or national level participation in sports and athletic activities for employees who qualify in these competitions, to develop a sense of confidence and achievement in them (Tata, n.d.).

ANZ Bengaluru-The Australian and New-Zealand Banking Group Ltd, dealing in banking and financial services, has a dedicated referral program along with specialized sourcing tie-ups to acquire a strong talent pool of persons with disabilities. They organize a series of sensitization workshops to train hiring managers to resist the urge to assess candidates on the basis of their body language, and focusing on their abilities instead of their disabilities. Furthermore, they have formed a task-force comprising of business unit heads, project managers, hiring managers and team leads along with performance dashboards to objectively monitor and track their work performance and progress (PWC, 2016). They also provide additional benefits such as trained house staff/nurses and special medical cab facilities. As part of their talent acquisition strategy, ANZ Bengaluru collaborates with EnAble India to provide educational and skill development opportunities at their training facility which has a capacity for 400 candidates with disabilities. EnAble India also assists them with job profiling and career mapping. ANZ and SAP also partner together to sponsor the "India Inclusion Summit" an initiative to spread awareness about people with disabilities in mainstream society. (ANZ, 2016)

Wipro-An Indian multi-national corporation in IT sector, Wipro has 6 pillars in its Disability Inclusion agenda comprising of recruitment, career development, employee engagement, accessibility, talent transformation and enablement. They collaborate with CII, Ability, various NGOs and other channels to organize job fairs, walk-in interviews and pre-hiring support like internship opportunities to help scout candidates from non-conventional sources. (Wipro, 2015) Career development includes "role rotation and on-site opportunities, career mapping through an individual development plan (IDP) and annual tracking."(PwC, 2016) Their employee engagement

policy is focused around annual town halls and leadership connects where employees with disabilities are given a forum to voice their concerns and also network with business leaders. It also provides a platform for being appreciated through reward and recognition for managers and employees who have excelled in their work or acted as change agents for disability inclusion. Other platforms include panel discussions, YamJams, (online collaboration sessions for knowledge sharing), quarterly newsletters, annual celebrations of persons with disabilities etc.

Vindhya E-Infomedia- Founded in 2006, this Bengaluru and Hyderabad based BPO Company is a pioneer in its industry by delivering cost effective business solutions through its unique business model of mainstreaming differently abled employees into its workforce. Over 60% of their employees comprise of people having some form of disability and they have envisioned increasing this representation to over 90%. Their key initiatives include conducting refresher training programs for fresh hires as well as existing employees, and focusing on career development by investing in their professional certifications from external agencies. All team leaders are green belt certified and the organizational climate is such which encourages leadership development. Employees are not told what to do but are encouraged to find solutions on their own, providing them with the necessary support and resources needed to be self reliant. Employees are also offered subsidized accommodation facilities close to the office (Youth4Jobs, 2015).

Conclusion

This paper outlined the legal and business justification for inclusion of differently abled people in the workplace, and the benefits of making differently abled people part of the workforce. It also looked at methods to implement inclusion practices in the workplace, and stressed the importance of companies to go beyond the minimal standards laid down by law and adopt creative practices in disability sourcing, screening, recruitment and on-boarding practices, talent management and employee retention. Recognizing the value added by differently abled people, leading organizations in various sectors are proactively undertaking disability inclusion in the workplace, which will hopefully encourage others to follow.

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