Successful Employees With Disabilities Through the Lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory: A Case Study at Sephora

Jeffrey R. Moore
Anderson University

Sarah Hankins
Anderson University

Susan E. Doughty
Anderson University

In an age where many companies are struggling with employee retention, an alternative is proposed. This study investigates the factors that make employees with disabilities successful. Research indicates that employees with disabilities are just as successful as their counterparts—with a notable distinction. They often exhibit more loyalty and higher retention than their non-disabled counterparts.

Researchers interviewed several participants with disabilities who were employed at two Sephora USA distribution centers. These interviews were compiled to paint a picture of a model employee with disabilities. Additionally, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1994) is applied as a framework to provide workplace context. Findings indicate that successful employees with disabilities are characterized by personal drive, performance, perseverance, adaptability, and a desire to help others.

Our findings help organizations that are building inclusive workplaces to consider both the direct and indirect enablers impacting employees with disabilities, causing them to flourish. Successful disabled employees, through their resilience in overcoming the challenges of their disabilities, bring a positive change to their teams through their character and outstanding performance.

Keywords: disabilities, employees with disabilities, complexity leadership, personal development, inclusive workplace, Bronfenbrenner, ecological systems

INTRODUCTION

Organizational development and Human Resource Management research have intentionally started to focus on the hiring of people with disabilities due to prosocial motivations as well as labor shortages (Kendall and Karnes, 2018; Brite, Nunes, & Souza, 2015; Donnelly & Joseph, 2012). There is a widespread desire to understand how to effectively integrate employees with disabilities into the workforce. Demonstrated successes have motivated more businesses to adopt inclusive endeavors and seek training

(Moore, Hanson, & Maxey, 2020; Zhu, Law, Sun, & Yang, 2019; Värlander, 2012). While not the pioneer, Sephora is an upcoming leader in the inclusion movement, having won the 2020 inclusive employer of the year award from APSE (APSE, 2020).

As the inclusive hiring movement continues to grow, research is needed to better understand the workplace context of a successful employee with limited skills. Understanding which factors influence their success is key to creating the right organizational structure and culture. We studied two distribution centers at Sephora by interviewing several successful employees with disabilities and Human Resources staff members focused on inclusion. Qualitative methods such as interviews and the collection of artifacts (company values, codes of ethics, rules, etc.…) allowed for for gathering rich data (Yin, 2014; Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2003).

To frame the individual development of employees we use Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1994). Combined with a qualitative study, it allows a holistic approach to understanding the multitude of inter-related factors that influence an employee with limited skills. What components served as catalysts towards a happy, successful employee? Which ones inhibited them? Research questions driving this study were:

- Where does the individual get their support?
- How have different Ecological Systems impacted their lives as a whole?
- What/who were the people/factors that had the most influence?

This case study allows for a deeper understanding of how a company can develop and integrate employees with limited skills. Building from past research, this study focuses on the story of the individual (Moore, Hanson, Maxey, 2020). Tying in key theories, the case study applies previous research and paints a picture of the results. It contributes an applied perspective to previously proposed theories. This is particularly beneficial to the growing business community that is hiring people with limited skills. This research will offer conceptual advancements to companies and managers facing challenges to integrate and develop their employees through inclusion initiatives because it shows the perspective of the employees themselves.

LITERATURE REVIEW

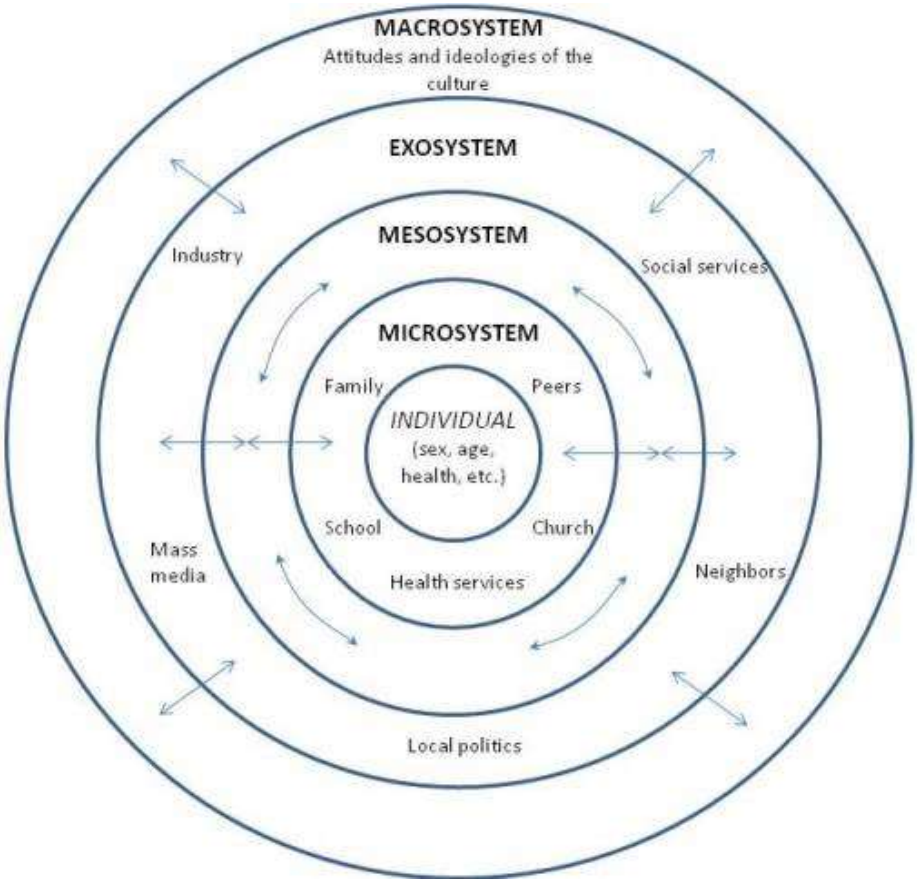
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Originally proposed in 1979, Bronfenbrenner's model has undergone a handful of revisions to allow for new findings. The ecological model uses a systems approach to identify influences on an individual (Figure 1). The model organizes these influences into different circles of influence, with the individual at its center. Directly outside the center lies the Microsystem, which Bronfenbrenner (1994) defined as a "pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the person in a given face-to-face setting…" (p. 39). The Microsystem encompasses the immediate interactions that a person sees daily (i.e., family, friends, co-workers).

Outside of that is the Exosystem. This comprises events, people, or settings that have a more indirect influence on the individual. For our paper, upper management, corporate culture, and productivity rates for the employee would fall into this category. The last circle would be the Macrosystem, which consists of the overarching pattern of these systems. They are reflective of the culture, specifically regarding the belief systems, bodies of knowledge, customs, symbols, etc. (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). An example of this would be the economy, political climate, or the social norms of a culture.

Linking between these circles is the Mesosystem. It is not a system itself, but rather the Mesosystem refers to interactions between two or more settings (e.g., the relations between work and home) through communication, relationships, and alignment of goals. Lastly, there is the Chronosystem. The Chronosystem lies outside of the ecological systems and refers to the change or consistency over time both within the person, but also in their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). An example of this would be a significant event, such as the Great Recession or the COVID-19 Pandemic. All these components of the model work together to influence an individual's development – or an employee's success.

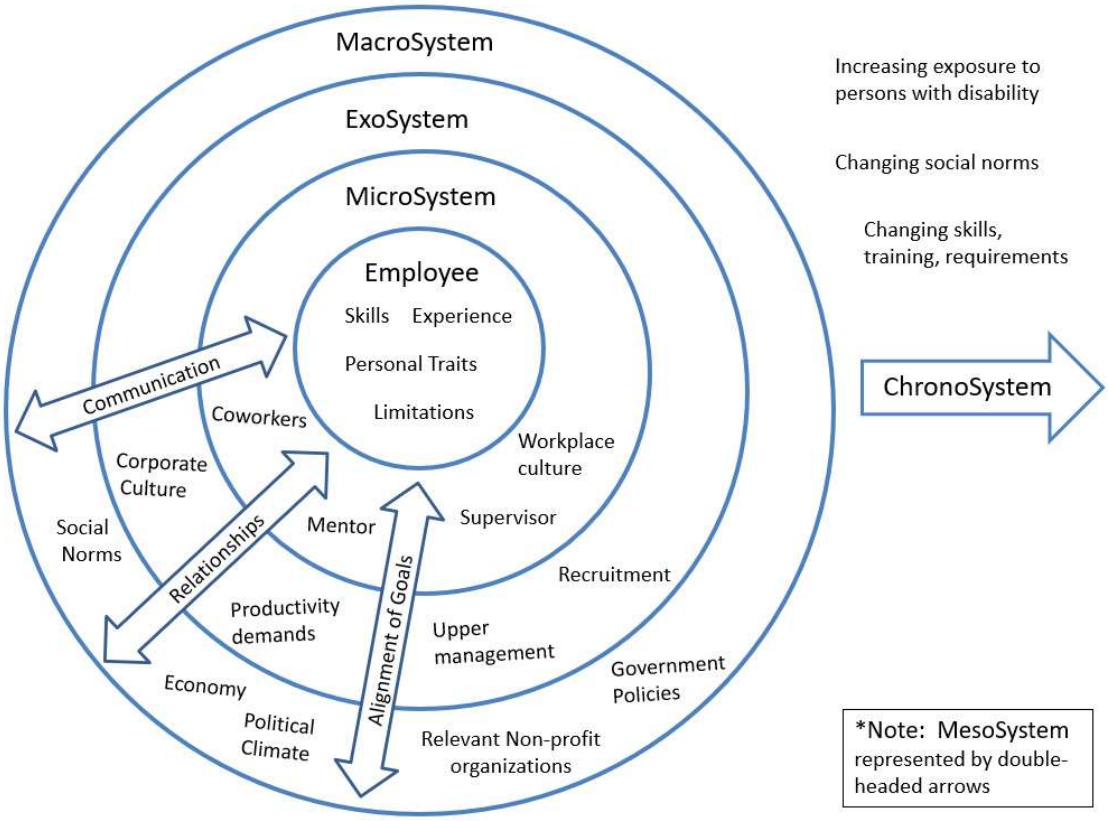
FIGURE 1
BRONFENBRENNER'S ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS FRAMEWORK FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT



Bronfenbrenner, 1994

Recently researchers Doughty & Moore (2020) apply the Ecological System to the developing employee with a disability (Figure 2). Their work abstracts out the interconnected direct and indirect influencers on successful workplace inclusion. We note the Microsystem of this workplace-focused model includes team members, immediate supervisors, and Human Resource staff (HR champions) with whom the individual interacts regularly. In the Exosystem, we find the key role that corporate culture established through upper management leadership, productivity demands, and recruitment agencies serving people with disabilities. The Mesosystem identifies key interactions between the systems of the inclusive workplace. These are the alignment of inclusion goals, communication, and relationships in the organization.

FIGURE 2
MODEL OF AN INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE FROM AN ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE



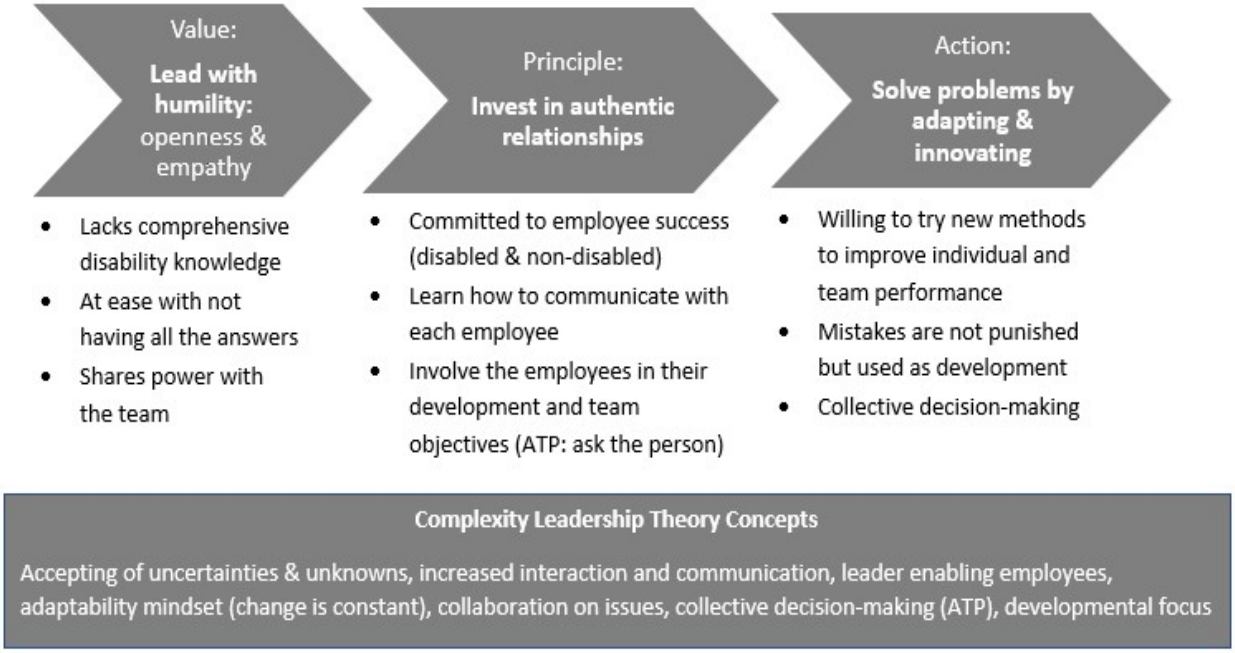
Doughty & Moore, 2020

Employing People With Disabilities

Research has shown that creating an inclusive workplace dramatically altered the culture of organizations. Managers were forced to deal with the challenge of the employee's disability by becoming more relational and less focused on a demanding autocratic performance mindset. These leader-employee relationships enabled reciprocal personal development which changed the culture to become a truly inclusive workplace (Moore, Maxey, Waite, & Wendover, 2020; Alper, & Domnitz, 2017).

Moore, Maxey, Waite & Wendover (2020) explain (Figure 3) the attributes needed in an effective inclusive manager which is key to healthy inclusive workplace culture. The key to the success of the leader-employee relationship is the humility needed by the leader to be open and empathetic to the disabled team member. Next, the leader invests in understanding what makes the employee successful. This personal focus is to understand the specificities and uniqueness of the employee. All employees have successfully graduated from the onboarding and training program and have proven their ability to produce at 100% of the production and quality expectations (Maxey, Moore, & Hanson, 2017). Building on the openness and the investment in his/her employee, the manager can then delegate decision making to the team to resolve operational and team member issues. The manager moves away from being a micromanager to become a coach who facilitates team success.

FIGURE 3
ATTRIBUTES OF THE INCLUSIVE MANAGEMENT STYLE



Moore, Maxey, Waite, & Wendover, 2020

Complexity Leadership

Inclusive workplace research has developed a model of how managers transition from an authoritarian leadership style to an employee-centered leadership style (Moore, Maxey, Waite, & Wendover, 2020). Figure 3 further explains the importance of complexity leadership skills used by managers and leaders in the inclusive workplace. Complexity leadership is the framework that allows leaders to deal with a high amount of uncertainty while creating effective teams. Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) has been successfully applied to complex industries such as healthcare, government, and inclusive workplaces (Moore, Hanson & Maxey, 2020; Horvat & Filipovic, 2018).

Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT), an emerging leadership theory, provides a framework to understand organizational change and leader-employee transformation. Complexity leadership, unlike many leadership theories, is not leader-centric but rather focuses on creating conditions for adaptation and change within the organization. This is achieved through encouraging the collective group to share ideas, create, learn, innovate, and solve issues so the organization can adapt. Decentralization needs to occur for employees to be highly interactive, solution-oriented, and collaborative (Marion, 2008; Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). Organizations embracing this approach have learned how to create great teams in turbulent contexts (Bushe & Nagaishi, 2018; Jamieson & Marshak, 2018). They have become agile, resilient, and innovative through employee-focused partnerships.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This qualitative research is designed based on a constructionist epistemology to effectively understand the individual development of a successful employee with a disability. Taking the perspectives of the participants we extract the collective viewpoints, where truth and meaning rise collectively within their cultural context (Merriam, 2009; Crotty, 2003). Through the case study method, we build a model of the successful disabled employee (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014).

The interview was designed as semi-structured, with questions centering around the individual, their support system, and their work environment (Yin, 2014). The duration of the interview lasted approximately 35-45 minutes. No other instruments were used in the study. As a case study, data analysis will be centered on collective themes, not individual representations.

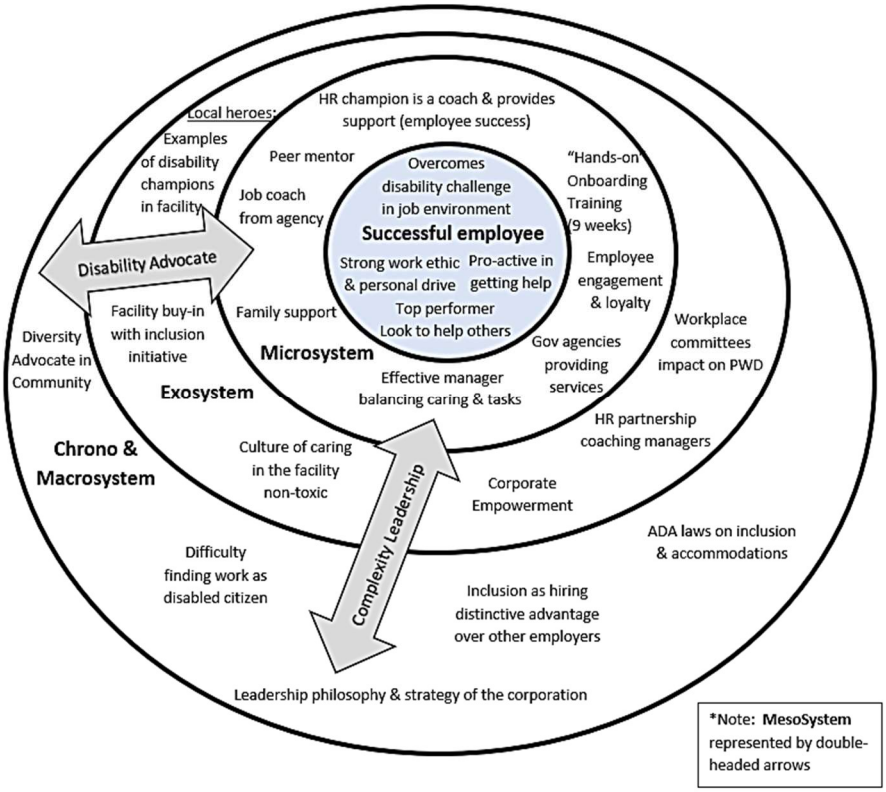
Sample

Participants were requested to volunteer by the HR department at the Sephora Distribution Centers in Memphis and Las Vegas. A well-performing individual from each distribution center was selected. The Human Resource inclusive staff member at each location was also interviewed. To ensure confidentiality, the names of the participants in this study have been changed. For the scope of this study, we focused on a smaller sample size to ensure a more in-depth result. The participants did not receive compensation for their interviews, and they had no pre-existing relationships with the researchers.

RESULTS

We applied the traditional model to our case study, placing the successful disabled employee at the center (Figure 4). First, we look at the Microsystem which are the people and relationships that directly interact with the employee. Second, the Exosystem, which is the people and relationships that indirectly interact with the employee, such as managers and executives in the company. Thirdly, the Macrosystem which is the system that includes the government, culture, and society at large. Fourth, the Mesosystem, which is the interactions between elements in different systems, such as work-life balance, communication between departments, as well as collaboration or competition between individuals or departments. All these categories are separate but work together to create a successful employee.

FIGURE 4
MODEL OF A SUCCESSFUL EMPLOYEE WITH A DISABILITY



Center – The Employee "Positive Change Agent"

The highly successful disabled employees all shared a common characteristic: being an overcomer. They overcame the challenge of their disability in an environment that is not ideal for their specific circumstances. Having overcome the challenge of their disability and learned to function effectively in a different environment, they became top performers. These individuals have a strong work ethic with a personal drive to succeed, are experts in their job functions, and are pro-active in getting assistance to accomplish their tasks. Driven by "satisfaction of doing a great job" one employee explains: "You have to be your own advocate." This employee says that you need to be pro-active in communication and when things are not well organized or if the support is not available on the floor, she must go find it to complete her tasks. Finally, these successful employees look to build the team and help others to be successful. In short, these successful employees are positive change agents through role modeling top performance as well as fostering genuine empathetic and supportive relationships with others.

Microsystem – People & Relationships That Directly Interact With the Employee

Essential to their success, employees point to the governmental agencies that partnered with the distribution center to develop a 9-week onboarding training program. This program was very "hands-on" which allowed them to master the technical skills needed to be successful. Furthermore, they explained that the "job coach", employed by the governmental agency, was critical in their success, as they worked with them one-on-one during the onboarding process. Another individual cited as instrumental in their success is the human resource disability lead who provided support and coaching. The disability lead was noted as the "biggest supporter helping me to solve problems and help me communicate". Finally, they point to the family support they receive from their spouse or their parents. This support provides them with positive reinforcement and emotional support as well as the internal drive to contribute and provide for their families.

HR champions at these distribution centers are heavily invested in their employees. We defined HR champions as human resource employees who work at the distribution center, oversee the disability initiative program, and serve as an advocate for the employees with disabilities. To them, it is not a "9-5" job. They preach servant leadership and strive to find creative solutions for the employees daily. One example of this is how the face mask requirement has impacted the deaf community at Sephora. With masks being mandated, deaf employees cannot read lips to aid in communication. One HR champion decided to bring in erasable boards for each individual so they could write down their words during a conversation – a big win for employees who are unfamiliar with conversing through sign language.

Moreover, HR champions strive to know the employees on more than a surface level. They know the names and faces of each disabled employee – and they strive to develop personal relationships with them. It is important to the HR champions that disabled employees feel they have someone to advocate for them, and that the HR champions become someone an employee is comfortable enough to go to for concerns. However, the HR champions are quick to disclaim that they do not take the place of the supervisor role; they are merely a mentor and a coach to help the employee with overcoming challenges. HR champions seek to support the employee without undermining the supervisor. This finding is crucial – HR champions in the successful environment serve as a resource, but not a replacement, for authority.

Exosystem – People & Relationships that Indirectly Interact With the Employee

The corporate headquarters provide considerable support for disabled employees by focusing on strategy and resources for recruiting people with disabilities. The corporate vision sets the stage for the distribution leadership to create a positive culture of caring in the facility. Our interviews highlighted the positive impact of a caring culture, referring to Sephora as "our family". This translates into employee engagement: during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, only 7% of the employees with a disability did not show up to work (compared to much higher absenteeism from their non-disabled peers). Finally, these successful disabled employees explained that they saw areas for improvement and were involved in facility improvement efforts centered around better communication, better organization, and improving leadership skills in the facility.

Macrosystem, Mesosystem, & Chronosystem

For this study, we combined the Macrosystem, the Mesosystem, and the Chronosystem. As we underwent the investigation process, we found that since employees interacted daily with elements toward the center of their Ecological System, those immediate interactions were at the forefront of their minds when giving responses. That is not to say that the Macro-, Meso-, and Chrono-systems are not important factors; rather they played a more indirect, behind-the-scenes role during the interviews. For example, the successful disabled employees explained that it was very difficult to find employment when you have a disability. They were very appreciative of their governmental agencies (in the Macrosystem) who provided them with their referral to work at Sephora. Beyond that, possible government incentives did not seem to have a daily impact on the individual.

In the Mesosystem, two themes emerged. First, the importance of a leadership philosophy that is supportive, communicative, and competent. One said: "leadership is the reason why it works". Second, getting involved in improving the organization. Successful disabled employees are themselves "all in" and want to continue to improve their organization through hard work, communication, and better employee-focused leadership. When discussing the need for improvement, observations were: "some managers are not very organized, some managers are not coaching, and we are not heard". Managers who focus solely on tasks to be accomplished without having a friendly authentic interest in others are not effective.

To conclude our findings, we present the summary employee operational metrics at the two Sephora Distribution Centers in our study (Table 1). These data were gathered during the spring of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic and is separated by employees with a disability (EWD) and their counterparts.

TABLE 1
COMPARATIVE METRICS FOR EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILTIES AT SEPHORA

Las Vegas		April 2020	June 2020
	# EWD	17	20
	% of full time employees	8%	10%
	non-EWD productivity	113%	142%
	EWD productivity	116%	116%
	non-EWD abscenteeism	3.07%	2.96%
	EWD abscenteeism	0.71%	1.40%
	non-EWD safety	2	2
	EWD safety	0	1
Memphis		April 2020	June 2020
	# EWD	103	94
	% of full time employees	25%	18%
	non-EWD productivity	99%	111%
	EWD productivity	104%	111%
	non-EWD abscenteeism	22.0%	25.0%
	EWD abscenteeism	2.0%	7.0%
	non-EWD safety	6	7
	EWD safety	3	1

Note. EWD = Employee with Disability

Employees with a disability provided consistently strong numbers in each category – often surpassing their counterparts. These numbers are a clear indicator that they demonstrated their loyalty through their attendance, their engagement through safety, and their drive through productivity. We take special note of

their extremely low rate of absenteeism during this pandemic. When comparing their rate of absenteeism, they were between 50% to 1,100% less than their counterparts.

DISCUSSION

We have seen outstanding employees with disabilities demonstrate the ability to overcome incredible personal difficulties and challenging work environments. However, the characteristics of these employees resemble the characteristics of successful employees without a disability. Both have a strong work ethic and high personal drive and are pro-active in getting help while being top performers. We recommend investigating the notion that a higher percentage of employees with a disability are top performers than their employees without a disability. We posit this due to two factors.

The first is the fact that they overcame personal, social, educational, and professional challenges to be successfully employed. Thus, overcoming challenges to be successful is second nature. Second, the social pressure on them as part of a minority in the workplace intensifies the need for the employee with a disability to function at a higher level to compensate for pre-existing negative biases. For employees without a disability, is it much easier to be mediocre at their job and get by with a lower level of excellence. Finally, successful employees with a disability have higher devotion and engagement compared to their counterparts, as relatively few companies have highly inclusive workplaces. Because they feel valued and have a sense of belonging, these employees develop a strong loyalty to their workplace.

A key finding to note would be the difficulty of the work that the employees with disabilities are tasked with. It is not necessarily only physical in nature; they must research products, manage picking locations, and navigate complex databases. There is a large amount of technology that they interact with daily. Moreover, these employees are required to be self-motivated by the nature of their job. They are on their feet all day, frequently moving from one location to the next. They must be disciplined and focused enough to accomplish tasks by themselves.

CONCLUSION

Companies have an opportunity to discover incredibly skilled, motivated, engaged, and loyal employees in the ranks of people with a disability. Employees with disabilities have shown that they are resilient to obstacles, adaptable to change, and determined to reach success. They are an excellent resource for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, hiring employees with disabilities creates another layer of diversity to the workplace. Oftentimes, diversity is thought of through the lens of gender, sex, race, ethnicity, age, religion, etc.; those with disabilities are not a group that generally receives the same representation. They bring with them a perspective and a culture that the workplace is sorely missing.

Having said that, employees with disabilities possess a set of traits that are difficult to find. They have had to go above and beyond to challenge the societal norms that assume they cannot be successful because of their disabilities. They cannot simply coast by to achieve success, but rather they have had to find innovative ways to acclimate to the conventional workplace environment. This requires high levels of resilience, adaptability, and perseverance. Moreover, their unique situation encourages them to think outside the box, respect one another's differences, and exhibit the courage to try intimidating things. All these things are the embodiment of the core values of many companies. These employees do not just notice the core values posted in breakrooms – they act them out daily. Future research should delve into further exploring their untapped potential.

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