



# **Disabled Women in the Working World: Bias and Barriers that Hinder Workplace Advancement**

*A report by Disability EmpowHer Network in partnership with  
P3 Technology*

**March 8, 2023**

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\*In recognition of the varying language preferences across the Disability Community and experience, throughout this paper person first language (i.e. women with disabilities) and identity first language (i.e. disabled women) are used interchangeably.

## ***EXECUTIVE SUMMARY***

There are over 20 million adult women with disabilities in the noninstitutionalized population in the United States.<sup>1</sup> However, the career options and trajectories of women with disabilities are under-researched. Disabled women have the lowest employment rate among disabled and non-disabled men and women in the same age bracket.

In comparison to non-disabled women, disabled women do not have the same career options. Non-disabled women are more likely to work in managerial and full time fields whereas disabled women tend to work part time and in service positions.

This study looks at businesses' hiring and promotion practices that impact disabled women and the opportunities disabled women have to take on leadership roles. To further understand how we can increase the number of disabled women in leadership roles, we surveyed 445 hiring professionals to gain insight into their hiring practices, business offerings, and disability representation within their organizations.

The study found that 44% of the total participants had no women with disabilities in leadership or management positions. In 52% of cases, respondents estimated they had at least one woman with a disability in management. Respondents indicated concerns about hiring disabled people, such as absenteeism and safety. Yet few organizations have adjusted their policies to better support flexible scheduling or increase workplace safety. According to participants, problem-solving, teamwork, professionalism, confidence and determination, and dependability represented the top five skills needed by disabled women candidates to be hired or promoted. However, mentorship, paid trainings, and skill building opportunities were only offered to employees in less than 20% of survey responses. The respondents who have no women with disabilities in management positions indicated the need for partnerships with agencies working with disabled talent and increased education on the benefits of hiring disabled women. Nearly half of all participants indicated that tax incentives would motivate them to hire women with disabilities into leadership positions, however there was minimal awareness of existing financial incentives for hiring women with disabilities, such as tax credits.

Disability EmpowHer Network, in partnership with P3 Technology, conducted this study to better understand barriers to leadership for women with disabilities. Disability EmpowHer Network is a non-profit run by and for girls and women with disabilities that connects, motivates, and guides disabled girls and women to grow, learn, and develop to their highest potential and have the confidence to lead.

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<sup>1</sup>US Census. "Sex by Age by Disability B18101."  
<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=sex&t=Disability&tid=ACSDT1Y2021.B18101>

## **INTRODUCTION**

Leadership is a quality and marker of success for those who aim to coordinate community efforts, manage divisions, or run organizations. While the number of women in general in leadership positions has increased significantly in recent times, there remains a lack of opportunity in leadership roles for women within their work and personal lives. A gender gap in leadership persists, despite women generally being higher educated<sup>2</sup> and scoring higher on leadership skills tests than men.<sup>3</sup>

Workplace discrimination based on disability, sex, gender identity, race, and age in the United States is illegal. However, people with disabilities are still underrepresented in workplaces.<sup>4</sup> Women and girls with disabilities are exposed to attitudes and stereotypes that result in discrimination based on the intersection of sex and disability. Yet women with disabilities still aim to be part of the workforce and often fill traditionally unpaid labor roles such as caregiving.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, while data is not consistently available for multiply-marginalized disabled women, anecdotal evidence suggests that a disabled woman's race, ethnicity, and other identities also play a role in discrimination. Data demonstrates that many disabled people are multiply-marginalized. For example, 1 in 3 LGBTQIA+ people in the United States self-report having a disability, and over half of transgender people report a disability.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, in the general population, women of color and LGBTQIA+ women face barriers to professional entry that other women do not encounter. LGBTQIA+ women may face discrimination based on their sexual orientation or familial status,<sup>7</sup> while trans women experience unique barriers to safety, autonomy, and privacy.<sup>8</sup> When a person is multiply marginalized by being a woman and of color, disabled, or LGBTQIA+, many of these barriers are compounded in experience by the individual.

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<sup>2</sup>Fry, Richard. "U.S. Women near Milestone in the College-Educated Labor Force." Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/20/u-s-women-near-milestone-in-the-college-educated-labor-force/>. Accessed 7 Nov. 2022.

<sup>3</sup>Folkman, Jack Zenger and Joseph. "Are Women Better Leaders than Men?" Harvard Business Review, 15 Mar. 2012, <https://hbr.org/2012/03/a-study-in-leadership-women-do>.

<sup>4</sup> "PERSONS WITH A DISABILITY: LABOR FORCE CHARACTERISTICS." Bureau of Labor Statistics. Available at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/disabl.pdf>

<sup>5</sup>"Women in the Workplace 2022." LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, <https://womenintheworkplace.com/>. Accessed 9 Nov. 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Campaign, "Understanding Disability in the LGBTQ+ Community." 08/12/2022. Available at <https://www.hrc.org/resources/understanding-disabled-lgbtq-people>

<sup>7</sup> "How the LGBTQ+ community fares in the workplace." McKinsey & Company, available at <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/how-the-lgbtq-plus-community-fares-in-the-workplace>

<sup>8</sup> "Being transgender at work." McKinsey Quarterly. Available at <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/being-transgender-at-work>

Leadership at corporate levels is still largely male-dominated. Roughly 6% of CEOs in the United States are women, and less than 30% of c-suite positions are held by women.<sup>9</sup> There is a lack of data on the number of CEO and C-suite positions held by women with disabilities; however data is available at other levels. Of those identified as women, white women outnumbered women of color in Senior Vice-President, Vice-President, CEO, and managing and directing roles in 2022.<sup>10</sup> White women make up 24% of vice presidents, while women of color make up only 8% of these positions. White women account for 21% of c-suite positions, whereas women of color occupy 5% of C-Suite positions.<sup>11</sup> This begs the question: what are the career prospects of multiply-marginalized women, such as disabled women of color and disabled trans women?

## **Context of Barriers to Leadership**

Women and girls with disabilities are affected at many levels of our culture, impacting their ability to access leadership positions in their workplaces or communities. Women with disabilities disproportionately experience poverty, low wages, and lack of access to higher education, all affecting their ability to take advantage of leadership opportunities.

### *Income, Wages, and Poverty*

Women are more likely to experience poverty than men.<sup>12</sup> While poverty affects children's likelihood of leadership roles at similar rates, as adults, women are most likely to remain in poverty<sup>13</sup>. Lack of support, wealth and wage gaps, unpaid caregiving responsibilities, and segregation in job types all contribute to the larger number of women experiencing poverty.<sup>14</sup>

For women with disabilities, the likelihood of living in poverty is over double that of women without a disability<sup>15</sup>. From ages 25-54, nearly a quarter (24.7%) of employed

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<sup>9</sup> "Pyramid: Women in the United States Workforce (Infographic)." *Catalyst*, <https://www.catalyst.org/research/women-in-the-united-states-workforce/>. Accessed 11 Nov. 2022.

<sup>10</sup> "Women in the Workplace 2022." LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, <https://womenintheworkplace.com/>. Accessed 9 Nov. 2022.

<sup>11</sup> LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, "Women in the Workplace 2022."

<sup>12</sup> The Basic Facts About Women in Poverty. (2020, August 3). Center for American Progress. Retrieved August 17, 2022, from <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/basic-facts-women-poverty/>

<sup>13</sup> Moller, Kenza, "Growing up in poverty makes growing into leadership roles difficult" available at [https://smith.queensu.ca/insight/content/growing\\_up\\_in\\_poverty\\_makes\\_growing\\_into\\_leadership\\_roles\\_difficult.php](https://smith.queensu.ca/insight/content/growing_up_in_poverty_makes_growing_into_leadership_roles_difficult.php)

<sup>14</sup> The Basic Facts About Women in Poverty. (2020, August 3). Center for American Progress. Retrieved August 17, 2022, from <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/basic-facts-women-poverty/>

<sup>15</sup> *Spotlight on Women with Disabilities, March 2021*. Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2021.

women with a disability live in poverty.<sup>16</sup> Poverty is not only a result of a disparity in pay between disabled women and other workers. It stems from multi-faceted global and systemic barriers that hinder the empowerment and success of disabled people.<sup>17</sup> For example, some disabled women are employed under the legal protection of Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act, which allows disabled people to be paid rates below minimum wage.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, systemic issues contributing to the poverty status of women may also be exacerbated by race and ethnicity.

While there is limited research regarding disabled women of color, specifically, research shows that women of color face poverty at rates overall higher than white women, with American Indian and Alaskan Native women experiencing the highest rates at 24.6%.<sup>19</sup> From this data, we can theorize that multiply-marginalized disabled women likely experience higher rates of poverty.

### *Work and Education*

Though work and education can help to decrease poverty rates, not all women benefit from these options. Educational attainment is disproportionate between non-disabled women and women with disabilities. Non-disabled women, in general, have some of the highest education rates and tend to work more in managerial and full-time fields. Women with disabilities are more likely to work part-time and in service positions<sup>20</sup> and have the lowest levels of educational attainment.<sup>21</sup> In comparison, men with disabilities are employed 4 more percentage points than women with disabilities.<sup>22</sup>

Employment differences by race and ethnicity show that Asian and white women are more likely to work full-time and in management and professional positions, while Black

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<sup>16</sup> *Spotlight on Women with Disabilities, March 2021*. Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2021.

<sup>17</sup>The Basic Facts About Women in Poverty. (2020, August 3). Center for American Progress. Retrieved August 17, 2022, from <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/basic-facts-women-poverty/>

<sup>18</sup>Fact Sheet #39: The Employment of Workers with Disabilities at Subminimum Wages | U.S. Department of Labor. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/fact-sheets/39-14c-subminimum-wage>. Accessed 9 Nov. 2022.

<sup>19</sup> The Basic Facts About Women in Poverty. (2020, August 3). Center for American Progress. Retrieved August 17, 2022, from <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/basic-facts-women-poverty/>

<sup>20</sup>"PERSONS WITH A DISABILITY: LABOR FORCE CHARACTERISTICS." Bureau of Labor Statistics. Available at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/disabl.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> *Spotlight on Women with Disabilities, March 2021*. Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> *Spotlight on Women with Disabilities, March 2021*. Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2021.

<https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ODEP/pdf/Spotlight-on-Women-with-Disabilities-March-2021.pdf>

and Hispanic women are more likely to work in low-wage positions.<sup>23</sup> LGBTQIA+ individuals also face employment disparities due to their identities. Transgender people, in general, are twice as likely to be unemployed than cisgender individuals.<sup>24</sup> These outcomes for marginalized groups suggest that further research is needed on employment access and success for nonwhite and LGBTQIA+ disabled women.

## Workplace Barriers for Disabled Women

Disabled women are not less capable of leadership and management. Rather, societal barriers such as sexism, racism, and ableism have created situations where women with disabilities are left undereducated, unemployed, and under-invested in as leaders. These disparities prevail despite the best attempts of successful disabled leaders and organizations that support the growth of women with disabilities.

Disabled women have found success as federal legislators, mayors<sup>25</sup>, award-winning actors, doctors, lawyers, and managers when they have the tools to navigate the barriers that hinder their success. For example, disabled women report higher percentages of entrepreneurship than women without disabilities, with 11.3% being self-employed versus 8.2% of non-disabled women. This number can be compared to the 12.3% of self-employed men without disabilities.<sup>26</sup>

Research into the hiring of people with disabilities has found that the systemic inability to access educational growth and skill-building has influenced the low hiring efforts of people with disabilities shown by organizations.<sup>27</sup> In addition, employers' stigma and fears around hiring employees with disabilities have also been shown to be a hindrance to inclusion in hiring practices.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Women in the Labor Force: A Databook: BLS Reports: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. <https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/womens-databook/2019/home.htm>. Accessed 11 Nov. 2022.

<sup>24</sup> "Being transgender at work." McKinsey Quarterly. Available at <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/being-transgender-at-work>

<sup>25</sup>Zendehnam, Sara. "31-Year-Old Angels Camp Mayor Becomes First Deaf Female Mayor in the US." FOX40, 7 Feb. 2018, <https://fox40.com/news/local-news/31-year-old-angels-camp-mayor-becomes-first-deaf-female-mayor-in-the-us/>.

<sup>26</sup> *Spotlight on Women with Disabilities, March 2021*. Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Dalgin, R. S. (2017). *The Complex Nature of Disability Stigma in Employment: Impact on Access and Opportunity. Stigmas, Work and Organizations*, 55–70. doi:10.1057/978-1-137-56476-4\_4

<sup>28</sup> Dalgin, R. S. (2017). *The Complex Nature of Disability Stigma in Employment: Impact on Access and Opportunity. Stigmas, Work and Organizations*, 55–70. doi:10.1057/978-1-137-56476-4\_4

Human Resource departments, recruiters, and others responsible for hiring are an integral part of the journey to giving disabled women the opportunity to pursue leadership positions within their companies. To better understand the issue and prepare women with disabilities for career advancement, Disability EmpowHer Network, along with P3 Technology, surveyed 445 hiring professionals about the makeup of their organizations and the estimated number of women with disabilities in managerial and C-Suite positions. This survey is the first step in taking a holistic glance at barriers to entry to leadership opportunities for women with disabilities in the workplace.

More research and evaluation are needed to determine what can be improved to increase the employment rate of disabled women and their chances for upward mobility and career advancement.

## ***METHODOLOGY***

The rate at which disabled people of working age are employed differs from that of non-disabled people. Disabled people do not hold the same positions nor share the same career advancement opportunities as their non-disabled colleagues. However, research into the work and leadership opportunities of disabled women is limited.

This study aims to answer the questions:

1. What barriers exist in the application and interview process for disabled women jobseekers?
2. What barriers exist in hiring or advancing women with disabilities into leadership positions?
3. What skillsets or characteristics would make disabled women more attractive leadership candidates to hiring professionals?
4. How do workplaces interact with disabled employees?

The initial survey focused on recruiters, human resources personnel, and owners/operators who have hired employees in the last 12 months. The survey data was collected from the Questionpro survey platform in October 2022.

## ***PARTICIPANTS, MANAGEMENT, AND DISABILITY REPRESENTATION***



This survey includes 445 participants, who are hiring professionals or business owners representing businesses ranging from one employee (n=5) to 10,000+ employees (n=23), with the majority of businesses being 51-500 employees (n=154).

We asked respondents the size of their organizations and to estimate the number of women with disabilities represented in their leadership positions. Respondents representing organizations between 11 and 500 employees had management staff representing 10-15% of their organizations, or an estimated 1-75 management staff positions.<sup>29</sup> Of the 445 hiring professionals surveyed, 250 **estimated** that they had at least one woman with a disability on their management staff, representing more than half of the participant organizations.

**Yet 44% of the businesses represented did not have any women with disabilities represented in their leadership and management personnel.**

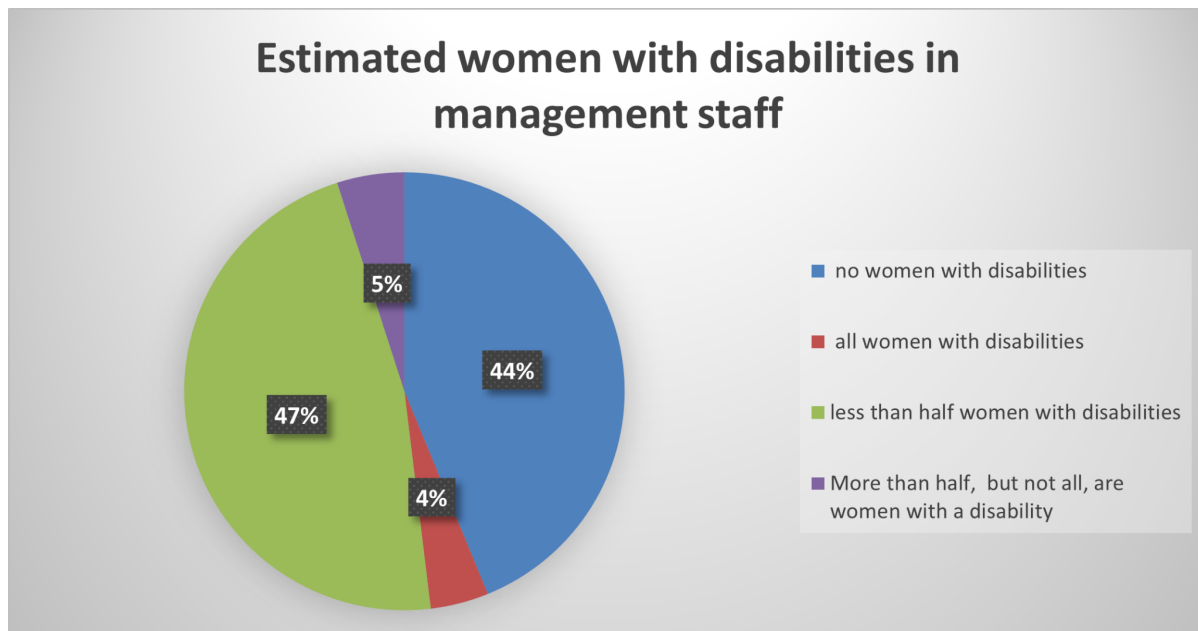


Image of a pie chart titled "Estimated women with disabilities in management staff". The pie chart shows that 44% of respondents said no women with disabilities, 4% said all women with disabilities, 5% said more than half of their management staff, 47% said less than half of their management staff.

## Employee Surveys

Participants were asked if they conduct disability surveys, and if so, how many women with disabilities were represented. 41% of respondents reported that they conduct

<sup>29</sup> Calculated using the low estimate and smallest business size (10%, 11 employees) and the highest estimate and 500 employees (15%, 500 employees)

disability surveys, with 65% of those who do conduct disability surveys reporting that they have at least one woman with disabilities in leadership and management positions. Nearly one-third of respondents who conducted surveys (29%) noted no women with disabilities in leadership and management positions being identified in these surveys.

Of all the disabled women in management roles, less than half were women of color. Furthermore, of the survey participants who affirmed that they had disabled women in leadership, 20% did not have a single disabled woman of color in the makeup of disabled women managers in their organization.

The nearly 50% of the respondents who have no women with disabilities in management positions indicated the need for increased education on the benefits of hiring disabled women, as well as the need for partnerships with agencies working with disabled talent. Programs and organizations working with disabled women can aid in increasing employers' access to disabled women talent for their staff.

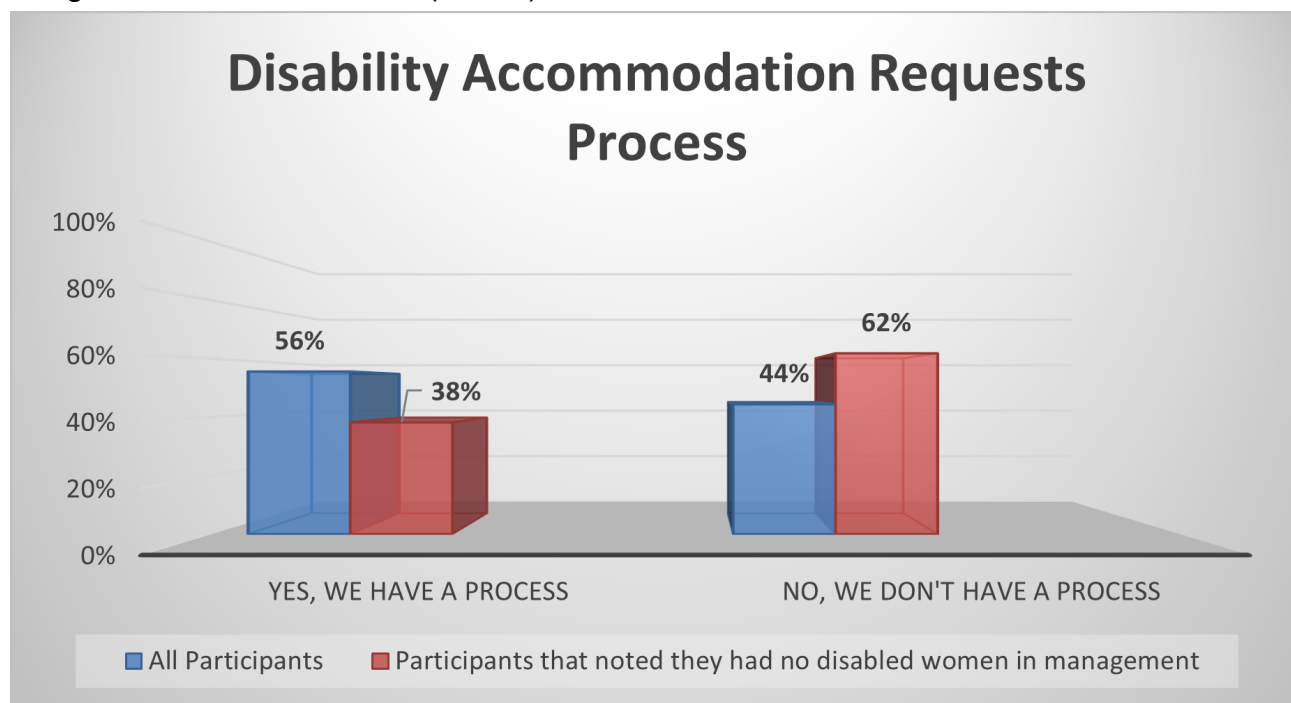
### **Accommodation Requests**

We also asked participants if they had a formal disability accommodation process. 53% of respondents had a process in place, while 47% had no process for employees to ask for disability accommodations. 83% of the organizations with an accommodation process indicated that management staff had used the process in the past. These findings suggest that when there is an accommodation process in place, employees at all levels will use the accommodation process that is offered to them by their employers. Likewise, participants that had “no disabled women” in management or leadership positions were less likely to have a disability accommodation process than the overall group. 62% of businesses with no disabled women in leadership shared that they did not have an accommodation process to support disabled employees in the workplace.

Respondents demonstrated that employers have some awareness of disabled staff in their organizations. However, there is not consistency in the availability of data collected by organizations through disability access surveys or accommodation request procedures across hiring practices. Disabled women may face inconsistent access to job and leadership opportunities because of the different awareness levels that hiring businesses have regarding the needs of disabled employees and the legal requirements regarding employing people with disabilities.

Overall, businesses claiming that half or more of their total management included women with disabilities (n=43) were slightly more likely to include accommodation

information in job posts than businesses with less than half of their management staff being women with disabilities (n=207).



This bar graph shows the percentage of respondents that said that their organization did or did not have an accommodation request process next to the number of respondents that also answered 'no women with disabilities in management'. 56% of participants said they do have a process compared with 38% of those who also reported having no women with disabilities in management.

## ***DISABILITY, HIRING, AND INTERVIEWING***

### **Hiring Practices**

Organizations that aim to hire disabled talent may find that regular business practices hinder the longevity and advancement of women with disabilities. Researchers have noted several common practices in hiring, interviewing, and office culture that often act as barriers to gainful employment and advancement opportunities for disabled people.<sup>30</sup> We asked survey respondents what practices they employ that may hinder the full participation of disabled employees, curtailing the growth and trajectory of disabled women who aim for leadership positions.

This survey addressed topics such as interview practices, accommodations, job descriptions, and job notices to gain insights on ways to increase interview and position

<sup>30</sup> Small, Sanda, Catherine de Boer, and Michelle Swab. "Perceived Barriers to and Facilitators of Labor Market Engagement for Individuals with Chronic Physical Illness in Their Experience with Disability Policy: A Systematic Review of Qualitative Evidence Protocol." *JBIR Database of Systematic Reviews and Implementation Reports* 13, no. 12 (January 15, 2016): 59–69. <https://doi.org/10.11124/jbisrir-2015-2493>.

access opportunities for women with disabilities, as well as ways to guide disability advocacy related to inaccessibility and discrimination in employment.

For accessibility practices such as providing interview questions in advance, providing alternative interview formats, or using American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, automatic inclusion of these accommodations occurred in less than one third of the surveyed group. Additionally, over one-third of respondents (39%) reported that they would not provide interview questions in advance when requested as an accommodation. Over 28% do not provide ASL interpreters, even when requested, and 24% do not provide assistive technology such as screen readers and communication devices. Notably, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is an anti-discrimination law that requires businesses with more than 15 employees to provide reasonable accommodations to people with disabilities. A reasonable accommodation request should be evaluated on an individual basis to assess whether the modification will ensure that a qualified person with a disability has equal opportunity in the hiring process, can perform the essential job functions, and can enjoy equal employment opportunities and benefits. Businesses that fail to provide reasonable accommodations may be liable under the ADA.<sup>31</sup>

Other hiring practices including unpaid demonstrations over an hour and the use of artificial intelligence screening technology, were included at 30% and 20%, respectively. Unpaid demonstrations, also called skilled demonstrations, often require prospective employees to have the time, transportation, and financial resources to do free work in the hopes of being hired for a future position. This limits the ability to successfully complete job interview processes to gain employment for people with disabilities, who already face limited opportunities for work. Artificial intelligence screeners can have incorporated biases around social and cognitive skills, which exclude promising hires for differences in behaviors that are unrelated to the job.<sup>32</sup> These screeners have been cautioned for their potential to discriminate against people with disabilities.

An inaccessible application and interview process will systemically discriminate against people with disabilities, who may otherwise be a fit for the position but need access to accommodations in the application and interview phases.

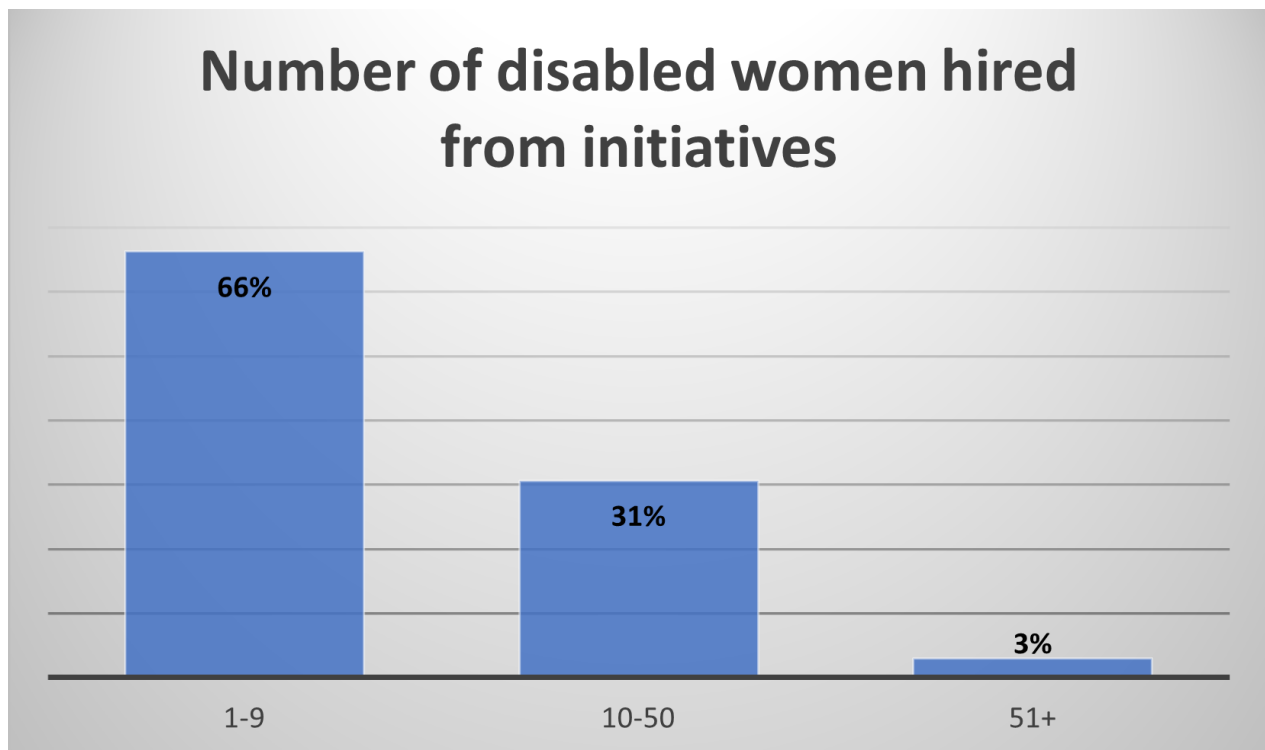
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<sup>31</sup> The ADA: Your Responsibilities as an Employer. U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Accessed March 7, 2023 from <https://www.eeoc.gov/publications/ada-your-responsibilities-employer>.

<sup>32</sup> Cunningham, Nathan. "How Artificial Intelligence Affects Workers with Disabilities: A New Toolkit for Businesses." U.S. Department of Labor Blog. available at <https://blog.dol.gov/2021/11/01/how-artificial-intelligence-affects-workers-with-disabilities-a-new-toolkit-for-businesses>

## Hiring Initiatives and Incentives

Participants whose organizations had specific priority hiring initiatives for certain employee populations were most likely to focus on the diversity of race and ethnicity. Disability, veteran/military, gender parity, and generational diversity were initiatives in less than 20% of participant businesses.



This bar graph is titled number of disabled women hired from initiatives. This shows the estimated number of disabled women hired from specific initiatives. 66% hired 1-9 disabled women. 31% hired 10-50 employees, 3% hired 51+

Of those surveyed 60% worked with external programs, recruiters, or partners in recruiting potential employees generally, with 42% increasing the number of women and disabled people in their hiring processes. While the majority hired between 1-9 new disabled women employees, 31% of respondents who used these partnerships hired between 10-50 disabled women. This suggests that organizations that do not limit their hiring practices to in-house recruiting may increase their hiring of disabled women through recruitment partnerships. Of the 445 respondents, 264 had hired women with disabilities into management and leadership positions from these programs at some point.

We also asked participants to identify factors that would further incentivize the hiring of women with disabilities into leadership positions. Tax incentives were picked by 220, or nearly 50% of participants. However, participants indicated little familiarity with existing tax benefits for businesses who have employees with disabilities, including the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, Disabled Access Credit, or Barrier Removal Tax Credit. All of these credits aim to increase disability hiring and retention in the workplace.<sup>33</sup> The most well known credit incentive among those surveyed was the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, which only 37% of participants were aware of.

## Hiring Considerations

When women with disabilities succeed in the interview process, there are still factors that hiring professionals consider before determining whether or not to hire them. We asked participants to rate their level of concern from “no concern” to “serious concern” regarding factors such as absenteeism, cost of accommodation, and work culture. All of these factors may reduce the hiring of women with disabilities, even with a successful interview opportunity.

Participants frequently chose 'not a concern' across issues such as cost, which has a history of being a barrier to accessibility. Accommodations causing an 'undue hardship' due to expense provides leeway for accommodation denials and negotiations.<sup>34</sup> For example, both 'cost of accommodation' and 'cost of building or tool modification' had cumulative rates of 27% and 30%, respectively, of 'no concern.' However, businesses with less than half or no women with disabilities in leadership had a higher prevalence of marking costs, 'not a concern.' It may be that these hiring professionals do not consider the cost a significant factor because of the low number of disabled women that they employ. Similarly, they may have lower rates of disabled women employees if they are not supplying accommodations or modifications at their cost. Research has found that workplace accommodations are often determined to be no cost, while the median spent is \$500.<sup>35</sup>

Safety was the highest priority concern among participants. This was the only workplace factor in which nearly half of participants noted a medium to high level of concern.

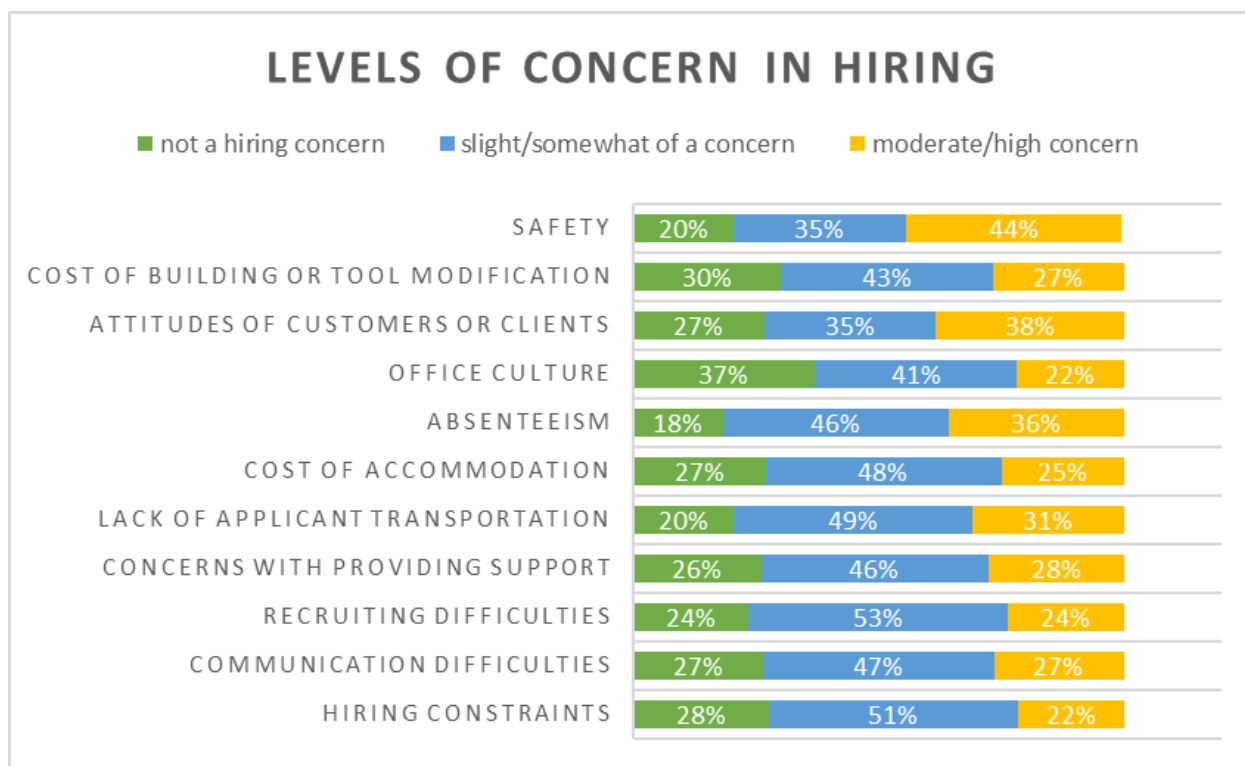
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<sup>33</sup>Internal Revenue Service “ Tax Benefits for Businesses Who Have Employees with Disabilities” available at <https://www.irs.gov/businesses/small-businesses-self-employed/tax-benefits-for-businesses-who-have-employees-with-disabilities>

<sup>34</sup> “What is considered an "undue hardship" for a reasonable accommodation?” ADA National Network available at <https://adata.org/faq/what-considered-undue-hardship-reasonable-accommodation>

<sup>35</sup>“Reasonable Accommodations for Disability” Office of Disability Employment. Available at <https://www.employer.gov/employmentissues/Workplace-inclusion/Reasonable-accommodations-for-disabilities/>

While there may be safety concerns with employers who have a higher rate of workplace injuries overall, using workplace safety or medical conditions to otherwise discriminate against qualified candidates with disabilities is illegal in the United States.



This is a stacked bar graph showing the level of concern in hiring women with disabilities from hiring professionals. Moderate/high concerns are marked in yellow and range from hiring constraints (22%) to safety (44%).

Many of the workplace factors associated with higher levels of concern can be decreased by organizational policy. Participants were asked if they offered 15 different workplace benefits. They rarely offered benefits in areas where it could address their business concerns, such as paid parking, transportation vouchers, flexible scheduling, paid time off, educational assistance, and a spectrum of health insurance plans. For example, even though commuter benefits are common in metro areas, only 19% of respondents that listed transportation as a high concern offered paid transportation or reimbursed transportation costs. Those who rated lack of training as a high concern were the least likely to offer paid training, skill building, and employee training, and only 15% offered lifelong learning and career development.

The survey responses suggest that while HR professionals expect applicants to come into their position with certain skills and tools, they often may not prioritize internal training for job promotions and growth. Organizations focusing on job and life skills

training for people with disabilities could provide support, training, and services that will equip women with disabilities to be competitive candidates.

To increase the potential of women with disabilities being hired and promoted to leadership positions, we asked HR professionals what skills would influence the hiring or promotion of disabled women in their organizations. **Problem-solving, the ability to work with a team, professionalism, confidence and determination, and dependability represented the top five.** Notably, these skills are not always easy for a disabled applicant to demonstrate on a resume or in an interview in order to show their proficiency. Problem-solving and teamwork skills are often teachable and are evident in the daily lives of women with disabilities. The inaccessibility of society means women with disabilities regularly problem solve and work with others in professional settings, transit, household, and caregiving duties. Professionalism and confidence are personal characteristics that can be developed through mentorship and office culture. Dependability may be connected to the larger number of respondents with concerns around absenteeism and access to transportation in hiring women with disabilities. Additional systemic or organizational benefits that increase paid time off, remote work options, or transportation access may help increase feelings of dependability for HR professionals in hiring.



This bar graph shows career advancement opportunities offered by participants' businesses. Employee training is most offered at 21%, while external mentorship and redeployment or reskilling are least at 6%.



Similarly to benefits, only some participants claimed to offer employees robust training and skill building, indicating a lack of investment in the growth of entry and mid-level employees. Mentorship opportunities, skill building, internal promotions, and lifelong learning and career development were offered by less than 20% of participants. Employee training was offered by 21%, while only 13% offered paid training.

The participants' responses suggest that while there may be increasing interest in hiring disabled talent, many organizations do not provide sufficient services and benefits within their work processes to address their own areas of concern over hiring or promoting women with disabilities. Concerns around recruiting highlight the potential benefit of programs, services, and organizations supporting disabled women in the workplace.

## ***NEXT STEPS AND RESOURCES***

This research focused on barriers to entry for disabled women pursuing management and leadership positions. While there have been improvements to the inclusion of disabled people in the workplace and leadership positions, many organizations have given little priority to hiring and promoting disabled women in management positions. Based on the responses, the majority of these workplaces would benefit from learning about existing incentives for hiring disabled people and how to provide benefits and services that improve the skills, training, and educational attainment needed to be promoted into higher-level roles.

Despite these barriers, disabled women are innovative and excel in leadership roles. They constitute a large part of the paid and unpaid workforce, and they have cultivated skills beneficial to management and leadership. Additional research on disabled women leaders and their lived experiences of pursuing, preparing, and occupying these roles is necessary for a holistic picture of the barriers and facilitators to workplace integration and leadership opportunities. With this in mind, Disability EmpowHer Network is committed to further research on the topic to expand our perspective and insight.

Employers, as well as third-party organizations, have opportunities to assist in increasing proficiency in desired skills and visibility of disabled women leaders, such as:

- Committing to broader compliance with anti-discrimination laws, and going beyond compliance to create more disability-friendly workplaces and better facilitate the growth of disabled employees. Providing services, programs, and supports that focus on additional skills training, mentorship, personal development, and equitable access to education may support the career

trajectories of disabled women and girls aiming for leadership roles in their futures.

- Implementing programs and initiatives focused on hiring women with disabilities, including training and employee-based systems that shape the work climate and culture. This will provide HR with unique opportunities to facilitate inclusive and supportive work climates that improve the conditions for women with disabilities in the workplace.
- Using accessible hiring and interview practices. Accessible hiring and interviewing can help reduce the number of disabled women who are hindered in their career growth due to organizational practices and not due to lack of qualifications. Removing unnecessary job requirements, providing interview accommodations, and partnering with disability consultants and organizations can get more people with disabilities through the application and interview process.
- Providing access to work benefit offerings such as transportation, robust paid time off, health care packages, remote work, and flexible scheduling. Adequate workplace benefits support women with disabilities in areas of health and safety, transportation access to employment, and work-life balance.
- Additional steps to create more disability-inclusive work environments include: hiring disabled consultants to conduct workplace audits and provide workforce disability and implicit bias trainings, prioritizing the hiring of multiply-marginalized disabled women, and ensuring that employees are aware of their rights to accommodations and resources available to them.

Where research and experience have highlighted issues, resources and support exist. Organizations such as the Job Accommodation Network, Partnership on Employment & Accessible Technology, and the Employer Assistance and Resource Network equip employers with tools and resources to support people with disabilities in the workplace.

Lastly, Disability EmpowHer Network is committed to supporting disabled women as they endeavor to advance into leadership roles. Through our career coaching, public speaking, and mentorship programs, Disability EmpowHer Network offers opportunities for women with disabilities to develop and strengthen the skills identified as necessary in this study and anecdotally. Disability EmpowHer Network is also committed to supporting businesses in becoming more accessible and welcoming to disabled women including but not limited to providing individual consultations on how to be more

accessible and comply with the law, intentional hiring and business practices, and expanding recruitment efforts, because we know that when disabled women lead, we all succeed.