RESEARCH BRIEF

Workplace Experiences of Individuals with Disabilities

Work is a critical part of the lives of most adults, with important implications for individuals' quality of life. Beyond the financial benefits, work provides important opportunities for social and intellectual engagement. However, all work environments are not equal. While some workplace climates can enhance individuals' lives, others can be a source of unhealthy stress. According to "The Workplace and Health," a July 2016 report of a study conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health in collaboration with National Public Radio and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, among working adults in the U.S. nearly half report that their job affects their overall health, but only 28 percent of these workers believe that effect is a good one. In this same study, workers in dangerous or low-paying jobs, those in retail, and individuals with disabilities are most likely to say their job has a negative impact on their stress levels (43 percent), eating habits (28 percent), sleeping patterns (27 percent) and weight (22 percent). Workplace culture and experiences may be of particular concern for individuals with disabilities, who as a group, tend to experience more work and life stressors than people without disabilities.

During the spring of 2014, as part of a study entitled "Getting and Keeping People with Disabilities in the Workforce: Negotiating Work, Life, and Disability", researchers at Cornell University's Yang-Tan Institute on Employment and Disability fielded a survey of employed individuals with disabilities to gain insights about a wide range of workplace issues and experiences. The following brief describes some of the key workplace factors addressed in this survey and their relationship to individuals' quality of work life, degree of work-life conflict, and intention to discontinue working for their current employer.

Workplace Factors

Many workplace factors that can influence individuals' experiences, quality of work life, and turnover intention. Some important ones are:

Inclusiveness of workplace climate: This refers to the degree to which all employees, regardless of personal characteristics, have access to workplace resources and opportunities and are able to contribute and participate in the workplace.

Quality of manager relationship: This construct refer to the degree to which manager-subordinate relationships are fair, supportive, trusting, empathetic, and respectful.

Harassment/discrimination: These constructs that refer to repeated aggressive, offensive, or unwelcome behaviors and unjust or prejudicial treatment toward and individual or group, respectively. For the purposes of this study, respondents were asked whether they had experienced or witnessed either harassment or discrimination during the previous 12 months.

In the survey described above, researchers were interested in the degree to which these three workplace factors were ultimately related to:

Quality of work life: This is the degree to which individuals are able to satisfy a variety of needs as a result of workplace participation.

Turnover intention: This refers to whether an employee plans to leave their current position.

Work/life conflict: This is the degree to which work and non-work activities interfere with successful, satisfactory participation in work in addition to other life domains such as family, leisure, and self-care.

Results

As expected, quality of work life was positively related to the existence of an inclusive workplace climate ($r = .734$, $p < .001$) and to the quality of manager-subordinate relationships ($r = .600$, $p < .001$), and was negatively related to turnover intention ($r = -.554$, $p < .001$) and work/life conflict ($r = -.584$, $p < .001$). Similarly, an inclusive climate and good quality of manager-subordinate relationships were negatively related to turnover intention ($r = -.528$, $p < .001$; $r = -.509$, $p < .001$, respectively), and work/life conflict ($r = -.484$, $p < .001$; $r = -.471$, $p < .001$, respectively).

Twenty three percent of respondents reported having been personally subjected to harassment or discrimination in their current workplace in the previous 12 months. Thirty one percent had witnessed harassment or discrimination of others during the same period. Sixteen percent of respondents reported both having experienced harassment/discrimination themselves and witnessing it happening to others.

Personally experiencing harassment or discrimination was related to poorer quality of work life ($r = -.459$, $p < 0.001$), manager-subordinate relationships ($r = -.427$, $p < 0.001$) and a less inclusive workplace climate ($r = -.501$, $p < 0.001$). Experience of harassment or discrimination was associated with higher reported turnover intention ($r = .359$, $p < 0.001$) and work/life conflict ($r = .301$, $p < 0.001$). A similar pattern was observed for individuals who had witnessed harassment/discrimination, but not personally experienced these behaviors.

Correlations among workplace environment factors and work/life factors

Workplace Factor	1	2	3	4	5
1. Quality of Work Life	1				
2. Inclusive Climate	.734*	1			
3. Qual. Manager Relationship	.600*	.569*	1		
4. Turnover Intention	-.554*	-.528*	-.509*	1	
5. Work/life Conflict	-.584*	-.484*	-.471*	.409*	1
6. Personally experienced harassment/discrimination	-.459*	-.501*	-.427*	359*	.301*
7. Witnessed harassment/discrimination	-.354*	-.451*	-.306*	.256*	.259*

Pearson Correlation
*p < 0.001

Conclusion

The responses of survey participants suggest that inclusive workplace climates, high quality manager-subordinate relationships and low work/life conflict are related to better quality of work life and higher levels of intention to continue working in one's current position. In addition, the presence of harassment or discrimination in a workplace, even when only witnessed rather than personally experienced, is associated with less inclusive workplace climates, poorer manager-subordinate relationships, poorer quality of work life, greater work/life conflict, and higher levels of turnover intention.

References

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