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A Talent Pool That Many Companies Neglect: Employees with Disabilities

NEW YORK, October 12, 2017—A first-of-its-kind study published by the Center for Talent Innovation (CTI) finds that far more people than expected have a disability: 30 percent of college-educated employees working full-time in white-collar professions in the U.S.

Using the new, broader U.S. federal definition of disabilities (finalized in 2016, the definition now includes mental health and chronic conditions) and rigorous, nationally-representative data, CTI's report *Disabilities and Inclusion* has uncovered that employees with disabilities make up an enormous talent pool that employers overlook far too often--to their own detriment.

The study also uncovered reasons that employees with disabilities have remained under the radar. Sixty-two percent of employees with disabilities have "invisible disabilities"—people can't tell they have a disability upon meeting them. Additionally, only 21 percent of employees with disabilities disclose them to their employers' human resources departments.

Invisibility and lack of awareness about this high percentage of their workforce translates into significant costs for employers. Seventy-five percent of employees with disabilities report having an idea that would drive value for their company (versus 66 percent of employees without disabilities). Yet employees with disabilities report experiencing negative bias at their companies and a majority feel stalled in their careers. So, despite being more likely than those without disabilities to say they have ideas of market value for their companies, nearly half of those same employees (48 percent) report that their ideas did not win endorsement from people with the power to act on them.

"From our interviews and focus groups, we learned that people with disabilities are particularly innovative. In order to navigate the world with a disability, they have to problem-solve each day. They can contribute this gift to their employers, but only if they know they will be recognized and rewarded for it," says Julia Taylor Kennedy, executive vice president and director of publications at CTI.

The implications of the research for companies is clear. Employers who want to elicit the best ideas from their people should rely on inclusive leadership—and this carries extra relevance for leaders of people with disabilities.

How? In [prior research](#), CTI determined that inclusive leaders exhibit at least three of the following behaviors: ensuring everyone gets heard, making it safe to propose novel ideas, giving actionable feedback, taking advice and implementing feedback, empowering team members to make decisions, and sharing credit for team success.

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With inclusive team leaders, employees with disabilities are more likely to have their ideas supported or endorsed than those who do not have inclusive team leaders (61 percent versus 44 percent). Employees with disabilities who have inclusive leaders are also less likely to face stalled careers.

“Now that we know employees with disabilities make up nearly a third of the white-collar workforce, employers simply can’t afford to ignore this crucial talent cohort,” says Laura Sherbin, co-president of CTI and a managing partner of Hewlett Consulting Partners. “By understanding employees with disabilities—and listening to their ideas—companies can unlock enormous potential.”

CTI’s *Disabilities and Inclusion* report highlights additional ways employers can signal inclusion to employees with disabilities, and showcases best practices from companies like Accenture, Bloomberg LP, and Unilever, as well as organizations with expertise on the topic of employing people with disabilities like the U.S. Business Leadership Network and Lime Connect.

In addition to U.S. data, the report spotlights how the experiences of employees with disabilities in Brazil, Germany, India, Japan, and the U.K. differ from the U.S. It also includes spotlights on caregivers, employees with mental health conditions, and employees with autism spectrum disorder.

For more information on *Disabilities and Inclusion*, please visit www.talentinnovation.org.

Research Sponsors:

Accenture, Aetna, Bloomberg LP, Johnson & Johnson, KPMG, Lime Connect, McKesson, Prudential, PwC, Unilever, USBLN, Wells Fargo

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LAURA SHERBIN is co-president at the Center for Talent Innovation and a managing partner at Hewlett Consulting Partners. She is an economist specializing in work-life issues and gender. She has taught "Women and Globalization" at the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University, and is coauthor of *Harvard Business Review* articles, "How Diversity Can Drive Innovation," "How Gen Y and Boomers Will Reshape Your Agenda," "Off-Ramps and On-Ramps Revisited," and *Harvard Business Manager* article "Letzte Ausfahrt Babypause." She is also coauthor of Harvard Business Review Research Reports *The Athena Factor: Reversing the Brain Drain in Science, Engineering, and Technology* and *The Sponsor Effect: Breaking through the Last Glass Ceiling* and CTI reports including *Executive Presence*, among many others. She earned her Ph.D. in economics from American University.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY is executive vice president and director of publications at CTI. She also drives qualitative research at the Center, and advises on digital learning strategy and implementation at Hewlett Consulting Partners. Taylor Kennedy coauthored *Mission Critical: Unlocking the Value of Veterans in the Workforce* and *Power of the Purse: Engaging Women Decision Makers for Healthy Outcomes*. A seasoned writer, producer, and interviewer, Taylor Kennedy has moderated sessions and hosted podcasts at the United Nations, Carnegie Council for Ethics and International Affairs, The Conference Board, and many others. She has also collaborated with business and gender experts on articles published in *Forbes*, *Time*, and academic journals, and has advised speakers for major platforms like the World Economic Forum and the United Nations.

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Previously, Taylor Kennedy hosted 51%, a public radio show on gender issues, and reported for NPR and NPR member stations. She earned a journalism degree from Northwestern University and a master of international relations from Yale University.

About the Research:

The research consists of surveys (U.S. and international); in-person focus groups and Insights In-Depth® sessions (a proprietary web-based tool used to conduct voice-facilitated virtual focus groups) involving over 80 people; and one-on-one interviews with over 100 men and women in the U.S., Brazil, Germany, India, Japan, and the U.K. We also conducted in-company surveys among select sponsors of the research with over 600 respondents.

The U.S. survey was conducted online and over the phone in October and November 2016 among 3,570 respondents (1,605 men and 1,965 women; 1,083 people with disabilities) between the ages of 21 and 65 currently employed full-time in white-collar occupations, with at least a bachelor's degree. Data were weighted to be representative of the U.S. population on key demographics (age, sex, education, race/ethnicity, and Census Division). The base used for statistical testing was the effective base.

The international survey was conducted online in April 2017 among 500 respondents (100 in Brazil, 100 in Germany, 100 in India, 100 in Japan, and 100 in the U.K.) between the ages of 21 and 64 currently employed full-time in white-collar occupations, with at least a bachelor's degree and classified as having disabilities according to the U.S. federal definition.

The U.S. and international surveys were conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago under the auspices of the Center for Talent Innovation, a nonprofit research organization. NORC was responsible for the data collection, while the Center for Talent Innovation conducted the analysis. The in-company surveys were conducted by the Center for Talent Innovation.

In the charts, percentages may not always add up to 100 because of computer rounding or the acceptance of multiple responses from respondents. Unless otherwise cited, all quantitative data contained in the report are derived from the US or international surveys.

About the Center for Talent Innovation:

The Center for Talent Innovation (CTI) is a New York City-based think tank that focuses on global talent strategies and the retention and acceleration of well-qualified labor across the divides of demographic difference including gender, generation, geography, sexual orientation, and culture. CTI's research partners now number more than 85 multinational corporations and organizations.

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