

# The Integration of the Intellectually Disabled into the Workplace

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*Abstract: This paper explores the transition of the intellectually disabled into the workplace in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. It looks into the enactment of the legislation known as the Americans with Disabilities Act and the amendments that were later made to the Americans with Disabilities act. With the enactment of this legislation, new opportunities for the intellectually disabled became available, or at least it seemed. This paper explores these opportunities such as the sheltered workshops, the pros and cons of these job opportunities, their negative impacts on the disabled, and the setbacks it brought for the Americans with Disabilities Act. Furthermore, the potential and realistic integration of the intellectually disabled is also considered. This paper revolves around the ethics involved with hiring the intellectually disabled, how corporations these days make use of this workforce, and finally, the practicality of having the intellectually disabled, or mentally disabled, in the workplace and the effectiveness they provide as part of the workforce.*

## **Introduction:**

The workplace is a constantly changing and adapting environment. The traditional concept of the workplace, which was previously structured and defined in terms of roles, does not hold up today. In addition to the incorporation of technology, globalization, and flexibility in today's workplace, there are also changes that were made regarding the mentally disabled. In 1990 the Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA, was passed and that changed the entire spectrum of opportunities for the disabled. It prohibited corporations from discriminating against individuals for their disabilities, which can take many forms such as physical disabilities and mental disabilities. It has been 23 years since the ADA was passed into law and currently the opportunities for the disabled should be broader, more diverse in nature

and definitely more accessible; however, it is apparent that corporations will have their reservations towards hiring the mentally disabled, especially in terms of the resources needed and the ethics involved. Therefore, these obstacles will be explored.

### **Research Questions and Thesis:**

The research questions are as follows: Are the intellectually disabled suited to hold jobs? How have work opportunities for the mentally disabled changed over the years? What types of limitations and difficulties do they face in today's workplace? Based on the research conducted concerning the topic, the intellectually disabled are qualified to different extents based on individual cases to hold jobs and positions. Over the years, the ADA has increased the work opportunities for the intellectual disabilities, and overall, both employers and society have taken a more positive approach towards including the intellectually disabled as part of the workforce.

### **Theoretical Frameworks:**

Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were very few, if any, opportunities for the intellectually disabled in the workforce. It was presumed that hiring the intellectually disabled would be a waste of the company's resources and would have no advantages whatsoever. However, in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this approach and mentality began to change with the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which was later amended in 2008. This Act forbade the discrimination against the disabled and spurred the opening of job opportunities for the disabled, many in the form of sheltered workshops. Overall, this topic incorporates four major theoretical frameworks: ethical problems of hiring the intellectually disabled, the concept of living wage, a disposable workforce, and affect in an organization. Articles from the authors Gertner, Magdoff/Magdoff, and Barsade/Gibson provide the general outline of this research paper. The complexity of this topic shows that there is no clear-cut right answer concerning the hiring of the intellectually disabled and the dilemmas that arise from it. However, under these frameworks a general idea of improvement in the integration

of the intellectually disabled is apparent. In his article, "What Is a Living Wage?" Jon Gertner discusses the concept of earning enough money to support a decent living, a feat not accomplishable by the minimum wage; although the term decent differs from one person to another, Gertner defines it in terms where all basic needs are satisfied. Magdoff and Magdoff contemplate about workers that are not being employed and how this is a huge potential asset that corporations are overlooking. As for Barsade and Gibson, they look into the overall atmosphere that exists in the workplace known as "affect" in their article "Why Does Affect Matter in Organizations?" These theoretical frameworks are utilized because not only do the intellectually disabled in the sheltered workshops earn far below the living wage, they also can be categorized as a workforce greatly neglected because of corporations' reservations. Moreover, these reservations greatly impact the affect of a work setting if the intellectually disabled are hired and the conditions are not suitable for their capabilities.

### **Important Definitions/History:**

Primarily it is essential to define a term that will be used repetitively; intellectual disability. This term is defined as "significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior which covers many everyday social and practical skills" (Definition of Intellectual Disability). Commonly referred to as a certain form of retardation, individuals with intellectual disabilities function a little slower than others with no intellectual disabilities (in later areas of the paper, these individuals will also be referred to as ID). Certain forms of intellectual disabilities include "Down syndrome, Prader-Willi syndrome and Williams syndrome" (Rosner 208). Intellectual disabilities result from genetics such as mutations in the DNA of the individual that can result in an extra chromosome. Many people with intellectual disabilities have been discriminated against in many aspects of society due to the conception that these people are too impaired to be able to function as contributing members of society; this discrimination arises from the effects of the genetic mutations. Many of those with intellectual

disabilities look different than others, speak slower, or act in ways that differ from members of society without intellectual disabilities. In 1990, this perception of the intellectually disabled changed when legislation was passed in order to accommodate for their needs and aid in their integration into both society in general and more specifically, the work place. This law was split into five main titles: employment, public services, public accommodations, telecommunications and miscellaneous. The purpose of the Americans with Disabilities Act was to “make the American Society more accessible to people with disabilities” and set a formal definition for an intellectual disability (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as amended). According to the Act, a person with intellectual disability adheres to these three basic definitions: has a physical or mental impairment, has a record of such impairment, or is regarded as having such an impairment (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as amended). Although this distinction sets a basic outline for the definition of intellectual disability, it was not encompassing enough. By 2008, this Act was amended to revise “the definition of disability to more broadly encompass impairments that substantially limit a major life activity” (The ADA Amendments Act of 2008); this was important because it excluded devices such as hearing aids or contact lenses from classifying an individual as disabled. Therefore, with the passing of this Act as well as the Amendment in 2008, many businesses that once stifled opportunities for the disabled were now forced to make opportunities available for them. Opportunities such as these initially took the form of sheltered workshops.

#### **Sheltered Workshops:**

When legislation was passed and there was an apparent need to find employment for the intellectually disabled, sheltered workshops arose to suit these needs. Initially, these workshops were created as “segregated employment conceived to provide people with disabilities opportunities for activity and productivity during the day” (Bates-Harris 47). Organizations set aside areas where the intellectually disabled could spend time performing activities in a safe place while providing

them with monetary compensation. However, as the ADA increased the possibilities of employment for the intellectually disabled, these sheltered workshops changed into being places where the intellectually disabled were trained to acquire skills to benefit them in an actual work setting. Theoretically this concept was flawless because of its ability to accommodate the intellectually disabled while preparing them for actual jobs; however, it presents many disadvantages. Among these disadvantages is that these workshops do not challenge the mentally disabled. The disabled are made to perform unchallenging tasks, such as counting out merchandise or merely putting labels on them; these tasks do not develop their skills or prepare them for an actual workplace. “Typically these skills are sometimes not even transferable to traditional work because most sheltered workshops do not have modern tools or machinery. So, in the end, they fail to prepare workers for traditional work – even traditional factory work – at all”; hence, although these workshops are successful in providing a place for the intellectually disabled to be productive, they are impractical in the sense that they do not provide any benefit for the mentally disabled, all of whom will need actual jobs after training (Bates-Harris 47). Additionally, the issue of monetary compensation also arises. Because the MD are asked to perform very low skill jobs, they do not receive much money in return. Therefore, the intellectually disabled that rely solely on these sheltered workshops for a living are at a major disadvantage. Hence, the sheltered workshops are good in theory, but when actually put into practice they accomplish almost nothing significant in regards to the disabled. Rather, they create more problems, especially ethically when it comes to the issue of compensating the intellectually disabled.

#### **Ethics:**

In today’s workplace, ethics play a major role in many situations. The diversity in the American workplace has caused for a difference in opinion regarding the morality of certain issues, mainly due to the various traditions and beliefs unique to individual workers. A major ethical issue today arises due to the concept of minimum wage versus

that of living wage. In Jon Gertner's essay, "What Is a Living Wage?" he questions the ethics of giving people minimum wage even if it does not suffice. Gertner talks about how in today's society the minimum wage is no longer applicable, but rather, people are in need of what is known as the living wage. Gertner, as well as other living wage proponents, advocate that the living wage legislation "must come in a sweeping and righteous gesture from the top" (Gertner 3). They believe that this issue should be conquered on a federal level in order to ensure that even small businesses and practices give their employees enough money that they can survive on.

With this concept in mind, let's apply this argument to the sheltered workshops and the ID. The ID in the sheltered workshops do not even earn minimum wage, and according to a 2008 study of "291 individuals with disabilities from 40 sheltered workshops, the average hourly earnings were \$2.30 and average monthly earnings were \$175.69" (Bates-Harris 46); the minimum wage is \$7.50 per hour.

Thus, the intellectually disabled who are employed in the sheltered workshops do not even fall into the category of those that Gertner argues for, but rather, they are at an even lower level. While you have Gertner arguing that the minimum wage is not enough for a decent living, here we have the mentally disabled unable to even muster that minimum wage. The ethics involved in this situation do not only revolve around the concept of compensating the intellectually disabled with lower than minimum wage but also by placing them in a situation where they are not even capable of independently fending for themselves. This is an even greater issue in situations where the families of the intellectually disabled cannot provide for themselves. Therefore, it is plausible to conclude that with all the factors involved, sheltered workshops are morally wrong on many levels. In fact, any sort of employment that pays the intellectually disabled less than minimum wage is employing discrimination, which counteracts the purpose of the ADA.

### **Societal/ Corporation Acceptance:**

Although one would expect that most corporations would be against hiring the intellectually disabled, due to difficulties that may arise, certain research shows otherwise. In the article "Employers' Motives to Hire Intellectually Disabled People" by Per O. Larsson and Rafael Lindqvist, there appears to be three main motives that cause employers to actually seek out the intellectually disabled for employment. These three categories are: economic, production and social/care motives.

Initially, the employers were given the choice between charity work and hiring the intellectually disabled. However, the employers chose to actually have the disabled perform services that would ultimately pay back to the society in the form of charity work. This shows that the intellectually disabled are important assets to employers; "most of [the] employers contend that their disabled workers to some extent make necessary work tasks. The workers facilitate the work of other employees, and they have a status as helpers or assistants" (Larsson/Lindqvist 7). If the intellectually disabled workers are able to make the work of others feasible and quicker, then ultimately this helps employers economically. It is important to distinguish between economically and monetarily at this point; the assistance of the intellectually disabled allows the corporations to save on resources such as time, which increases efficiency and is overall good for the economics of the corporation.

Additionally, employers attempted to find a type of work that best suits the intellectually disabled worker. After many trials, they found that simple repetitive tasks were the most ideal because they allowed the intellectually disabled worker to focus and excel; hence "as a consequence disabled workers become involved in the work community" (Larsson/Lindqvist 8). This consequence not only creates a friendly affect in the job setting, but also increases the productivity of the company overall. This concept of a friendly environment is what Sigal Barsade and Donald Gibson discuss in their article, "Why Does

Affect Matter in Organizations?”. According to these authors, studies have shown that there is “a strong linear relationship between greater positive mood and creativity in organizations” (Barsade 46). Thus, if hiring intellectually disabled workers creates a warmer environment and positively affects other workers, then this will increase the company’s output.

This demonstrates that unlike previously conceived, there is a willingness of employers to hire the intellectually disabled. In fact, they are looking into a disposable workforce that may have been overlooked for many of the previous years. As Fred Magdoff and Harry Magdoff would argue, it is important for employers to “create sufficient new jobs annually to keep pace with productivity growth as well as population growth” (Magdoff 31). Therefore, by tapping into this previously overlooked workforce, employers are not only helping out the intellectually disabled, but are also staying on track in the competitive economy.

#### **Mentally Disabled Capabilities:**

Each person has his or her own unique capabilities and skills, and the same applies to individuals with intellectual disabilities. Because there are many forms of intellectual disabilities, it is a disservice to those who suffer from ID by grouping them all into one category. Some are affected more than others while some are able to function as close to “normal” as possible. Thus, it is essential to test the competence of the mentally disabled in more than one setting. For example, let us look at three main intellectual disabilities: Down syndrome, Prader-Willi syndrome and Williams syndrome.

Recent research was conducted on individuals with the above-mentioned types of genetic disabilities where they were tested on their ability to perform certain types of tasks in many different situations; “this study begins the process of describing how everyday social competence varies among persons with different genetic intellectual disability syndromes” (Rosner 216). The results of the study showed the following: “the Down’s syndrome group showed the highest overall social

competence scores, while individuals with Prader-Willi syndrome fared worst in terms of their behaviour with others. The Williams syndrome group scored lowest in terms of skill with jobs and chores” (Rosner 209). Based on these results, it is shown that jobs that require interaction with the general public would be best suited for those with Down syndrome. Those with Prader-Willi syndrome would require a job that limits their interaction with people such as shelving or stocking. Finally, those with Williams syndrome would probably require a job that engages them and does not bore them. The presence of such research shows that there is no need for sheltered workshops. Research like this allows for corporations to integrate the intellectually disabled into their workforce rather than segregating them and paying them less than minimum wage. It also implicates that it is not impossible for the intellectually disabled to interact with others and maintain a job with its responsibilities. This need to place the intellectually disabled in jobs that suit their capabilities was also apparent in the study done by P.Petrovski and G. Gleeson concerning the job satisfaction and psychological well being in the intellectually disabled. According to their research, “there was also a moderate significant negative correlation between job satisfaction and loneliness...showing that workers with the most job satisfaction perceived less loneliness at work”, an apparent agreement with the results of Rosner’s study (119).

#### **Mentally Disabled Today:**

There are general areas that employ the mentally ill in societies today such as supermarkets, sheltered workshops and local businesses. Such an example is with a McDonalds restaurant in Ontario, Canada. Bob, an intellectually disabled young man who works in downtown London, is known to be an effective part of the work community at the restaurant. “According to his manager, Mike Warren, “Bob’s a part of the team here and each one of us has a job to do in order for everything to run smoothly” (Community Living Ontario). Mike does not discredit Bob’s contribution to the work force, and McDonalds as an employer continues to assert its willingness to hire the intellectually disabled not

only for the sake of diversity, but also because it makes economic sense.

Many of the employers that seek to hire the intellectually disabled cooperate with employment agencies in order to obtain the best workers possible. Such a company is Walmart, which has been hiring the intellectually disabled for the last ten years. According to the manager Jim Pilckington, “the deadlines for employees are the same for everyone...everyone is accountable for having their work done and all employees meet the expected standard” (Community Living Ontario). This is very essential because it shows that the intellectually disabled are not discriminated against. They are expected to hold the same standards as any other employee, and that is essential in making them marketable to employers.

Moreover, these positions are known to have a positive impact on the intellectually disabled and their self-esteem. When they are successfully assimilated into the workforce, this gives them a sense of self-worth that exceeds any moral support they can receive from their families. According to J.M. Cramm, “from the perspective of people with an intellectual disability, supported employment contributes to self-development and has a positive effect on well-being” (512). Hence, when employers such as Walmart and McDonalds hire these intellectually disabled, they are not only profiting economically, but are also doing philanthropic work. This supported employment has a positive effect on “the well-being of people with an intellectual disability, regardless of how it is achieved” (Cramm 519).

#### **Counterargument:**

As mentioned before, there are many practical reservations concerning hiring the intellectually disabled. Although it would be a great accomplishment to include them in today’s workforce, the intellectually disabled do indeed have significant differences that may hinder them in their jobs. This issue is recognized, not only by employers, but also by the families of the intellectually disabled. For example, in his article “It’s About Relationships: A Response to Professor Turnball”, David Westling states how many families “do not value the

opportunity of self determination or liberty for their child with IDD because they fear the world will mistreat him or her if there is too much exposure” (217). This revelation discredits the ability of the intellectually disabled to interact with other employees and confirms the worries of employers that may not want to hire the intellectually disabled for this reason.

It is also important to analyze the background in which the intellectually disabled grew up. If they grew up in a family that nurtured their interactions with society and others, this would later on help employers with integrating the intellectually disabled into the workforce. As Sadie Young and Tim Hawkins show in their surveys, “parents with intellectual disabilities have fewer support contacts than those who do not have intellectual disability and that they experience an absence of friendships”(354); this implies seclusion and lack of interaction. Therefore, with all this in mind, it is very difficult for corporations to be willing to hire the intellectually disabled because of the fear that this would be a waste of their resources. This then implies that the intellectually disabled are not suited for jobs.

Thus, the counterargument in this case would revolve around the capabilities of the intellectually disabled. Those who argue against hiring the intellectually disabled could say that they are not suited for the job in terms of their qualifications and would just be a waste of an employer’s resources. However, as shown in this paper, not all intellectually disabled individuals are identical. To place them all in one category would be a major injustice to them. Studies have been conducted to see where those with intellectual disabilities can be placed. Ultimately, this counterargument is illogical and invalid because it relies on discrimination and nothing else.

#### **Conclusion:**

After all the research has been conducted, it can be concluded that the ADA has increased the opportunities for the intellectually disabled. With this legislation, employers have been more hesitant to rule out the intellectually disabled as a workforce and have been

more willing to explore the option of having an intellectually disabled individual in their workplace. With that being said, the intellectually disabled still face some challenges when it comes to proving themselves and disproving preconceived notions that both the employer and society have of them. The initial hypotheses and thesis turned out to be correct; the intellectually disabled can be assimilated in today's workforce successfully and do not need to be placed in segregated work areas that stifle their growth and improvement.

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