

Chapter 86

Creating Protective Barriers for Students with Disabilities in E-Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

As corporations and organizations continue to make strides in employing people with disabilities, in part, as an act of social responsibility, other entities have started to realize the need and value of this untapped human resource. Studies have shown that employees with disabilities have low turnover rates, low absenteeism, and high motivation to prove themselves. In today's workplace, many organizations will need to rethink their employment practices in order to compete for employees from the current, shrinking workforce. Thus, these employers are now looking towards academic institutions for well-qualified candidates. The key question here is whether academic institutions and educators are prepared to enable, educate, protect, and motivate learners with and without disabilities for changes in the workforce. One way that academia is helping to break down barriers to education is through the incorporation of online learning, or "e-learning." Whereas barriers to education for people with disabilities have traditionally taken the form of architectural and attitudinal impediments, e-learning may help mitigate such barriers, equalizing the learning environment for all students.

INTRODUCTION

Disability used to signal the end of active life. Now it is a common characteristic of a normal lifespan. Sooner or later it will occur in the lives of most people, surely in the life of every family (Dart, 1996, p. 5).

It has been estimated that as many as 650 million people from around the world are disabled, approximately 10 percent of the world's total population (Disabled World, 2013). Although such a figure is alarming, regrettably, societies in general have had a long history of attitudes, biases, and prejudices towards anyone who has looked, acted, or behaved differently than the social norm. This has resulted in

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barriers in the form of difficulties endured in securing permanent employment and obstacles in obtaining a quality education for people with sickness or disabilities. Fortunately, in the past few decades, such barriers have been eroding. Particularly in countries such as the U.S., which has enacted legislation, to include the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), advocating for the legal rights of those with disabilities to have the same opportunities as those without disabilities. Much more needs to be done, however, from organizations to individuals, if people with disabilities are to be given the same opportunities as everyone else.

To understand the barriers and need for organizational and individual change, it is first important to understand the overall picture of the U.S. workforce. Historically speaking, it can be seen that this workforce has been narrowly focused toward able-bodied individuals. One of the key elements driving this has been choice. Employers may have certain attitudes and biases toward certain group of individuals, creating a predisposition to not hire certain groups of people, such as those with disabilities. Such bias could be founded on negative attitudes, misinformation about certain disabilities, or perhaps nothing more than a personal dislike of individuals not similar to their *ideal* current workforce employee. These biases, predispositions, and prejudices are attitudes which have a pervasive negative influence in the minds of coworkers, managers, and executives. Fortunately, there has been an equal amount of opposition from various organizations, groups, and society in general. In fact, there has been a growing movement towards more social responsibility than ever before. Unfortunately, for people with disabilities, this has been a very slow movement on their behalf.

Not surprisingly, when speaking from the perspective of the corporate entity, many organizations have traditionally worked inside a vacuum focused almost exclusively on profits. One of the leading federal mandates for facilitating change in organizations has been the ADA. Disappointingly, while the role of business to implement the ADA has been a critical component to its success, at the same time, business has been slow in the implementation process. That is, while the ADA addresses the areas of employment, education, transportation, and telecommunications, and as mandated, requires organizations to change employment practices and equalize the hiring process for people with disabilities, implementation has been longer with some organizations than others. This is in part due to the fact that organizations hold different perspectives, views, and overall objectives, shaped by the values and assumptions held by their organization's culture; values and assumptions that need to be changed.

Opportunely, organizations have started to realize that there is a need to change or modify their culture to reflect new policies, practices, and procedures in the treatment and view of people with disabilities. As Brutoco (1993) states, "because business is fully internationalized, it is the only institution with the resources and structure to serve as a catalyst for the broader planetary evolution that is underway" (p. 6). Therefore, organizations have a major role in making changes internationally, especially for the employment of people with disabilities. Such organizations are quickly realizing that policies, practices, and procedures alone are not enough, and changes must also occur in their local community and society in general (Boyett & Boyett, 1995) to include support from academic institutions.

That is, the relationship between academic institutions and business is reciprocal. Academic institutions play a critical role in aiding business in regard to job shortages, by producing curriculum, for example, that focuses on relevant skills and knowledge that employers need. While academic institutions have been seen to place particular emphasis on helping students based on socioeconomic status or other factors, such as race, these institutions also need to place importance in helping students with disabilities. Namely, as more students with disabilities focus on obtaining high education, there is a growing movement toward online education in lieu of the physical classroom. However, such a transition always

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