

DISABILITY AND THE FUTURE OF WORK

Edited by Fitore Hyseni, Lisa Schur,
Douglas Kruse and Peter Blanck

RESEARCH IN SOCIAL SCIENCE
AND DISABILITY

VOLUME 16

DISABILITY AND THE FUTURE OF WORK

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION TO THE VOLUME: SHAPING THE FUTURE OF WORK FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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The employment landscape is evolving rapidly, driven by technological innovations, shifting employer practices, and new government policies that redefine where and how work is performed (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016; Harpur et al., 2022; Schur et al., 2024). However, these transformations have not been universally beneficial. For people with disabilities, barriers such as low employment rates, precarious work conditions, and limited career advancement persist, undermining their full participation in the labor market. As we write this introduction, working-age individuals with disabilities are employed at less than half the rate of those without disabilities (BLS, 2025). This gap in employment rates has persisted despite studies showing that close to 80% of nonemployed people with disabilities want to work (Ali et al., 2011), which is a comparable percentage to nonemployed adults without disabilities (Bonaccio et al., 2020).

The expansion of the gig economy has also helped increase and shape employment opportunities for people with disabilities. People with disabilities, in particular, are more likely than those without disabilities to work in low-wage, part-time, gig work, or other contingent jobs (Harpur & Blanck, 2020; Schur & Kruse, 2021). While contingent jobs are sometimes beneficial for people with disabilities who are seeking more flexibility, they generally lack a robust safety net essential for all employees (Harpur & Blanck, 2020; Schur & Kruse, 2021).

The recent increase in the use of algorithms and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the workplace, such as for hiring, promotions, and monitoring productivity, has had additional implications for people with disabilities. Overreliance on biased algorithms may put people with disabilities at increased risk for disparate

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outcomes (Harpur et al., 2022). Employers must exercise caution when integrating AI and automation into decision-making processes, as these technologies, if unchecked, can unintentionally limit employment opportunities for people with disabilities (Harpur et al., 2022).

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the employment outcomes and opportunities of people with disabilities. During the pandemic, many office workers experienced the shift to remote or hybrid work. However, this shift in norms fueled by safety concerns often did not translate to jobs for people with disabilities. While workers with disabilities were more likely than those without disabilities to be teleworking before the pandemic, they were less likely to be teleworking as a result of the pandemic (Ameri et al., 2023; Kruse et al., 2022; Schur et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic and emerging technologies such as AI and automation thus have transformed and continue to transform work worldwide, including expanding the gig economy, enhancing assistive technology availability, and shifting traditional workplaces toward remote or hybrid models. These changes have significant policy and practical implications, especially for people with disabilities. Additionally, demographic shifts – such as the growing representation of younger, more educated disabled workers – create both opportunities and challenges. As labor market dynamics open doors for some, others remain at the margins, underscoring the need for research to understand and address these changes.

This volume of *Research in Social Science and Disability* brings together leading research that examines how systemic policies and practices, pandemic-driven transformations, and strategies for inclusion continue to shape the employment landscape for workers with disabilities. The chapters included in this volume explore changing workplace dynamics and propose strategies for fostering an inclusive and equitable future of work for people with disabilities.

The first section explores how employment dynamics and trends unfold across various sectors of the economy. Nanette Goodman, Arzana Myderrizi, and Giuseppe Franco Pagano explore labor force demographic changes to show how younger generations of workers, often more highly educated, are reshaping workforce dynamics. Their findings that the workforce of people with disabilities is increasingly comprised of the post-Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) generation underscore the need for a nuanced approach to inclusion – one that acknowledges the interconnectedness of disability, age, education, race, and ethnicity. Next, utilizing data from the Current Population Survey Displaced Worker Supplement, Michelle Maroto and David Pettinicchio investigate re-employment challenges for displaced disabled workers, showing that economic downturns often leave these individuals among the first to be let go and the last to be rehired. Their findings from analyses of displacement trends over time and covering two major exogenous shocks (i.e., the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic) highlight the importance of employer and government innovative and universal practices such as remote work in furthering the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace. Expanding on the current landscape of increased precarious, temporary, and gig work for people with disabilities, Nathan W. Moon, Frances H. Harris, Maureen A. Linden, Salimah Laforce, and Patricia C. Griffiths

document the experiences of contingent workers with disabilities. Using mixed-method research, they show that contingent work, despite its common lack of employee protections and benefits, often offers much-needed flexibility for workers with disabilities and thus has the potential to aid workers with disabilities to achieve “work equity.”

The chapters included in the next section document systemic barriers embedded within existing employment policies and offer recommendations for more inclusive frameworks. Laurin E. Bixby examines state policy drivers of employment disparities between people with and without disabilities across the United States. The findings show that employment disparities are smaller in states with more generous Medicaid and greater allocation of Long-Term Services and Supports (LTSS) expenditures to Home- and Community-Based Services (HCBS). This highlights the need for the development of consistent, equitable policies across states that can improve the future of work for the disability community. Zachary Morris and Nanette Goodman next address how the financial strain of disability-related goods and services, what they refer to as the “disability squeeze,” poses major barriers to full workforce participation. Findings from their survey highlight the need to reduce the extra costs of living with a disability. Then, Katharina Heyer’s work on sheltered workshops emphasizes the shortcomings of German disability policy that has promoted this form of segregated work as the primary institution through which people with intellectual and developmental disabilities experience the right to work. This continued reliance on sheltered workshops presents a challenge for inclusion and highlights the need for alternative approaches. Kate Caldwell, Sumithra Murthy, Rooshey Hasnain, Brenda Parker, and Bailey Werner offer one such framework for future research, policy, and the development of evidence-based best practices rooted on disability economic justice that they call the “Nexus Project.”

The chapters included in the third section provide a comprehensive overview of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment of people with disabilities. Morgan Sanchez’s investigation of experiences of faculty members with disabilities during this period makes visible the contradictions many individuals with disabilities experienced in the workplace. The stories from in-depth case studies illuminate the constricting nature of workplace accommodations in academia, which were challenging (prior to and after the pandemic) but resulted in greater flexibility during the pandemic. This dynamic is identified by the author as the tension between temporary progress and enduring inequities. Next, Frederike Scholz, Betul Yalcin, Koen Van Laer, and Jo Ingold question the notion of technology-mediated remote work as a “panacea for disability inclusion.” Using mixed methods, the authors show that while remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic was beneficial for workers with disabilities, they also encountered substantial technological problems and many of them lacked employer support during this digital transition.

The chapters included in the fourth and final section provide insights on existing and future disability inclusion practices in employment. Robert Gould, Mariana Garcia Torres, Sarah Parker Harris, Amy Satterthwaite, Gus Budiarta, and Mark Harniss provide an analysis and review of the national policy context surrounding the ADA, mental health, and employment. These authors highlight that mental health inclusion remains a persistent challenge, with gaps in policy

and practice limiting the effectiveness of the ADA in ensuring workplace inclusion. Findings from interviews with ADA technical assistance specialists and national disability experts emphasize that barriers to the implementation of the ADA such as fear of disclosure, stigma, and misunderstandings about the application of a rights framework to mental health disabilities have remained consistent since the ADA's passage 35 years ago. They identify transforming the US national dialogue that better connects mental health and disability as a key facilitator. Fatma Altunkol Wise, Nanette J. Goodman, and Lauren Gilbert next demonstrate the importance of supplier diversity programs, which integrate disability-owned businesses into procurement networks, as a promising avenue for promoting disability inclusion. Using publicly available data and interviews, the authors show that there are still challenges to including disability in federal, state, and private sector supplier diversity programs, and that more effort should be made to evolve strategies, simplify procedures, and foster partnerships to unlock the full potential of diverse suppliers like disability-owned businesses. In her literature review, Lauren Gilbert provides a framework to facilitate the development of research about career outcomes of people with disabilities. Finally, LaWanda H. Cook and Akemi Nishida illustrate the extra and often invisible labor that disabled workers must perform to meet workplace expectations that they call "ableism management."

Taken together, the chapters in this volume provide the future groundwork for scholars, advocates, policymakers, researchers, and people with disabilities to shape and reimagine a more inclusive and equitable future of work. The insights from the contributors using varied data sources and diverse social science methods emphasize the importance of needed structural reforms that address workforce inequities, support demographic transitions, and create new opportunities for future generations of workers with disabilities. The volume highlights the critical role of policy reform and advocacy and the need for inclusive employment frameworks that require coordinated efforts across sectors to address systemic barriers and ensure access to work for all. It is our hope that this volume serves not only as a resource but also as a call to action for those committed stakeholders in shaping the future of work.

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Volume Editors

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PART I

EXPLORING EMPLOYMENT DISPARITIES AND JOB MARKET TRENDS

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