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Library Trends, Volume 67, Number 3, Winter 2019, pp. 487-496 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2019.0008>



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Disability, the Silent *D* in Diversity

TENEKA WILLIAMS AND ASHA HAGOOD

ABSTRACT

Diversity is a benchmark that is sought after in workplace organizations as there is a proven correlation between institutional diversity and customer satisfaction (Association of Research Libraries, n.d.). Fulfilling the aspiration of a diversified workforce can prove challenging. When organizations aim to fill staff positions with representatives from certain subsets of the population, tokenism and merit may enter the conversation. Most organizations want to be diverse, but when diversity extends to impairments that require money and time to be invested, change can be slow to come. But what if one organization has a wide array of representation resulting in an enriched understanding of their customer base and how to serve them, but the same cannot be said of organizations that they partner with? Through interviews with library personnel, we examine their experiences and perceptions about the efficacy with which they are able to perform their job. We also include insights from Mike Galifianakis, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) coordinator for the Georgia State Financing and Investment Commission,¹ whose mission is to provide comprehensive educational and technical support for state agencies so that those programs, services, and activities operated by the State of Georgia are accessible and usable by everyone.

THE DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT ECOSYSTEM

According to Disabled World (n.d.), those who have disabilities make up the nation's largest minority group. Yet for whatever reason, people with disabilities are startlingly left out of the conversation around diversity. As W. Kamau Bell astutely notes of those with disabilities, "They're the one group on the planet that anyone could become a part of at any given

time” (2018). It may be helpful here to declare our working definition of the term *disability*. “Disability is the umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions, referring to the negative aspects of the interaction between an individual (with a health condition) and that individual’s contextual factors (environmental and personal factors)” (World Health Organization and World Bank 2011, 4). Suffice it to say that the term *disability* could likely affect any and all of us at some time in our lives. Some call the push for diversity a trend, some call it extraneous, but it’s worth taking a more critical look at the issue of diversity if it means that the scope is widened to include those with disabilities on a more consistent basis. Attitudes about the diversity trend run the gamut; however, it can’t be denied that there is a spotlight on this issue, and spotlights lend a sense of urgency and can precipitate change. Most of us agree that those with disabilities should be included in policy that affects their access. From an altruistic standpoint, that change can positively impact the lives of an underrepresented group, but from a more self-interested standpoint, diversity is good for business. According to Alan Lafley, former CEO of Procter & Gamble, “Diverse organizations will out-think, out-innovate and outperform a homogeneous organization every single time” (Herman [2010] 2011). But even in this well-meaning movement to make sure that an array of voices are at the table, there is still a deficiency in the representation. There is a subset of the community at large that is habitually ignored and marginalized. So while there is a structure in development—a vehicle designed to carry us more boldly and more inclusively into the future, a locomotive powered by progressive intentions, fueled by varied demographics, cheered on by hopeful bystanders—the proverbial train is leaving the station. Is anyone thinking to make sure there are accessible seats and accommodations on board?

Mike Galifianakis asserts that among the barriers to successful implementation of workplace inclusivity and accessibility are “lack of awareness of disability-related issues, lack of formal accommodation protocol and procedure, [and an] unwelcoming environment” (Galifianakis, June 1, 2018, email message to author). Galifianakis is uniquely qualified to weigh in on this topic. He has an insider perspective in that he has a condition that requires him to use assistive technology to perform his job, and he’s especially invested in seeing lasting reform on the disability-employment front. In addition to his responsibilities as ADA coordinator, “developing and implementing programs and activities to advance and monitor agency compliance with the ADA statewide,” he is “a frequent lecturer on disability law and operated his own law firm, specializing in disability law, prior to joining Georgia State Financing and Investment Commission, GSFIC” (State of Georgia ADA Coordinator’s Office, n.d.). Galifianakis’s office’s work is getting disability and accessibility issues on the frontline and challenging the status quo where this marginalized group is concerned.

The numbers alone illustrate the folly in marginalizing this group. People with impairments of any of the five senses, cognition, or mobility make up our nation's largest minority group. "About 56.7 million people—19 percent of the population—had a disability in 2010, according to a broad definition of disability, with more than half of them reporting the disability was severe, according to a comprehensive report on this population released today by the U.S. Census Bureau" (US Census Bureau 2012). But they remain a group largely untapped due to a number of reasons, including preconceived assumptions about their inability to perform job duties. Another contributing factor to consider is the individual's reluctance to self-advocate and self-promote. Adding to the detriment is the current climate—by some estimations, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is currently under attack. According to Bell's CNN special (2018), "the law is being threatened by pending legislation which allows business owners to disregard the ADA until formally notified by an individual." This is where the aforementioned reluctance to self-advocate or self-identify is critical. So while there is this vast subset of our nation's population, some of which are qualified candidates that could contribute tremendously to our national workforce, in many cases they are not even being invited to the employment table or they preclude themselves from it.

According to data derived from the Census Bureau's 2010–2012 American Community Survey (matched to the Bureau of Labor Statistics occupational projections), featured in the Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment policy, employment levels of people with disabilities are low, and those who are employed tend to be in low-paying occupations (United States Department of Labor, n.d). Only one-third (32.0 percent) of working-age people with disabilities were employed on average in the 2010–2012 period, compared to over two-thirds (72.7 percent) of people without disabilities (US Census Bureau 2012). With those bleak numbers in mind, consider that this group is being marginalized and not adequately supported once they manage to get to the table. This isn't to assert that employees with disabilities are willfully neglected; rather, their needs are simply not understood or there is no awareness. The manager of the walk-in branch of Georgia Library for Accessible Service, located in the Central Library in downtown Atlanta, Georgia, observes people at partnering agencies that do not understand the myriad of accessibility issues. "I find most of the times it's because people do not have the need or know anyone who requires special accommodations rather than them willfully not making accommodations" (Beverly Williams, May 8, 2018, email message to Asha Hagood).

This brings us to a more microcosmic view of the issue. Never mind the employment world at large; in the realm of libraries, an industry focused on goodwill, removing barriers to access and supplying every reader his book (Ranganathan, 1931), are we, too, failing the community of people

with disabilities? Are we making sure they're represented in our workforce? Are we providing the reasonable accommodations set forth by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) for those employees who require it?

In the twenty-first century, in an effort to offer equitable service, libraries have to continually challenge themselves to create an environment with variables. "It starts with developing policies, practices, and continued training that focus on inclusivity as a part of our individual and institutional missions" (Williams 2016). The best way for libraries to learn to serve all in their communities is for the community to be represented among the staff of the library. The current service model in public libraries perpetuates societal trends, actions, behaviors, and language that divide. Special populations are often served independently of traditional library transactions because of service delivery. Patrons with hearing loss are served visual books with captions. Working for the Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped is a separate service offered to those who lack the ability to see print or hold printed material. The format of audiobooks have changed from record discs, to cassette tapes, to flash drives as technology continually evolves. Libraries should mimic methods of universal accessibility that can eliminate barriers for more people in their communities. Although separation of services may not seem like it would have such a major impact, it does. It has permeated how we design our buildings and services by influencing a behavior that isolates those that are not part of the population majority.

An article by Jennifer Vinopal (2016) examining diversity in the library noted, "Despite our ongoing quest for diversity and a growing number of initiatives to increase it, the demographics of the professional librarian population haven't changed in any significant way. We are starkly lacking in diversity based on race and ethnicity (we are overwhelmingly white), age (librarianship is an aging profession), disability, economic status, educational background, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other demographic and identity markers of difference." The irony is not lost that in a service industry that endeavors to serve everyone, with particular attention to the underserved, we have within our library personnel ranks those who feel that their condition is often marginalized, not to mention the patrons who feel the library is not fully equipped to receive them.

WHERE DID *DIVERSITY* COME FROM, AND TO WHAT EXTENT HAVE LIBRARIES DISCOVERED IT?

Initiatives of diversity and inclusion have been a concentrated focus of libraries for the last twenty years. Libraries are actively seeking to fill reference desks with people that look like those in the communities they serve; the profession as a whole wants to be more reflective of a diverse populace. The drive to create accessible libraries has been a challenge for many

reasons. Stretched budgets along with limited training and resources often reveal disconnects between a vision and reality. Diversity in staffing confronts the personal assumptions and biases of individuals, which can impede opportunities for employees with disabilities.

Libraries, as community advocates, continually promote inclusivity in service and structure, but is the campaign for accessibility demonstrative of words or actions? More recently, newer libraries make accessibility in design a core focus of construction or renovation. Many aspire to what is called *Universal Design*, whereby “the design and composition of an environment [is] so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability” (National Disability Authority, Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, n.d.). In Georgia, Director of Library Planning and Construction Nathan Rall expressed, “It is critical for libraries to be able to meet the needs of their community, and they can’t do so if they must turn patrons away for lack of space or if they aren’t compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act” (Nathan Rall, May 8, 2018, email message to author). This edict is the foundation of an understanding that in order to serve our community, we must be accessible to all in our communities. The library represents something different for everyone. In *A Social History of Books and Libraries from Cuneiform to Bytes*, Valentine (2012, 24) writes, “Libraries may be defined in various ways but a popular contemporary approach is fourfold in nature as place, institution, service and idea.” The library as a growing organism has no place for fixed ideals, participants (practitioners and users), or service models.

A basic standard of accessibility from those who serve and those seeking service would create mutual opportunities for cultural, informational, and social exchange. In 2016, *American Libraries* featured an editorial article called “Inclusivity in Any Library: How we can improve Accessibility” (Williams). This article referenced how Starbucks had set the benchmark for enabling hearing-impaired patrons to order coffee with the use of two-way video screens that allowed captioning. The ability to holistically serve a representative cross-section of a community requires libraries to readily serve persons with varying degrees of abilities. In adapting to the inclusive model that libraries promote, it should also be represented throughout the library in design and policy. The article performed a temperature check on inclusivity in libraries, with Williams proposing that “equal access starts with policies, practices, and continued training that focus on inclusivity as part of our individual and institutional missions.” Accessibility is a crucial factor in diversity. It is more than shelf height and aisle space. It is more than workstations that can accommodate wheelchairs or screens that can display refreshable braille. The right equipment is imperative to show efforts in creating equitable spaces. However, the varied disabilities present in our communities would only produce infinite purchase requests and

specialized training if we relegate accessibility to product offerings. Accessibility is an attitude of service. It is the library that understands the advantages of sit-to-stand workstations for all patrons and the webmaster that makes each webpage accessible and captioned as a standard of service.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: HOW EFFECTIVE ARE DIVERSITY INITIATIVES AT-LARGE AND IN THE LIBRARY WORLD?

As librarians with the Georgia Libraries for Statewide Accessible Services (GLASS), our goal was to ascertain the attitude toward diversity in our own workspace. We spoke with ten people employed by GLASS in varying capacities—four with varying hearing, visual, and physical impairments and six without any disabilities. Each person was asked whether they perceived the campaign of accessibility in libraries to be one of action or merely words. Overall, we observed a divergence with respect to the responses, which revealed the disconnect between who we serve and how we serve them. The employees without impairments viewed the campaign for accessibility to be one of action, highlighting the purchase of assistive technology, the sponsored conferences focused on accessibility, and outreach specially committed to the promotion of inclusivity. The perspectives of those with impairments was markedly different. They spoke of pockets of advances in one area but nonexistent widespread change. Both groups echoed one another in the belief that changes in attitude and actions spur diversity and inclusion and the implementation of aspirational strategic plans that would be proactively inclusive. As one respondent said, “This means that there shouldn’t just be discussions and actions taken about/to help persons with disabilities, but they should also be included in said discussions and actions.” In the past our actions have been reactive. We have thought of those with different needs after the library is built, the programs are designed, and the website is live. In truly accepting our role as social advocates, we should innovate by integrating accessibility in our service models. Patrick Valentine (2012, 168) writes, “The challenge is clearer now, starker, more promising as well as more challenging. The library is not a hegemonic institution as some maintain, but mediates among its users and potentially among its nonusers, too. The American library and libraries akin to it in other lands are open to all who seek out their resources.” It is imperative for us to listen to those who most benefit from accessible formats and service to access information. As the old adage goes, if we build it, they will come. If we desire to create inclusive environments, there has to be consistent efforts to adapt and employ services to meet their needs, and we must reach beyond our presumptions about accessibility.

A hearing-impaired employee with GLASS defined accessibility as access to communication devices, closed captioning on programs, and access to performance tools that would make simple tasks easier. He notes, “The

campaign for accessibility has been in words far as I am seeing, no progress at my local libraries” (Smith, April 19, 2018, email message to author). He further responds that the weakness of accessibility in the workplace is the burden it puts on the employer to accommodate workers with disabilities. Galifianakis’s sentiments are similar, as he submits that an effective application of accessibility considerations would yield a workplace where “qualified individuals are able to optimize their talent and utilize their skills for employers because the workplace is welcoming and the physical and technological infrastructure is universally designed.” But he adds that this isn’t often the case and that “campaigns are mostly well intended, [but the] results are very mixed [and it is] difficult to achieve successful outcomes” (Galifianakis, June 1, 2018, email message to author).

Sadly, this observation reveals a fissure in our policies, practices, and processes, as they lack inclusivity as a basic standard. Accommodating provisions should be readily available or, better yet, used as the standard for all. The designation of special workstations should cease in favor of *each* area of the library being functional and accessible. We have been working toward this goal for many years, yet our sample reveals that in many areas we are still not meeting the needs of those requiring accessible service.

The needs of an impaired employee or patron to access information should not be viewed as a burden. A 2012 article in *Forbes* magazine states, “According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Job Accommodations Network annual report, *Workplace Accommodations: Low Cost, High Impact*, workplace accommodations not only are low cost, but also positively impact the workplace in many ways” (Owen 2012). This report found that more than half of requested workplace accommodations cost absolutely nothing for the companies to implement. Some examples of these accommodations include scheduling flexibility, allowances in dress code rules, or allowing somebody to sit or stand when other positioning is customary. The responsibility falls to us to design an inclusive blueprint of service that benefits all community members and to actively promote it in order to ensure its development and strengthening. The drive to be accessible and inclusive must begin within an organization. We cannot continue to espouse principles and values that we are not practicing.

IS DISABILITY TRADITIONALLY CONSIDERED IN DIVERSITY DISCUSSIONS?

We’ve examined some of the murky and less than amenable attitudes surrounding diversity initiatives and touched on what it looks like to be a person with a disability who is in the job market. It’s probably not a stretch to say that at the intersection of these two notions lies the crux of what is at issue here. Disability is not adequately included in the conversation and push for diversity because the diversity discussion already has its pain points—disability is an imprecise concept. And an issue as sensitive and

layered as diversity could only exponentially increase those pains. This is not an indictment of the employers or other stakeholders who are involved in the hiring (or spurning) of individuals with disabilities. There are considerations that would warrant proceeding with care and caution. Clearly defining and creating a metric to qualify disability can be sticky. As W. Kamau Bell's "The Disability Community" (2018) notes, there are "56.7 million people in America with hundreds of different disabilities," and that can be difficult to corral. Many discussions or campaigns opt to focus on impairments that are obvious physical disabilities and visual and hearing impairments. Evidence suggests that the few diversity initiatives that do aspire to include people with disabilities focus on those with obvious impairments. We concede that taking things of this nature into account can make the issue feel unwieldy, so again, this doesn't serve as an indictment. But, it is a rallying cry to employers to ramp up their efforts to be inclusive in their hiring practices—and particularly it serves as a clarion to the library community. In her article on diversity in library staffing, Jennifer Vinopal (2016) notes that ALA's statistics illustrate that library staffing lacks diversity in the usual-suspect areas of race and sex, but that "we lack other forms of diversity as well, though demographic data for areas other than race and ethnicity are less well tracked in the profession." She goes on to say that "the comparatively low employment of librarians with disabilities is also deserving of attention given the increase between 1990 and 2000 of people self-identifying [on the 2000 United States Census] as having one or more disabilities. While 19.2 percent of the population between the ages of 21 and 64 self-identified as having a disability on the 2000 United States Census, according to ALA statistics the percentage of credentialed librarians with disability status was 4 percent that same year."

CONCLUSION: IN A PERFECT WORLD, BETTER ENGAGEMENT WITH THE DISABLED WORKFORCE

An inclusive community that evolves from mutual exchanges benefits both participants. It is time for the campaign of accessibility to move beyond conferences and webinars. As technology changes the information landscape, it has created an opportunity for us to challenge our current service models. It may no longer be ideal to serve our populations differently due to service delivery but instead to create accessible formats available to all. This will foster an environment that is inviting to patrons and employees, which would inevitably lend itself to an inclusive environment. Is this not what the library advocates? Even in the environment we work in—serving visually impaired patrons, working alongside co-workers with varying impairments—our perspectives on accessibility are not the same. The alignment of the two perspectives can be met if the desire to be accessible starts in the beginning. Curb cuts, automatic buttons for heavy entryways in pub-

lic buildings, and automatic lifts for heavy objects on buses have benefitted all of us, not just those they were intended to accommodate.

The destiny of the library and our communities is in our hands. Libraries have successfully reinvented themselves and offer much more than books. From mobile reference to community gardens, we have fought to expand the definition of the library and meet the needs of our communities. Libraries have a long-standing reputation as the gatekeepers of infinite knowledge—a distinction that nods to the power of librarians. The perception of the gatekeeper should be one associated with invitation and not refusal. Those who are not experiencing disability—the majority—have to do more to gain a comprehensive understanding of what accessibility really is and the various ways that accommodations can be extended. By developing and implementing policies that could serve all, workspaces would not alienate employees who rely on alternative methods to complete tasks. It is much easier to build a library that can accommodate wheelchairs from the beginning than to later redesign spaces. Curb cuts are just as beneficial to the mother with a stroller as they are to a wheelchair user. The use of a button to open a heavy door benefits all of us, not just the elderly. Accessibility accommodations are often used by the able-bodied as much as by those with disabilities, and having their voices at the table—even if we have to coax them out—will increase our chances of getting it right.

NOTE

1. During the course of publishing this article, Mike Galifianakis resigned after twenty years of service. Georgia's new ADA coordinator is Stacey Peace.

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Teneka Williams is the manager for the GLASS Distribution Center in Morrow, Georgia. Teneka began her career with the GLASS Libraries as a part-time machine clerk. She was a Laura Bush Scholar and attended University of North Texas for her MLIS. During her time as a graduate student, she was awarded the E. J. Josey Scholarship Award and recognized as an American Library Association Spectrum Scholar. After earning her degree, she became the manager for the distribution center and was responsible for the talking-book collection move from the Murphy Avenue location to the Georgia State Archives. Teneka is the consummate advocate for inclusion and accessibility in Georgia's public libraries and continues to write on accessibility issues after having her first article, *Inclusivity in any Library*, published in the June 2016 issue of *American Libraries*.

Asha Hagood works as an outreach librarian for GLASS (Georgia Libraries for Accessible Statewide Services). She travels the state of Georgia raising awareness about GLASS, engaging with the visually impaired community, and fostering partnerships with agencies that serve the same population. She has worked as a media specialist in a K-8 and in various assignments in her nine years with public libraries, including managing young-adult programs as well as programs for adult literacy and job readiness. Asha earned a master of library science from the University of North Texas and a master of instructional design and technology from Walden University.