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Disability and Employment in Transition: Challenges, Innovations, and Opportunities

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Abstract

We explore emergent micro-, meso-, and macro-level issues that impact the experiences of people with disabilities at work and how these issues can drive research. These issues have received little attention in the management literature. At the micro level we examine how the definition of disability has moved from the medical model to an interactionist model, the intersectionality between disability and other identities, and evolving assistive technology. At the meso level we focus on ableism; new forms of work impacting the inclusion of people with disabilities; how disability is treated in organizations' diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) efforts; and the comparison of sheltered work to competitive market work. Finally, at the macro level, we examine the techno exclusion of people with disabilities, varying definitions of fairness (i.e., quotas versus accommodation), and the DEIA backlash.

INTRODUCTION

Ableism: a set of assumptions (conscious or unconscious) and practices that promote the differential or unequal treatment of people because of actual or presumed disabilities

Techno exclusion: the exclusion of people with disabilities from employment opportunities due to technology-related issues such as lack of access to technology or biased decision-making

Nearly 1 in 6 people worldwide has a significant disability (World Health Organization 2023). Despite the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (42 U.S.C. § 12101 et seq.) in 1990 and other inclusion efforts, employment outcomes for persons with disabilities remain poor. In 2023, only 47% of persons with disabilities in the United States were employed, compared to 82% of the general population (Erickson et al. 2025). In 2022, their unemployment rate was 7.9% versus 3.6% for the general population (Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor 2024; Erickson et al. 2024) and nearly a quarter lived below the poverty line (Erickson et al. 2025). Those who are employed often face underemployment, lower pay, and reduced job satisfaction (Bruyère et al. 2016, Markel & Barclay 2009, Schur et al. 2017, von Schrader et al. 2022). These disparities are mirrored globally (Bonaccio et al. 2020, Fleck 2024, International Labour Organization 2024). Researchers in many disciplines such as disability studies, computer science, economics, psychology, rehabilitation studies, law, sociology, labor relations, and management do research to find out why this is the case and to determine ways to overcome these employment discrepancies. Explanations for this exclusion range from lack of proper support at the individual level to structural societal bias.

We first approached this article by reviewing recent disability research in the management, organizational behavior, and organizational psychology literature (referred to as the management and organizations literature from now on) and then attempted to organize the literature according to functional topics (e.g., selection, inclusion, accommodation). In general, the literature has broadly focused on discrimination/employment barriers (e.g., Snyder et al. 2010), workplace inclusion (e.g., Dwertmann & Boehm 2016), self-disclosure of hidden disabilities (e.g., Lyons et al. 2017), accommodation issues (e.g., Schur et al. 2014), and various aspects of performance (e.g., Luria et al. 2014). As indicated by recent reviews (Beatty et al. 2019, Boehm & Jammaers 2024), much research is still needed in all these areas. Another recent trend in our literature driven by interest from the corporate world and society is research on mental illness (e.g., Colella & Santuzzi 2024, Follmer & Jones 2018, Rosado-Solomon et al. 2023) and neurodiversity (e.g., Austin & Pisano 2017, Bruyère & Colella 2022, Ezerins et al. 2024, Patton & Santuzzi 2024). While the management and organizations disability literature has grown over the last 30 years, it still lags behind the literature on gender and race issues (Boehm & Jammaers 2024, Colella et al. 2017). It remains fragmented across types of disabilities studied, questions asked (i.e., multitudes of dependent variables), and theoretical underpinnings. Furthermore, there have been many recent reviews, handbooks, and special issues devoted to the topic of disability (e.g., Beatty et al. 2019, Patton & Santuzzi 2024, Praslova 2023, Rosado-Solomon et al. 2023, Schloemer-Jarvis et al. 2022); therefore, we did not think another such review was warranted.

We learned two things that changed the scope and purpose of our article. First, one cannot remain in the management and organizations literature alone to study disability employment issues. Second, there are understudied and emerging events happening at the intersection of disability and work that should be influencing the direction of future research. Thus, rather than focusing on the past, we focus on these timely issues that are driving the experiences of people with disabilities in the modern labor market.

We used two criteria to choose topics to cover in this review. First, we selected topics that seem relevant to the management and organizations literature but have received little attention within it, despite being explored in other fields. These underrepresented yet important issues—such as the evolving definition of disability and disability identity, emerging assistive technologies (ATs), ableism, sheltered versus competitive employment, and techno exclusion—warrant greater engagement from management and organizations scholars.

Second, issues had to be timely. Research on discrimination, diversity, and inclusion is often spurred by external events (Colella et al. 2017, Mullin et al. 2024). The earliest work on disability in management and organizations emerged gradually in the 1970s and 1980s through experimental studies on discrimination (e.g., Czajka & DeNisi 1988, Krefting & Brief 1976), coinciding with the US Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The 1990s and early 2000s saw a wave of disability rights legislation globally—such as the ADA, Germany's Equality for Persons with Disabilities Act of 2002 (BGBl. I S. 1467), and the 2006 United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)—alongside active advocacy movements. Consequently, research on disability and employment exploded across many disciplines in the twenty-first century (Boehm & Jammaers 2024). We therefore see current events as a strong basis for selecting topics such as intersectionality, new forms of work, and the diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) backlash.

Gig work: short-term, flexible, and task-based work arrangements, often facilitated through technological advancements and digital platforms

Figure 1 provides an overview of our model, which begins at the micro level with individual-level issues. We first examine how the definition of disability has evolved from a medical model to a more contemporary view that understands disability as the result of an interaction between an impairment and an environment that privileges nondisabled individuals (i.e., an ableist environment). Next, we address intersectionality, recognizing that people with disabilities possess many identities that intersect to shape their experiences—an area still underexplored in management literature, though it is gaining attention elsewhere. Finally, we highlight recent advances in ATs and their impact on individuals with disabilities.

The meso level of our model focuses on the organizational and labor market context. We begin with ableism, or structural discrimination against people with disabilities. Another key issue is the evolving role of disability within organizations' DEIA initiatives—developments that shape future research needs in our field. Next, we discuss new forms of work (e.g., time-spatial flexibility or gig work) and their influence on the work experiences and inclusion of people with disabilities. Finally, we explore labor market structures, noting the disconnect between research on competitive employment and the rich but often separate literature on sheltered work environments, despite their potential to inform one another.

At the macro level, our model addresses legal and political factors. We begin with an analysis of how different countries legally operationalize fairness, contrasting quota-based systems (e.g., in India, many EU countries, and Brazil) with accommodation-focused, "equal playing field" approaches, such as those in the United States. Next, we examine various forms of techno exclusion that limit access and opportunity. Finally, we discuss the political backlash against DEIA efforts in the United States and its implications for the inclusion of people with disabilities and for researchers in this space.

There are two other things to note about our conceptual model. First, the boundaries between contexts are permeable, and events happening in one context can influence events and issues occurring in other contexts. For example, the political backlash against all DEIA programs will influence organizational DEIA programs and the research that is needed to support and protect these programs. Furthermore, in worst-case scenarios, this backlash can lead to the framing of concepts such as ableism as illegal or unfair. Second, technology is depicted as crossing through all contexts because technological advances have influence in all contexts, from the role of technology in AT to the legality of certain artificial intelligence (AI)-based selection systems.

MICRO LEVEL: THE INDIVIDUAL CONTEXT

The Definition of Disability

The way disability has been conceptualized has changed over the years. The earliest research, mainly in the field of rehabilitation, adopted a medical model of disability (Hughes & Paterson 1997, Shakespeare 2006). This medical model of disability considers disability to be an

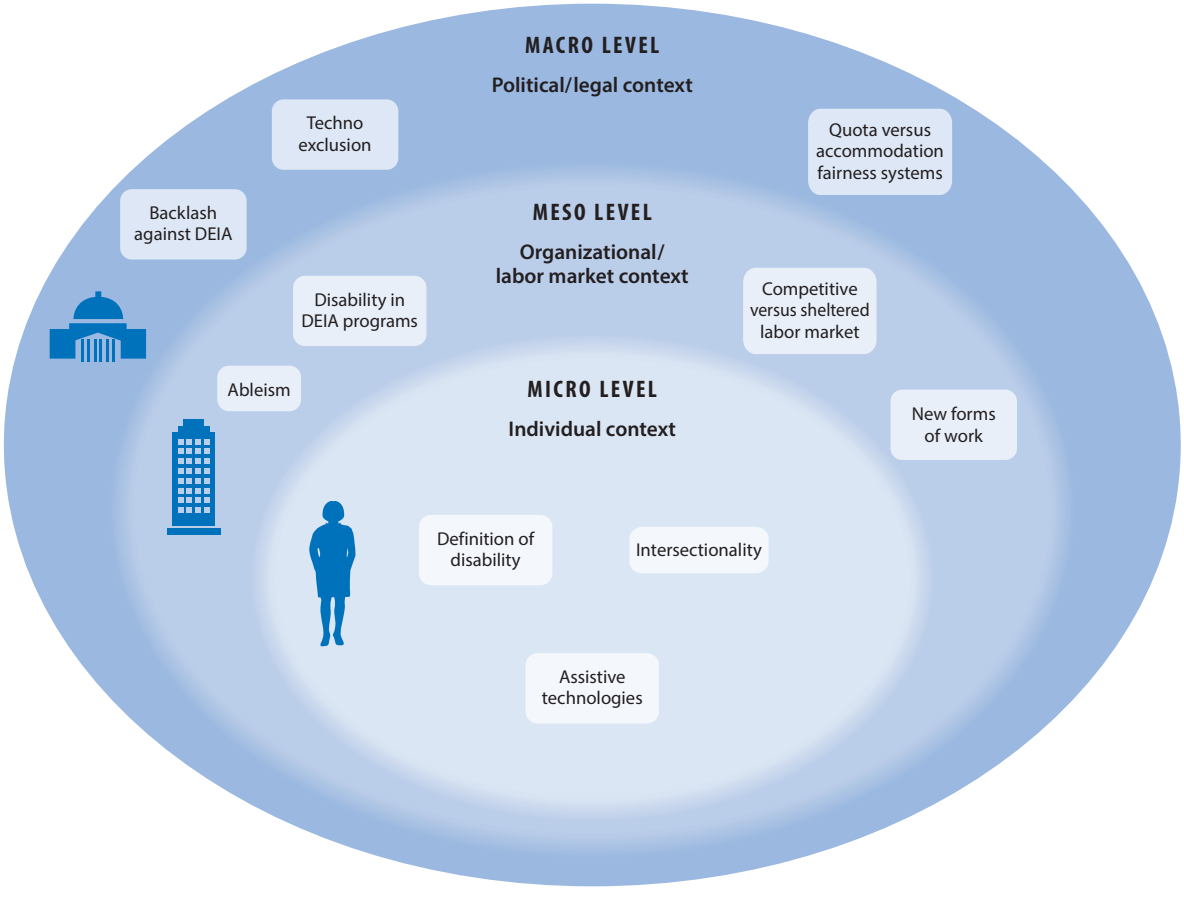

Figure 1

We present a graphic depiction of the organization of our review, which focuses on individual-, meso-, and macro-level emerging issues in disability and employment. At the center of the figure are individual-level phenomena including the evolution of the conceptualization of disability, intersectionality that recognizes that people with disabilities possess many identities that intersect to shape their experiences, and advances in assistive technologies that impact people with disabilities. The middle ring depicts meso-level phenomena reflecting the organizational and labor market context. This section includes ableism, which is structural discrimination against people with disabilities; the evolving role of disability within organizations' diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) initiatives; new forms of work (e.g., time-spatial flexibility); and competitive employment versus sheltered work environments. Finally, the outer ring depicts these macro-level phenomena: the contrast between quota-based and accommodation-focused "equal playing field" approaches to fairness, techno exclusion that limits access and opportunity, and political backlash against DEIA efforts in the United States. The boundaries between levels are fuzzy because events happening at one level can influence events at other levels.

individualized defect that prevents individuals from full participation in society and is something to be fixed or treated (Guevara 2021, Jammaers 2016, Shakespeare 2006). Research that adopts this model focuses on questions such as how to most quickly get injured workers back to work (e.g., Pransky et al. 2005) or what type of rehabilitation strategies work to ensure successful employment. It is also argued that this is the view of disability most common in the United States, as evidenced by the wording of the ADA (Areheart 2008).

In the 1970s, arising primarily from a British disability activist movement, the social model of disability was developed (Shakespeare 2006). This model distinguishes between impairment and

DISABILITY MODELS

The *medical model of disability* is a framework that views disability to be an individualized, medical defect that prevents individuals from full participation in society and is something to be fixed or treated.

The *social model of disability* distinguishes between impairment and disability, arguing that it is not one's impairment that makes people disabled; rather, it is societal, economic, and cultural barriers that create disability.

The *bio-psycho-social model of disability* states that disability results from the interaction of one's impairments and attitudinal, societal, economic, and cultural environmental barriers.

disability, arguing that it is not one's impairment that makes one disabled; rather, it is societal barriers that create disability. The social model focuses on the problem of disablement defined by Goodley (2014) as "social, economic, and cultural barriers that prevent people with impairments from living like their nonimpaired brothers and sisters" (p. 6). Although the social model has resulted in policies and research that have done a great deal of good, it has come under a variety of criticisms (e.g., Goodley 2014, Shakespeare 2006). One criticism is that it ignores the issue of impairment, which is real. Another criticism is that it ignores agency on the part of people with impairments (Shakespeare 2006). Research based on the social model of disability examines barriers to full workforce participation of people with disabilities. It is our opinion that most research in the field of management falls in this camp because rarely does it focus on the impairment in interaction with environmental barriers, nor does it often consider the agency of those with a disability. For example, laboratory studies looking at barriers such as stereotypes (e.g., Czajka & DeNisi 1988) often conceive disability as a fixed, static characteristic of people (Jammaers 2016). Thus, such studies overlook the constructed nature of disability in the workplace (Barnes & Mercer 2005).

Other conceptual frames for defining disability have emerged that consider disability as an interaction between both impairment and barriers (see Goodley 2024). The most influential of such models is the definition of disability given in the 2011 World Health Organization's *World Report on Disability*, which states that "disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. Defining disability as an interaction means that 'disability' is not an attribute of the person" (World Health Organization 2011, p. 4). They refer to this as the bio-psycho-social model of disability (see the sidebar titled Disability Models).

As mentioned above, research in management has primarily approached disability issues from the social model lens or what Jammaers (2016) refers to as the minority model. By failing to consider the interaction of impairment and social barriers, our literature has become somewhat fragmented across disabilities and associated impairments. Often, in empirical work, the impairments chosen for study seem to be randomly or conveniently selected without a lot of thought given to how the specific impairments would interact with specific contexts and the potential barriers for those contexts. We know that mental disabilities tend to be more stigmatized than physical disabilities (e.g., Colella & Santuzzi 2024), but that is about as far as it goes. There exists no governing framework to study impairment-contextual barrier interactions. Colella and colleagues (Colella & Varma 1999, Colella et al. 1998) examined the notion of disability-job fit, but there was little theoretical background to predict what impairments would lead to what disadvantages in what contexts. This line of work just focused on jobs in general, not specific barriers. Another criticism of the social model is that it ignores agency on the part of people with disabilities. Management research in recent years has begun to overcome this by examining how people manage in organizational contexts (e.g., Jammaers et al. 2016, Kwon 2020). For example, Johnson & Joshi

(2016) examined how individuals receiving an autism diagnosis engaged in identity management and well-being at work using both qualitative and quantitative methods. However, this research remains impairment specific, but it is an excellent start to begin building a framework extending across disabilities.

In summary, future research needs to focus on building a framework for studying disability that considers the interactions between impairments and context. Such a framework would advance research on disabilities and employment by providing a conceptual means of systematically conducting research and integrating research focusing on specific disabilities.

Another important issue for researchers is the evolving definition of disability, as some groups argue that certain physical, cognitive, or sensory differences are not impairments but natural variations of human diversity. A prominent example is the neurodiversity movement, which argues that neurological differences are aspects of regular human variation and should be recognized and respected as such (Singer 2016). Thus, conditions such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia should not be considered as disabilities but as other ways of cognitively experiencing the world compared to those who are neurotypical. Legally, it should be noted that disability legislation, such as the ADA, considers these conditions to be disabilities. The implication for researchers is the need to be sensitive when labeling conditions as disabilities, especially when individuals do not perceive their differences from the so-called norm as disabilities. Related to this identity issue is language preference of using either person first (e.g., person with a disability) or identity first (e.g., blind person) language. Proponents of the person first language claim that it puts the person before the impairment, whereas identity first proponents feel this language allows them to proudly claim their disability. We use the person first terminology in accordance with the American Psychological Association protocol.

Intersectionality

It has long been argued that there is a need to study disability in intersection with other identities and to acknowledge that there is often comorbidity between different disabilities, yet much of our research treats disability in a vacuum. Recently, there have been many studies in other disciplines examining the intersection of different disabilities with various identities on a range of dependent variables. Kavanagh et al. (2015) in a study of over 33,000 Australians found that various indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage were influenced by the interaction between disability type and gender, leading them to conclude that "crude comparisons between people with and without disabilities obscure how disadvantage is patterned according to impairment type and gender" (p. 191). Fuentes et al. (2024) conducted a scoping review of the studies examining the intersection of racism and ableism on both discrimination allegations and perceived discrimination. Their findings demonstrated various types of interaction effects on discrimination in most studies and that racism and ableism lead to unique stereotypes. However, they also had studies in their review where there were no effects for race or disability. One of the problems with this type of research is that there is little theory to guide what kind of effects may be expected, particularly when there may be more complex interactions. For example, Blanck et al. (2020) examined how age, disability, gender, race, and LGBTQ status interact to influence the likelihood of receiving an accommodation. They found that disabled lawyers, older women lawyers, older racial/ethnic minority lawyers, and LGBTQ minority lawyers have relatively low odds of having accommodation requests granted compared to other lawyers. What these types of studies tell us in general is that having multiple marginalized identities is worse than (in this case having an accommodation request granted) having only one marginalized identity, but the theory does not really exist to go beyond that in most cases.

Another important issue is the search for identities that mitigate the impact of disability stigma. For example, recent research on the intersection between the identity of military veterans and disability has demonstrated that being a veteran mitigates stigma (Ameri et al. 2025) or perceived injustice (von Schrader et al. 2022) associated with disability. Finally, the management literature on disability needs to consider comorbidity because many conditions coexist with other conditions. Future research on intersectionality would greatly benefit from strong theoretical frameworks to guide this research.

Assistive Technologies

Technology can play a transformative role in advancing vocational inclusion for persons with disabilities, serving as both a facilitator of access and a tool for empowerment. ATs—such as screen readers, speech-to-text applications, alternative input devices, and mobility aids—enable individuals with sensory, physical, or cognitive impairments to perform tasks that might otherwise be inaccessible.

Jamwal and colleagues (2020) carried out a scoping review and included 21 out of 2,400 studies on the interplay of technology and disability. They found that technology has been shown to enhance independence, participation, and quality of life for individuals with disabilities and complex needs. However, they also point to ethical concerns due to the vulnerability of this population, particularly regarding risks associated with social engagement and privacy in the use of monitoring technologies. Focusing particularly on the workplace, Marinaci and colleagues (2023) conducted a systematic review of the literature and identified 41 studies published between 2017 and 2023 that dealt with work implications of ATs. They concluded that ATs can help in multiple ways, including overcoming accessibility barriers, enhancing job performance, increasing independence, expanding career opportunities, adapting work environments, fostering legal compliance, and enabling long-term workability.

Moreover, while research on the implications of AI on disability inclusion is scarce, some first conceptual pieces (e.g., Almufareh et al. 2024) point to major opportunities in various fields such as improved ATs (e.g., through better speech recognition, computer vision, and mobility assistance), healthcare innovations (e.g., through personalized treatment plans, rehabilitation, and prosthetics), and inclusive education (e.g., through personalized learning pathways) (for a specific review on technology, disability, and education, see McNicholl et al. 2019). At the same time, researchers point to critical ethical challenges, including data privacy and algorithmic bias. Other scholars (Smith & Smith 2021) adopt a more cautious stance, raising concerns about the ethical implications of AI, particularly when it is used to suggest courses of action or make decisions on behalf of individuals. Potential downsides of technology (techno exclusion) for people with disabilities are discussed later in this review.

It should be noted here that essentially none of the research on AT is published in the management and organizations literature, with most of the work being done in the field of disability rehabilitation. There are many questions here that would be relevant to management and organizations scholars, for example, how to create work cultures that are most facilitative of the use of AT.

Table 1 summarizes the main research questions identified in this section.

MESO LEVEL: ORGANIZATIONAL/LABOR MARKET CONTEXT

Ableism

The concept of ableism has arisen out of the critical feminist and disabilities studies literatures. Ableism is defined as "a set of assumptions (conscious or unconscious) and practices that promote the differential or unequal treatment of people because of actual or presumed disabilities"

Table 1 Research needs and questions resulting from emerging issues at the micro (individual) level of analysis

Emerging issue	Research needs and questions
Definition of disability	Research on building a conceptual framework for studying disability that considers the interactions between impairments and context, as well as personal agency Implications of changing disability definitions on organizational practices
Intersectionality	How does disability interact with other marginalized identities to influence work experiences? What identities interact with disability to attenuate negative experiences? The eventual development of a theoretical framework to guide future research on intersectionality Acknowledgment that there is often comorbidity in research
Assistive technologies	Research on the ethical and privacy concerns regarding some technology in the workplace Research on organizational factors influencing the effectiveness and acceptance of assistive technologies

(Campbell 2009, p. 4) because there exists "a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human" (Campbell 2001, p. 44).

Applied to a work setting, this framework argues that there exists an ideal standard or prototype for the ideal employee and this prototype includes physical perfection. This ideal standard defines what is considered normal, and all who deviate from this standard are considered abnormal (Ho 2008, Jammaers 2016). Thus, employees who do not fit this conceptualization of the perfect type are othered, stigmatized, and subject to policies and procedures that are not conducive to their best interests. At its most radical, the ableism framework would argue that we should not be focusing on inclusion into existing organizational cultures because those cultures are ableist. Rather, we should be focusing on work that upturns these ableist belief systems and redefines what is considered normal. Practices and laws that are meant to help people with disabilities may instead hurt them by forcing them to conform to a system that does not support them (Harpur 2019).

Approaching disability research from an ableism perspective would require that researchers examine ableist beliefs, narratives, policies, and procedures present in the workplace and how these impact on the lives of people with disabilities. Sometimes ableism is just taken to mean disability discrimination (e.g., Lindsay & Fuentes 2022), which would suggest that there is a good deal of management research conducted from an ableist perspective. However, ableism scholars would argue that taking an ableist perspective in research is more than just studying discrimination events (e.g., stereotypes) but should focus on general discourse about people with impairments (Mik-Meyer 2016). At present, this is not a well-known perspective in the management literature, although there have been some recent studies using the ableist lens (Jammaers 2016, Jammaers & Zanoni 2021, Kwon & Archer 2022, Mik-Meyer 2016). For example, Mik-Meyer (2016) conducted a qualitative study in which employees were asked open questions about their interactions with another employee with cerebral palsy. Their results revealed that many of the respondents, unprompted, brought up a vast array of other stigmatized groups (e.g., homosexuals, transvestites, redheads, drunk drivers, old women, pregnant women, blondes, people in grief, etc.) as a way of othering the focal employee while at the same time trying to avoid othering them. This suggests that research that examines the norms in operation at the organizational, group, and interpersonal levels that signal ableism requires studying nondisabled people and how they react to disability. Most work on employer attitudes just surveys HR managers and does so at a very general level. Research is needed in the management and organizations literature that addresses discrimination from an ableist perspective in addition to the predominant equity perspective.

Disability and DEIA Programs

A major factor governing the inclusion of people with disabilities into the workplace is whether the organization actively engages in having and implementing policies and practices aimed at fostering inclusion of people with disabilities. In other words, is disability given strong consideration in the organization's DEIA program? We should note here that most companies just label their programs "DEI" and leave off the "accessibility" component. We include it to be complete. Disability has been slower to be considered in organizations' DEIA programs compared to other identity groups (Casey 2020, Mullin et al. 2024), although more and more companies have been including this group as they became more focused on social justice in general in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter movement (Mullin et al. 2024) and the proliferation of organizations aimed at working with partner companies toward disability inclusion such as Disability:IN and Cornell's Yang-Tan Institute on Employment and Disability. Yet, even if companies do include disability in their DEIA programs, there may be a gap between stated policy and practice (Ameri & Kurtzberg 2025, Klinksiek 2024).

In a qualitative study of HR managers and employees with disabilities, Klinksiek (2024) found that even if a company specifically focused on disability in their DEIA policy, there were still problems implementing the policy. Challenges included securing support for inclusion from senior leadership, difficulties identifying individuals with disabilities, and the increasing digitalization of work making jobs inaccessible for those with intellectual disabilities. Klinksiek (2024) also found that partnering with external disability employment organizations, gaining line managers' support, and increasing communication with employees with disabilities facilitated implementing DEIA policies.

Another issue is that it is unclear what actual programs and policies are most likely to be included and most helpful to people with disabilities. For example, Disability:IN (2024) found that while 93% of their members have disability employee resource groups, only 71% have a policy requiring that digital products are accessible to employees with disabilities and only 60% make all job candidates aware that they may request an accommodation for the job interview. These numbers may sound high, but this is an organization companies voluntarily join because they have a stated interest in hiring and including people with disabilities.

The effective inclusion of disability into DEIA policy is complicated by the fact that people with different disabilities have different needs and face different challenges. Usually, people with disabilities are treated as a monolithic group in DEIA policy. For example, Cavanagh et al. (2017) in their scoping review of HR practices in supporting people with disabilities found that there was very limited managerial knowledge about the needs and difficulties faced by employees with intellectual disabilities as compared to other impairments. Thus, HR policies and procedures aimed at disability were less effective for ensuring the inclusion and success of these employees. Another example is that accommodation needs vary greatly by impairment. For example, an autistic person may require a very quiet workspace because of sensory sensitivity; however, this would be irrelevant to a person in a wheelchair who would require accommodations related to physical accessibility (e.g., ramps, wide aisles).

Another issue to consider when examining the inclusion of disability into DEIA programs and policies is whether doing so perpetuates existing ableism in the organization. As we previously discussed, efforts to include people with disabilities can be viewed as trying to force people to conform to a system that is ableist, i.e., views physical perfection as the ideal and thus has policies and procedures designed to support this ideal (Harpur 2019). For example, the provision of an accommodation may help someone perform the job but at the same time may lead to greater stigmatization because the accommodation singles the person out as being different from the standard of the ideal employee.

Future research is needed to address these issues: the adaptation of disability into overall DEIA policies, the potential gap between policy and implementation, the effectiveness of various practices at inclusion, the efficacy of one-size-fits-all policies, and the auditing of current policies to ensure that they are not perpetuating ableism. Finally, the most pressing issue facing the inclusion of disability into DEIA programs, at least in the United States, is the current political backlash against DEIA programs in private, public, and educational organizations. We address this issue later.

Flexwork: the ability to perform work across variable times and locations

New Forms of Work

The organization of work is undergoing significant change, with emerging models challenging traditional employment structures. For people with disabilities, these developments present both potential benefits and new risks. Whereas traditional employment prioritized stability, legal protection, and structured accommodation processes, emerging work models focus on individual autonomy, flexible arrangements, and digital accessibility. We examine three interrelated dimensions of this shift: the rise of time-spatial flexibility, the growth of platform-based gig work, and self-organizing and strength-oriented systems.

The first dimension of the new ways of working (Aroles et al. 2021, Klinksiek et al. 2023) is time-spatial flexibility or flexwork, which has increased considerably (Malhotra 2021). Time-spatial flexibility refers to the ability to perform work across variable times and locations, rather than adhering to fixed schedules and centralized office settings. This includes practices such as remote work, flexible hours, and asynchronous collaboration. Prior work has discussed the effect of time-spatial flexibility on persons with and without disabilities, pointing to potential benefits such as increased organizational commitment (Wittmer & Lin 2017), improved work-life balance (Hill et al. 1998), and enhanced physical safety and well-being due to reduced commuting demands (Kulkarni & Lengnick-Hall 2011, Schur et al. 2020). Telework can also ease access to accommodations by reducing reliance on employer-provided adjustments (Harpur & Blanck 2020). Employees with disabilities are more likely than others to request remote work (Schur et al. 2014), yet they are underrepresented in teleworking roles due to their concentration in lower-paid, nonmanagerial positions (Hoque & Bacon 2022). While telework can improve job-related outcomes for people with disabilities, it does not eliminate the broader disability disadvantage, as similar benefits are experienced by employees without disabilities (Hoque & Bacon 2022). In addition, time-spatial flexibility might come with particular challenges for persons with disabilities as it might further increase social isolation, communication gaps, and difficulties in maintaining team cohesion (Sewell & Taskin 2015), which pose important challenges for this group of employees (Kulkarni & Lengnick-Hall 2011, Randle & Hardy 2017). In this respect, Schertler et al. (2024) recently found that an increased use of home offices causes drops in inclusion over time. Consequently, organizations, leaders, and team members seem well-advised to organize time-spatial flexibility in a way that secures social inclusion, particularly for employees with disabilities. Klinksiek and colleagues (2023) proposed a holistic conceptual model toward this goal, pointing to both moderators (accessibility, impairment type, climate for inclusion) and mediators (work-impairment coordination, justice, isolation, and privacy concerns).

Another type of new work is represented by the gig economy, referring to a labor market characterized by the prevalence of short-term, flexible, and task-based work arrangements, often facilitated through technological advancements and digital platforms (Ashford et al. 2018). In this model, workers—commonly classified as independent contractors rather than employees—engage in freelance, on-demand tasks instead of holding permanent, full-time positions and pursuing long-term career models. While disability-specific work on the gig economy is limited, existent studies identified specific opportunities and risks for workers with disabilities. For instance, Shannon & Cosley (2022) conducted a qualitative study with 24 workers with different

disabilities, employed in four types of gig work: ridesharing, delivery, crowdwork, and freelancing. They found that gig work offers low entry barriers and can be a crucial source of income for those traditionally excluded from the job market. However, it also poses challenges such as algorithmic control and performance evaluations—a concern also identified by Walkowiak (2023). Further, people with disabilities often must engage in invisible labor to make up for platform-specific shortcomings (such as a lack of accessibility). Similarly, Zyskowski and colleagues (2015) found that crowdsourcing workflow designs can negatively affect people with disabilities, yet they offer advantages to normal office environments such as increased job flexibility and less dependency on public transport. Ćwiklicki et al. (2024) point to further advantages for persons with disabilities such as more customized workplaces, a self-managed workload, and increased and potentially interesting customer contact. On the other hand, they also point to challenges such as a lack of a supportive organizational culture (Blanck 2020) and nonaccessible platforms as well as the need to implement accommodations themselves. Further, gig workers with a disability might lack job training and face potentially taxing interactions with biased customers. In sum, the authors conclude that gig work with humanistic management approaches and in the social economy sector might be best for people with disabilities.

Taken together, gig work offers immediate income opportunities, flexible scheduling, and remote work options. These factors can reduce physical, social, or transportation barriers that often hinder access to conventional employment for persons with disabilities. At the same time, gig work operates in a regulatory gray zone with a lack of job accommodations, structured career advancement, health benefits, and job security. If not accompanied by broader legal recognition and supportive infrastructure, the gig economy might reinforce economic marginalization of persons with disabilities. In this context, Veen et al. (2023) highlight the interplay of gig work and social welfare, introducing the concept of accidental flexicurity to describe how public welfare systems inadvertently compensate for the low and unstable income associated with gig work. Therefore, policymakers, employers, and platform designers must consider how to extend rights, protections, and inclusive practices across both models to ensure equitable participation for people with disabilities in the evolving world of work.

A final type of new work practices is represented by emerging organizational models such as holacracy that build on the idea of self-management (Lee & Edmondson 2017, Robertson 2015). Such models diverge from traditional hierarchical firms, which frequently operate through rigid job descriptions and top-down authority, offering limited flexibility to adjust roles or workflows (Schell & Bischof 2022). For people with disabilities, such inflexibility can pose significant barriers, reinforcing exclusion and limiting access to meaningful work. For instance, Baumgärtner and colleagues (2015) and Schur and colleagues (2009) found that a lack of organizational flexibility is related to decreased job satisfaction of persons with disabilities. Supporting the promise of flexibility, Branicki and colleagues (2024) drew from a nationally representative sample of employees in the United Kingdom and showed that flexible working practices can substantially improve employment outcomes for neurodivergent people. Moreover, a lack of autonomy in conventional settings may hinder the implementation of individualized accommodations and negatively impact psychological well-being. In this respect, Brzykcy and colleagues (2019) showed that people with disabilities profit from individualized employment conditions through increased work ability.

In contrast, self-organizing models allow for stronger personalization, adaptability, and mutual support, fostering more empowering workplaces. Their inherent flexibility also facilitates higher levels of job crafting—self-initiated behaviors through which employees shape and redefine their roles (Tims & Bakker 2010, Wrzesniewski & Dutton 2001). Through job crafting, individuals can align their work with their strengths, needs, and functional capacities, creating a more personalized and meaningful fit between themselves and their roles—a process particularly well-suited

Holacracy: an organizational model based on self-management rather than hierarchy

Job crafting: self-initiated behavior through which employees shape and redefine their roles

to accommodating the diverse needs and abilities of persons with disabilities. Empirical support for this notion stems from Brucker & Sundar (2020, Sundar & Brucker 2023), who found that people with disabilities engage in job crafting, particularly if they have higher education or more job experience. Stronger disability-related limitations were found to weaken the relationship of crafting work with work performance. Further, Sundar & Brucker (2021) reported that a job crafting intervention for people with disabilities can increase both crafting behaviors and work-related self-efficacy. In sum, while self-managed structures are not without challenges—such as unclear responsibilities or inconsistent accessibility protocols (Bernstein et al. 2016)—their potential to support diversity and adaptability through strength-based job crafting makes them promising models. Realizing this potential, however, requires deliberate attention to inclusion, accessible design, and a workplace culture that supports all forms of difference.

As new ways of working continue to reshape the employment landscape, several important research questions emerge regarding their implications for people with disabilities. Chief among them is how organizations, digital platforms, and policymakers can design and implement flexible and nontraditional work arrangements in ways that actively promote—not merely permit—inclusion, accessibility, and sustained social integration for people with disabilities. Moreover, future research is warranted to examine how various flexible work arrangements (e.g., in terms of time and space) differentially impact individuals with varying disability types (e.g., physical versus mental). Additionally, there is a need to explore which specific managerial practices, technological affordances, and organizational cultures most effectively enable job crafting and empowerment, particularly across different types and severities of disabilities. In addition, questions about team-based job crafting arise because employees with disabilities should not work in isolation but within larger systems such as teams. Actively involving coworkers in these practices may enhance effectiveness by expanding the overall crafting potential. Finally, scholars should examine what broader systemic interventions—legal, institutional, and infrastructural—are necessary to ensure that evolving work models do not inadvertently replicate or exacerbate existing inequalities but instead serve as catalysts for more equitable and human-centered forms of labor market participation.

Labor Market Structure

Another important factor influencing disability inclusion is the specific type of labor market being studied. A central dichotomy concerns people with disabilities' inclusion in the first (or open) labor market versus their participation in sheltered or protected employment.

The first labor market refers to mainstream employment where individuals with and without disabilities work under typical conditions. In contrast, sheltered employment takes place in segregated settings specifically designed for individuals with disabilities, typically providing structure but offering limited pay, few opportunities for advancement, and restricted access to competitive employment (Cimera 2011). Since the ratification of the UNCRPD, rights-based critiques of sheltered work have intensified, driving comparative research on the outcomes, accessibility, and policy implications of both models across national contexts (United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/61/106 2006).

Sheltered workshops emerged in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as charitable, paternalistic institutions focused on providing structure for disabled individuals, especially veterans, rather than financial independence (Slorach 2016). Often excluded from standard labor laws, these settings lacked wage and employment protections. Despite evolving rights-based critiques, sheltered work remains common. In Germany, over 300,000 people with disabilities are employed in more than 700 workshops (Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Werkstätten für behinderte Menschen 2023), and similar models exist across Europe, where about one-third of people with disabilities

work in such settings (Shima et al. 2008). These institutions are legally sanctioned and publicly funded, typically through social insurance and employment agencies (Cimera 2017).

Regarding employment outcomes, comparative studies consistently show that participation in the first labor market is linked to higher wages and more financial autonomy. For instance, Cimera (2011) compared two cohorts of more than 4,900 people with intellectual disabilities working either via supported employment in the first labor market or in sheltered workshops; they found a comparable employment rate (60%) yet higher earnings, more working hours, and less cost to serve for the first group. However, access to the regular labor market is often limited to those with higher educational attainment, fewer or less severe impairments, or greater social capital. Sheltered settings tend to offer predictable routines and lower entry barriers, but they are frequently criticized for low wages, stagnation, and limited mobility. For example, in Germany's WfbM (Werkstätten für behinderte Menschen) system, workers earn on average €150–200 per month, far below a living wage and without full labor rights (Degener 2016). Moreover, transition rates from sheltered to open employment remain extremely low, challenging claims that sheltered settings serve as stepping stones. Authors such as Gill (2005, p. 613) lament that workshops are "no longer a place of societal liberation" but rather "cement a lifelong servitude to the workshop."

Social and psychological outcomes are also divergent. Inclusive employment is generally associated with improved well-being, self-esteem, and life satisfaction (Jahoda et al. 2008). In regular work organizations, employment affirms identity and fosters societal participation. A comparably broad body of literature focused particularly on people with intellectual disabilities and found that they have more positive work experiences in inclusive compared to sheltered work. For instance, Akkerman and colleagues (2016) in a review of 13 studies found higher levels of job satisfaction for those in regular work settings, potentially fostered by more pronounced perceptions of social relations, support, and fit between own needs and workplace characteristics. However, also in the first labor market, individuals with disabilities may face discrimination (Boehm & Jammaers 2024, Colella & Stone 2005), inadequate accommodations (Baldridge & Swift 2013, Nevala et al. 2014), or ableist work expectations (Jammaers & Zanoni 2021, Jammaers et al. 2016). In this respect, sheltered environments may offer protective social networks and less performance pressure, especially for people with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities. In fact, there is research indicating that sheltered workshops can be perceived as a safe place with greater opportunities for the development of friendships and reduced loneliness (Gascon 2009), compared to competitive work settings.

Despite ongoing reforms, disability rights advocates continue to criticize sheltered employment for contradicting the principle of full inclusion and violating Article 27 of the UNCRPD. Activists and scholars argue that these models reinforce segregation. While countries such as the United States—through the Employment First movement (Hall et al. 2018)—and others such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Canada have moved toward more inclusive employment policies, the WfbM system remains deeply institutionalized in German-speaking regions. Reform is challenging, hindered by fears of displacing workers or disrupting routines for individuals with high support needs. Moreover, the "choice" to stay in sheltered work is often shaped by limited access to supported employment and persistent discrimination in mainstream labor markets.

From our perspective, at least three key research areas emerge. First, most individuals in sheltered work have cognitive (up to 75% in Germany) or psychological disabilities (21%), while relatively few have physical impairments (Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Werkstätten für behinderte Menschen 2023). Similar patterns appear in the United States, where "the promise of integrated employment remains elusive for the majority of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities" (Hall et al. 2018, p. 207). These groups are also the most stigmatized

and underrepresented in regular work settings (Beatty et al. 2019). Thus, before dismantling sheltered work, research should explore how to effectively include these groups in competitive employment. Priorities encompass improving transitions from sheltered to regular work (Özbek & Girli 2023) through person-centered planning, job placement (Lyons et al. 2022, Maravelias 2022), and supported employment (Drake et al. 2012). Moreover, management scholars should examine what mainstream organizations can learn from sheltered work, particularly regarding job-person fit (Hennekam et al. 2020), given the current literature's gap on effectively including workers with cognitive disabilities.

Second, emerging studies show how employees in sheltered settings actively reconstruct their work, disability, and identity to foster inclusion and resist benevolent marginalization (Bend & Priola 2021, Hein & Ansari 2022). Hein & Ansari's (2022) multiyear study of a German workshop illustrates how workers redefined themselves with support from leadership that evolved from guardianship to allyship, collectively reshaping the workshop's identity from shelter to inclusion. Such work builds on prior research on transforming sheltered environments (e.g., Dague 2012) and reveals how subtle forms of ableism persist in both sheltered and mainstream contexts. Future research should examine how well-meaning practices sustain hierarchies and how inclusive, individualized change can emerge from within organizations.

Third, hybrid models bridging sheltered and competitive work—such as inclusive social enterprises and customized employment—are becoming more popular. These models combine supportive environments with mainstream employment principles, aiming to move away from paternalistic, deficit-based frameworks (Buhariwala et al. 2015, Maravelias 2022). Examples include Specialisterne, a Danish firm employing people with Asperger's (Austin & Pisano 2017). While promising in promoting dignity and productivity, their capacity for achieving true inclusion is debatable. For instance, Chui et al. (2023) note that such enterprises often fail to support transitions to open employment due to structural and policy barriers. Mauksch & Dey (2023) also warn that these models can unintentionally commodify disability, reinforcing new hierarchies. Further research is needed on the long-term labor market impacts and scalability of these alternatives, accounting for individual characteristics such as socioeconomic status, type, and severity of disability.

Table 2 summarizes the main research questions identified in this section.

MACRO LEVEL: POLITICAL/LEGAL CONTEXT

Quotas Versus Accommodations

To mitigate disability-related employment disparities, policymakers globally have pursued two primary types of intervention: quota systems, which mandate minimum hiring targets for persons with disabilities, and accommodation-focused frameworks (equality of opportunity), which emphasize antidiscrimination laws and workplace adjustments tailored to individual needs (Hasegawa 2007). Both approaches have distinct strengths and limitations that have shaped policy outcomes and the direction of academic research in this field.

Quota systems mandate that employers reserve a specific proportion of jobs for people with disabilities, typically enforced through penalties or levies for noncompliance. This approach is used in most European countries (i.e., in 23 out of 27 EU member states) but also in Asia (e.g., in China, India, and Japan). In Germany, for example, companies with 20 or more employees must allocate 5% of their workforce to individuals with severe disabilities or pay a monthly compensatory levy of up to €720 per unfilled position from 2024 on. In these systems, funds collected from noncompliant employers are typically redirected to programs supporting vocational training, workplace adaptation, and disability employment initiatives (Sargeant et al. 2018). Also, China, India, and

Table 2 Research needs and questions resulting from emerging issues at the meso (organizational/labor market context) level of analysis

Emerging issue	Research needs and questions
Ableism	Do certain practices designed to help actually hurt? Research on organizational discourse regarding discrimination Research that moves from an equity perspective to an ableist perspective
Disability and diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) programs	How does one gain support for disability inclusion in DEIA programs? Which programs and policies are most likely to be included and are most helpful? What is the efficacy of one-size-fits-all policies? How does one design for individual needs?
New forms of work	How can organizations, platforms, and policymakers design new work models to actively promote inclusion and accessibility? How do flexwork policies affect different disability types? Which management practices and technologies best support job crafting across disability types and within whole teams? What systemic changes are needed to ensure new work models reduce inequality for disabled workers?
Labor market structure	How can one effectively include sheltered work employees in competitive employment? What can organizations learn from sheltered work? What are the long-term labor market impacts and scalability of hybrid models?

Japan use quota systems, but they differ in design and implementation. In China, employers must reserve 1.5% of jobs for persons with disabilities, with regional variations, and noncompliance results in contributions to a disability employment fund. India mandates a 4% reservation for persons with disabilities in public sector jobs under its Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, though enforcement in the private sector is voluntary and potentially less robust.

Quota systems have been widely studied for their ability to foster employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Most of this research is rooted in economics and often uses econometric methods. Results imply that quota systems have varying impacts on the employment of individuals with disabilities across different countries. Positive employment results were shown for countries such as Austria (Lalive et al. 2013), Hungary (Krekó & Telegdy 2025), and Japan (Mori & Sakamoto 2018), while results were less clear for countries such as Spain (Malo & Pagán 2014) or South Korea. For the latter, Nazarov and colleagues (2015) found little effect of a policy change between 2004 and 2006, while more recently, Han et al. (2024) identified a stronger labor market effect using a quasi-experimental regression discontinuity design. For France, Barnay and colleagues (2019) used panel data including health and labor market histories and even identified a negative effect of the French Disabled Workers Act of 1987, which introduced financial compensation in case of noncompliance for private organizations employing at least 20 workers. In sum, while the majority of studies seem to point to positive labor market outcomes for people with disabilities, various boundary conditions seem to play a role here. These include person factors such as gender, type, and severity of disability [e.g., males, full-time employees, and mildly impaired individuals profit more (Han et al. 2024)] as well as organizational and labor market factors such as supply-side barriers [e.g., too few persons with disabilities in certain regions (Krekó & Telegdy 2025)]. Further, it is important to note that while quotas seem generally effective, many employers do not fulfill them. For example, only 39% of German organizations (Bundesagentur für Arbeit 2025) and 31% of French organizations fulfilled the quota requirements in 2023 (Connexion-emploi 2025). Reasons for this nonattainment are typically attributed to employers' unwillingness, often rooted in stereotypes against people with disabilities (Santuzzi & Cook 2020).

And even if quota requirements are met, workers with impairments are often relegated to low-paying jobs, left isolated at home, assigned meaningless tasks, or confined to menial roles with little responsibility (Stull 2014).

Finally, there is an ongoing scholarly debate about the meaning and connotation of disability quotas. While they seem at least partially effective as a policy tool to increase labor market participation, they are frequently viewed as a relic of social welfare, outdated and in opposition to the newer, equality-driven policy frameworks (Revillard 2022). More specifically, as disability quotas were originally developed for war veterans and not in the context of antidiscrimination, they are linked to a welfare and medical model of disability. In this way, quotas can be perceived as a stigmatized form of special treatment (Heyer 2005), reinforcing stigma and paternalism and implying that individuals with disabilities are incapable of entering the labor market independently or competing on equal footing (Sargeant et al. 2018). In addition, disability employment quotas may have unintended side effects. To enforce compliance, governmental agencies must define, measure, and officially label disability. Brzykcy & Boehm (2022) examined this procedure in the German context, where eligible employees can voluntarily obtain official recognition as severely disabled through medical reports and an ID that grants benefits such as tax reductions and dismissal protection. However, the study found that despite these advantages, employees often experience a social cost, reporting a noticeable decline in perceived inclusion at work.

At the same time, recent research has reframed quotas as tools of affirmative action, addressing structural discrimination at both the firm and country level, rather than compensating for reduced individual productivity (Buchter 2020, Degener 2005). This shift reframes quotas through the lens of the social model of disability (Oliver 1983), aligning them with broader antidiscrimination efforts. Several European countries also practice a combination of quotas and equality laws (Bunt et al. 2020). This perspective is also taken up in a recent study by Richard & Hennekam (2020), who interviewed 39 individuals in France. Their findings imply that under certain conditions, a quota system can empower people with disabilities, allowing them to leverage their disability status as a strategic asset to gain a competitive edge. Yet, as the authors point out, individual differences such as one's educational level, disability visibility, and the need for workplace adaptations might decide if empowerment through quotas is achieved, together with supportive firm-level characteristics such as an inclusive climate.

In contrast to quota systems, accommodation-focused frameworks emphasize antidiscrimination laws and workplace adjustments to ensure equal access to employment. These frameworks rely on principles of equality and individualized solutions to address workplace barriers. With the 1990 ADA, the United States took a leading role in formalizing disability rights through legislation. Under Title I of the ADA, employers with 15 or more employees must provide reasonable accommodations unless doing so imposes an undue hardship. Accommodations describe "modifications in the job, work environment, work process, or conditions of work that reduce physical and social barriers" (Colella & Bruyère 2011, p. 478). Among the most often used modifications are modifying the overall worksite (e.g., parting, bathrooms, ramps), the individual work environment (e.g., large screens, orthopedic chairs), working times (part-time or flex-time), or working locations (e.g., working from home) (Schur et al. 2014). Similar accommodation frameworks have been adopted in other countries, including Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom.

As Beatty et al. (2019) point out, accommodations are among the more intensively studied organizational responses to disability, particularly focusing on employees' decision-making around accommodation requests (e.g., Baldridge & Veiga 2001, 2006), as well as organizational responses to accommodations. Accommodation-based models are often regarded as fostering deeper inclusivity than quota systems, as they aim to create workplaces where people with disabilities can thrive based on their individual abilities. For example, research by Schur et al. (2014) showed that

workplace accommodations are effectively used by employees both with and without disabilities. If granted, they are positively associated with outcomes such as perceived organizational support, commitment, and job satisfaction, and they can even generate positive spillover effects on the attitudes of coworkers who did not receive accommodations. Similarly, Nevala et al. (2014) conducted a systematic review of the literature and found moderate evidence that specific types of accommodations (e.g., vocational counseling and guidance, education and self-advocacy, help of others, changes in work schedules, work organization, and special transportation) foster employment and reduce costs for physical disabilities. The authors point to self-advocacy, support of the employer and community, amount of training and counseling, and flexibility of work schedules and work organization as key facilitators of accommodation yet also point to the low number of available high-quality evaluations in this domain. Chandola & Rouxel (2021) used longitudinal data from the United Kingdom and found that accommodations are helpful for closing the disability-employment gap, particularly for people with mental impairments. Unfortunately, this group was less likely to receive such accommodations.

From a cost perspective, accommodations are typically described as effective, imposing rather minimal burden on employers. The Department of Labor's Job Accommodation Network's (2024) most recent (2019–2023) survey of approximately 4,500 employers found that 56% reported that accommodations cost nothing, 37% had a one-time cost with a median cost of $300, and 7% had an ongoing accommodation cost with a median annual cost of $1,925. Most employers reported that the accommodations they provided had been effective. Despite such information messaging for decades (Bruyère & Colella 2024, Kaye et al. 2011), employers still fear the cost of having to provide reasonable accommodation and cite it as a reason for not hiring persons with disabilities (Goodman et al. 2024).

Despite these findings, numerous research questions and avenues for future investigation persist. First, there is comparably little research investigating the perspective of employees who actually receive accommodations and/or are affected by disability quotas, particularly in relation to people-oriented success factors such as collegial and supervisor support during and after the implementation process (Brzykcy et al. 2019, Kensbock et al. 2017, Samosh et al. 2023). Longitudinal and qualitative studies, taking into account further boundary conditions such as firm-level inclusion practices and policies (Boehm et al. 2021), might be worthwhile. Second, major work-related trends—such as digitalization and evolving work practices—as well as external developments and shocks (e.g., new legislations) present promising avenues for future research. As an example, Fuentes & Lindsay (2023) studied potential effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and identified 37 studies that revealed mixed impacts of pandemic-related workplace accommodations for people with disabilities, highlighting both benefits (e.g., improved accessibility and reduced stigma) and challenges (e.g., new health risks and accommodation needs). Later, we discuss the potential impact the DEIA backlash could have on accommodation. Finally, disability is just one aspect of a person's identity, and recent research by Hyseni et al. (2024) highlights the importance of examining other demographic factors, such as ethnicity, gender, age, education, or job type, that significantly influence the likelihood of both requesting and receiving accommodations.

Techno Exclusion

Earlier in this review, we described how technology can facilitate the inclusion of people with disabilities through increasingly sophisticated ATs or by allowing for more flexible work arrangements. However, with increasing reliance on technology, the potential for digital discrimination against people with disabilities also becomes more likely. Thus, technology can lead to both techno inclusion and techno exclusion. Techno exclusion can be due to unequal access to ATs,

inaccessible digital design, and digital bias in AI-based personnel decision-making. We discuss these issues here.

Overall, people with disabilities are at a disadvantage in access to technology compared to people without disabilities. A Pew Research Center poll (Perrin & Atske 2021) found that Americans with disabilities are much less likely to own various types of technology than those without disabilities. For example, only 62% of people with disabilities own a desktop or laptop computer compared to 81% of those without disabilities. The gap was 72% versus 88% for smartphones. Furthermore, disparities in the use of AT by people with disabilities interact with other sociodemographic identities such as age, ethnicity, education, and socioeconomic status (Ilunga Tshiswaka et al. 2015, Kaye et al. 2008).

Additionally, there remains a lack of research examining how individuals with different disabilities may benefit unequally from technological interventions. For example, individuals with sensory impairments may derive greater benefits from certain assistive innovations, while those with psychological disabilities may face unique challenges or derive comparatively fewer advantages. Addressing these potential disparities seems crucial for developing inclusive technological strategies that equitably support all disability groups. Moreover, it remains unclear how various outcome variables—such as perceived inclusion, experiences of stigma, health, and job performance—are differentially influenced by technological interventions (e.g., Manzoor & Vimarlund 2018, Tsatsou 2020). High costs, limited awareness, and unequal access—especially in low-resource settings such as the Global South—might remain major barriers (Rohman & Vo 2024, Roy & Lewthwaite 2016). Finally, the success of technological solutions likely depends on supportive (HR) policies, inclusive workplace cultures, and ongoing user training, factors that have always played a critical role in making disability diversity work (Boehm & Dwertmann 2015). These are all issues deserving of future research.

Another source of techno exclusion occurs when digital materials needed for work do not follow protocols for accessibility and thus exclude people with disabilities from their use, such as an app that is not usable with a screen reader or lacks captioning. Failure to provide digitally accessible materials constitutes failure to accommodate under the ADA. Indeed, 2,387 website accessibility lawsuits were filed in 2022 (ADA Site Compliance 2023). The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines are technical standards for web and mobile app accessibility under Title II of the ADA. Accessibility is also mandated by other governments including those of the EU member states, Canada, and India (Parthasarathy et al. 2025).

One cause of inaccessible digital materials is failure on the part of developers to follow accessibility protocols; consequently, only about 4% of the top 1 million websites are fully accessible (Branham et al. 2024, Parthasarathy et al. 2025, WebAIM 2024). Formal accessibility training for programmers and software developers is lacking (Coverdale et al. 2024, Parthasarathy et al. 2025). Another issue is that people with disabilities often are not employed in the development or testing of accessible software (Branham et al. 2024).

The other major cause of the use of inaccessible material at work is that organizations are either unknowledgeable about or reluctant to assure accessibility. One solution is to hire an accessibility expert. However, accessibility experts report that management's low prioritization of accessibility efforts and lack of education of relevant organizational members (e.g., HR managers, supervisors) are major hurdles with their clients (Parthasarathy et al. 2025). This finding is in organizations that do care enough to hire an accessibility consultant. Most organizations are not aware of or do not have a concern about accessibility (Kwon 2024). Research on digital accessibility is usually conducted by computer science researchers. Management and organizations scholars have a great deal to contribute to this literature by developing theory-based solutions for how organizations can become more welcoming of accessible technology. It is likely that willingness and ability

to adopt accessible technology are tied to inclusive cultures, supportive HR practices, and ongoing training (Boehm & Dwertmann 2015, Kwon 2024), but there is very little scholarly research addressing this issue.

The third area where there is potential for techno exclusion is digital bias in AI-based personnel decision-making. A 2020 report by the Center for Democracy & Technology stated that an estimated 33% of businesses use some form of AI in hiring and other HR practices (Brown & Richardson 2020). This number is no doubt much higher today. This technology takes several forms such as résumé screening, face and voice analysis from recorded video interviews, gamified testing, and trait testing.

Much has been written about the potential unfairness of AI-based recruiting and selection systems (Bennett & Keyes 2020, Branham et al. 2024, Brown & Richardson 2020, Henneborn & Eitel-Porter 2022, Tippins et al. 2021, Zhuang & Goggin 2024). AI-based hiring systems have the potential to violate the ADA in terms of being accessible to people with disabilities, as well as unfairly screening out people with disabilities. An example of inaccessibility would be using a virtual reality game to select people that would be impossible for people with mobility limitations to use. An organization using such a test would be responsible for providing an accommodation or an alternative test, which would be highly unlikely (Brown & Richardson 2020). An example of unfair screening is a facial recognition tool that measures facial expressions, eye contact, vocal enthusiasm, and vocabulary during recorded verbal job interviews (Brown & Richardson 2020). Such a tool would screen out people with impairments relating to affective expression or even visually impaired individuals. If vocal enthusiasm or eye contact are not needed for the job, this is unfair screening.

Best practices for organizations using AI in their hiring practices require that they are transparent to candidates about the use of AI and that they audit their instruments or tools for bias. Many organizations do audit for sex and race bias; however, few audit for disability bias (Brown & Richardson 2020, Henneborn & Eitel-Porter 2022, Zhuang & Goggin 2024). Part of the problem has already been discussed above. Another issue is that there are so many ways in which the content of selection instruments can be inadvertently biased against people with various disabilities, making audits more difficult. Finally, many people do not disclose their disabilities at the time of hiring, so it is difficult to offer accommodations that may be needed (Henneborn & Eitel-Porter 2022, von Schrader et al. 2014).

Again, the management and organizations literature has not addressed the issue of digital bias with respect to disability. Most of the work in this area has been done within the computer science and IT fields or, to a lesser extent, the rehabilitation fields. Best practices are known for how to avoid digital bias. Companies such as Microsoft provide excellent examples of how they have developed digital hiring systems to encourage the hiring of people with disabilities. The issues preventing the implementation of biases such as management reluctance, fear of disclosing, lack of education, and noninclusive climates are all in the purview of management and organizational scholars who have a great deal to contribute to this line of work.

Backlash

Despite active research interest, growing worldwide legal and policy developments, and increased corporate support for the inclusion of people with disabilities into the workforce, the largest disruption to this optimistic picture is the current unprecedented degree of backlash against all DEIA efforts, including disability rights and inclusion, being experienced in the United States at the time of writing this review. Backlash against disability rights is not new. Disability activists and legal scholars have argued that backlash in the United States against the ADA began soon after

the law became active because courts began interpreting the law so that the definition of disability became so narrow that it was difficult for plaintiffs to win discrimination suits because they could not be classified as disabled (Porter 2025). This led Congress, in a bipartisan vote, to pass the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, which significantly broadened the definition of disability (Emens 2012).

Earlier we discussed how more organizations were focusing on disability in their DEIA efforts; however, others have noted that there has still been backlash occurring in recent years (Follmer et al. 2024, Porter 2025, Prasad & Śliwa 2024). In the United States, this backlash has rapidly accelerated since January of 2025 (Ng et al. 2025). The US federal government has put political pressure on government agencies, businesses, and academic institutions to eliminate their DEIA programs and activities. In addition to a backlash against general DEIA efforts, there have been some blatant public attacks aimed at those with disabilities. For example, Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., in an April 16, 2025, press conference regarding the rising prevalence of autism among 8-year-olds stated that children with autism "will never pay taxes. They'll never hold a job." This is clearly not true for many with autism (Jacobsen 2025). When a plane lost a door in flight, there was a government-supported media push suggesting that the cause of this accident was due to hiring mentally ill people through DEIA programs (Newhouse 2025). President Trump has signed numerous executive orders prohibiting DEIA programs (Ng et al. 2025) and shutting down or depleting the resources of agencies supporting the community of people with disabilities. It is too early to tell what the impact will be on federal grant money for projects related to disability and employment. Government agencies must comply with these executive orders, but the responses of private universities and companies have been varied, falling on the continuum from refusing to change the way they approach DEIA to totally erasing all DEIA policies, positions, and messaging. So, what does this mean for scholars doing research on disability and employment?

Unfortunately, it can no longer be assumed that social justice reasoning alone can be used to justify promoting the hiring, accommodation, and inclusion of people with disabilities within organizations. It is still illegal to discriminate against those with disabilities in the United States, but it has become much more difficult to actively include and promote people with disabilities in many contexts. Scholars and practitioners advising companies on how to manage their DEIA goals and programs in this new environment stress that these initiatives must have clear goals that align with the company's strategic objectives and that DEIA policies and practices must be evidence based, i.e., empirically shown to influence important outcomes (Burnett & Aguinis 2024, Creary et al. 2025, Roberson 2025). Thus, it is imperative that the contributions of persons with disabilities be documented and linked to meaningful organizational performance indicators. We need research that empirically demonstrates the benefit of hiring people with disabilities and the efficacy of specific practices aimed at improving specific outcomes associated with employing people with disabilities.

There are plenty of testimonials in the practitioner literature that provide anecdotal accounts of successful experiences of employing people with various types of disabilities (e.g., Austin & Pisano 2017, Job Accommodation Network 2025). While this is positive messaging, it is unlikely to be helpful in situations where there needs to be strong justification to put resources into promoting disability inclusion within one's organization. More theoretically guided research that examines dependent variables that are likely relevant to business objectives is needed. The following are four examples of this type of research using desirable business metrics.

Dwertmann et al. (2025), using creativity theory (Nijstad et al. 2021), demonstrated in a series of studies that including a colleague with a disability in a work group increased idea generation and the creativity of those ideas. Thus, the presence of colleagues with disabilities in real-life work groups led to more creativity and, consequently, innovation. Siperstein et al. (2006, p. 4)

asked the question, "how do we motivate businesses to hire people with disabilities? The answer to this question may hinge upon the consumer." They conducted a large-scale national consumer survey and found that 87% of respondents would prefer to give their business to companies that hire individuals with disabilities. Similarly, Dwertmann et al. (2023), using signaling theory and valuation-by-association logic, found in multiple multimethod studies that employing people with disabilities leads to higher perceptions of corporate social responsibility on the part of customers. An industry study conducted by Accenture (2023) found that companies that they labeled as "Disability Inclusion Leaders" outperformed their industry peers by 25% on productivity (measured as revenue per employee), as well as on other economic indicators. In these examples, employee innovation, voiced consumer preference, perceived corporate social responsibility, and productivity are metrics strategically important to business.

The second imperative facing organizations due to backlash is the need to ensure that DEIA practices and policies achieve the outcomes they set out to accomplish (Robb & Rana 2024). Thus, research is needed that demonstrates how specific policies and practices influence inclusion or performance outcomes.

For instance, people on the autism spectrum may face unfair bias in traditional job interviews (Saleh et al. 2022), but this bias may be removed if they can present their answers to questions in writing instead of verbally. Whelpley & May (2023) found, as expected, that job applicants on the autism spectrum performed more poorly on in-person job interviews than neurotypical candidates. However, when the transcripts from these interviews were evaluated, the autism spectrum disorder candidates were judged to be better candidates than the neurotypical candidates, indicating that written responses to interview questions, rather than face-to-face questioning, may be a way of ameliorating the bias against neurodiverse job candidates that is often experienced in traditional job interviews (Saleh et al. 2022).

Saleh et al. (2023) used a multistudy approach to examine which features of recruiting methods were most effective in increasing the likelihood that a person with a disability would apply for a job and in identifying candidates with disabilities. Results showed that web content featuring disability in diversity and inclusion statements that went beyond the boilerplate Equal Employment Opportunity Commission language, images of people with disabilities, information about accommodations, leadership statements supporting people with disabilities and making inclusion a priority, and evidence of affirmative hiring or internship programs for people with disabilities increased interest. Technical improvements to website accessibility (e.g., screen readers) and the availability of multiple modes of communicating with recruiters were also important to potential job applicants. One result of the current backlash environment is that companies, government agencies, and universities that are rolling back their DEIA efforts are most likely getting rid of practices such as inclusive language and images aimed at specific groups. These are just the types of practices that facilitate the recruitment of people with disabilities. Given that there will be a great deal of variance in how organizations react to the current environment, US researchers have an unprecedented opportunity to examine how changes in policy, and perhaps climate and culture, influence employment outcomes for persons with disabilities.

Another topic potentially affected by the DEIA backlash are accommodations, which were discussed above. Before the benefits of accommodation can be realized, the employee must request the accommodation, the organization must grant it, and it must be implemented in a manner that facilitates success. Thus, the organization must provide a climate of psychological safety in which employees feel safe enough to request accommodations (Gonzalez et al. 2020) and have sound accommodation practices in place (Jansen et al. 2021) to realize these benefits. When there is backlash against DEIA procedures, these elements are likely to be missing and several scenarios become possible: (*a*) Deserving employees will not request needed accommodations and

Table 3 Research needs and questions resulting from emerging issues at the macro (political/legal) level of analysis

Emerging issue	Research needs and questions
Legal operationalization of fairness	What are the perspectives of employees who receive accommodations and/or are affected by disability quotas? Longitudinal, (quasi-)experimental, and qualitative research on the implementation and effects of both accommodations and quotas How do major work trends and external shocks influence the effectiveness of or preference for either system?
Techno exclusion	Research examining how individuals with different disabilities may benefit (unequally) from technological interventions at work How are various outcome variables, e.g., perceived inclusion, stigma, health, and job performance, differentially influenced by technological interventions? Development of theory-based solutions for how organizations can become more supportive of accessible technology Research on digital bias based on disability in artificial intelligence–based personnel decision-making
Diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility backlash	Theory-driven research on interventions that impact key business outcomes Research demonstrating how specific policies and practices influence inclusion or performance outcomes

subsequently fail (perhaps confirming negative stereotypes); (*b*) accommodations requests will be unfairly rejected, leading to failure on the part of the requesting employee and lack of evidence of the positive benefits of accommodation; and (*c*) accommodation procedures will be poorly handled, thus confirming beliefs that accommodations do not work or cause problems. Instead of attributing these accommodation failures to a failed system, they may be wrongfully attributed to a failed idea of accommodating people in general. This scenario holds true for all other inclusionary practices. What this means for disability researchers is that we must be very clear in developing prescriptions and boundary conditions around procedures, interventions, and policies for supporting and including people with disabilities into the workplace.

Table 3 summarizes the main research questions identified in this section.

CONCLUSION

Despite 35 years of federal disability rights legislation in the United States, growing worldwide legislation throughout the twenty-first century, the UNCRPD, and growing corporate social responsibility and DEIA efforts, there has not been much improvement in the employment situation of people with disabilities (Bonaccio et al. 2020, Fleck 2024, International Labour Organization 2024). Our review of emerging issues brings both hope and concern for the workplace inclusion and employment of people with disabilities and an expanding research agenda for management and organizations scholars in this area.

These issues provide a rich research agenda for management and organizations scholars. Many of these issues come from outside the field and raise new questions. **Tables 1–3** summarize the research needs and questions identified in this review that are particularly relevant to management and organizational studies scholars. The overarching agenda should be to understand the micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors that facilitate inclusion and ameliorate still existing discrepancies in the world of work.

These emerging issues suggest two major practical implications for the inclusion of people with disabilities into the workplace. First, while technology has the potential to level the playing field for many people with disabilities in terms of employment opportunities, it also has the

potential to widen disparities through lack of access to technology, technology that is inaccessible, or technology that results in biased decision-making. For example, new technologies are emerging every day that can prevent one's impairments from becoming disabilities by changing the nature and the type of work done by people with disabilities. If disability is defined as the interaction between an impairment and the environment, and the environment is no longer disabling due to technology, then there is no longer disability. On the other hand, the benefits of technology are available only to those who have access to the technology, and unfortunately people with disabilities tend to have unequal access to technology compared to others. This will certainly be an area where intersectionality with other identities such as socioeconomic status will come into play.

Second, the world has come a long way in questioning ableist beliefs underlying popular approaches to disability employment practices such as quotas and sheltered employment, as well as the medical conceptualization of disability. At the same time, a jarring backlash against DEIA practices—including practices targeting people with disabilities—is unfolding in the United States, and it is still too early to determine its immediate or long-term effects.

In summary, we are at a crossroads as to what the future employment scenario will look like for people with disabilities. Management and organizational studies scholars can add a great deal to this discussion at this very important time in history.

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The authors are not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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