Building Trust in Job Seekers and Employees with Disabilities

State of the Science Conference

Mason Ameri, PhD – Rutgers Business School

1

Disability Employment Puzzle

For Candidates with Disabilities

Want to feel safe asking for accommodations without facing bias; Unsure where to work or who to trust (Ameri, 2024)

For Companies

Struggle to attract people with disabilities and prove they're fair employers (Ameri & Kurtzberg, 2024)

Advice

- **Share your story** to build trust (Hebl & Skorinko, 2006)
- **Hold back** personal info until protections are in place (Ameri & Kurtzberg, 2022)

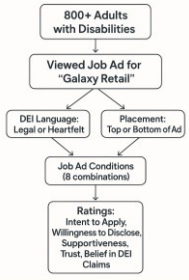
2

2

Talking the Talk

Study 1: Does signaling inclusion through a job ad informally and outright help?

(Kurtzberg & Ameri, 2024)



3

3

Legal
Galaxy Retail is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action employer. All qualified applicants will receive consideration for employment without regard to…

Heartfelt
Galaxy Retail is an Equal Opportunity Employer—By Choice. We believe we are best equipped to help our associates, customers and the communities we serve live better when we really know them…

4

4

Findings: Language and Framing Helps

Heartfelt DEI Statement
- Boosts intent to apply
- Increases comfort disclosing disability
- Company seen as supportive and trustworthy

Top-placed DEI Statement
- Builds more trust
- Strengthens views of work culture

Skepticism Remains!
- People want proof…
  "Actions speak louder than words"

Takeaway
Disabled job seekers want sincerity and evidence

5

5

Walking the Talk

Study 2: What can a company do, say, or show to be more convincing?
(Ameri & Kurtzberg, 2024b)

6

6

Hearing From Leadership

Hearing From Leadership

"As the CEO of Electris, I care deeply about promoting disability employment. This issue hits close to home for me, as I have a family member who lives with a disability. Seeing their talents and contributions has shown me just how much individuals with disabilities have to offer in the workplace. I believe that everyone deserves the chance to succeed, no matter what their abilities may be. At Electris, we work hard to create a welcoming and supportive environment where all employees, including those with disabilities, feel valued and respected. We provide the accommodations people need and actively remove barriers so that everyone can fully participate in the workplace. I'm proud of what we've accomplished so far, but I know there's always more we can do. I'm personally committed to continuing this important work and building a better, more inclusive future for everyone."

Aaron Masterson
CEO, Electris

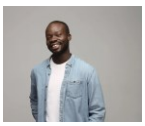
7

7

Testimonials

Software Engineer
Ashley Jones

"It's a self-starter culture where I can really just be my authentic self. I have the flexibility to excel within my own comfort zone so I can proudly give back to the company. I have always felt welcomed. It's great to work for a company that values individuality and personal growth."



Data Analyst
Don Francis

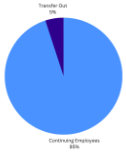
"I have an invisible disability and was hesitant to ask for extra time and breaks. But my boss was super understanding and supportive when I finally did. Electris gave me what I needed to succeed, no questions asked. I'm grateful to work for a firm that values equity and inclusion."

8

8

Where We've Stood Over the Past 5 Years

Retention Rate for Employees With Disabilities



45% FEMALE EMPLOYEES	38% ETHNIC MINORITY EMPLOYEES
18% NEW HIRES ARE PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES	12% EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES BEING PROMOTED TO HIGHER POSITIONS
75% ACCOMMODATION REQUESTS BEING FULFILLED WITHIN 90 DAYS	100% CERTIFIED IN INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP EDUCATION

9

9

Findings: Realism Matters

Intent to Apply

Confidence increased with:

- Stats & Awards
- CEO statements
- Employee stories

Trust Perceptions

Stats & awards alone didn't build trust

- CEO statements or employee stories were essential

Combining DEI Elements

- **54%** more intent to apply
- **63%** saw the company as trustworthy
- **65%** rated the company higher overall

Takeaways

Real people. Real results. That's what earns the trust of disabled job seekers

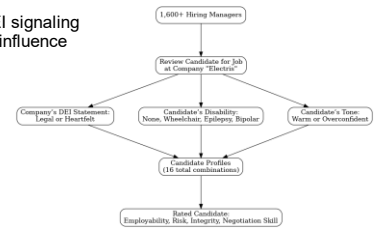
10

10

Bringing Inclusion Goals to Reality

Study 3: Can DEI signaling devices similarly influence employees?

(Ameri & Kurtzberg, 2025)



11

11

Findings: Heartfelt Language Shifts Hiring Decisions

DEI Statements

- Heartfelt language improved ratings for candidates with disabilities
  - Legal language helped less, especially for **invisible** disabilities

Wheelchair Candidate

- Rated most employable
- Seen as least risky
- Viewed with highest integrity

Mental Health Stigma

- Bipolar disorder drew the most bias

Tone Matters

- Overconfident makes better negotiator
- Overconfident*bipolar disorder = backfired

Takeaway

The right words make a difference

12

12

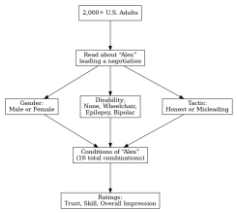
The Weight of Mental Health Stigma

Study 4: What happens when mental health enters the bargaining table?

(Kurtzberg & Ameri, 2024b)

Findings: Bias undercuts negotiation performance

- **Bipolar disorder** triggered the harshest judgments, especially for women
  - *"THIS WOMAN IS HORRIBLE AT THE OPENING BID. LET'S SEE WHERE THIS TRAIN WRECK GOES."*
  - *"That's the bimbo's initial offer??? Give me a break, how did she get this job?"*



13

13

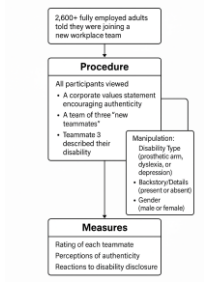
Authenticity Paradox

Study 5: Can mental health authenticity hurt?

(Kurtzberg, Ameri, & Foster-Gimbel, 2025)

Findings: 94% supported authenticity, but 75% said it can go too far

- Teammate Reactions
  - **Most favored:** Dog trainer
  - **Also viewed positively:** Prosthetic arm or dyslexia
  - **Less favored:** Mother of three
  - **Least favored:** Depression (despite emphasizing skills and commitment)
- **After hearing about a teammate with depression,** participants became less supportive of authenticity at work overall



14

14

Overview

Study 1: The language of inclusion matters

Study 2: Trust needs touch

Study 3: Heartfelt language a strong anchor in hiring fairly

Study 4: Mental health bias still creeps in

Study 5: Authenticity has limits; Some disclosures carry risk

15

15