In their focal article, Lindsey, King, Dunleavy, McCausland, and Jones (2013) make a clear and compelling call to action, identifying various ways industrial–organizational (I–O) psychologists and practitioners can help eradicate employment discrimination. In our response article, we echo this call, focusing specifically on one of the largest diversity groups that we know the least about: employees with disabilities.

Employees With Disabilities: An Overlooked Diversity Group

There are a number of different estimates for the prevalence rates of disabilities, and they are all surprisingly high. According to the 2011 World Report on Disability (see http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/en/index.html), more than one billion people around the world have some type of physical or mental disability. According to the latest U.S. Census, over 56 million Americans—nearly one out of five—have a disability (Brault, 2012). Of these, 29 million are between the working ages of 21 and 64.

Despite these high prevalence rates, researchers at Harris Interactive found that less than 30% of companies have disability-specific diversity policies or programs in place, according to the 2010 Survey of Employment of Americans with Disabilities (see http://www.2010disabilitysurveys.org/). The study also found that only 18% of companies offer disability training programs to their managers or employees, and only 56% of human resource (HR) managers and executives could estimate the percentage of employees with disabilities that worked in their organization. On average, they estimated that just 3% of their workforce had a disability. These estimates are probably low,
considering that Brault (2012) found that approximately 10% of the U.S. workforce has a disability. Multiple factors could be causing this underestimation. First, many HR professionals and employees probably do not realize that the definition of disability according to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)—described below—is quite broad. Second, some employees may choose not to disclose that they have a disability, fearing that such an admission may have a negative impact on their career. On the basis of our experience and the work we do with the National Organization on Disability, we estimate that the percentage of employees with disabilities is approximately 10–15% of the workforce.

One reason for these low estimates could be due to a lack of awareness about what it means to have a disability. A common misconception is that an employee must be deaf, blind, or in a wheelchair to be considered to have a disability. But according to the ADA, “an individual is considered to have a ‘disability’ if s/he has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, has a record of such an impairment, or is regarded as having such an impairment” (see http://www.ada.gov/q&aeng02.htm). This law, which was enacted in 1990 to prohibit discrimination based on disability, protects employees with a wide range of impairments, including everything from hearing loss, speech impediments, and learning disabilities to long-term depression, epilepsy, and AIDS. It also covers employees with a mental illness, those who have recovered from a past disability such as cancer, or those who may face discrimination because of a perceived impairment such as a limp.

Steps in the Right Direction: Advocacy, Action, and Legislation

In light of these high prevalence rates, low levels of awareness, and limited utilization of HR programs, advocacy groups like the National Organization on Disability are making the case for change, calling for the full participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of life and work. Working with companies like Lowe’s, they have designed programs to help attract, engage, and retain employees with disabilities.

In addition, proposed legislative changes may have a profound impact on the way that organizations accommodate employees with disabilities. Currently, the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) is proposing a series of significant changes to its affirmative action and nondiscrimination requirements in an effort to reduce barriers to equal employment opportunity for individuals with disabilities. Under the proposed regulation, federal contractors and subcontractors would need to implement a number of changes that would impact the way companies recruit, retain, and manage employees with disabilities. Proposed changes include:

- Setting a hiring goal of having 7% of employees be workers with disabilities in each job group of the contractors’ workforce;
- Inviting all job applicants to voluntarily self-identify as an individual with a disability at the pre-offer stage of the hiring process;
- Conducting regular anonymous surveys of their employees and provide all respondents with an opportunity to self-identify as an individual with a disability;
- Maintaining written records of all employment decisions involving individuals with disabilities, including rationales;
- Developing and implementing written procedures for processing employee requests for reasonable accommodation;
- Engaging in a minimum of three specific types of outreach and recruitment efforts to recruit individuals with disabilities.

These changes have been described by U.S. Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis as “one of the most significant advances
The Need for More Research

Of all the changes proposed by the Department of Labor, the one that might produce the biggest immediate improvement could be the call for regular surveys of employees with disabilities. Many companies conduct annual employee surveys and use various demographic variables—such as race, gender, nationality, and age group—to ensure that various segments of the employee population are having a common positive experience. In recent years, a small but growing number of companies have started asking employees about their disability status as well.

This is notable because to date little research has been conducted on the attitudes and perceptions of employees with disabilities. To the best of our knowledge, just one large-scale study has been conducted (see Schur, Kruse, Blasi, and Blanck, 2009). Using survey data collected from 1,645 respondents between 2001 and 2006, Schur et al. (2009) found that employees with disabilities face a number of significant disparities at work, have more negative evaluations of their work experience, and have lower levels of company loyalty, job satisfaction, and commitment.

In an effort to build on this research and learn more about the work experience of employees with disabilities, we have been working with the National Organization on Disability to study this underinvestigated employee population. Over the past 5 years, we have assembled a large database of survey responses from employees with disabilities and conducted various analyses.

To date, data have been collected from 13 separate survey administrations in seven multinational companies. One hundred and eighteen survey items—assessing employee satisfaction levels with topics like company leadership, immediate manager effectiveness, pay satisfaction, job satisfaction, career development, teamwork, employee engagement, and employee commitment—were asked across these companies. Respondents were also asked to indicate if they considered themselves to have a disability (e.g., *Do you consider yourself a person with a disability?*). Of the 846,048 employees who responded to this item, 25,182 (3.0%) indicated they had a disability. Interestingly, this prevalence rate of 3% is consistent with results from the National Organization on Disability’s 2010 Survey of Employment of Americans with Disabilities (see http://www.2010disabilitysurveys.org/), but it is lower than the 10% prevalence rate estimated by Brault (2012). Future research should seek to determine why this discrepancy exists. As noted earlier, the difference could be due to how the term disability is defined by the ADA or understood by survey respondents. For instance, dyslexia is considered a disability according to the ADA. But if a dyslexic employee has developed compensatory strategies so that it does not impact her work, she may not consider herself to have a disability. Or, fearing that such an admission may jeopardize her career growth, she may not feel safe enough to indicate she has a disability—even when completing a confidential survey.

To determine if attitudinal gaps exist between employees with and without disabilities, we conducted a series of comparative analyses in October 2012. Three key findings emerged:

1. Employees with disabilities were less favorable about their work experience than their nondisabled coworkers. Across 111 of the 118 items included in this study, employees with disabilities were less satisfied with their work experience than their nondisabled peers.

2. On average, employees with disabilities were 8.0% less satisfied than their nondisabled coworkers with their experience at work. That’s more than twice as large as any other
demographic-based difference (e.g., male vs. female attitudes) that exists in the database.

3. The largest attitudinal gaps (10% points or more) were found on items that measured employee perceptions of respect, fairness, influence, leadership, empowerment, and communication (see Table 1). In each of these critical areas, employees with disabilities were at least 10% less satisfied than employees without disabilities.

These results are consistent with those found by Schur et al. (2009) and suggest that employees with disabilities face a number of challenges at work.

Opportunities for the I–O Community

As I–O psychologists and practitioners, we are in a unique position to create positive change in the organizations with which we work and to which we consult. Although possible interventions and research studies abound, here are five practical steps that can help create a more inclusive environment for employees with disabilities.

1. Include disabilities in diversity policies and programs. Most companies have diversity policies and programs. But few have disability-specific policies or programs. By ensuring that people with disabilities are included and explicitly noted in diversity policies and programs, we can raise awareness and promote inclusion within organization.

2. Identify and remove stumbling blocks for employees with disabilities throughout the employee lifecycle. Most companies have robust programs in place to help attract, retain, and develop their workforce. But sometimes these programs pose problems for employees with disabilities. For example, online timed selection tests may be extraordinarily difficult for a job applicant with dyslexia. By evaluating each element of a company’s employee lifecycle and ensuring there are not any stumbling blocks for employees with disabilities, we can ensure that we are building inclusive and supportive cultures.

3. Conduct research and assess attitudes. Considering the number of employees who have disabilities, we know relatively little about their experiences, needs, and challenges at work. With that in mind, more organizations should consider including disability-focused demographic items on their employee surveys and allow employees to self-identify if they have a disability. Data can be used to investigate attitudinal gaps, benchmark against external norms, and explore the unique needs and challenges of employees with disabilities. On the basis of Sirota’s research, only 3% of companies inquire about disability status on their engagement surveys. The good news is that the pending OFCCP regulations may soon spur a dramatic uptick in this practice.

4. Empower employees with disabilities. Technology can be a great equalizer for employees with disabilities. Assistive technologies such as software recognition packages, screen readers, and alternative keyboards can provide employees with disabilities with the help they need to perform to their full potential. Both the National Organization on Disability and the Job Accommodation Network provide support and guidance about aspects of job accommodations and ADA compliance assistance. Affinity groups, peer networks, and coaching can also be used to help employees with disabilities create connections within the organization.

5. Set goals and monitor progress. One powerful way to translate a disability strategy into reality is to set goals and monitor progress. Using a balanced scorecard approach, goals can be
Table 1. Survey Items With the Largest Attitudinal Gaps Between Employees With Disabilities and Employees Without Disabilities Included in Sirotas Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Employees without disabilities</th>
<th>Employees with disabilities</th>
<th>Gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management treats me with respect and dignity</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>−17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am treated fairly at work</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>−17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My immediate manager takes actions based on employee ideas and opinions</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>−12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My company is effective at communicating to employees on matters that affect them</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>−11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, top management at my company is effective</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>−11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have the authority I need to do a quality job</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>−11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees usually get a fair hearing for their complaints</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>−10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have enough information to do my job well</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>−10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 89–108. Ratings provided on a five-point Likert scale. Lower scores demonstrate lower monetary compensation, and litigiousness.

Lindsey and colleagues have placed a noble challenge—the eradication of workplace discrimination—in front of us. We hope that this article has raised awareness about employees with disabilities and generated ideas about how we—as a field of researchers, consultants, leaders, and change agents—can create work environments that work for everyone, regardless of ability status.

References

