

# Improving the working lives of people with disabilities

Dr. Lisa Nishii



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Dr. Lisa Nishii studies and conducts research that is focused on how to improve diversity and inclusion in the workplace. She has conducted multiple studies that focus on workplace outcomes for persons with disabilities (PWDs).



## To begin, what attracted you to researching disability issues?

The Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) has a long history of working with organisations, government agencies and communities to enhance the employment outcomes of individuals with disabilities. About 10 years ago, I was approached by researchers working at the Employment and Disability Institute about collaborating on a research project. I had already begun my research on diversity and inclusion but, like many other diversity researchers, had focused primarily on issues related to race and gender in organisations. I knew nothing about disabilities and was interested in expanding my lens.

At the time (and this is still largely true), much of the published research focused on the individual employment experiences of people with disabilities working across a wide variety of organisations. What we planned to do together was somewhat different – we wanted to do a “deep dive” into organisations and collect data not just from individuals with disabilities, but also their co-workers, managers and senior leaders so that we could develop a more nuanced understanding of how the work experiences of individuals with disabilities are impacted by the social context and relationships at work.

## Were there any major roadblocks to gaining funding for this project?

People might be surprised to learn that social science research can be expensive. We would not have been able to conduct our ongoing research projects without the generous funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

## Were there any other complications you experienced while conducting your research?

Unfortunately, we often face complications while conducting research. For instance, although we always assure respondents of the confidentiality of their responses, we usually prefer to be able to track survey responses to particular individuals. However, in one of our studies, we ended up needing to conduct an anonymous survey in which we could not identify individual respondents. We prefer to be able to identify respondents not because we care which individuals have said what, but because this is the only way we can then link survey data to other data sources once we start analysis. By having to make the survey anonymous (based on our partner organisation’s requests), we lost our ability to link employee responses to those of their specific supervisors as well as with HR data, which was unfortunate.

Another common complication that we face relates to survey response rates. Low response rates can bring a number of limitations to the research. It becomes difficult to know whether the respondents who have completed the survey are representative of the broader workforce. In addition, survey response rates also dictate the type of analyses that are possible. In the case of one of our studies which involved social network analyses, we were unable to construct complete models of the social networks within the organisation due to low response rates. Instead, we focused our analyses on egocentric networks or people’s reports of their own social networks.

This means that respondents answered questions about the individuals at work they consider to be friends, key sources of information and/or mentors, as well as the demographic background of these individuals.

They also shared information about the quality of their relationships with each of these individuals. Although we couldn’t tell from this egocentric network data which individuals were most central in the social networks of the organisation, we were still able to learn how people’s relationships at work are affected by the inclusiveness of their work environment. Individuals working in inclusive groups not only have more demographically dissimilar individuals in their networks, but they also have fewer negative interactions with dissimilar others. Being able to show this in our social network data is really important because it is these negative interactions that are particularly harmful when it comes to people’s satisfaction and engagement at work. When, in diverse work contexts (which almost all are nowadays), managers fail to foster inclusive norms, people tend to experience more conflict particularly with dissimilar others. This conflict drives down the engagement and performance of groups and increases turnover.

## You used a complicated and many-faceted study design in order to adequately assess what is a complex topic. Was the planning and preparation for this project more arduous than for others you have done in the past?

This type of study design is the norm for the kind of research that I do in which I link information about the adoption of specific organisational practices and the social context of work (i.e. workgroup climate, group norms, leadership, etc.) with employee experiences and employment outcomes. These research models necessarily involve data collected from multiple sources: HR information systems, organisational leaders, HR representatives, line managers and employees, often at multiple points in time.

# Sophisticated Research Method Provides New Insights

The Employment and Disability Institute of Cornell asked Dr. Lisa Nishii to use her training as an organisational psychologist to research ways to improve the workplace experience of individuals with disabilities.

## INEQUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE

Managing workplace relationships is a daunting task for many people. For persons with disabilities (PWDs), this task is even harder. PWDs are chronically un-employed and under-employed. According to the U.S. Census Bureau- In the year 2012, an estimated 34% of people with disabilities were employed, compared to 72% of people without disabilities. PWDs who are employed earn, on average, 72 cents to the dollar, and face higher risks of being fired. They are also less likely to be given job-related training. The Americans with Disabilities Act was passed in 1990 to provide equitable access to the workplace for people with disabilities. Despite this, many managers do not understand the policies and practices in place for helping employees who have disabilities. Some disabilities are not readily apparent, and this often leaves PWDs in the position of deciding whether or not to disclose that information to an employer. They worry that disclosure will cause others to expect less of them, not take them seriously or isolate them from social networks in the workplace. Some may simply not disclose because their disabilities and their tasks at work are often unrelated. Although not disclosing might protect individuals with disabilities from being discriminated against due to their disabilities, not disclosing can come at a cost, in particular the emotional toll of constantly and consistently hiding their disabilities. The work of Dr. Nishii provides new information that can address the many factors that complicate the lives of so many.

## A NEW ERA OF DISABILITY RESEARCH

One challenge faced by researchers who study the workplace relationships of PWDs is the current body of research that is available. Most previous research conducted on this topic consisted of small-scale studies that primarily used other people’s perceptions of PWD instead of PWDs’ own experiences in the workplace. There are several reasons for this. First, employees who do not report their disability status may be excluded from the research. Since

disability status can change over time with the aging process or progressive conditions, people don’t necessarily see themselves as being a person with a disability and also disability status can change from year to year. Lastly, the vast diversity of disabilities should be included in research for accurate representation in addressing the issues of workplace equality.

## What we planned to do together was somewhat different – we wanted to do a “deep dive” into organisations and collect data not just from individuals with disabilities, but also their co-workers, managers and senior leaders so that we could develop a more nuanced understanding of how the work experiences of individuals with disabilities are impacted by the social context and relationships at work.

Organisations that work to improve diversity and inclusion in professional environments have long focused on race and gender, and only now are they turning their attention to PWDs. This has led to new opportunities for researchers like Nishii. Nishii addresses this dearth of information by conducting multi-level studies, a type of study design with which she is very familiar and has used frequently in the past. Multi-level analyses are capable of elucidating the relationships among higher-level constructs and lower-level constructs. In this case, high-level constructs include managerial behaviour or workgroup climate, and low-level constructs include the individual-level experiences of employees working in these workgroups. These research methods are complex, but are becoming more common with the development of increasingly sophisticated statistical software packages that can accommodate the computational requirements involved. Using this method, Nishii was able to examine the individual relationships



between different people and workgroups in an organisation and how those relationships are affected by workplace practices and culture, as well as how those relationships affect outcomes for individual employees and the workplace as a whole.

## FINDING THE ANSWER

In a study for the Employer Practices Related to Individuals with Disabilities Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (see [www.employerpracticesrrtc.org](http://www.employerpracticesrrtc.org)), Nishii and her colleagues conducted interviews with senior managers in various HR departments as well as with managers and supervisors. These interviews gave her insight into the barriers to success that senior managers feel those with disabilities face. In addition, she conducted focus groups with those with disabilities about their workplace experiences in order to determine what barriers they thought were detrimental to their success. Researchers sought opinions on how well their organisation recruits, engages, and retains employees with disabilities, and what other complications



they faced on a daily basis. They also obtained information from employees without disabilities who work closely with those with disabilities. Nishii found that co-workers' reaction to requesting accommodations was a large factor in how inclusive employees with disabilities perceive their work environments to be. Separate focus groups were also conducted to identify how supervisor attitudes can facilitate or create barriers to effective accommodations for people with disabilities.

Using the information obtained from interviews and focus groups, Nishii then developed a survey. Examining the results of individual-level employee experiences, Nishii found that, overall, employees with disabilities report less favourable experiences at work: for example, in terms of being treated fairly, feeling supported, having a high quality relationship with one's supervisor, receiving adequate performance feedback, and perceiving opportunities for advancement. The survey also revealed that only 58.6 per cent of employees with disabilities shared their disability status with supervisors. Rates of disclosure to HR departments are even lower at a mere 12.2 per cent. Employees with emotional and mental disabilities are the least likely to disclose that information, with only 38.5 percent disclosure to supervisors. Individual-level responses also provided information as to when and why accommodations are requested, and more importantly, when and why they are not requested. Those with physical and vision impairments are the most likely to request accommodations, with slightly fewer requests being made by those with chronic health, mental and emotional, cognitive and hearing disabilities. The accommodations requested

most frequently were changes related to work tasks and job structure or schedule. Other requests included physical changes to the workplace, new or modified equipment and changes in policy or communication practices. Few employees with disabilities did not request an accommodation that they needed, out of fear that it might affect their future opportunities or change their manager's opinion of them.

The experiences of PWDs, as well as their willingness to disclose their disability status, vary significantly depending on their immediate work environment. The most important contributions from Nishii's research involve insights about the factors that predict the quality of PWD's work experiences. Surprisingly, nearly three-quarters of managers are not aware of the disability policies and practices in place within their organisations, and yet this awareness is critical. The more managers are aware of their organisation's disability practices and think that they are effective, and the more they perceive that senior leaders are committed to disability issues, the better they are at fostering work environments that are inclusive of PWDs. Their data show that managers who believe in the strategic benefits of disability initiatives implement disability practices in ways that promote better outcomes for PWDs than managers who think that disability initiatives are adopted purely for legal compliance purposes. These better outcomes include having a positive experience when requesting an accommodation, feeling more comfortable about disclosing one's disability, and being treated well and fairly by co-workers even after disclosing one's disability.

Nishii also finds that PWDs who have a good working relationship with their supervisor, or have a mentor within the organisation, experience less disability-related bias within their work groups. Also, to the extent that PWDs have what they need to be effective in their jobs, the less bias they experience. PWDs whose skills are well matched to their job, receive adequate socialisation when they first enter a job, and receive adequate performance feedback feel less socially isolated because of their disability. These important, novel contributions to the literature will enhance future research on the work experiences of persons with disabilities as well as vastly improve the work lives of many people.

## Researcher Profile



### Dr. Lisa Nishii

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Dr. Lisa Nishii was educated at Wellesley College and received her Ph.D. from the University of Maryland. Currently, she teaches in the Human Resources Studies department at Cornell University. It is here that she also pursues her research interest in the field of organisational diversity and inclusion, employee perceptions of organisational practices, and cross-cultural/international issues within organisations. Nishii received the Best Dissertation Award from the Society for Industrial and Organisational Psychology and five "best paper" awards for papers that appeared in *Science*, the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, and *Personnel Psychology*. She also serves on the editorial boards of five different psychological and organisational research journals, and is the incoming Chair of the Gender and Diversity in Organisations Division of the Academy of Management.

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