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JOAN BANKS-SMITH  
00:08

Welcome to another special edition of Fast Takes. This is your host, Joan Bank Smith. In this episode, I interviewed doctors John O'Neill, director of the center for Employment and Disability Research at Kessler Foundation, and Andrew Houghtonville, research director of the University of New Hampshire's Institute on Disability, about people with and without disabilities and how they fared in the workplace during 2021. Let's start with you, Dr. O'Neill. It's clear that 2021 tells a tale of tenacity and resilience among workers with disabilities. What do you think are the underlying reasons for this contrast with their counterparts without disabilities?

JOHN O'NEILL 00:53

But I'd like to just kind of review very quickly the data itself or the bottom line in terms of what the data is saying. Since the onset of COVID, folks with disabilities have totally recovered from their pre-COVID rates of employment, whereas people without disabilities have not. They're yet to have recovered. And there I'm talking about, literally, the proportion of people who are actually employed. There's also another measure that's referred to as labor force participation rate and that's proportion of people that are employed but also looking for work. So it's engagement in the labor force. Folks with disabilities have exceeded their pre-COVID level of engagement in the labor market. They've simply stayed engaged. And they're actually at new historic highs in terms of their participation rate relative to their own rate prior to COVID. Whereas people without disabilities have not recovered in terms of their labor force participation rate. They have not recovered from their pre-COVID levels of labor force participation.

O'NEILL 02:13

These data that are suggesting that folks with disabilities that are currently doing quite well in terms of their employment rates. It could be due to several different reasons. One is that people with disabilities have a work ethic that often prioritizes loyalty. Historically, there are a number of studies that have shown that there's less employee turnover among people with disabilities versus people without disabilities. We also know that the built environment is frequently inaccessible for people with disabilities and people with disabilities, as a result, they've had to find workarounds to overcome these physical obstacles. The same sense of ingenuity is probably being applied to looking for work, becoming employed, and staying employed. For example, it would not surprise me if people with disabilities are taking advantage of the number of job openings that are currently unfilled and taking advantage of the fact that employers are really desperate to fill these unfilled jobs. In addition, individuals with disabilities are often reluctant to give up hard one gains. They may be much more willing to stay employed and to continue to be employed during the COVID period because sometimes it takes quite a bit of effort to become employed in the first place.

O'NEILL 03:58

I think the issue of loyalty, a sense of ingenuity, and being opportunistic, and in the positive sense of that term, taking advantage of opportunities as they arise. I realize I'm putting a positive spin on the reasons why people with disabilities have recovered

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from their pre-COVID employment rates. There may be some other issues as well, but those are the main things that I think may be operative at this time.

BANKS-SMITH 04:32

Professor Houtenville, the anti-data for 2021 revealed contrasts in how people with and without disabilities dealt with the ongoing effects of the pandemic in the labor market. Can you tell our listeners about the differences that you observed?

HOUTENVILLE 04:48

It's really fascinating. When we look back on 2019, the year before the pandemic, 2020 kind of right at the meat of the pandemic, and then 2021, which is still in the pandemic, of course. During the initial effect of the pandemic on the labor market, people with disabilities actually stayed in the labor market. So there's a statistic called the labor force participation rate. And when we look at 2019, the year before, and 2020, the year of the pandemic, it actually stayed the same. It was 33.6%. And that was actually always a big shock. And when we look at the monthly data, it still bears out even in the monthly data. It's not any artifact of the trend within the year. People with disabilities stayed active in the labor market. Now, what does that mean? It means that as a population remained engaged to either working, on temporary layoff, or actively looking for work. And so it was a really interesting story to see unfold over the course of the pandemic, as the nTIDE Report kind of tracked that each month to month to month. Another thing to point out is that this wasn't the case for people without disabilities. People without disabilities declined between 2019 and 2020 as a whole, and we see this in the monthly data. Another thing to point out is that 2021, even though the pandemic is still going on, the labor force participation rate of people with disabilities rose to 35.1%.

HOUTENVILLE 06:29

And that's actually almost the historical high, which was right around the time of the Great Recession. People with disabilities not only have reached the pre-pandemic level, but they're actually increasing even further while people without disabilities, that's not the case, unfortunately. They have not yet reached their pre-pandemic 2019 level. And so there is a stark contrast in labor force participation between people with and without disabilities. One thing that we've talked about in /nTIDE Report during our monthly webcast is that it's kind of a double-edged sword. People with disabilities may be active in the labor market again, working, looking for work, on temporary layoff, staying engaged. But that may be out of necessity. They may be in families that are really scrapping for resources to meet the family's needs. And so a lot of people are staying in the labor force. A lot of people with disabilities as a whole stayed in the labor force. It's a good story if you think about engagement and the future months of and years after the pandemic. During the pandemic, it might be a different story it might be one of great distress that made people stay in the labor market and really round around for work.

BANKS-SMITH 07:48

You spoke about the labor force participation rate, but what about the employment-to-population ratio?

HOUTENVILLE 07:55

So there's a statistic called the employment-to-opulation ratio at the Bureau of Labor Statistics tracks month to month. It's akin to the unemployment rate, but it's really the percentage who are employed. The nTIDE Report tracks that month to month for people with and without disabilities. 2021 was a really good year for the employment. The percentage of people with disabilities who are employed, not only did they

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increase, but they increased past their pre-pandemic levels in 2019. So in 2019, the employment to population ratio was 30.9%. So 30.9% of people with disabilities ages 16 to 61 were employed. During the pandemic, that declined by almost two percentage points to 29.1%. Now that's a little bit deceptive because there was a really big fall in 2022 during the lockdown. And so that number is kind of balanced out by the three months in 2020 that were before the pandemic and the recovery from the lockdown period. People with disabilities, their employment to population ratio was actually 31.3% in 2021. So let me repeat that. So it's 30.9% in '19. In 2020, it was 29.1%. And then in 2021, it's at 31.3%. And so people with disabilities have recovered past their pre-pandemic level.

HOUTENVILLE 09:26

And when you look at the months, what that's hiding in the months, if you go to our nTIDE webcast, where we talk about the trends over the last decade or so, that actually shows that even in 2021, it's been increasing steadily. And the highest level was really above the historic high back 2008. It's been a really interesting year for people with disabilities. And we're really hoping that this pattern continues and we see growth. Now, story's a little bit different than for people without disabilities. For people without disabilities, they still haven't reached their pre-pandemic level. So 2019, before the pandemic, around 75% of people without disabilities were employed. That's still only at 72.5%. So around two and a half percentage points below in 2021, it's still below by about two and a half percent. And so people with disabilities have really recovered and gone past the pre-pandemic level, where people without disabilities haven't really reached that level yet. There's still a bit of a way to go for them.

BANKS-SMITH 10:41

To learn more about doctors O'Neill and Houtenville, Kessler Foundation, the University of New Hampshire's Institute on Disability, and nTIDE, links for the program notes.

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