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Workplace inclusion of persons with a disability: Comparison of Indian and German multinationals

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# **Workplace Inclusion of Persons with a Disability: Comparison of Indian and German Multinationals**

## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – In the present study, we integrate research on human resource systems with work on disability management practices to outline how multinationals across India and Germany are engaged in efforts to increase workplace inclusion of persons with a disability.

**Methodology** – Semi-structured interviews with respondents from multinational corporations in India and Germany were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed.

**Findings** – Employers followed three guiding principles (i.e., beliefs): importance of harnessing diversity, encouraging multi-stakeholder engagement internally, and engaging with the external ecosystem to build internal human resource capabilities. Respondents further noted two interdependent and mutually constitutive programs that covered the life-cycle of the employee: job flexibility provisions and integration programs. Country-specific differences existed in terms of perceived external stakeholder support and availability of talent.

**Research implications** – Our results complement prior research with respect to the importance of organizational factors for the inclusion of persons with a disability and also extend prior research by shedding light on the role of the national context in such inclusion endeavors.

**Practical implications** – Findings indicate that disability-inclusion principles may be universal, but their operationalization is region-specific. Global organizations must be aware of these differences to design effective inclusion programs.

**Social implications** – Our study helps in designing and evaluating appropriate inclusion initiatives for persons with disabilities, an important yet underutilized group of potential employees in both India and Germany.

**Originality/value** – This is the first study to investigate country-specific commonalities and differences in fostering workplace inclusion of persons with disabilities in India and Germany.

**Keywords:** Disability, Workplace inclusion, India, Germany.

## **Workplace Inclusion of Persons with a Disability: Comparison of Indian and German Multinationals**

The worldwide incidence and awareness of disability are increasing (World Federation for Neurological Rehabilitation, 2015; World Health Organization, 2011). While disability is associated with stigma (McLaughlin *et al.*, 2004) and employment outcomes of persons with a disability leave much to be desired (Baldrige *et al.*, in press; Konrad *et al.*, 2012), a few proactive organizations are attempting to meaningfully include employees with a disability in the workforce (Baumgärtner *et al.*, 2014; Habeck *et al.*, 2010; Kulkarni and Rodrigues, 2014). Researchers are also increasingly looking at enhancing inclusion of persons with a disability through outlining organizational characteristics (e.g., perceived flexibility; Baumgärtner *et al.*, 2015) and initiatives which influence employee outcomes (e.g., communicating with external stakeholders; Kulkarni and Rodrigues, 2014).

Through the present study, we offer a complement to prior research by outlining and comparing how two Indian and two German multinationals are working proactively toward workplace inclusion of persons with a disability. Specifically, as described later, we fill a gap in our understanding of employers' inclusionary activities across countries, and respond to the call for comparative studies across national contexts. Our study is anchored in the human resource systems framework which highlights the importance of human resource principles (e.g., beliefs) and programs (e.g., set of formal human resource activities) in achieving organizational outcomes (Arthur and Boyles, 2007). This framework is particularly aligned with Stone and Colella's (1996) seminal disability framework, which also points to the importance of beliefs and sets of formal organizational activities that influence the workplace treatment of employees with a disability.

The research question guiding the present study is: How do multinational organizations proactively work toward workplace inclusion of persons with a disability? In answering this question, we contribute to the workplace-specific disability literature in the following ways. First, we focus on positive organizational initiatives aimed at inclusion. This offers a complement to the bulk of research which has focused on structural (e.g., accommodations) and attitudinal barriers (e.g., espoused stereotypes regarding hiring or inclusion of persons with a disability in the workplace; Kulkarni and Lengnick-Hall, 2014). Second, workplace inclusion research has focused on retention practices and how such practices may influence the hiring of those with a disability (Habeck *et al.*, 2010) or on the communication of organizational disability-specific engagement to stakeholders through annual reports (Kulkarni and Rodrigues, 2014). These studies are limited with regard to their focus on specific issues and are confined to organizations within one country. As a related point, which we elaborate upon later, even when employers acknowledge the importance of inclusion-related beliefs (McFarlin *et al.*, 1991; Moore *et al.*, 2010) or activities (Kaye *et al.*, 2011), we do not know what employers actually *do* toward achieving that goal. We add to the extant body of knowledge by outlining human resource principles and programs across multinationals, something not done to date. Third, we go beyond a one-country approach and instead describe how multinationals compare in their inclusionary efforts across nations. In doing so, we expressly respond to the call for comparison studies on disability across national contexts (Baldrige *et al.*, in press).

We understand disability from a medical and social perspective as a deviation from the norm or a condition that creates barriers to full societal participation, a view prevalent in both the Indian and the German context (Baldrige *et al.*, in press). In the following sections, we first outline the literature on workplace inclusion of persons with a disability. Next we outline the

institutional contexts in both India and Germany. This is followed by an explication of the methodology we followed. Finally, we present findings from the study and discuss how they reflect and extend research on workplace inclusion of persons with a disability.

### **Workplace Inclusion of Persons with a Disability: The Importance of Employer Beliefs and Activities**

Most of the extant research indicates that employers do not hire and retain persons with disabilities. This is a direct consequence of their beliefs. For example, erroneous beliefs about employees' reduced job performance, inaccurate knowledge about accommodations, concerns about legal liability, and beliefs about expenses associated with accommodations influence organizational access and treatment of persons with a disability (Houtenville and Kalargyrou, 2012; Kaye *et al.*, 2011; Lengnick-Hall *et al.*, 2008). For example, in a study conducted with 21 administrators from three business sectors (i.e., healthcare, hospitality, and retail), Hernandez *et al.* (2008) noted that managers were concerned that supervisory time spent on employees with a disability would be high and productivity would suffer given possible absenteeism issues. Respondents in this study further noted that advancement was perceived as a problem as persons with a disability were hired in entry-level and semi-skilled positions and promotion opportunities for them were scarce. Furthermore, in a meta-analysis, Ren *et al.* (2008) found negative effects of disability on performance expectations and hiring decisions. Thus, overall, employers' expectations and beliefs can negatively influence the workplace treatment of persons with a disability (Stone and Colella, 1996).

Alternatively, research counters the negative expectancies (of employers) and outcomes (for employees). For example, in a survey of Fortune 500 companies, McFarlin *et al.* (1991) found that employer attitudes are positive with respect to turnover, absenteeism, and

performance. Furthermore, those with exposure to employees with a disability espouse more positive attitudes. Other research also indicates that employers describe persons with disabilities as loyal and hardworking workers who have low absenteeism rates and long tenures (Hernandez *et al.*, 2008). However, this line of research is relatively scant.

With regard to employers' actual programs or sets of activities, research shows that these may inadvertently lead to suboptimal inclusion. For example, recruitment may be limited to certain locations which are inaccessible to persons with a disability. Also, job analysis may extend beyond the necessary requirements to include ideal requirements, which persons with a disability may not always fit (Stone and Colella, 1996; Stone and Williams, 1997). As another example, social integration is suboptimal when inclusion activities are unclear or laid out in an ad hoc manner as the workforce slowly becomes diverse (Kulkarni and Lengnick-Hall, 2011). Other activities such as not having in place role models or mentors and lack of critical feedback limit the career advancement of people with disabilities (Jones, 1997). In contrast, supportive policies and associated tangible activities can reverse the aforesaid suboptimal inclusion. For example, employer tax credits and incentives, flexible work schedules, and disability awareness training can lead to more organizational inclusion for persons with a disability (Houtenville and Kalargyrou, 2012).

Whether influenced by beliefs or activities, serious and negative consequences ensue for persons with a disability. For example, in a large-scale survey study, Schur *et al.* (2009) found that disability is linked to lower average pay, training, and participation in decisions and to more negative attitudes of employees with a disability toward the job and the organization. Employees with a disability respond to such disparities by reporting a greater likelihood of turnover, less loyalty, and lower willingness to work hard for the organization, as well as relatively lower

levels of job satisfaction. The skills of those with a disability can thus remain underutilized (cf. Lengnick-Hall *et al.*, 2008).

Overall, while employers acknowledge the importance of positive attitudes and beliefs (McFarlin *et al.*, 1991; Moore *et al.*, 2010) and activities such as awareness building to increase workplace participation of persons with a disability (Kaye *et al.*, 2011), we do not know what employers actually *do* toward achieving that goal. The outcome of such a situation is that persons with a disability do not always experience optimal workplace inclusion and must make efforts on their own to advance their careers (Kulkarni and Gopakumar, 2014). Furthermore, despite signatories and ratifications to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the associated global discourse on disability inclusion, we do not know how employers across the globe compare with regard to their inclusion efforts. We identified only one study which explicitly examined how human resource professionals in the United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (U.K.) have responded to their respective disability nondiscrimination legislation (Bruyère *et al.*, 2004). This study indicated that employers are particular about workplace accessibility and accommodations, but countries differ in that more U.S. respondents reported difficulty in making information accessible for persons with visual impairments, whereas more U.K. employers reported difficulty in making recruiting locations accessible.

Thus, to complement prior research and systematically build our understanding of how employers increase workplace inclusion, we draw from two aligned frameworks – the human resource systems framework (Arthur and Boyles, 2007) and the seminal disability-specific framework, which outlines how those with a disability may be treated within workplaces (Stone and Colella, 1996). The human resource systems framework (Arthur and Boyles, 2007) allows us to outline human resource principles (e.g., beliefs) and programs (e.g., sets of formal human



resource activities) of employers across India and Germany. The disability-specific framework (Stone and Colella, 1996) also highlights the importance of such human resource systems because these principles and activities are directly relevant to how employees with a disability are treated within an organization. As an example, research shows that when the perception of a just organizational climate is high (i.e., when employees sense fairness and equity within the workplace), negative responses (e.g., turnover intention, low job satisfaction, low organizational loyalty) are tempered (Schur *et al.*, 2009). However, neither the aforesaid framework (Stone and Colella, 1996) nor other recent reviews on disability in the workplace (Vornholt *et al.*, 2013) have shed light on exactly how multinational organizations proactively work toward workplace inclusion of persons with a disability, a gap we seek to address.

In summary, we skirt barriers and instead focus on the inclusion of a traditionally marginalized group, we go beyond a focus on specific organizational issues within one country, and we respond to the call for comparative studies across national contexts. Overall, through our comparison approach, we hope to highlight the best efforts across nations and nudge researcher and practitioner conversations toward the creation of an inclusive workplace context for persons with a disability. In doing so, we are aligned with the evidence-based approach, which is seen as useful in offering a context-sensitive view of cross-national diversity practices (e.g., Klarsfeld *et al.*, 2012).

## **Method**

We first outline the institutional context in both countries and then explain our data collection and analysis efforts. Our choice of these two countries was contingent on practicality and convenience, as well as our understanding of these contexts. Specifically, as described later, the authors are familiar with both contexts, have a deep engagement with the disability

ecosystem in both countries, and thus have access to unique respondents. Independent of our personal engagement across these countries, we relied on past research to guide our choices. Specifically, Baldrige *et al.* (in press) have outlined various national contexts with specific reference to disability discrimination, and we understood India and Germany as having somewhat comparable and simultaneously unique features which would make the comparison interesting.

The present choice of contexts also proffers a supplement to past research. This is because most of the existing research on disability is heavily focused on North America (Beatty *et al.*, 2016) and we believe that with the growing economic importance of other countries such as India and Germany, and calls for a focus on diverse countries (e.g., Beatty *et al.*, 2016), the present study can further our global disability-specific understanding. Drawing from the work of Baldrige *et al.* (in press), we briefly outline the Indian and German national contexts below.

### ***Similarities across contexts***

In both India and Germany, the medical view of disability seems to be dominant. For example, in India, disabilities are defined as impairments (e.g., sensory limitations). Similarly, in Germany, deviations from a set standard or norm are used to understand the extent of disability. However, Germany also adopts a social view of disability, where barriers are perceived as externally imposed and not limited to bodily functioning (Dwertmann and Boehm, 2016). Both countries also issue medically based identification cards/certificates. Such identification allows for access to certain disability-specific benefits and employment quotas. Both countries also passed legislation in the mid-1990s which forbids discrimination against those with a disability. Finally, research on disability-specific workplace discrimination in both countries is still relatively limited.

### *Differences across contexts*

While the countries are similar in the aforementioned ways, there are differences. For example, India has not been home to any disability-specific mass movement (Bhambhani, 2004) while Germany experienced one starting in the 1970s which was aimed at creating equal opportunities. Awareness of disability-specific issues is thus higher in the German ecosystem. With regard to the employment context, a formal voice through labor unions is not guaranteed in India (Diversity and Equal Opportunity Centre, 2009), while a contrasting situation exists in Germany (Kock, 2004). Finally, while formal penalties are not meted out for quota noncompliance in India (Dawn, 2012), quotas are enforced in Germany (Kock, 2004). One can thus consider by extension that workplace access and inclusion of employees with disabilities in India seems to lag behind Germany.

### *Sample and procedure*

We chose respondents carefully based on the following criteria, which were very specific to our research aim. First, we wanted respondents who were distinctively positioned within their organization such that they knew of both organizational disability inclusion policies and had implemented them in some capacity. These criteria meant that respondents could inform us about the human resource principles (e.g., organizational beliefs) and programs (e.g., set of formal human resource activities), as Arthur and Boyles (2007) suggested and which are noted as being important in Stone and Colella's (1996) disability framework. Second, we sought employers who had a presence in both India and Germany. Even if respondents were located in one country, they could inform us about any similarities and differences across contexts.

Based on these criteria, we contacted potential respondents in four multinational organizations. Each respondent was known to us personally given our professional contacts and

each agreed to speak with us. Notably, each respondent was not only responsible for managing a business line but also was engaged actively in the disability inclusion efforts of the organization, making our respondent set unique.

Respondent details are as follows. Of the two Indian respondents, one works in a software multinational and is responsible for running customer research analytics. He is also an active disability champion in his organization, that is, he is responsible for several disability-inclusion initiatives. The second Indian respondent works in a multinational bank, is their chief operating officer, and is also an active disability champion in his organization. Of the two German respondents, one works in a software multinational and is its strategy-to-execution lead, as well as the global project manager for diversity and inclusion and for Autism at Work. Our final German respondent is from a manufacturing multinational, takes care of its car production and assembly line from a human resource perspective, and is also responsible for the organization's disability and inclusion initiatives.

Though we were highly selective in our respondent choice for the present study, our engagement with the organizational and external ecosystem in both countries is much deeper. For example, one of the authors is involved in a four-year disability inclusion project with the German manufacturing organization. This project involves ongoing employer-driven surveys to increase inclusion, and these surveys involve inputs from the author. As an additional example, another author involved in the present study is engaged in documenting inclusion efforts in Indian workplaces (e.g., collating best practices with regard to career advancement of persons with a disability). We do note that neither author was involved in the crafting of principles or programs of the organizations under study. Both these authors are also connected with local non-governmental organizations in India and Germany and can corroborate what respondents have

noted with regard to inclusion efforts as aided by the external ecosystem (e.g., inclusion as aided by non-governmental organizations, explained in the findings section).

We conducted face-to-face interviews. Our interview guide was focused on the following topics: employers' efforts and commitment in recruiting and integrating persons with a disability in their respective organizations, senior management involvement in disability-specific inclusion efforts, descriptions of such efforts, and if and how institutional actors (e.g., the government, local non-governmental organizations) were integrated into the organization-level inclusion efforts. Interviews were semi-structured. This meant that while we followed the aforementioned topic areas for each respondent, respondents could steer the conversation toward outlining the efforts in a particular area of inclusion depending on their context. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with permission. One interview was conducted in German (later translated into English) and the other three were conducted in English. Two of us are fluent in both German and English and we ensured translation accuracy.

Findings were discussed by the authors at all points in time and all the authors read each transcript and discussed themes. More specifically, the third author, who travelled to and was present physically for interviews in India and Germany, not only transcribed all interviews but was also responsible for the initial slicing of data. For example, he listed all themes prevalent in the data (e.g., multi-stakeholder engagement in inclusionary efforts, flexibility in jobs) in spreadsheets. Then we read each transcript, discussed each theme, and noted any similarities and differences across India and Germany with a particular focus on capturing human resource principles and programs. We leveraged the aforesaid framework (Arthur and Boyles, 2007) to distinguish between human resource principles and programs and sorted quotations accordingly. All findings are listed below and summarized in Tables.

## Findings

Each respondent noted similar human resource principles (i.e., the overall guiding beliefs) and programs (e.g., set of formal human resource activities). We also noted two differences. In the sections that follow, we outline similarities and differences.

### *Similarities in human resource principles across multinationals*

As indicated in Table 1, we noted three distinct similarities across organizations. First, each respondent noted a clear focus on harnessing diversity as a guiding principle. Employees were seen as a critical resource and as a talent pool. Explicitly referring to the importance of harnessing a diverse employee base, our respondent from the Indian software organization explained that the talent of each employee should be utilized as well as broadcast:

How to harness diversity and using it to our advantage. Especially on Persons with Disability Day when we created lot of short video stories focusing on their accomplishments and broadcasted across the organization. At the same time [we got] endorsements by business leaders as to how useful [the employees'] work is.

Harnessing diversity was also noted in the other interviews. For example, our respondent from the German software organization spoke of “engagement with persons with a disability as a business project” which allows the organization to meet the “business challenge of scarcity of required talent” and argued that there is a “business case” for inclusion. Our respondent from the Indian bank also focused on talent by saying that “persons with a disability tend to be extremely motivated, ambitious and sure of themselves, particularly in the demographic context of India [as] they grow up through a lot of struggle.” Finally, noting pride about his company’s image of being an employer of choice, our respondent from the German manufacturing organization explained:

Ensuring prevention and conveying job security for employees is also important. Employees see that they are able to remain with the company up until retirement and that

the company cares about them. There are benefits for the company, though hard to quantify....

Respondents thus spoke of harnessing diversity toward utilization of talent as it implies positive outcomes for the organization. The second common guiding principle was multi-stakeholder engagement. This meant that both the top leadership and all other employee groups at different levels and across functions were engaged in inclusionary efforts. For example, our respondent from the German manufacturing organization noted that the chief executive officer and the chief human resource officer spread awareness through organizational communication. He mentioned a specific example wherein an “executive board presentation” in 2014 had led to an even greater emphasis on the topic of demographics and diversity within the organization. Our respondent from the Indian bank further noted that alongside upper management:

The team leader himself is responsible for ensuring that there is enough cooperation and suitable environment for persons with a disability. The network of persons with a disability [helps] empower and assist [each individual] in the workplace environment.

Explaining the multi-stakeholder approach in his organization, our respondent from the Indian software organization explained that the board of governors set “the target for creating an inclusive workplace” and that:

Idea of inclusion starts from top in our organization. Global Diversity Council is steered by CEO, Head of Diversity, and business leaders. Persons with disability is an important agenda identified by them. To identify all policies, programs concerning persons with disability at the corporate level. And then it is cascaded down to different business units and locations. At the same time, some inclusion practices may begin at the ground level. For example, say a departmental party is being held at a place where it is accessible to persons with disability. There’s always a guideline and set of communications for such situations.

The same guiding principle was echoed by our respondent from the German software organization:

In [the organization], there is a designated chief diversity officer. But the topic of inclusion is not only centered on her. We believe in a bottom-up approach rather than a top-down approach of leadership. This is because of the inherent understanding that the 12 member top management is not smarter than some 60,000 employees. That is why [the organization] nurtures initiatives that come from the bottom up. The top management's commitment is unquestionable toward diversity, including CIO, CEO all being onboard. But bottom-up execution is the preferred way to go.

The third common guiding principle was engagement with the broader (external) ecosystem to help internal organizational workings. For example, respondents from both the Indian organizations explained that their organizations worked with local non-governmental organizations (the best available help in their ecosystem) to build internal human resource capabilities. For example, our respondent from the Indian bank said that his organization utilized help from local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to “identify talent, with onboarding, training, [and] mentorship” as all organizational members are “not experts in the [disability] field.” Our respondent from the Indian software organization also explained the importance of local non-governmental organizations:

We are partnering with a number of NGOs that are helping persons with a disability to increase their employability through training. We also support the NGOs in their work and host them in the company environment, including [giving them] resources like computers, etc. Some NGOs are creating a databank of persons with a disability who are employable...we partner with [that activity] also.

Working with the broader ecosystem was also noted by our German respondents. For example, our German respondent working with the software organization said that his company worked with local partners such as Specialisterne in Germany as well as global partners. Specialisterne works toward employment for people with autism and those who may face similar challenges. Finally, our German respondent from the manufacturing organization explained:

There are close relationships with the integration offices in Germany. The German statutory pension insurance scheme provides annual subsidies... There are subsidies



for hiring and retaining apprentices with disabilities, ergonomic adaptation of work stations, and advanced or executive trainings....

While each respondent noted local non-governmental partners as key external stakeholders that helped build an inclusionary workplace, only German respondents referred to the government as being a helpful partner. This difference will be discussed in a later section.

[Insert Table 1 here]

### ***Similarities in human resource programs across multinationals***

As indicated in Table 2, respondents talked about two broad programs to support workplace inclusion of persons with a disability: job flexibility provisions and integration and sensitization programs.

**Job flexibility provisions.** Respondents explained that they recruited on their own as well as with the help of local non-governmental organizations, as mentioned earlier. Recruitment was taken as a given, and efforts, they remarked, were more focused on matching skills of the employee with jobs available within the organization. Employees were allowed to switch jobs after recruitment or at any time to make the best use of available talent. Flexibility in jobs was also an option open to those who may develop a disability later in their working life (e.g., muscular-skeletal diseases). Our respondent from the German manufacturing organization cited a specific example:

Some of the common challenges are to be found in lean and efficient manufacturing in an assembly environment... There are challenges in synchronous manufacturing in the assembly line, in meeting the set out quantity targets, and the need for seated work stations for persons with a disability. The option is of course to find alternative tasks.

A similar sentiment was reiterated by our respondent from the Indian bank. Referring to persons with a disability as a “pool of talent that has not yet been tapped into” and a pool that’s “sticky and loyal,” he commented:

For recruitment [this pool] has large potential...we have not yet been able to gauge still what potential the pool can hold...People with mild autism are found to be good at repetitive jobs. So, quality testing is suitable for them in some circumstances...Mapping the job with the ability of the person...for example, our call center job is not suitable for the hearing impaired.

**Integration and sensitization programs.** Respondents explained that apart from recruitment and job flexibility, their respective organizations engaged in what may broadly be termed as ‘integration and sensitization programs,’ a term indicated by our respondent from the German manufacturing organization. We use this broad term also because all our respondents saw specific programs within their organizations as interdependent and mutually constitutive. Specific undertakings under this broad umbrella included sensitization training for all stakeholders, accessibility audit programs, and mentoring programs. Our respondent from the German manufacturing organization said:

There is a standardized integration process for employees with a disability. Stakeholder roundtables for each affected employee take place at least once a year...And decisions about further steps are taken with the assessment of actual performance deficit in the current workplace. Trainings for supervisors are conducted and evaluated in cooperation with the University [in Switzerland].

Our respondent from the Indian software organization also noted that his company’s Employee Resource Group served as its focal integration program. He said:

We have an Employee Resource Group where persons with a disability voluntarily join and convene meetings once a month preferably over the phone and are also joined by HR [human resource] and personnel responsible for facilities to understand the challenges faced...More of a self-support group but also joined in by facilitators from the organization. Also, they can anonymously reach out to the Corporate Diversity Office, which strictly monitors the process of inclusion...We ensure the accessibility and movement to all facilities and also town halls are conducted in places which are

accessible. Recently, an audit of facilities was conducted according to international standards....

The same respondent also explained that all “technical assistance available post recruitment [such as] software for the visually challenged” and buddy programs to ensure familiarity “with the systems and processes of an organization as large as ours” were in place. These can be initiated by the Employee Resource Group. The integration process was thus aimed at the “life cycle of an employee.”

Integration programs also included similar undertakings at the German software organization. Our respondent said that his company used a “three points of contact” system wherein an internal buddy or mentor alongside external coaches helped each employee with a disability with accommodations (e.g., noise reduction) and any other workplace issues. He also explained that integration meant sensitization exercises, careful use of terminology, accessible internal communication, and accessible structures and processes.

[Insert Table 2 here]

### ***Two differences across multinationals***

In this section, we describe two differences across the multinational contexts. These are summarized in Table 3. As mentioned earlier, each respondent noted that it was important for his global organization to leverage help from the local institutional context (e.g., non-governmental organizations were seen as partners for increasing workplace inclusion efforts). When referring to the local context, each respondent also noted that while guiding human resource principles were the same across the global units, the operationalization of the principles was idiosyncratic to the local context. In the words of our respondent from the Indian bank, operationalization was “region dependent.”

The biggest difference between India and Germany was the perceived support from the government. Consistent with what we noted in our description of the institutional contexts of both countries, governmental support in India was perceived as lacking, while that from the German government was perceived as being relatively better. For example, the German manufacturing respondent explained that his company had a manufacturing plant in India, and it was marked by “less strict legislative requirements compared to Germany and weaker legal protection against job dismissal,” implying a reduced need to care for the job retention of workers with acquired disabilities. Our Indian respondent from the software organization also reiterated that Indian governmental regulations nudge organizations to recruit persons with a disability; however, governmental quotas for disability-specific hiring and tax benefits are not as important as the moral responsibility of the organization to nurture the talent of those with a disability. Our respondent from the Indian bank also reported that his organization is “not relying on any sort of government help” and that government-established employment quotas do not help in disability inclusion efforts. Respondents thus noted that external institutional stakeholders were perceived as being differentially useful based on the country contexts.

Another difference particular to the Indian context was the urban-rural divide and, specifically, the availability of talent. For example, our respondent from the Indian bank explained that education, opportunities, and accommodation were better in the urban areas than in the rural areas of India. Our respondents from Germany did not note such within-country differences. However, they did note that for their units in India, the availability of talent could not be taken for granted. Referring to “a distinct difference in the cultural dimension,” our respondent from the German software organization explained that:

The profiles obtained of persons with a disability in terms of recruitment are also usually different in different cultures. There is less work experience in India, teaching of life

skills...[in] an IT-specific environment as well. The motivation for persons with a disability and goals of inclusion are the same. However, the circumstances are different so operational approaches differ a little. One needs to take note of the fact that governmental apathy is higher in India as opposed to Germany.

With regard to the availability of talent, German respondents explained that German industry is faced with demographic change, specifically with reference to age. Thus, many older employees develop disabilities. Consequently, in Germany, successful disability management also focuses substantially on keeping those with a disability in the job and looking for talent internally, while in India, they argued, it is probably more about getting those with a disability into the workplace. Overall, while guiding principles were similar across multinational locations, specific operationalization of the guiding principles was region-dependent – based on perceived stakeholder support and regional availability and search of talent.

[Insert Table 3 here]

## **Discussion**

In the present interview-based study, we set out to describe what multinational organizations across India and Germany have done to increase workplace inclusion of persons with a disability. Our findings indicate that employers followed the same three broad guiding principles: (a) harnessing diversity (viewing employees as a critical resource and as a talent pool), (b) multi-stakeholder engagement (involving both the top management team as well as all other employee groups to increase inclusion efforts), and (c) engagement with the external ecosystem (using the best available help in their ecosystem such as non-governmental organizations to build internal human resource capabilities). Respondents also noted two broad activities or programs: job flexibility provisions (switching jobs to match skills, if required) and integration and sensitization programs (sensitization training for all stakeholders, accessibility audit programs, and mentoring programs). Two differences were the region-specificity of

perceived stakeholder support (the government was perceived as relatively more supportive in Germany than in India) and availability of talent (urban areas in India were perceived as better with regard to talent supply than rural regions, a point not noted for Germany).

### ***Implications for theory and future research***

Here we note how current findings are in line with past research, how they extend current theory, and the implications for future research endeavors. First, present findings regarding the importance of organizational factors for the inclusion of employees with a disability are consistent with prior work by Schur *et al.* (2009) and Baumgärtner *et al.* (2015). In addition to their emphasis on the role of corporate culture and organizational flexibility, respectively, our research proposes that three additional organizational factors (i.e., a diversity-friendly mind-set, a multi-stakeholder approach, and use of the external ecosystem) foster the successful workplace inclusion of people with a disability and that all three can be found in both Indian and German multinationals.

Second, our focus and findings can be perceived as indicative of human resource activities which build an important foundation for inclusion in general. Our German respondents specifically noted age with respect to disability. We thus believe that the present findings are generalizable to other minority groups. For instance, Armstrong-Stassen and Templer (2006) and Boehm *et al.* (2013) described human resource activities for older employees, including recruiting, training and life-long learning, career management, flexible working time/place systems, health management, and performance measurement and remuneration. Future research might examine which human resource principles and programs are relevant across diverse employee groups.

Third, the present findings reinforce the importance of both internal (Colella, 1994; cf. Lengnick-Hall *et al.*, 2008) and external stakeholders (Hernandez *et al.*, 2008) to hire and include persons with a disability. Present findings further extend the importance of external stakeholders by outlining *which* external stakeholders matter in particular national contexts. This means that while disability-inclusion principles may be universal, their operationalizations are region-specific. We thus steer the conversation to positive actions that employers have undertaken in multinational contexts, and toward highlighting region-specific and universally inclusive human resource approaches.

Finally, the unique background of our respondents helped us answer our research question as is required to document employer views (Arthur and Boyles, 2007). However, research shows gaps in what employers state and do (Breward, 2016; Hernandez *et al.*, 2000). Future research can thus also be aimed at examining how all employees experience the stated human resource principles and programs (cf. Boehm *et al.*, 2014). The experience of policies and programs – that is, the actual implementation of human resource practices – and a sense of the human resource climate can be gained through employee surveys (Arthur and Boyles, 2007). Conducting such surveys will help in obtaining a more complete view of how inclusionary contexts are created and experienced.

Although well versed in the global context to answer our questions, we acknowledge the limitations of our small and convenience sample. A broader set of top management-level respondents will further help document inclusionary efforts. Next, employers we studied are global and fairly resource-rich organizations. It is plausible that large and resource-rich organizations are relatively more likely to engage in inclusion efforts (Houtenville and Kalargyrou, 2012). Furthermore, their efforts may mirror an isomorphic notion of global best

practices and may not reflect the country's institutional context. Our study, therefore, may not be construed as a cross-cultural study. We echo the point made by Klarsfeld *et al.* (2016) that more such comparative work should be undertaken to enrich our understanding of what works across national contexts and what does not. We are also aligned with their view that researchers must take into account differences across cultures as well as national contexts when examining diversity issues. For example, India is a diverse country with sub-cultures (Dheer *et al.*, 2015) and may be seen as a multi-cultural entity in itself (cf. Ng and Tung, 1998; Tung, 2008). Therefore, while our study provides an initial nudge, it must be seen as exploratory and future efforts can be aimed at mapping cross-cultural (ethno-cultural; e.g., Hofstede, 1984/2001; Tung and Verbeke, 2010) as well as cross-national (socio-economic; e.g., Mullen, 1995) similarities and differences. Such research can be facilitated by longitudinal indices obtained from national governments and international organizations (see Klarsfeld *et al.*, 2016, for examples of such indices).

### ***Implications for human resource practice***

Present findings indicate which broad ideas employers can think about to better their inclusion efforts. Some findings (e.g., having all internal stakeholders fully engaged in the creation of an inclusionary context) are directly applicable. Others (e.g., leveraging of external stakeholders best suited in their contexts) are region-specific. For instance, employers can lead roundtables or other fora in which context-specific best practices are discussed and implemented. Such fora can also shed light on underlying employer beliefs which guide tangible activities.

With regard to beliefs, organizations should be keen to foster positive diversity mind-sets or climates throughout the organization (Nishii, 2013; Shore *et al.*, 2011). As indicated in our study as well as in prior work, top management support is a key success factor for diversity



initiatives (e.g., Jayne and Dipboye, 2004; Rynes and Rosen, 1995). In the case of disability, top management support can help overcome widespread stereotypes and negative attitudes held by stakeholders, such as colleagues and supervisors (Bruyère *et al.*, 2003; Schur *et al.*, 2005).

Finally, firms should implement disability-friendly human resource systems to unleash employees' full working potential. With regard to the concrete design of such activities, anchored in beliefs systems, organizations should strive for disability-inclusive rather than disability-specific human resource systems (Boehm and Dwertmann, 2015). In other words, human resource beliefs and activities should fulfill the needs of all employee groups, including those with special needs such as employees with disabilities. Offerings such as job flexibility provisions and integration programs are important pillars of social inclusion and should be complemented by barrier-free recruiting, fair performance appraisal and promotion systems, and access to training for all employee groups. By doing so, ability-inclusive human resource systems are likely to foster positive diversity perceptions within the whole organization, enabling productivity and well-being for multiple minority groups (e.g., older employees) and contributing to organizational performance in the long run (Boehm *et al.*, 2014).

In conclusion, we hope that our findings contribute to the diversity and inclusion literature and that the present findings provide a foundation on which future research on this theoretically and practically relevant issue may be based.

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**Table 1: Similarities in human resource principles across multinationals in India and Germany**

| Finding  | Key import of finding  | Examples   |
|--|--|--|
| Harnessing diversity                             | Employees are a critical resource and talent of each employee is utilized as well as broadcast | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating and broadcasting videos focused on accomplishments of employees with a disability</li> <li>• Highlighting the business case for disability-specific inclusion</li> </ul> |
| Multi-stakeholder engagement                     | Internal stakeholders across functions and hierarchy are engaged in inclusionary efforts       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involving chief officers and boards to spread awareness through organizational communication</li> <li>• Eliciting initiatives from lower lever employees</li> </ul>               |
| Engagement with the broader (external) ecosystem | External networks are utilized to aid inclusion efforts  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilizing help from local (disability-specific) non-governmental organizations to identify talent, to conduct training, and for mentorship programs</li> </ul>                    |

**Table 2: Similarities in human resource programs across multinationals in India and Germany**

| Finding                                | Key import of finding  | Examples   |
|--|--|--|
| Job flexibility provisions             | Job changes are allowed after the person is hired              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allowing for job changes to match person's skill (and/or acquired disability on the job) to tasks</li> <li>• Creating new tasks to accommodate disability</li> </ul>  |
| Integration and sensitization programs | Integration processes are aimed at the life cycle of employees | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducting sensitization training for all stakeholders</li> <li>• Conducting accessibility audits</li> <li>• Conducting mentoring programs</li> <li>• Conducting periodic stakeholder roundtables for each affected employee</li> </ul> |



**Table 3: Differences across multinationals in India and Germany**

| Finding                                      | Key import of finding   | Examples  |
|--|---|---|
| Perceived support from external stakeholders | Stakeholder support is different across nations                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• German respondents view government support as being relatively better as compared with Indian respondents</li> </ul>   |
| Availability and search of talent            | There are country-specific differences in the availability and search of talent | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Availability of talent in India is better in urban (as compared with rural) areas given education opportunities and accommodations; a point not noted by German respondents</li> <li>• Indian respondents seek talent externally (e.g., hiring persons with disability) while German respondents also seek talent internally (e.g., older employees who may develop disabilities are seen as a talent pool)</li> </ul> |