



Highlights of [GAO-11-81SP](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Convened This Forum

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Rehabilitation Act) requires agencies to take proactive steps to provide equal opportunity to qualified individuals with disabilities, but their rate of employment with the federal government remains low.

GAO was asked to identify barriers to the employment of people with disabilities in the federal workforce and leading practices that could be used to overcome these barriers. On July 20, 2010, GAO convened a forum to identify leading practices that federal agencies could implement within the current legislative context.

In preparation for the forum, GAO surveyed a wide range of knowledgeable individuals to identify barriers and leading practices. Forum participants were selected from among respondents (or their representatives) to reflect varying expertise and views concerning the employment of individuals with disabilities. The survey results formed the basis for the initial forum agenda, and were refined by participants to focus on actions they deemed most important.

Comments in this report do not necessarily represent the views of any individual participant or the organizations that these participants represent or with which they are affiliated, including GAO.

View [GAO-11-81SP](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Laurie E. Ekstrand at (202) 512-6806 or [ekstrandl@gao.gov](mailto:ekstrandl@gao.gov).

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## HIGHLIGHTS OF A FORUM

### Participant-Identified Leading Practices That Could Increase the Employment of Individuals with Disabilities in the Federal Workforce

#### What Participants Said

Participants said that the most significant barrier keeping people with disabilities from the workplace is attitudinal, which can include bias and low expectations for people with disabilities. According to participants, there is a fundamental need to change the attitudes of hiring managers, supervisors, coworkers, and prospective employees, and that cultural change within the agencies is critical to this effort.

Participants identified practices that agencies could implement to help the federal government become a model employer for people with disabilities. Participants reached the following conclusions:

1. Top leadership commitment is key to implementing and sustaining improvements. Unless top agency officials are committed, improvements will not happen.
2. Accountability is critical to success; goals can help guide and sustain efforts and should be reflected in human capital and diversity strategy plans.
3. Regular surveying of the workforce on disability issues provides agencies with important information. Participants suggested that surveying be implemented at all stages of the employment life cycle.
4. Better coordination could help improve employment outcomes, as coordination within and across agencies is critical.
5. Training for staff at all levels can disseminate leading practices throughout the agency. This provides agencies the opportunity to communicate expectations regarding the implementation of policies and procedures related to improving employment of people with disabilities.
6. Career development opportunities inclusive of people with disabilities could facilitate advancement and increase retention. Participants suggested that agencies offer details, rotational assignments, and mentoring programs that are fully accessible to all employees.
7. A flexible work environment can increase and enhance employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Participants emphasized telework as a key component, as well as flexible work times and job sharing.
8. Centralizing funding at the agency level can help ensure that reasonable accommodations are provided. Participants stated that effective centralized funds should include accountability, flexibility, and universal availability.

Although forum discussion focused on practices agencies could implement, participants also noted the need for model policies and guidance from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). This is consistent with the July 2010 executive order that directs OPM to work with other agencies to design model recruitment and hiring strategies for individuals with disabilities.