Compensation Data and Individuals With Disabilities

Finding good national data on compensation and individuals with disabilities is difficult business, but there is progress.

Roughly 10 percent of the U.S. population has at least one disability, and demographics are driving an increasing interest in the employment and labor market outcomes of individuals with disabilities ("Employment and Work," Bruyère, Barrington and Albrecht, Sage 2012).

A new generation of veterans with disabilities and the aging working Baby Boomers are just two factors increasing the numbers of employees with disabilities in the U.S. workforce. Almost 55 million Americans live in a household with at least one family member who has a disability (Employment and Disability Institute, Cornell University). Despite the workforce and consumer numbers, we don't know enough about the differences in wage and salary income (and total compensation) between those with disabilities and those without. This is in part because the data are very difficult for practitioners and researchers to collect. Difficult, but not impossible.

Cornell Data Tool

Cornell's Institute for Compensation Studies and Employment and Disability Institute have developed a tool for use by researchers and practitioners interested in national survey data on compensation and disability measures. The Cross-Dataset Catalog of Disability and Compensation Variables was developed as part of a grant to Cornell called the Employer Practices Related to Employment Outcomes Among Individuals with Disabilities Rehabilitation Research and Training Center.

Cornell University
ILR School
Institute for Compensation Studies

Kevin F. Hallock, Ph.D.
Donald C. Opatrny '74 Chair,
Department of Economics
Cornell University

Joseph R. Rich '80 Professor,
Departments of Economics and HR Studies
Cornell University

Director,
Institute for Compensation Studies,
Cornell University

Board Member,
WorldatWork Society of Certified Professionals

This is part of an ongoing research program funded by the U.S. Department of Education's National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR), the main federal agency supporting "applied research, training and development to improve the lives of individuals with disabilities" to integrate disability research into science and technology, health care and economics policy. (For more on NIDRR, log on to www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/nidrr/about.html.)

The Cross-Dataset Catalog is a useful first-step tool for those seeking data collected through U.S. national surveys on compensation and workplace outcomes or on Individuals with disabilities, or, as in my case, both. The web-based tool — which you can find at www.disabilitystatistics.org/eprrtc/codebook.cfm — essentially indexes 11 data sources across a number of categories of variables, including education and training, health insurance, leave time, employer contributions to health insurance plans, tips, bonuses and, of course, straightforward information like wage and salary income. Say, for example, one was interested in knowing something about employer contributions to education and training programs for employees, he/she could use the tool to find which of these 11 data sources has survey information on this variable and what the fine print is behind its collection.

The surveys catalogued, ranging from the American Community Survey to the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, differ dramatically. Some are on large samples of individuals at a point in time (e.g., the Census of Population) and some are on a smaller set of individuals (still with thousands of observations), but are surveyed many times over many years (e.g., Panel Study of Income Dynamics).

The tool also provides a checklist of the wide variety of demographic information on the individuals in the data, such as age, level of education, gender, occupation, industry and various measures of disability.

The tool does not link one directly to the raw data. Rather, it helps a user simplify a search by demographic characteristics (i.e., measure of disability) or compensation variables (i.e., bonus), to identify which of the 11 data sources has some information of interest. Previously, the user new to these data sources would have to pore through daunting and detailed codebooks in search of existing data. To be sure, at the eventual point of analyzing the data, one will need to examine the codebook for details of each dataset and variable. But the tool is a useful first step in speeding the search process and improving the productivity of researchers in search of data on disabilities and compensation.

A Comment on the National Datasets

The Cross-Dataset Catalog of Disability and Compensation Variables tool also reveals the rich diversity of pay data collected across these 11 national surveys. The data from these surveys are obviously less precise than what employers know about their own payroll. This may not, however, be the case regarding disability data. Knowing how many employees in your workplace have a disability is complicated and the evidence is strong that employees "underreport" their disabilities to their employers — many individuals with disabilities fail to disclose disabilities to their employer for a variety of reasons, including, perhaps, fear of discrimination.

Furthermore, remember that the value in these data is precisely that they go beyond your company walls and therefore allow computation of useful benchmarks. Plus, they have incredibly rich information on individuals and are available (mostly) for free.

I certainly don't mean to suggest that these national data sources should supplant benchmark data currently used by organizations. Rather, they are an interesting additional source and many of the variables aren't really collected anywhere else, especially regarding disability status.

Future Research

Given the service our wounded warriors have provided; given the bubble of older Baby Boomers working longer than past generations (and age is correlated with disability); given the rapidly expanding knowledge base on disabilities like the autism spectrum, post traumatic stress disorder or emotional issues; and given this is an important protected class that anyone can unwillingly become a part of at any time, pay equity for individuals with disabilities should be of interest to us all.

In a future column, I will discuss some research results regarding the pay gap between employees with and without disabilities. In the meantime, I hope the body of literature on disability status and compensation will expand through new studies prompted by this Cross-Dataset Catalog tool. If you have done any compensation-related research on employees with disabilities, please don't hesitate to share your insights with me. **ws**