

# Employee Nonresponse and Disability Utilization Analysis: Much Ado About Something

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As noted in a prior [post](#), survey nonresponse may pose significant challenges for the (a) appropriate calculation of disability utilization percentages and (b) correct interpretation of the results. In an ideal world, 100% of employees would complete OFCCP's Voluntary Self-Identification of Disability form, and analytic and interpretation challenges would not be an issue. However, as industrial/organizational psychologists, we regularly contend with the realities of substantially lower response rates in organizational research than might be observed in an ideal world. In addition, we know that the extent to which the employees that do not respond differ in meaningful ways from the responders will influence the extent to which survey results actually generalize to the larger workforce (Horowitz & Manski, 1998; Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007). The degree to which nonresponse creates misleading results that do not generalize is known as *nonresponse bias*. In this post, we highlight some nonresponse bias issues that may have an impact on upcoming disability utilization percentages and provide some best practice tips for combatting nonresponse.

## Why concern ourselves with nonresponse to the disability self identification form?

Survey nonresponse simply refers to the percentage of a survey target sample that does not respond.<sup>1</sup> If employees that (a) choose not to complete the self-identification form or (b) choose the "I DON'T WISH TO ANSWER" option represent the same proportion of persons with disabilities as the entire workforce, nonresponse does not introduce bias into the results. For example, imagine a fictional AAP with 1000 employees, 70 of whom are persons with disabilities (thus, 7% of the workforce is persons with disabilities). If 100 employees either do not complete the self-identification form or choose the "I DON'T WISH TO ANSWER" option, and 7 of them are persons with disabilities, the percentage of persons with disabilities in the nonresponse group ( $7/100 = 7\%$ ) is equal to the percentage of persons with disabilities in the overall workforce. Consequently, there are 900 responses (Yes and No) that can be analyzed in the utilization analysis, and 63 are affirmative responses (YES, I HAVE A DISABILITY [or previously had a disability]). Thus, the percentage of the workforce calculated to have a disability in the utilization analysis ( $63/900 = 7\%$ ) is equal to the actual percentage of the workforce with disabilities ( $70/1000 = 7\%$ ). There is no nonresponse bias in such a case.<sup>2</sup> However, if persons with disabilities are either (a) over-represented in the nonresponse group (i.e., a higher percentage of persons with disabilities in the nonresponse group than in the entire

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<sup>1</sup> Although many may not view the Voluntary Self-Identification of Disability form as an organizational survey, per se, it is a solicitation of employee information to which employees may choose to respond or choose to ignore. At this fundamental level, the form is in fact a survey and the process of collecting the requested information will be fraught with the same research problems as those vexing applied researchers for years.

<sup>2</sup> This assumes that the 100 nonresponders are not incorporated into the denominator of the calculation (i.e., not assumed to be not disabled).

workforce) or (b) under-represented in the nonresponse group (i.e., a lower percentage of persons with disabilities in the nonresponse group than in the entire workforce), nonresponse bias influences the generalizability of the calculated utilization percentages.

## What do we know about survey nonresponse?

### *Base Rates Matter*

Empirical research investigating the influence of survey nonresponse on the validity of survey statistics has been around since the late 1930s (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007), and although much has been learned about the implications of nonresponse, organizational researchers continue to contend with response rates that commonly fall below 50% of the surveyed workforce.

According to a recent meta-analysis investigating response rates across hundreds of survey studies, approximately 100 of which focused on organizational surveys, response rates typically range between 15% and 60%, with an average of approximately 35% responding. Thus, nonresponse rates of 40% to 85% are typical. The bottom line – surveys result in some level of nonresponse.

In modern organizations, the importance of completing organizational surveys is regularly communicated to the surveyed workforce via clear senior executive level support. In the age of big data, it is no surprise that business leaders understand the value of good organizational survey data<sup>3</sup>. What, then, explains continually high levels of survey nonresponse? For one, the research tells us that over-surveying can lead to workforce fatigue or annoyance with surveys. With respect to the disability self-identification form, employees may not prioritize its completion as it may be viewed as just another survey being pushed by executives. Second, an evaluation of the different types of nonresponders may be illuminating.

### *Who are The Nonresponders?*

The research on nonresponse is clear that there are two types of nonresponders: passive nonresponders and active nonresponders. Passive nonresponders are those who have every intention of completing the survey, but do not. Drivers of passive nonresponse vary, but common explanations include a lack of conscientiousness on the employee’s part and high workload demands. In contrast to passive nonresponders, active nonresponders are those who overtly refuse to provide survey information. The drivers of active nonresponse differ considerably from those of passive nonresponse, and may include attitudes about the organization (e.g., low job satisfaction) or trust in how the survey results will be used. In evaluating whether nonresponse bias may pose problems in calculating disability utilization percentages, answering the questions in the following matrix may be helpful.

		<b>Type of nonresponder</b>	
		Passive nonresponse	Active nonresponse
<b>Type of nonresponse</b>	No response at all	Are persons with disabilities <u>more or less</u>	Are persons with disabilities <u>more or less likely to</u>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/sites/sylviaavorhausersmith/2013/08/14/how-the-best-places-to-work-are-nailing-employee-engagement/>

		likely to intend on responding but not respond to the self-id form than persons without disabilities? If not, this does not pose a nonresponse bias risk.	actively ignore the self-id form than persons without disabilities? If not, this does not pose a nonresponse bias risk.
	I do not wish to self-identify response	This cell is not of concern, as choosing “I DON’T WISH TO ANSWER” is inherently active nonresponse	Are persons with disabilities more or less likely to answer “I DON’T WISH TO ANSWER” than persons without disabilities? If not, this does not pose a nonresponse bias risk.

It strikes us that the likelihood of passive nonresponse introducing nonresponse bias into the disability utilization percentages is low; however, persons with disabilities and persons without disabilities may view the self-identification form very differently in terms of the data utility, sensitivity of the information being asked, invasiveness of the questions, etc. In such a case, active nonresponse rates may be higher in one group or the other. Such a case increases concerns about nonresponse bias.

### Techniques to minimize survey nonresponse

Although nonresponse is a reality that we must accept, there are some techniques that may help increase response rates. All manner of different techniques have been evaluated by research, and many are shown to be ineffective or are simply infeasible when data are anonymous. We provide a summary of the techniques in three sections below:

- Those that are infeasible with regard to the disability self-identification form
- Those that are ineffective and are likely a waste of time
- Those that have been shown to sometimes increase response rates

### Techniques that are infeasible

1. *In-person survey of nonresponders* – Identify nonresponders and randomly select a sample of them to complete an in-person survey. The anonymous nature of the self-identification data precludes this option.
2. *Sponsorship* – Use a neutral, reputable entity (such as a University) to collect and analyze the information.
3. *Personalization* – Provide target survey takers with a personalized invite to complete the survey (e.g., through a personalized cover letter). In large organizations, this is far too costly and disruptive.
4. *Personal delivery* – Personally deliver surveys to each target survey taker, whether through a hand delivered survey or a personal email. In large organizations, this is far too costly and disruptive.

### Techniques generally considered ineffective.

5. *Incentives* – Use incentives (like monetary rewards or gifts) to attract survey takers or make them feel obligated to complete the survey. Although this sounds good in theory, in practice the use of incentives (especially for employees) has not been particularly effective.

### Techniques generally considered effective.

#### *Those that combat passive nonresponse:*

6. *Adequate time to respond* – Provide target survey takers adequate time to complete the survey. Some individuals choose not to participate simply because they don't have enough time.
7. *Advance notice* – Provide target survey takers with (timely) personal, advance notice of the pending survey. Advance notices prepare survey takers for the upcoming survey and may evoke a sense of accountability – both of which are associated with higher response rates.
8. *Follow-up notices* – Send a limited amount of reminder notes to nonresponding survey takers and encourage them to participate.

#### *Those that combat active nonresponse:*

9. *Anonymity* – Preserve the anonymity of survey takers. This is particularly important if the respondents are asked to provide potentially sensitive information. The nature of the disability self-identification data already meet this recommendation.

#### *Those that combat both active and passive nonresponse*

10. *Publicize survey information* – Actively publicize the survey to target survey takers (e.g., through posters, emails, information session). Survey takers who are more familiar with the process and how results will be used are more likely to participate.
11. *Topic relevance or importance* – Try to communicate the importance and impact of survey completion to survey takers. Surveys that are more important (or are of higher interest) to survey takers, are associated with higher response rates.

### **Conclusion**

Clearly nonresponse will be an issue when conducting any survey. Although we've outlined a variety of techniques to help improve survey response rates, these practices will not eliminate survey nonresponse. As we have addressed (hopefully extensively), survey nonresponse can have huge implications on the accuracy of conclusions drawn from survey data.<sup>4</sup> In situations where the percentage of employees with a disability will be compared to a goal, and results affect next steps, it is critical that the percentage acted upon is as accurate as possible.

### **Citations**

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<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed discussion on this point, see our previous [post](#) on the topic.

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