



Beyond Compliance: Making Disability Inclusion a Competitive Advantage

Diversity and inclusion initiatives often assume a broad perspective applied organization-wide rather than selectively. For the disabled (and others), a better approach is to maximize potential segment-by-segment as a competitive advantage.

By Jeremiah Prince

The passage of the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA) evoked cheers and optimism that people with disabilities would get more opportunities to join the workforce in capacities that take advantage of talent and potential in a safe work environment. Employers have embraced their duty to provide reasonable accommodation and are more willing to hire the disabled, but the effort to date has been mostly a strategy of compliance with the law.

There are exceptions some businesses go beyond compliance and consider employment of the disabled a strategy for gaining a competitive advantage. These businesses have already discovered that people with disabilities brought qualities to the workplace – like increased loyalty and fewer absences – that benefit the entire workforce.

Not Enough Progress

The ADA and ADAAA have driven some progress but not enough as the unemployment rate remains more than twice the rate for people without disabilities and annual earnings are 28 percent lower than earnings for the non-disabled.

Several factors are holding back progress, like unconscious bias and lack of understanding of the disabled persons abilities.

However, time has made one factor in particular stand out as a barrier to progress. It is the tendency to paint diversity and inclusion initiatives with a broad brush across the organization, rather than adapting to diverse segments to create an environment where all people can participate equally. From a compliance perspective, legal requirements are met, but that does not mean accessibility and engagement are maximized.

The gap between ADA-ADAAA compliance and inclusion is wide. Compliance addresses meeting minimum reasonable requirements for workplace accommodation and not thoughtlessly excluding people from positions based on their disabilities. Inclusion means maximizing the full potential of the disabled and requires a supportive culture and deep management awareness and understanding of success strategies for working with people with disabilities to improve organizational outcomes and reach goals. Compliance is obeying the law. Inclusion is enhanced competitiveness.

Hired as Equals



Focusing on diverse workforce segments is more aligned with the way organizations work. Walgreens is a leader in the employment of people with disabilities and has learned that its workforce model gives it a competitive edge by going beyond hiring the disabled to developing a workplace and Human Resources policies that maximize employee potential, no matter what particular needs exist. The disabled are hired as equals to the non-disabled rather than being placed in lower paying and lower skilled positions as so many other corporations continue to do. The disabled are given equal opportunities for career planning, job mobility and job advancement.

A desire to maximize employee potential led to Walgreens' diversity model focusing on disability segments within its workforce. For example, Walgreens believed people with autism could fill challenging jobs in its distribution centers, if the jobs were holistically redesigned to accommodate people with and without disabilities. Beginning with the Anderson Distribution Center, followed by new centers opened after that, jobs were redesigned at the same time technology was reformed, making sure new jobs did not have more complexity than current jobs. The results of the new model is that 42 percent of the distribution centers have cognitive or physical disabilities, all jobs are easier to do for all employees, and the centers operate at a 20 percent higher efficiency rate. Everyone is held to the same performance standards.

There are effective practices for successfully including people with disabilities in the workforce. One is forming alliances with community organizations and government agencies that work with the disabled. These groups help employers understand the specific needs of people with disabilities and many offer work skills training.

Another important practice is developing an organization-wide culture that is supportive of the disabled. To develop such a culture, managers need training and encourage dialogue. They cannot be afraid to discuss issues like accommodation, and they must know how to communicate with team members who have issues like hearing or mobility impairment.

Competitive Advantages Found

Tim Griffin, manager of Dell UK, noted there is a shortage of skilled workers. Those with disabilities have much to offer to tackle the shortages, but there is a need to integrate skills training for the disabled from the primary grades to the university. He also points out that educating recruiters and managers on overcoming stereotypical views is a key best practice.

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, approximately 20 percent of the U.S. disabled working-age people are employed, creating a vast under-utilization of more than 173 million potential employees.

The competitive advantage flows from greater operational efficiency and workforce engagement. People who have been unsuccessful at finding employment due to disabilities are more loyal employees and experience fewer absences compared to the non-disabled. The case study conducted by Assistant Professor Kalargyrou at the University of New Hampshire and sponsored by Deloitte, found that Walgreens' Connecticut Distribution Centre turnover rates was 15 percent compared to 55 percent in its other centers. The study also found reduced absenteeism, employees more likely to show up early for work, and higher customer satisfaction ratings.



Moving beyond compliance with the ADA and ADAAA is good business, enhancing a positive corporate brand.

Rather than approaching diversity as a one-model-fits-all, focus on employee segments and ensure each segment has fair opportunities to use their capabilities as participating team members and equal opportunities to advance.

Successful employers train the recruiters, supervisors, managers, and HR people in strategies for recognizing talent in the disabled. It is not a case of ignoring the disability, but rather a case of seeing beyond it.

That is challenging for many people because a culture has set individuals with disabilities apart from the rest of society for so long and convinced people in general that accommodating the disabled turns the employer into a charity. Thanks to companies like Walgreens and Dell, these beliefs are proven wrong.