



Disability Works ... in the Supply Chain

Inclusion is a principle that should embrace every aspect of a business – culture, policies and practices, talent recruiting and management, and general operations. Today, there is also increasing focus on disability inclusion in the supply chain.

Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) is a principle that began with a focus on Human Resources-related policies and initiatives. For people with disabilities, it meant companies made a sincere effort to recruit people with disabilities and to provide necessary accommodations to ensure they had real opportunities to succeed. Today, that principle has expanded to embrace everything the company does, meaning it impacts internal and external business activities. Research has proven that disability works in the workforce, but now companies are realizing that D&I, including people with disabilities, in practice should lead to better products and services.¹ That means disability works in the supply chain, as well as the workforce. Leading companies are using a variety of focused strategies and employee groups to attract disabled-owned businesses and businesses that proactively utilize people with disabilities in various capacities.

Shared Commitment

Building a competitive, sustainable business today requires more than good business acumen. It requires a commitment to diversity as one element of Social Responsibility. Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) once applied mostly to the workforce, but today it is a commitment to employees, customers and communities, and the supply chain. The initial concentration has been on D&I in the supply chain based on gender, race, and multiculturalism, but this approach excludes the large diverse population of people with disabilities.

Diverse suppliers are important to the supply chain many reasons. One is that supply chain diversity gives a company access to new ideas, products, materials, and services, and it is a source of innovation. Diverse suppliers also offer knowledge about and access to diverse, global, changing and/or growing marketplaces. To realize these advantages requires, first, finding the top, qualified suppliers, and second, developing a shared commitment so that everyone remains on the same path. The shared commitment is not just between the employer and suppliers. The organization as a whole should have a shared commitment to increase diversity in every aspect of business activities, including the supply chain.

Engaging All Resources

An organizational culture that proactively supports diversity will have employees at every level and involved in every initiative, activity, and project who actively help business leaders find disabled-owned suppliers or suppliers who employ a substantial number of people with disabilities. They share the commitment to Corporate Social Responsibility, sustainability, and competitive success.



Including people with disabilities in the workforce and diverse suppliers in the supply chain is not just the right thing to do. It is a competitive strategy as well. The responsibility for finding qualified suppliers is not only the responsibility of sourcing and procurement personnel. It is everyone's responsibility in a culture of inclusion and acceptance. That means a variety of resources are engaged in the effort to locate suppliers who either are owned or managed by a person with a disability or suppliers who have successfully included people with disabilities in their organizations. The same resources assist Human Resources with finding qualified people with disabilities as employees and contracted labor.

Resources include online recruitment and supplier portals, but that is not nearly enough to accelerate the inclusion of people with disabilities. In fact, some highly qualified talent may not have easy access to an organization's website or portals unless it is disability-friendly. Other resources for building a supply chain that includes people with disabilities are all Employee Resource Groups, not just the ERG for people with disabilities. Additional resources are Tier I and Tier II suppliers, people responsible for D&I workforce and supplier initiatives, special teams like those responsible for ensuring the company practices global social responsibility and sustainability, business partners, diversity associations like the US Business Leadership Network (USBLN), supplier conferences, community members, and employees and their families. It is well-developed networks and a shared commitment with all stakeholders that strengthen the development of a supply chain that includes people with disabilities.

[Inclusion and Acceptance](#)

It is important that global businesses understand that inclusion does not mean enabling suppliers in developing economies, or in countries that are known to be biased against people with disabilities, to take advantage of cheap labor. Social Responsibility includes ensuring fair labor and business practices for all people are a core value. For example, there are global suppliers who operate in 'sheltered workshops' which are actually factories with exploitative and unsafe working conditions. As U.S. businesses continue to expand globally, they need to understand the local systems and terminology to ensure social responsibility is truly practiced.

IBM is a corporate leader in supply chain diversity. The company has a global supplier diversity program that is centrally driven but relies on its business units in various geographic locations for real-world implementation. The resources include procurement commodity teams, community relations managers, diversity program managers, market development executives, and technical teams. The company developed and uses various toolkits to assist diverse suppliers, including disabled-owned suppliers, and regularly interacts with external organizations like the USBLN. To expand inclusion of people with disabilities, supplier eligibility policies direct that people with disabilities owned businesses can be 51 percent owned, managed, and controlled by one or more persons with disabilities, a service-disabled veteran OR be a supplier that employs a large number of people with disabilities.



It is a culture of D&I that serves as the foundation for building a company that includes employees and suppliers with disabilities because it means the company has gone beyond accommodation. A culture of acceptance is also necessary so that the D&I of people and suppliers with disabilities is embraced by everyone across the company as important to corporate success. Everyone is proactive in finding talented people and innovative businesses and helping them flourish. To develop a supply chain with disabled-owned businesses requires a shared commitment and collaboration. It also requires a successful communication system to ensure recommendations make it to decision-makers and are not lost in the noise of daily operations.