



## Creating Opportunities for People With Disabilities for Operating Success

People with disabilities can enhance organizational operating success, strengthen a culture of inclusion, and bring new perspectives to product designs and marketing. So why are so few of them still able to find employment?

The numbers speak for themselves. By the end of 2019, 19.3 percent of people with disabilities were employed compared to 66.3 percent of people without a disability. There are many reasons used to explain the wide gap, but the fact is that across all age groups, people with disability were less likely to be employed. For businesses, it means foregoing the advantages the employees with disabilities bring to companies.

Using the Conference Board report as a resource, the research in "Leveling the Playing Field – Attracting, Engaging and Advancing People with Disabilities" clearly defines the business case for hiring people with disabilities and the steps organizations can take to attract and retain them by creating opportunities and supportive workplaces. The needle is not likely to move in terms of the employment statistics unless employers fully understand that intentionally or unintentionally excluding people with disabilities equates to missed business opportunities.

### Source of Labor When Labor is in Short Supply

Employing people with disabilities is a global human rights issue, but it is a challenge that must be met country by country.

The Conference Board Research Working Group (RWG) on Improving Employment Outcomes for People with Disabilities takes a global view of the advantages of hiring people with disabilities, the ways an organization can create a workplace where people with disabilities thrive, strategies for measuring success for people and the organization, and ways to encourage people with disabilities to self-report. The last aspect is a particularly difficult one to achieve because tens of millions of people continue to hide their disabilities to avoid rejection in society and as employees.

The business case for hiring people with disabilities is supported by a number of factors. The RWG used the United States for its research, and one reason is the American Disabilities Act (ADA) was a forward-thinking legislation that defines the various classifications of disabilities and added legal teeth to not discriminating against people with disabilities. A minimum of 10.4 percent of the population has a disability, so this group of people is an underutilized labor pool. It does not make sense to ignore this source of labor.

### Moving Beyond Assumptions



Employers are often concerned about potentially higher costs associated with hiring people with disabilities. Costs include workers' compensation costs, healthcare costs and reasonable accommodations costs.

Statistics found that people with disabilities do not claim workers' compensation at a higher rate than people with no disability. Accommodation costs are negligible with research going back to 1978 finding the average direct cost ranged from \$25 to \$600 per year. Many people with disabilities self-accommodate by purchasing their own assistive devices.

Healthcare costs are harder to assess for several reasons. The annual healthcare costs per person are four times higher than those of a person without a disability, but there are many factors that lower those costs. For example, the Veterans Administration covers service-related disabilities; many people do not develop a disability until they are close to retirement age; and most employers do not offer 100 percent healthcare costs.

Another common concern of employers is employment-related charges brought under the ADA. The top charges were related to termination, making reasonable accommodations, terms and conditions of employment, harassment, and discipline. This issue is directly related to the workplace policies and procedures, environment, and culture. Employers hiring people with disabilities must make a strong commitment to diversity and inclusion and all that implies.

### Growing the Business Through Inclusion

People with disabilities are key connections to a still largely untapped market. Employees with disabilities, their family members, and their caregivers are consumers of assistive devices, general services and products. Many of these people will purposefully choose to do business with companies that employ people with disabilities.

Also of importance is the fact that people with disabilities can give insights into life with a disability, identify unmet consumer needs, contribute to innovations in new products and product designs, and assist with marketing with thoughtfulness and knowledge. People with disabilities are natural problem solvers, too, an important ability when an organization is striving to be agile and responsive to stakeholder needs.

Organizational readiness is a critical quality to ensuring people with disabilities can succeed. The RWG recommends developing a strategy for engaging people with disabilities that addresses six variables. They are top management commitment, communications, an integrative infrastructure, the employment process, measurement and self-disclosure, and organizational climate. The strategy is built on a positive culture based on values and beliefs about diversity and inclusion. An employer should assess whether organizational change is required in order to successfully integrate program initiatives for people with disabilities.

### Measuring the Inclusion Effort



Initiatives and general organizational success at integrating people with disabilities must be measured. There are a host of metrics that can keep change efforts on track while making sure goals are reached.

They include factors like the proportion of interviews with people with disabilities; number of people with disabilities hired; proportion of people with disabilities receiving developmental assignments by type of assignment; revenue generated for new products developed by people with disabilities; employee engagement; leadership engagement; cost of accommodations; fulfilment of objectives and goals; and any other relevant metric that assists with decision-making and inclusion of people with disabilities.

Ideally, all people with disabilities will inform their employers of a disability which then adds validity to the metrics. In the real world, disclosure can be a struggle. A lot depends on things like the organizational culture. People are more likely to disclose to coworkers, rather than managers, when they think it is important for others to know, performance of essential job duties is negatively affected by the disability, there is a visible disability, an accommodation is needed, or people are given the opportunity to disclose on job applications.

Disclosure can be encouraged through anonymous employee surveys, employee focus groups, offering forms on which the employee can self identify, and so on. Too many people with disabilities believe that disclosure will lead to negative consequences. The purpose for collecting disclosure data must be to drive an inclusive culture, provide appropriate accommodation, develop safety measures, improve the talent management system, reduce legal risks, and strengthen accountability.

### Good for Everyone

Increasing the employment of people with disabilities is good for those with disabilities, good for organizations, and good for society. Inclusion will not happen unless businesses develop inclusion strategies and hold leaders accountable.

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