The Broad Perspective on Workplace Accessibility

Workplace accessibility is a principle encompassing everything from the physical layout to HR practices. Most importantly, accessibility must rest on a foundation of an inclusive culture.

The need for workplace accessibility for people with disabilities is commonly recognized in the business world, yet exclusion or job limitations continues to be the more common practices. One of the reasons is likely due to misinformation and false assumptions about things like the cost of developing an accessible workplace or the impact of disabled employees on general productivity. Yet, leading companies are proving that using best practices for accessibility combined with a culture of inclusion improves engagement and productivity. Taking cues from businesses that overcome challenges to accessibility and robustly implement a variety of accommodations demonstrates the numerous alternatives for employers.

Assessing the Present Workplace

Best practices begin with an evaluation of the current work environment and ensuring current employees with disabilities are reasonably accommodated. Every organization benefits by ensuring everyone is as productive as possible because they can access necessary resources, technology, meetings, etc. An important question the employer should ask itself is: Are policies on work schedules, leave time, and job restructuring inclusive of people with disabilities? Another critical questions is: Is the process for considering accommodation requests reasonable and applied with good faith effort? It is one thing to have a policy, but a policy must be supported by honest decisions and actions.

Workplace accessibility best practices also include evaluating the current culture of inclusion. Frontline supervisors have some of the greatest impact on an organization's culture because they work the closest with a variety of employees. Top down support for including people with disabilities is crucial to ensuring HR policies and procedures are supportive, but the reality is that senior leaders are messengers while managers and supervisors down the line are engagers and implementers. Companies setting standards for inclusion of people with disabilities also evaluate their supplier policies and procedures to evaluate whether they encourage and include businesses owned by people with disabilities to provide goods and services. Is the supply chain formed with businesses representing a diversity of categories such as businesses owned by people with disabilities or veterans with disabilities?

Preparing for the Future

The employment numbers for people with disabilities who want to work remain stubbornly low. At the end of 2016, 27.7 percent of people with disabilities, aged 16 to 64 years old (working age), were employed, and they are more likely to be employed part-time.* In many cases, it is not because companies are unwilling to hire them. It is more a case of being afraid to do so because they fear people with disabilities will cost the company too much money in accommodations and will not be as productive as people without disabilities. A labor shortage highlights the fact that companies are overlooking a population of people who want to work but are unable to find full-time jobs or any job.

Companies that understand the importance of inclusion develop HR policies and procedures that promote the attraction, recruitment, hiring, development, and career planning for all diverse people. They understand that remaining competitive requires inclusiveness across the board and from the top down. The Bureau of Labor statistics say that people with disability are more likely to work in service occupations and less likely to work in management and professional occupations. Best practices include having people with disabilities on boards and in management positions because they serve as role models for inclusion. Managers responsible for recruiting and hiring should be held accountable for employing people with disabilities, but they should also be held accountable for ensuring the people hired are not underutilized.

Fulfilling the Mission

CSC recognized the need for giving opportunities and holding managers accountable. The company developed procedures to hire people with disabilities in a variety of positions from administrative to clerical; provide promotional opportunities through career development, training, and leadership programs; encourage participation in all company programs and events; and become a community role model for employment of people with disabilities. The company has a global employee resource group for people with disabilities and partners with numerous organizations assisting people with disabilities, and installed disability-friendly communication systems.

Each company is unique, but companies sincere about including people with disabilities leverage their inclusion in a way that fits the organization's particular mission. For example, Hartford Insurance offers group disability insurance and workmen's compensation to employers. Hartford helps its business customers develop return-to-work programs for employees which includes making accommodations.

Accessibility Across the Board

Implementing accessibility best practices for space, technology, Human Resources, and training and development contributes to developing a culture of inclusion. It is not one thing that makes a workplace accessible. It is the integration of everything. For example, a disabled employee has an accessible office but is unable to attend meetings in the conference room because there is not enough space for a wheelchair. The employer either moves the meeting or installs technology so the

employee can virtually attend. An employee with a mental disability can do most of the job responsibilities except for two. The employer restructures the job, giving those responsibilities to someone else, but adds responsibilities the disabled person can manage, ensuring the person has the appropriate resources available for the restructured job. In yet another example, a blind employee has a guide dog, so the employer allows the person to bring the guide dog to work.

Accessibility is often considered in terms of facilities and equipment, but it is really a much broader concept. People with disabilities need accessibility to coworkers, meetings, physical spaces, equipment, accommodating work schedules, websites and other technologies, and jobs. The American Disabilities Act requires employers to make reasonable accommodations, but organizations with a culture of inclusion really do not need the law for a guide to treating people with empathy and fairness.

The Job Accommodation Network (Jan) offers the free in-depth "Employers' Practical Guide to Reasonable Accommodation Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)" which is available online at https://askjan.org/Erguide/index.htm. The National Organization on Disability (NOD) offers a free, confidential assessment for benchmarking inclusion of people and veterans with disabilities. The "Disability Employment TrackerTM" is available at https://www.nod.org/services/tracker/. Employers have never had more access to free assistance than they have today.