

Disability inclusion at work: the many not the few

Teresa Almeida examines how disability prejudice perpetuates workplace ableism and the disability unemployment gap. People with disabilities face ongoing barriers to employment, as well as within the employment cycle and peer atmosphere. More flexible accommodation for all employees will help increase disability inclusion within companies.

Privilege in the Workplace series - [The Inclusion Initiative](#) - #TIIThursday

One billion people, or 15 per cent of the world's population, experience some form of disability, making them one of the largest and most heterogeneous diversity groups in society ([World Health Organization, 2011](#)). In the UK, 20 per cent of adults report having a disability, with 70 per cent of those estimated to be non-visible ([POST, 2021](#)). Despite the existence of a range of non-discrimination legislation and policies, disability is associated with higher levels of inequality across the labour force and social and political environments ([Heymann et al., 2014](#)). Indeed, disabled people have been subject to historical and present-day marginalisation, as "ableism" or the privilege of not having a disability, creates barriers for accessing power, resources, and opportunities ([Baynton, 2013](#)).

At work, there is a growing body of evidence exploring the labour market outcomes of disabled people. This evidence indicates that finding and retaining work when one is disabled is a challenge. Working-age disabled people are more likely to be unemployed, earn less and encounter more barriers to advance in their careers ([Heymann et al., 2014](#)). In Europe, the employment rate among those with disabilities is 47 per cent, compared to 67 per cent among those without a disability ([Jones, 2021](#)). In the US, the gap is wider: 19.3 per cent of those with a disability were employed compared to 66.3 per cent without disabilities in 2019 ([US Department of Labor, 2021](#)), with estimates showing this disparity is increasing over time.

While these data might not paint a complete picture, with other factors such as age and education being correlated with disability, discriminatory practices in the labour market have also been identified in correspondence experiments. In these studies, fictitious profiles are sent in job applications to open positions, with the only difference being disability status. By monitoring the resulting call-backs, researchers can measure unequal treatment solely based on disability, providing direct evidence of lower recruitment outcomes ([Baert, 2017](#)). For instance, in a large-scale field experiment in Canada, applications were sent to 1,477 open positions ([Bellemare et al., 2018](#)). The researchers found that disclosing a physical disability halved the call-back rate of applicants: from 14.4 per cent for those without a disability to 7.2 per cent when disclosing a disability within an application. As disability scholars point out, few groups experience as much discrimination as people living with disabilities, yet the labour market inclusion of disabled people can help break down entrenched stereotypes, benefiting individuals, organisations, and national economies ([Heymann et al., 2014](#)).

Barriers to the inclusion of people with disabilities

A well-documented reason for the lower participation of disabled people in the labour force is a lack of awareness of disability, coupled with pessimistic views or beliefs about disabled workers' performance ([Bonaccio et al., 2020](#); [Kaye et al., 2011](#)). Central to workplace disadvantages and discrimination associated with disability are biases stemming from either inaccurate information or prejudice. Employers tend to underestimate the productivity or work capacity of disabled employees ([Jones, 2008](#); [Jones et al., 2006](#)) and overestimate the costs of making workplace accommodations or reasonable adjustments to reduce disadvantages for disabled people ([Heymann et al., 2014](#)).

A lack of awareness, while not constituting outright discriminatory behaviour, can perpetuate privileges as disabilities are often invisible in the corporate context. Employer surveys indicate that disabled people face additional barriers within firms driven by peer discomfort and unfamiliarity ([Chan et al., 2010](#); [Dixon et al., 2003](#)). Beyond self-reported data, reviews of organisations' public statements and policies reiterate that disability is a familiar, but silent issue. In 2003, less than half of companies on the Fortune 500 list included disability in their definition of a diverse workforce ([Ball et al., 2005](#)). Almost 20 years later, in FTSE100 companies there are still no executives with a reported disclosed disability, and only 5 per cent issued board-level statements on disability as part of their leadership agenda ([Gbedemah, 2021](#)). This suggests that while companies are seemingly committed to diversity, disability is neither high nor always included on their agenda.

Coupled with a lack of awareness, incorrect assumptions about disabilities can permeate decisions across the employment cycle. At the recruitment stage, inadequate knowledge can partly explain the resistance to hiring disabled workers ([Bonaccio et al., 2020](#)). Managers might assume applicants do not want challenging careers, or in some cases, no work at all ([Hemphill & Kulik, 2016](#)). These assumptions have been demonstrated by disability action organisations and academic research to be largely unfounded. For instance, an analysis of the US General Social Survey demonstrates that while disabled employees report lower pay levels and job security and more negative treatment by management, they have similar organisational commitment and turnover intention compared to those without disabilities ([Schur et al., 2017](#)).

At the same time, disabled people are often stereotyped as less productive ([Beatty et al., 2019](#)). An analysis of labour force outcomes by [Kruse](#) and colleagues (2018) shows that only part of the disability earnings gap can be explained by differences in productivity-related requirements. Further, a meta-analysis of experimental studies on recruitment intentions found a negative effect of disability on performance expectations ([Ren et al., 2008](#)). Thus, disabled people have to overcome these negative stereotypes to sustain their work identities, using strategies such as highlighting their agency to contest how their disability limits productivity ([Jammaers et al., 2016](#)). Driven by these stereotypes and founded concerns that their disability can result in disparate treatment, many people with non-visible disabilities face a difficult decision about disclosure. They must weigh the benefits of gaining access to accommodations and being able to explain behaviour against the costs of being disadvantaged ([von Schrader et al., 2014](#)).

A final related barrier is the misperception that the benefits of employing a disabled person will not exceed the costs ([Schartz et al., 2006](#)). For instance, a UK survey found that 20 per cent of employers consider the costs of modifying the workplace makes it expensive to employ disabled people ([Reed in Partnership, 2016](#)). However, consistent results from the U.S. Job Accommodation Network (JAN) annual survey shows that accommodations can also benefit the firm through the retention of valuable employees, improvements in productivity, savings in workers' compensation and increased diversity. Additionally, these benefits require little investment; a high percentage (58 per cent) of accommodations cost nothing to make, while the remainder typically cost approximately \$500 ([Loy, 2015](#)). Further, employees without disabilities might also require accommodations. This was particularly salient in the shift to working-from-home following COVID-19. While some disabled employees benefit from flexible working, so do those with caring responsibilities or even people who live far from the office. Emerging evidence in fact suggests that accommodating personal needs, regardless of disability status, can have a positive spillover in perceived organisational support for all employees, creating a more effective and equitable workplace ([Schur et al., 2014](#)).

Addressing these workplace barriers serves not simply a moral purpose, but a business one too. First, as an insufficiently utilised resource, businesses recruiting disabled people tap into a new labour pool. Second, employees within the business can also acquire disabilities, which tends to happen particularly over one's working life. As the population ages, the incidence of disability increases ([World Health Organisation, 2011](#)). Disability-inclusive environments are, thus, also important to retain and advance staff, especially considering the [rising retirement age](#). Third, it creates an opportunity to address the demands of consumers, who are being physically or virtually turned away from businesses that do not cater to them ([WebAIM, 2021](#); [Williams & Brownlow, 2020](#)). It is therefore not surprising that a recent [Accenture](#) report (2019) found a strong correlation between financial performance (both in terms of profitability and value creation) and disability-inclusive practices.

How to address disability inclusion?

Despite the increasing awareness and evidence on inequalities experienced by disabled people, very little information is available on which interventions are effective in equalising workplace outcomes. Some insights can be gleaned regarding the role of workplace practices by exploring the experiences and outcomes of disabled employees within and between companies. Using a large-scale dataset of more than 30,000 US employees, [Schur](#) and colleagues (2009) found that disability gaps vary significantly across companies. At the same time, they disappear in workplaces where all employees report high levels of company fairness and responsiveness, pointing to the importance of an inclusive corporate culture. Thus, firm-level interventions that focus on organisational culture may be promising in ensuring equal opportunities at work.

Reframing accommodations

Interventions that support the needs of all employees, regardless of disability status, can have both a direct impact for disabled people and positive spillovers on workplace culture ([Schur et al., 2014](#)). It is worth keeping in mind that not all disabilities are visible, nor do they require accommodations all the time. Therefore, companies can frame accommodations not as disability-specific but as something that all employees can require. For instance, GSK has changed their messaging from “making accommodations”, which holds disability-specific sentiment, to “being accommodating” ([Scott-Parker, 2021](#)). In doing so, the new message highlights the importance of culture and behaviour, as opposed to a policy solely regarding disabled employees. Indeed, the pandemic has shown that individual accommodations requests are now normal: businesses are planning to tailor onboarding for new hires and increase the flexibility of where and when employees are expected to work ([Kropp, 2021](#)). For disabled employees, this decentralised flexibility can have a positive impact on job satisfaction ([Baumgärtner et al., 2015](#)), and is critical in attracting and retaining people at work.

Increasing awareness of disability

Given the barriers discussed previously, there is a clear need for training and dissemination of accurate information. Training sessions, particularly for management, can help people better understand the challenges faced by disabled employees and reduce the stigma or bias of being disabled ([Kennedy Jr. et al., 2019](#)). The evidence supporting the effectiveness of disability diversity training is still lacking ([Phillips et al., 2016](#)), however they can increase awareness of disability ([Kulkarni et al., 2018](#)). In the UK, the Disability Confident scheme encourages employees to raise awareness of disability inclusion efforts, with self-reported evidence indicating that 88 per cent of employers who have signed up have increased awareness of disability equality amongst recruitment staff ([Department for Work & Pensions, 2018](#)). One way to improve on this training is to consider not just the content of communications, but also the messenger. Testimonials and first-hand accounts can help dispel inaccurate stereotypes by highlighting how disabled employees perform all job elements deemed important and actively contribute to the organisation ([Bonaccio et al., 2020](#)).

Start from the inside

Tackling ableism at work also means dealing with the reality that employees are not being heard or might be motivated to keep their disabilities hidden. Enhancing the participation and visibility of disabled people can help identify barriers for self-disclosure and remove undue hardship ([Baker et al., 2018](#); [Sherbin et al., 2017](#)). Most companies still need to implement a comprehensive plan for recruiting, promoting and retaining disabled employees ([Khan et al., 2019](#)). It is also important to consider that disability type has an impact on the level of integration in the firm, and the severity of the stigma an individual is likely to experience ([Vornholt et al., 2013](#)). Therefore, auditing existing practices and consulting disabled people on barriers as well as the design of programmes can yield positive outcomes for firms. To craft these policies, insights from qualitative interviews stress the importance of identifying operational challenges in day-to-day operations by seeing them with accessible needs in mind ([Baird & Reese, 2018](#)). For instance, “can text-heavy reports be produced in video or audio format?” or “can slides be sent to attendees ahead of time?”

Moving forward

Including disabled people in the workplace can benefit workplaces and help garner new and better perspectives on disability. However, to close the disability employment gap, we need to be able to evaluate progress by collecting data while being aware that there are very heterogeneous disability experiences. To move forward, organisations should seek commitment from senior management to work together to create an organizational environment that improves disability visibility, acceptance, and support.



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