To ensure equal opportunities for disabled employees, organisations must listen to them

*Perceptions of disability are one of the biggest barriers that disabled people face in the workplace. The way in which disability is spoken of influences the attitudes people have, which can result in negative stereotypes and misconceptions. **Jasmine Virhia** highlights the voices of disabled professionals she spoke with. She writes that the beauty and perils of language are that it has the capacity to change the way in which we think.*

To celebrate Disability History Month, I highlight the voices of disabled professional workers who have shared their experiences in the workplace,

The qualitative part of The Inclusion Initiative's [Diversity and Productivity](#) research programme has involved interviewing 200 people across banking and finance, professional services, technology, manufacturing and the charity sector to understand better what helps and hinders productivity at work. In doing so, we've sought to understand the actions firms can take in terms of policy and practice to create environments that enable productivity for *all* employees. These actions can often be small and inexpensive, and they have a disproportionately positive impact, particularly for those who face societal and professional barriers based on their identity.

By sharing experiences here, I hope that you as a colleague or leader will gain an understanding of how you can [ensure equal opportunities](#) for disabled employees and contribute to creating more inclusive workplaces. What became clear throughout our interviews was that perceptions of disability are one of, if not the, biggest barriers that disabled people still face in the workplace. The way in which disability is spoken and written about across society, particularly in the workplace, influences the attitudes people have, which can often result in negative stereotypes and misconceptions. The [beauty and perils of language](#) are that it has the capacity to change the way in which we think.

Without realising, you may be endorsing medical perspectives which often use dehumanising language, placing disability within a normal/abnormal binary, further implying that 'something… needs to be fixed' (Andrews, 2016). In contrast, a social perspective highlights how a distinction must be made between challenges related specifically to disability and those due to biased societal attitudes and values.

Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of participants.

Mei, a researcher said:

"So, I think visual impairment is not a problem for me to fulfil my role and my duty, but people's attitudes towards me and my disability, for me. is the biggest barrier."

Charlotte, who works in the charity sector, said:

"People judge you. You know, if you say you have a disability, they're like, okay. But then they automatically think oh well, you can't do that, so I'll set the bar down here. Or they'll set it up here. If you say you have a certain disability, people automatically think what you can and can't do rather than talking to you and going from there."

Elizabeth, a brand manager said that:

"[Disabled people are often faced with the] soft bigotry of low expectations."

It is necessary to ensure spaces for people to highlight their skills, expertise, and goals for career development within their role, alongside any additional requirements which may involve adjustments to working practices or environments. Employees should not have to seek out safe spaces to have conversations about what they need at work to be productive. This should be handled privately and treated as highly sensitive…not doing so deters people from seeking out the help they need.

Georgia, a consultant, explained:

"We did an HR push to upload the whole self-ID thing, to update your data and to indicate if you needed any special material or resources, and I remember doing that, uploading and updating it in the system. I remember the way it was handled. The default response was really weird and off-putting, so I think I just avoided the topic. I had ticked the box saying yes, I'd like to consider alternative means of support, and then as soon as

that was updated, I remember someone from HR instantly put something in my diary, which was not private. She said, "This is to discuss the special needs that you have" in the subject space. My team are constantly looking at my diary […] trying to schedule with clients and whatever, and I just felt like it was very unprofessional. I thought if you can't really get this right and handle it in a sensitive way, I don't think I'm going to put my hand up and ask for much more support."

While there are actions organisations and employees can take to be more inclusive, it's necessary to understand that not all disabled people will want, nor require the same types of support.

Georgia also said:

"Sensitive recognition of individual needs. So yeah, I think my organisation is probably trying to do the right thing but there's not necessarily that psychological safety for people to feel okay. To me, the sensitive part is missing, so sensitivity around creating more of an atmosphere of acceptance."

Given that it enables colleagues to come to work without the psychological strain of self-censorship, psychological safety is not only a crucial aspect of employee wellbeing in the workplace but it can encourage productivity in various ways. Psychological safety captures the extent to which one believes that others will give them the benefit of the doubt when taking risks (Edmondson, 1999). Perceptions of psychological safety are therefore reliant on the quality of relationships between team members when measured by trust (Gu et al., 2013; Huang & Jiang, 2012; Schulte et al., 2012) and the successful promotion of psychological safety is reliant on changing leadership behaviours, organisational practices, characteristics of the team and relationship networks (Newman et al., 2017).

Georgia continued with:

"I think it's one thing to actually feel safe in an environment, and it's another to think that you're creating safety. If you were to ask people in my company what does psychological safety mean, I'm pretty sure that, 80 per cent or so could give a decent answer, but if you were to watch them day to day and see how they talk or maybe see how they've interpreted that concept, it's going to be pretty different, just because as a company, I think we're still figuring out, just how sensitively, to gauge where people are at and how

to prevent people feeling judged if they have a specific condition or need."

Actions can often speak louder than words. Those wanting to create psychologically safe environments can do so through their behaviours. Reinforcing your employees' strengths by providing opportunities for these strengths to be demonstrated will not only contribute to an individual's job satisfaction but will help to remove the stigma disabled people often face in the workplace. Similarly, employees will demonstrate whether they feel psychologically safe when you can observe that they are confident in seeking help with managing job demands, engaging in open dialogues about errors or mistakes, reporting instances of bullying or unfair treatment and general dissenting opinions without fear of repercussions (Kahn, 1990; May et al., 2004).

When engaging in performance-based conversations, having a person-centred approach underlined by empathy will likely render discussions more useful for both parties.

Georgia suggested:

"Positive storytelling, sharing of an individual's strengths and just who they are. You know, whatever they bring to the table has helped when potentially, there might be stigma or there might be like a lack of understanding."

It can often be a challenge between organisations or managers wanting to seem fair with their direct reports or teams, but then, obviously needing to maybe pay special attention to certain things. My manager gets stuck in that trap, I think, so showing empathy and maybe willingness to flex and accommodate as needed, without worrying 'what about this person+'…"

The best way to understand what your employees need? Listen to them to improve their productivity at work.

Charlotte said:

"You know, the only way you can do that is by listening. Sometimes you can talk and talk and talk, but the best way to get information is by listening to others, observing, looking how they're responding. Body language: 'is the body language positive?', 'are they hiding?', 'are they shy?', 'are they closing in?' You can see in their face, you can see by the body language, 'are they standing up straight, confident?' 'Are they trying to hide?'

'Are they answering when you're asking questions?' 'Are they stepping back a bit?' 'Is it because it's too noisy?', 'Is it because it's too busy?' So, there are so many different things you have to take into account to be the best deliverer of whatever it may be. It could be emotional support, mental support, it could be physical support."

Using data to motivate and implement changes in the workplace requires organisations to understand the lived experiences of those who are underrepresented in the workforce or who often are "neglected" in the sense of low levels of coverage by policies to aid their progression. We aim to share specific actions in the coming months that both organisations and individuals can take to embrace diversity and maximise productivity.

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