Disability and leadership: Engendering visibility, acceptance, and support

This landmark report offers an overview of the case for inclusion of people with disabilities not only in the workforce but also in executive leadership roles. By recognizing the unique challenges faced by leaders with disabilities, organizations can build more comprehensive diversity policies to create an inclusive environment for all employees.

It seems that every conversation about the most critical leadership challenges facing our clients today includes a discussion of diversity: "How do we get more women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ community into the boardroom and C-suite?" But the diversity discussion almost never includes leaders with disabilities. The conversation is complicated by the difficulty of defining the term "disability"—some people are physically disabled but cognitively unimpaired, others cope with mental illness, and still others suffer from conditions (such as addiction) that make employment difficult to sustain (see sidebar "How we define 'disability'").

According to one study, 3 in 10 white-collar professionals in the United States have a disability.[1] Yet, despite being "the nation's largest minority,"[2] people with disabilities remain invisible in the workplace. In fact, there is a widespread notion among senior executives that there are no people with disabilities in their ranks. Indeed, while chief human resources officers (CHROs) and chief diversity officers (CDOs) are increasingly likely to be well versed in the legal, practical, and organizational aspects of disability and inclusion, many of the executives they work with are not. As a result, they may have never taken the time to think about the topic of disability at all, let alone inclusion of people with disabilities as part of diversity and inclusion policies—and how a disability can be an asset in a skilled leader.

While some companies have started building inclusion policies that welcome people with disabilities in entry-level positions, the inclusion of people with disabilities in the ranks of senior leaders is still emerging as a priority. Our research uncovered that to succeed, many leaders with disabilities have had to hide their disability and its extent for as long as possible. If they received support, it was primarily under the radar when an observant and caring leader, boss, or mentor helped them navigate the organization to reach the top ranks.

Simply stated, we can do better.

This three-part article will explore the paths of companies leading the way on inclusion for people with disabilities. It is based on interviews with leaders with and without disabilities, an analysis of research on the topic, and our experience in executive search and disability and inclusion (see sidebar "About the research").

In part one, we detail the case for including people with disabilities in the workforce at all levels—from entry-level positions to the C-suite. In part two, we go in depth on the challenges of including people with disabilities. This sets the stage for part three, which focuses on how to create an environment for people with disabilities and the role of leadership in doing so.

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[1] Specifically, the study found that up to 30% of college-educated employees between the ages of 21 and 65 working full-time in white-collar professions in the United States have a disability. Most of the data in this report centers on the US population. For reference, the World Health Organization estimates that 15% of the global population has a disability, and across the globe, people with disabilities are less likely than able-bodied individuals to be employed. For more information, see Laura Sherbin, Julia Taylor Kennedy, Pooja Jain-Link, and Kennedy Ihezie, *Disabilities and Inclusion: Global Findings, Center for Talent Innovation*, 2017, talentinnovation.org; *World Report on Disability: Summary*, World Health Organization and World Bank Group, 2011, apps.who.int.

[2] "Diverse perspectives: People with disabilities fulfilling your business goals," US Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy, accessed October 17, 2018, https://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/fact/diverse.htm.

How we define "disability"

"Disability" can cover a long list of physical, cognitive, developmental, sensory, and psychological conditions. For the purposes of this three-part article, we define "disabilities" in the widest sense. Disabilities may be readily visible, as with a physical disability requiring the use of a prosthetic or wheelchair; completely invisible, as with a learning disability such as dyslexia; or intermittently perceptible, as with a speech disorder. They may change in severity over time, as with a condition that heals (such as a broken leg) or one that gets worse (such as a degenerative condition). Some disabilities may become apparent only in some activities and not in others, as with a disability that impairs the ability to type on a keyboard but not to speak into a talk-to-text device. Some disabilities may be lifelong, while others arise years after birth.

Definitions of disability may be legal, medical, functional, and more, and each of those definitions may be contested. Legal definitions of disability vary from country to country.[1] As we discuss in part two, the lack of a clear definition of disability can be a barrier to the development of inclusion policies and programs to support people with disabilities in the workforce.

However, this ambiguity should not be an excuse for inaction. At the organizations we interviewed, the only consensus was the imperative to act; organization leaders must decide what they are trying to achieve with their disability inclusion policies, which will influence who should be included in the definition.

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[1] For example, in the United States, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines a person with a disability as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment.

"My disability has made me more eager to be successful because there are not that many examples of people with a disability in leadership roles . . . Who is the most famous person with a disability that you know? Most people probably can't name anyone—maybe FDR. That drives me a lot."

—David Carmel, vice president, strategic alliances, Atara Biotherapeutics

About the research

We began our efforts to deepen our understanding of this important area of diversity and inclusion by interviewing respected professionals, executives, and academics who have visible disabilities, as well as leaders in disability rights and advocacy. These individuals were generously and remarkably candid, and they helped us quickly home in on the key challenges and opportunities faced by organizations that are committed to creating fully inclusive workplaces—including at the top. Special thanks to:

Victor Calise
Commissioner,
New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities

David Carmel
Vice president, strategic alliances,
Atara Biotherapeutics

Ila Eckhoff
Managing director,
BlackRock

Richard Ellenson
Chief executive officer,
Cerebral Palsy Foundation

Sheena Iyengar
S. T. Lee Professor of Business,
Columbia Business School

Tim McHale
Chief marketing officer,
Madison Avenue Social

Mark Pinney
Chief financial officer,
Penrose Hill

Cecile Rochet
Inclusion and diversity innovation lead,
Accenture

James Stearns
Regional trade compliance counsel,
Americas and Asia Pacific,
Accenture

Susan Scheer
Chief executive officer,
Institute for Career Development

We also interviewed senior human resources executives about their companies' practices with respect to inclusion of people with disabilities. To complete the picture, we looked at current academic and corporate research, synthesized best practices from many sources, and drew on our experience in executive search, our work consulting with our clients on diversity and inclusion, and the expertise of our colleagues who are leaders in disability advocacy.

Why include people with disabilities?

The case for inclusion of people with disabilities is not fundamentally different from the case for inclusion of women, people of color, and the LGBTQ population. Numerous consultancies have produced research reports validating that diversity improves the bottom line.[3] Because inclusion of people with disabilities is still such a new area of focus for most organizations (if they focus on it at all), these studies generally do not explicitly identify people with disabilities as a diversity group to study.

Still, many companies have begun to design programs targeted specifically at entry-level employment for people with disabilities of all skill levels. These include programs targeted at veterans with disabilities or customized recruiting for highly technical positions for which people with disabilities may be uniquely qualified—for example, technology companies hiring individuals with autism for technically skilled roles.[4]

These programs are a good start—if only a start—given that people with disabilities in the United States are more than twice as likely as people without disabilities to be unemployed.[5] And many of those who are employed may be underemployed or underutilized because of insufficient accommodations or individuals' own efforts to conceal or minimize their disability. Here, we provide some background information on the size of the population of people with disabilities, as well as an overview of some recent research on the case for diversity and inclusion.

The number of people with disabilities in your workplace is large— and likely to get larger in the future

"Why do we need to worry about including people with disabilities when we don't have any people with disabilities in our company?"

—Senior profit-and-loss leader

There are two main reasons why leaders don't always consider people with disabilities in their inclusion policies. The first is not understanding that people

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[3] For example, McKinsey & Company's *Women Matter* series, which has been published every year since 2007, provides a wealth of evidence that achieving gender parity could enlarge the labor force and increase prosperity—to the tune of $12 trillion in additional global GDP by 2025. For more, see *Women Matter: Time to Accelerate*, McKinsey & Company, October 2017, mckinsey.com.

[4] Anne Kadet, "Startup touts unique talent pool: Workers with autism," *Wall Street Journal*, September 4, 2018, wsj.com.

[5] "Persons with a disability: Labor force characteristics study," US Bureau of Labor Statistics, June 21, 2018, https://www.bls.gov/news.release/disabl.nr0.htm.

with disabilities can do the jobs they have in their organizations. The second, more egregiously, is not realizing that a significant number of their existing employees have disabilities and need support (beyond that already in place through compliance with relevant legislation, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act).

Recent studies suggest that the latter reasoning is extremely widespread. A groundbreaking study on people with disabilities in the workforce by the Center for Talent Innovation (CTI) found that 30% of white-collar professionals in the United States have a disability.[6] But as with other diversity groups, many individuals with disabilities "cover"—that is, do whatever they can to avoid revealing they have some kind of disability to their employers.[7] The CTI study found that only 1 in 10 employees with a disability discloses it to their employers.

As the workforce ages and faces more health issues, the rate of disability in the workplace is likely to increase. Indeed, the percentage of people with disabilities in the United States rose from 11.9% in 2010 to 12.6% in 2015.[8] These studies suggest that the population of employees with disabilities in any company's workforce likely *outnumbers* the population of people of color or LGBTQ individuals at the company—and it's likely to grow in the future.

Any of your current employees could become disabled at any time

"I had a couple of friends who got spinal cord injuries, too, but they worked in investment banking. It was much more difficult for them than for me in the healthcare industry. There was no sense that their limitations were worthy of being accommodated."

—David Carmel, vice president, strategic alliances, Atara Biotherapeutics

Just over one in four of today's 20-year-olds will become disabled before reaching age 67.[9] This conservative estimate takes into account only those people who meet the US Social Security Administration's criteria for receiving Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits—which is not sufficiently inclusive of people with disabilities. Indeed, while the widespread image of a person with a disability may be someone in a wheelchair or who is blind or deaf, research (and common sense) shows that disability affects individuals in myriad ways and can be temporary or permanent. According to the World Health Organization, one in five adults in the United States will experience some sort of mental health disorder—mood disorders, anxiety, phobias, impulse control issues, and the like—in a given year.[10]

[6] Sherbin, Taylor Kennedy, Jain-Link, and Ihezie, *Disabilities and Inclusion: Global Findings*, 2017.

[7] "Covering" is a term originally coined by Erving Goffman in his book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1986). It is used in the diversity and inclusion context to describe the steps individuals take to hide personal attributes (for example, race, sexual orientation, religion, disability) that prevent them from fitting into a mainstream culture.

[8] Michelle Yin, Dahlia Shaewitz, Cynthia Overton, and Deeza-Mae Smith, *A Hidden Market: The Purchasing Power of Working-Age Adults with Disabilities*, American Institutes for Research, April 2018, p. 2, air.org.

[9] "Fact sheet," US Social Security Administration, 2018, https://www.ssa.gov/news/press/factsheets/basicfact-alt.pdf.

[10] "Mental health by the numbers," National Alliance on Mental Illness, accessed October 17, 2018, https://www.nami.org/learn-more/mental-health-by-the-numbers.

Our interview group included multiple examples of individuals who became permanently disabled in the prime of their lives and careers and had to completely reshape their professional paths because their employers were not prepared to support them at the onset of their disability. "After my accident, I tried to find my way back in with my old colleagues, but they just felt my wheelchair was too big an impediment," said Mark Pinney, chief financial officer of Penrose Hill. "There was a lot of golfing, travel, and other activities; I just did not fit. A few individuals made an effort, but the culture was not supportive. It was impossible."

Being inclusive of diversity groups, such as people with disabilities, is good for business

"Our community's differences are our strengths from a business perspective. Whether it is attracting top candidates with or without a disability who value working in an inclusive environment, reducing costly staff turnover, or ensuring that products and services meet the needs of customers with disabilities, the results add up to an untapped economic boom for businesses."

—Susan Scheer, chief executive officer, Institute for Career Development

The research supporting the business case for diversity and inclusion is too extensive to summarize in this article. Some key findings, however, directly or indirectly support the inclusion of people with disabilities.

Research supports the value of diverse groups in problem-solving

Numerous studies document the value of diversity and inclusion in leadership. A 2018 study by McKinsey of more than 1,000 companies across 12 countries found that "companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 21% more likely to outperform on profitability and 27% more likely to have superior value creation" compared with companies in the bottom quartile. In addition, the study found that "companies in the top quartile for ethnic/cultural diversity on executive teams were 33% more likely to have industry-leading profitability."[11]

Unsurprisingly, given the lack of visibility on this topic and the prevalence of covering by those with disabilities, the study did not look at the population of people with disabilities on top teams. However, the authors did suggest that "the myriad ways in which diversity exists beyond gender (for example, LGBTQ+, age/generation, international experience) . . . can be a key differentiator among companies."

Research into team dynamics offers an even more persuasive case for diversity and inclusion in general and for people with disabilities specifically. Much of that research reveals direct links between diversity on teams and better performance. Writing in *Harvard Business Review*, the authors of "Why diverse teams are smarter" cite numerous studies that demonstrate the superiority of diverse teams in such tasks as sifting evidence, solving problems, correctly pricing stocks, making decisions, and innovating.[12]

Similarly, writing in *Scientific American*, Katherine W. Phillips of Columbia Business School wrote about her work surveying decades of research on team diversity: "It seems obvious that a group of people with diverse individual expertise would be better than a homogeneous group at solving complex, nonroutine problems. It is less obvious that social diversity should work in the same way—yet the science shows that it does."[13]

[11] Vivian Hunt, Sara Prince, Sundiatu Dixon-Fyle, and Lareina Yee, *Delivering through Diversity*, McKinsey & Company, January 2018, mckinsey.com.
[12] David Rock and Heidi Grant, "Why diverse teams are smarter," *Harvard Business Review*, November 4, 2016, hbr.org.
[13] Katherine W. Phillips, "How diversity makes us smarter," *Scientific American*, October 1, 2014, scientificamerican.com.

This better functionality is partly because "interacting with individuals who are different forces group members to prepare better, to anticipate alternative viewpoints, and to expect that reaching consensus will take effort," she writes. "People work harder in diverse environments both cognitively and socially. They might not like it, but the hard work can lead to better outcomes."

People with disabilities bring unique life experiences and perspectives to their roles

Like other diversity groups, employees with disabilities bring valuable perspectives and life experiences that abled employees do not have. Consider, for example, the difference in perspective that an engineer in a wheelchair or with a visual disability might bring to a team of abled engineers working on a self-driving car.

These different experiences and perspectives stem not only from discrimination and bias that people with disabilities may have encountered but also from the environment they face. Indeed, many people with disabilities occupy a physical world not designed for them. As a result, they must constantly devise fresh problem-solving strategies, develop new mental maps, find effective communication strategies, and repeatedly demonstrate resilience simply to do what those without disabilities are readily able to do.

CTI's recent study found that three-quarters of employees with disabilities report having ideas that would drive value for their companies versus only two-thirds of employees without disabilities. According to Julia Taylor Kennedy, executive vice president and director of publications at CTI, "From our interviews and focus groups, we have learned that people with disabilities are particularly innovative. In order to navigate the world with a disability, they have to problem-solve each day."[14]

In addition to using this experience to bring value to the workplace, employees with disabilities can often help companies cater better to people with disabilities. The American Institutes for Research estimates that working-age people with disabilities in the United States have $490 billion in disposable income—roughly equivalent to that of the African-American population.[15] Clearly, companies that do not consider these consumers are missing out.

People with disabilities may bring special skills, finely honed skills, or fierce drive that makes them uniquely valuable to organizations

Some companies, such as Microsoft, have recognized that hard-to-fill technical roles requiring

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[14] "A talent pool that many companies neglect: Employees with disabilities," press release, Center for Talent Innovation, October 12, 2017, https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/a-talent-pool-that-many-companies-neglect-employees-with-disabilities-300535118.html.

[15] Yin, Shaewitz, Overton, and Smith, *A Hidden Market*, p. 1.

concentration on highly repetitive analytical tasks can be ideally suited to individuals with certain types of autism.[16] Our interviewees also pointed out that organizations face challenges that a person with a disability might be better at solving.

In reality, leaders with disabilities who have risen to the tops of their organizations may have unique leadership qualities relative to other leaders. Indeed, because most people either consciously or unconsciously assume that "disabled" is equivalent to "not able," leaders with disabilities must explicitly articulate and repeatedly demonstrate the value that they add to an organization, on a team, or in a specific role more than abled leaders.

For people with disabilities, the need to prove their value does not end with an offer letter. Once inside an organization, our interviewees—all of whom have reached the top echelons of their professions—told us that they still have to proactively demonstrate

value and engagement well beyond the level expected of the abled. "I would never ask for help related to my disability early in my career," said James Stearns, regional trade compliance counsel for the Americas and Asia Pacific at Accenture. "I would never let them see me sweat." According to Heidrick & Struggles research, resilience (which includes the drive to overcome any obstacles or setbacks to achieve professional goals) and adaptability (which includes the capacity to adapt and flex to different situations for impact) are critical leadership qualities of the highest-performing leaders.[17]

People with disabilities may have unique advantages in the workforce of the future, too, where robots and artificial intelligence will replace human beings in performing routinized tasks or roles. As Columbia Business School Professor Sheena Iyengar told us, the need for individuals with disabilities to constantly think more proactively about the value they contribute to an organization could be putting them in the forefront of today's changing nature of work. "Routinized jobs are disappearing," Iyengar said. "What we are hiring people for now is judgment, imagination, and social skills. One of the reasons people with disabilities were disadvantaged in the past is because they could not conform to conformity, but if every single person is going to have to prove their unique ability, then there should be less discrimination against people with disabilities."

[16] Kadet, "Startup touts unique talent pool."
[17] Colin Price and Sharon Toye, *Accelerating Performance: How Organizations Can Mobilize, Execute, and Transform with Agility*, Wiley, January 2017. See especially Chapter 9, "Accelerating Leaders."

A growing movement to fully include people with disabilities is underway

"By including people with disabilities in the workplace, we all gain a new and better perspective on disability—and it also changes individuals with disabilities' perception of themselves, and what is possible."

—Victor Calise, commissioner, New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities

More than ever before, many companies now actively pursue initiatives and programs to support inclusion of people with disabilities across their organizations. Each year, the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) and Disability:IN jointly issue a Disability Equality Index (DEI) report based on a survey of disability inclusion practices among Fortune 1000 companies and American Law 200 law firms. Since the pilot survey in 2013–14, the number of corporations participating in the DEI has risen from 48 to today's number of 145. Of those 145 companies, 62.7% achieved the highest score possible on the 2018 DEI—a substantial increase from 2015, when only 22.5% of the 80 participating companies earned the top score.[18]

While the report identifies areas in which companies lag behind, its sponsors say they expect to see more companies participate in future surveys and "a corporate community fully dedicated to enhancing their cultures and increasing opportunities for the disability community."

Conclusion

"To the extent that we can get more visible role models, then sure—people will start believing in individuals with disabilities more."

— Sheena Iyengar, S. T. Lee Professor of Business, Columbia Business School

"You cannot be what you cannot see" is a commonly cited reason for increasing the visibility of diversity at the top of organizations. Today the argument is frequently made that women and people of color who are working their way through school or up the corporate ladder need role models in leadership who look like them and who have had similar life experiences. That same argument holds for the very large number of employees in our workforce with disabilities, many of whom struggle behind the scenes while wondering if there is any hope for achieving their professional goals.

But we cannot expect people with disabilities who have covered their disabilities in order to achieve their success to openly share their stories until they are certain their organizations have policies that will support them.

So what can we do?

The case for including people with disabilities in diversity and inclusion policies and programs is abundantly clear. These policies can lead to improved group problem-solving, strengthened teams informed by varied life experiences and perspectives, and uniquely valuable special skill sets. Above all, including people with disabilities is good for business. That said, it presents numerous unique but foreseeable challenges, which are addressed in part two. Part three discusses how leading companies are paving a path for people with disabilities in inclusion policies.

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[18] *The 2018 Disability Equality Index: A Record Year for Corporate Disability Inclusion and Leadership*, American Association of People with Disabilities and Disability:IN, accessed October 17, 2018, disabilityequalityindex.org.

Challenges of including people with disabilities

Essential for senior executives who have little experience with the issue of disability and inclusion but want to come to terms with it is to *see it*—which means, first of all, seeing that disabilities exist in their workforce. Next, it means seeing people with visible disabilities not as *disabled first* but as *people first*. It means recognizing that many people with invisible disabilities feel compelled to hide those disabilities or else face outright discrimination. It means recognizing how bias toward individuals with visible and invisible disabilities operates and understanding how they resemble and differ from other diversity groups. It means acknowledging that workplace environments may discriminate against those with disabilities.

So what can be done? Here we address the key challenges to inclusion of employees with disabilities: a lack of understanding that disability already exists in the workplace, difficulty in crafting a comprehensive inclusion policy for employees with disabilities, and conscious and unconscious bias. In part three, we will review best practices to overcoming these challenges.

We don't always see disabilities—both visible and invisible

"[For most of my career], I spent all of my time trying to make my disability disappear. Even at my wedding, I told my videographer never to film me walking. When I am at my desk, I keep my cane in the corner. I try to make my disability invisible."

—Ila Eckhoff, managing director, BlackRock

One of the initial obstacles in creating inclusive workplaces is that many leaders and organizations don't understand that disability already exists in their workplace. As discussed in the introduction, "disability" can cover a long list of both visible and invisible physical, cognitive, developmental, sensory, and psychological conditions. Even as a community, people with disabilities do not agree about how to define disability—many do not self-identify as part of

Disability is an interaction between a person and an environment

"I miss out on a lot because people always present slides at meetings and I can't see them. All they have to do is send them to me in advance, which I have learned to ask them to do. But they would never think of it on their own."

— Sheena Iyengar, S. T. Lee Professor of Business, Columbia Business School

the community at all. According to Mark Pinney, chief financial officer of Penrose Hill, "This is a key issue with disability . . . are we more alike (people with disabilities in general) or more different (blind versus spinal cord injured)? It is hard to define the community that we live in." Obscuring the issue further, most individuals with disabilities do whatever possible to hide them in their workplace. The difficulty in developing a commonly accepted definition of disability leads to—indeed, can even be an excuse for—inaction on the topic at the organization level.

Among the organizations we interviewed, there was no consensus about the best way to define disability for the purposes of a disability inclusion policy—other than the consensus that each organization must decide for itself what it is trying to achieve with its disability inclusion policy and therefore who should be included in the definition. Some organizations have opted not to define disability at all but rather clarify that their policy is to support an inclusive workplace for all, including employees with disabilities—however that may be defined by the employee.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, an international human rights treaty adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2006 and subsequently signed by more than 170 countries and the European Union, does not define disability. Instead, its preamble says that "disability is an evolving concept" and that "disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."[19]

This understanding of disability sheds light on a unique challenge of crafting a comprehensive inclusion policy that considers employees with disabilities: it is not necessarily the individual's attributes that prevent his or her full participation at work but rather physical facilities and widely accepted practices that favor the abled. Indeed, workplace design; talent recruitment, selection, and promotion practices; and the way work gets done often create conditions that make it difficult for people with disabilities to fully contribute.

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[19] "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD): Preamble," United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, accessed October 17, 2018, https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/preamble.html.

To craft inclusive policies, company leaders must take a fresh look at nearly all operations. In the parking garage, does the door to the elevator bank block the wheelchair ramp? For meetings, are there alternatives to everyone sitting around a table? Can text-heavy reports be produced in video or audio format for the sight-impaired? How would a training session or meeting accommodate a hearing-impaired colleague? These and other day-to-day aspects of work can stand as critical barriers to employees with disabilities. The first step in identifying operational challenges is seeing them with accessible needs in mind. Only then can they be properly addressed.

"If you have someone who has a hearing disability and you add a hearing loop to a conference room or captions to videos, that disability goes away," said Victor Calise, commissioner of the New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities. "If you have an employee who is blind, and you use video that has audio description, that disability goes away."

Bias against and fear of people with disabilities are common and often widely accepted

"Adults do weird stuff [around people with disabilities]— like when I am out with my wife, they will talk to her like I am not there or speak loudly like I can't hear."

—David Carmel, vice president, strategic alliances, Atara Biotherapeutics

Due to conscious and unconscious bias, people with disabilities are often viewed as objects of pity or charity, or in need of social protection. They are seen, consciously or unconsciously, as *not able*.

Unfortunately, an all-too-common theme in our interviews with leaders with disabilities was the experience of not getting a role for which they were qualified simply because of their disability. "People with disabilities have to answer the question 'what is your value-added?' because other people don't know how you can contribute," said Sheena Iyengar, S. T. Lee Professor of Business at Columbia Business School. "As a blind person, I have always known that I have to create value. When you have a disability, you can't quite make a fairness argument because there might actually be tasks you are unable to do, so it is really up to you to understand and demonstrate how you will create value."

"Society regards disability not just as a limitation in sight, hearing, mobility, or mental or intellectual functioning, but as a condition of generalized defect and damage," said Fredric Schroeder, first vice president of the National Federation of the Blind. "While it is recognized that people with disabilities face discrimination, it is quietly yet firmly believed that the limited opportunity they face is at least in equal degree the inevitable, unescapable consequence of their infirmity."[20]

In the worst cases of conscious bias, many individuals may (overtly or quietly) experience fear of or for people with disabilities. This fear may be a consequence of good intentions—for example, the fear of saying something wrong that might offend the person, fear that the person may get hurt in an unfamiliar setting, or fear that the person may do something that hurts someone else. Other fears may be born of lack of understanding of how the disability affects the person's behavior, leading to the fear that the person might do something unexpected. At their most harmful, these fears are unfounded and based on misinformation—for example, that the disability "might be catching."

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[20] "People with disabilities: The orphan minority," speech delivered at Jacobus tenBroek Disability Law Symposium, March 2015, https://nfb.org/images/nfb/publications/bm/bm15/bm1506/bm150605.htm.

Even if they are not fearful, many people are simply uncomfortable around people with disabilities and will avoid contact with them. Our interviews uncovered a clear and present theme of blatant bias and discomfort that these leaders simply have had to ignore.

Conclusion

"It is a tough truth that people with disabilities are often not recognized for their potential. An even tougher truth is that companies working to create inclusion often think acceptance, kindness, and understanding are what's needed. What's really needed are the supports and accommodations that allow an individual to see and fulfill their potential. These solutions are out there; we need to be better at sharing them."

—Richard Ellenson, chief executive officer, Cerebral Palsy Foundation

People with disabilities certainly share some characteristics with other diversity groups. They face discrimination; their differences may be visible (as with race) or invisible (as with sexual orientation). And membership in one group does not preclude membership in another—a situation dubbed "intersectionality," in which, for instance, a partially sighted black lesbian is at the intersection of four identities historically subject to discrimination.

But the population of people with disabilities is fundamentally different from other populations in ways that must be thoughtfully considered in developing effective inclusion policies and programs. This reality puts a considerable onus on organization leaders to carefully consider inclusion policies for people with disabilities as opposed to other groups of people. In part three, we will examine how organizations already on the journey to create forward-looking disability and inclusion policies are approaching these challenges.

How leaders can create an inclusive environment for employees with disabilities

Despite the challenges discussed in part two, many companies—such as Accenture, Delta, Goldman Sachs, Kaiser Permanente, and Merck—are breaking new ground in supporting people with disabilities in leadership roles. And several organizations—including the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD), the National Organization on Disability, and Disability:IN—support the dissemination of best practices in disability inclusion via research, advocacy, and disability inclusion indexes and trackers. These indicators highlight both that companies are making strides in disability inclusion and that key gaps still need to be bridged. A leading benchmark in the United States is the Disability Equality Index (DEI), a joint project of the AAPD and Disability:IN that invites Fortune 1000 companies and American Law 200 law firms to self-report their disability policies and practices.

While there is no overarching policy prescription that will work in every setting, these organizations and our research with top leaders in diversity and inclusion have identified several best practices to consider.

Advocate for disability inclusion at the top, from the top

"A lot of it is the tone at the top . . . the mind-set that leaders with disabilities should be included and are valued. If you don't have that, you won't get very far."

—David Carmel, vice president, strategic alliances, Atara Biotherapeutics

It's no accident that the DEI allots almost one-third of available points in its index score to the "Leadership & Culture" category—which consists of formal statements, employee resource groups (ERGs), hiring goals, internal advocacy and support, executive sponsorship, public statements, and performance metrics. Indeed, it cannot be emphasized enough that foundational to achieving progress in disability inclusion is the commitment of top leadership, starting with the CEO and the

CHRO, to establishing a disability inclusion policy and promoting employees with disabilities into leadership roles. From there, the support of leaders in IT, legal, facilities, and communications, as well as those in positions to influence culture and talent management, are equally critical.

Beyond acting as role models, top leaders have the power to make disability inclusion an enterprise-wide priority by holding the organization accountable and introducing metrics—for example, the number of employees with disabilities hired, promoted, and in key leadership positions. Leaders, collectively, could demand the same level of transparency among boards and the C-suite regarding people with disabilities that is now being called for regarding women and people of color.

Finding leaders with disabilities who are willing to speak publicly about them—especially if their disabilities are invisible to others—is one best practice. One global organization we interviewed found several senior leaders with visible and invisible disabilities willing to publicly support the disability inclusion policy. These leaders held local office meetings to get people thinking and talking in a safer and more intimate environment and created videos

that were shared with other offices that did not have a local leader with a disability. According to Ila Eckhoff, managing director of BlackRock, "We discovered that if leaders with disabilities or who were impacted by disability showed up and told their story, we got more people to tell stories, and this helped get others comfortable with being part of our ERG supporting those with disabilities."

Catalyze culture change

"You must look for a culture of inclusiveness in the companies that you might want to work for. It's all about the mind-set toward those with differences."

—David Carmel, vice president, strategic
alliances, Atara Biotherapeutics

The aphorism "culture eats strategy for lunch" applies to disability inclusion as much as to any other strategic priority. For people with disabilities to succeed in the workplace, a culture must be in place that not only accepts their presence but embraces it. Organizations breaking ground in disability inclusion are challenging the mind-sets that impede hiring people with disabilities and supporting them in achieving their professional aspirations.

A culture committed to inclusion of employees with disabilities must support transparency about disability in the workplace—and make it safe for individuals to disclose their disability without fear of negative consequences, whether in the interview or at the boardroom table. In our work and interviews, several concrete actions were shared with us as inroads to catalyze culture change.

Establish an employee resource group

One best practice is to establish ERGs for employees with disabilities; these groups can then create grassroots change in culture. Unfortunately, the very fear of disclosure that makes such groups necessary means that many of these disability-oriented ERGs, similar to LGBTQ ERGs, have trouble attracting members. With reticence and reluctance posing major barriers, support groups often start by addressing the issue via other relationships—a friend, spouse, child, or colleague who is affected by disability. Indeed, disability often affects individuals without disabilities by creating demands upon them as caregivers. In this way, many of an organization's employees are likely touched by disability, leaving them grappling with managing it on their own for fear of being discovered with a disability themselves or affected by a loved one's disability.

Designate disability allies

Another best practice is to designate "disability allies" in the organization who are easily identifiable—for example, with an icon on their employee badge or a sticker on their office window. This public affirmation of support not only makes it visible within the culture that disability inclusion is an important organizational priority but also identifies individuals willing to be a resource for those affected by a disability.

Provide inclusion training

All employees should receive training that focuses on disability awareness, addressing the conscious and unconscious biases that can prevent people with disabilities from being welcomed and integrated

quickly. More precisely, disability allies will need training on company policies with respect to people with disabilities as well as on handling specific situations that may be brought to them. Those with supervisory responsibilities will need training on the legal aspects of disability as well as how to onboard, supervise, and evaluate an employee with a disability while considering different workstyles or necessary accommodations. For hiring managers and HR professionals, training should focus on policies, regulations, and best practices for providing accommodations; special considerations when interviewing and assessing people with disabilities; sources of talent with disabilities (for example, partners, agencies, on-campus programs, and other sources); and practices for supporting the onboarding and development of people with disabilities.

Communicate the business case

"You may, as an organization, be trying to solve a problem that a person with a disability would be uniquely able to solve in a way that a 'normal' person could not."

—Sheena Iyengar, S. T. Lee Professor of Business, Columbia Business School

As discussed in part one, the business case for diversity and inclusion is increasingly clear—but it still too rarely includes reference to people with disabilities. Leadership must make it plain: including employees with disabilities fully in the workplace is good for business.

The exact business case—and what will make it compelling—will vary from company to company. These arguments can be commercial: employees with disabilities can offer unique value propositions, or people with disabilities represent a large and growing consumer segment and prefer to buy from companies that are disability inclusive. They can also

be values-based: supporting the career aspirations of employees with disabilities, and helping reduce the widespread underemployment and unemployment of people with disabilities, are the right things to do.

"Our focus is enablement," said Cecile Rochet, inclusion and diversity innovation lead at Accenture. "We are supporting persons with disabilities because it is the right thing to do. We expect creativity, innovation, and exceptional performance from all of our people, but we think it is our job to find roles where persons with disabilities can excel. We do not think of this as helping people with a lack of ability. We think of it as enabling those with unique abilities who may work differently."

The business case will typically also reference the benefits of disability inclusion for existing employees with invisible disabilities, encouraging them to bring their whole selves to work and not waste energy and productivity on covering. "People without disabilities try so hard to protect people with disabilities—but we must take care not to over-protect," said Sheena Iyengar, S. T. Lee Professor of Business at Columbia Business School. "The more people with disabilities are exposed to new challenges and opportunities, the more they will be able to do."

Provide appropriate accommodation

"With some companies pulling back on things like allowing employees to work from home, it seems like we are at risk of turning away from simple ideas that could support employees with disabilities working more productively."

—Mark Pinney, chief financial officer, Penrose Hill

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was intended to prevent discrimination in employment against any "qualified" person—someone who holds the necessary education and skills for a job whose essential functions they can perform with or without an accommodation. Under the law, employers are required to provide a "reasonable accommodation," unless doing so would pose an undue hardship on the company. Examples of accommodation include making existing facilities accessible, modifying work schedules, acquiring or modifying equipment, and altering tests, training materials, or policies.[21]

Of course, complying with the ADA is a good place to start. A common concern cited by management is the potential cost of providing accommodations—but this fear is largely unfounded. Studies have shown that the cost of providing accommodations is actually quite low, at a median of $600. That's because many of the accommodations needed—such as flexible schedules and allowing employees to work remotely—cost nothing. Even the cost of software, ergonomic chairs, and other physical accommodations is relatively small. The phenomenal strides that have been made in assistive technology, such as talk-to-text software, have made these kinds of technology accommodations not only highly effective but also very cost-effective.[22]

Most professionals with disabilities are aware of the accommodations they need to be at their most productive and simply need a knowledgeable HR manager and an IT specialist to assist them during the onboarding process to adapt their work environments. "I am savvy about what I need," said

21 "Enforcement guidance: Reasonable accommodation and undue hardship under the Americans with Disabilities Act," US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), October 17, 2002, https://www.eeoc.gov/policy/docs/accommodation.html; "Notice concerning the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Amendments Act of 2008," EEOC, accessed October 17, 2018, https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/statutes/adaaa_notice.cfm.

22 D. J. Hendricks, Lisa C. Batiste, Anne Hirsh, Helen A. Schartz, and Peter Blanck, "Cost and effectiveness of accommodations in the workplace: Preliminary results of a nationwide study," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (fall 2005), dsq-sds.org; "Workplace accommodations: Low cost, high impact," Job Accommodation Network, September 2007, https://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/gladnetcollect/383/.

Mark Pinney, chief financial officer of Penrose Hill. "It's basic—like a different keyboard—but you have to advocate for what you need."

Our research and interviews uncovered the importance of having clear accountabilities in place around accommodation: contacts for new and existing hires to discuss their accommodation needs with, facilities and IT employees who are trained in supporting the accommodation needs of people with disabilities and who proactively set an accommodation plan, and budget allocations to make sure accommodations are financed.

Facilities professionals or advisers should seek to use universally accessible design wherever possible from the outset to reduce the need to add physical accommodation after the fact. Writes Brian Bérubé, "Barrier-free design is not architecture specifically for [people with disabilities]. It's simply design that takes into account the wide range of potential users of a building—the temporarily or chronically disabled, the elderly, children, and indeed, the able-bodied making deliveries, carrying groceries, pushing a baby carriage or moving furniture."[23]

Involving people with disabilities in the design of new buildings, office spaces, and other facilities is another accommodation best practice. Victor Calise, commissioner of the New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, pointed out that engaging his department in the design process for the 9/11 Memorial & Museum was critical in making the final design accessible to wheelchair users. "Previous designs would not have allowed a person with a mobility disability to view the reflecting pool the same way as others," Calise said. "Our office worked with the architects to modify the design to provide access at the four corners of the structure. Now, those with mobility disabilities can see the reflecting pool and fully experience the impact of the memorial. If people with disabilities are not involved in the design process, design usually does not become inclusive."

Go beyond compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (or its equivalent)

"We are only as disabled as our environment."

—Victor Calise, commissioner, New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities

While a good start, complying with the ADA (or the equivalent outside the United States) is not enough. Indeed, too many assume that if their facilities are compliant with the ADA, they have an accessible work environment, and all necessary accommodations are already in place. However, this is not always the case. An ADA-compliant bathroom with a door that sticks may pass the building inspection, but it could still present a challenge to people who use mobility devices if they are unable to open or close the door. High-top tables used for lunchrooms or meeting spaces may be impossible for some to use. ADA-compliant parking can be regularly blocked by service delivery vehicles.

Simple, cost-effective adaptations that may not be required by the ADA can go a long way toward making the work environment more inviting for people with physical disabilities. These solutions include height-adjustable desks, work spaces without doors, accessible relaxation or "wellness rooms," and kitchen areas with open seating.

"I tell people that I am not disabled, and people say, 'What do you mean?'" said Calise, who in addition to

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[23] Brian Bérubé, "Barrier-free design—Making the environment accessible to the disabled," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 124, no. 1 (January 1, 1981): pp. 68–78, ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/.

being commissioner of the New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities is also a wheelchair user and Paralympic athlete. "And I tell them, the reality is if you make my environment accessible, you really take away my disability; if you add a ramp and you lower the desk and you make sure every work area has no obstacles to me, that there are door handles I can open, that the door pressure is right, then I am not disabled in that environment."

Plug into existing diversity and inclusion structures—internally and externally

"I did not have mentors. I had to do this on my own."

—Mark Pinney, chief financial officer, Penrose Hill

Disability inclusion has much to gain from the work already done to support inclusion of other diversity groups. The same accountabilities, processes, and support resources in place for other diversity networks should be adapted to meet the needs of employees with disabilities in a way that is coherent with overall diversity and inclusion policies. Our interviews uncovered many best practices in diversity and inclusion policies for employees with disabilities.

Some leading companies designate at least one person in HR who is responsible for driving the disability inclusion strategy end-to-end across the organization. This individual can help support localized efforts for disability inclusion while also bringing an enterprise-wide perspective, shepherding resources, and disseminating best practices among satellite teams.

Leading companies are also working on increasing the pipeline of talent by not only diagnosing the practices that deter identifying and hiring those with disabilities but also developing new practices that overcome these barriers. These companies also focus on onboarding practices and ongoing career development to ensure that employees with disabilities receive the mentoring and professional support they require and that their unique needs are met. Experienced hires, managers, and leaders with disabilities can also benefit greatly from the kind of sponsorship that is now more commonplace for women and people of color in organizations promoting diversity and inclusion.[24]

Great mentors were frequently mentioned by the leaders we interviewed as a key element of their success—when they had them. "It was so hard for me coming up in my career," said Ila Eckhoff, managing director at BlackRock. "I was often the only woman in the room when I started out in financial services—let alone someone with a disability!" Mentors can help people with disabilities see the possibility that might not have been envisioned for them or help them navigate the unique obstacles they face in advancing into leadership roles due to their differences.

Another best practice we identified is connecting with local and regional organizations supporting disability goals. Many cities have programs designed to promote employment of people with disabilities by advising and consulting with companies seeking to become more inclusive. For example, NYC: ATWork, sponsored by the New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, is an initiative to connect unemployed or underemployed people

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[24] For more on how companies can approach the development of sponsorship programs, see Christiane Bisanzio and Maria Mihailevscaia, "Want to get more women to the top of European finance? Sponsor them," Heidrick & Struggles, February 28, 2018, heidrick.com.

Disability advocacy organizations

These organizations are working to improve the inclusion of employees with disabilities and may be useful sources of additional information:

Center for Talent Innovation
https://www.talentinnovation.org/

Cerebral Palsy Foundation
http://www.yourcpf.org/

Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation
http://www.christopherreeve.org/

Disability:IN
https://disabilityin.org/

Institute for Career Development
http://www.icdnyc.org/

National Organization on Disability
https://www.nod.org/

United Spinal Association
http://www.unitedspinal.org/

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with disabilities to meaningful, living-wage jobs. The initiative focuses on creating a pipeline of talented candidates for employers looking to expand their talent pool to people with disabilities. Other national and international organizations can be excellent resources. See sidebar "Disability advocacy organizations" for more information on resources for ideas and support.

Conclusion

"If there is one thing that it's really important for leaders to do, it is to give the people around them the ability to imagine possibility."

—Sheena Iyengar, S. T. Lee Professor of Business, Columbia Business School

Starting the conversation on disability inclusion is only the beginning of moving things in the right direction. Chief human resources officers, chief diversity officers, and executive leadership teams will need to work together to create an organizational environment and policies that improve visibility, acceptance, and support. Doing better won't be easy— but the benefits will far outweigh the growing pains.

To summarize, this three-part article covered the following issues:

In part one, we detailed the case for including people with disabilities in the workforce at all levels—from entry positions to the C-suite. To start, the population of people with disabilities is large and growing, and any employee could become disabled at any time. Ultimately, inclusion is good for business, leading to improved problem-solving, newly defined and supported roles, and unique and specialized skill sets. For these and other reasons, the movement to establish inclusion policies for people with disabilities is already underway.

Part two went in depth on the issues associated with including people with disabilities, such as the need to create an inclusion policy and acknowledging and dismantling conscious and unconscious bias.

Finally, part three highlighted the steps organizations can take to address the needs of people and employees with disabilities. Various solutions and methods are already available—companies need only adopt and adapt them.

Regardless of your role, personally seeking out opportunities to vocalize your support for hiring, promoting, and sponsoring people with disabilities is the best action any individual who cares about this issue can take. ■

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Human Resources Officers Practice

Heidrick & Struggles' global Human Resources Officers Practice's search professionals partner with our clients to help them identify strategic human resources leaders who are prepared to lead and create high-performing organizations. They must do this in the face of a confluence of trends that are changing the very nature of work itself, reshaping the workforce of the future, and placing never-before-seen demands on the human resources function. These trends include:

- **Rise of automation and artificial intelligence.** Artificial intelligence, machine learning, digital, the cloud, and big data are radically changing the nature of work.

- **Multigenerational workforce.** Soon more than five generations will be in the workforce, each with different mind-sets, work habits, and expectations.

- **Rise of the "gig" economy.** Remote work is the new norm, and by 2020 as much as 40% of the workforce could be independent contractors.

- **Global disruption.** Climate change, economic disruption, and political unrest are creating new levels of uncertainty about global operating conditions.

- **Instantaneous information sharing.** Employees have new expectations for how information will be shared and used in a digital, 24/7 world dominated by social media.

- **Intensified war for talent.** Leaders who are able to excel in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous markets with compressed and rapidly accelerating time frames are in short supply and strong demand.

- **Not just diversity but inclusion.** Pressure is intensifying to accelerate progress on creating not only a genuinely diverse workforce but also a truly inclusive culture.

Our HR executive search professionals work closely with our clients to ensure that their human resources leaders are equipped to lead and manage through this rapidly changing environment. We help our clients find HR leaders with the business acumen, strategic and market insight, financial savvy, operational capabilities, and ability to harness data and technology to drive business success. These leaders must be culture shapers with the foresight, resilience, and adaptability to drive transformative change in organizations through strategic talent management.

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