



Disabilities

Do Your D&I Efforts Include People with Disabilities?

by Caroline Casey

March 19, 2020



Krisana Antharith/EyeEm/Getty Images

Summary. There are more than one billion people worldwide – around 15% of the population – living with a disability. As consumers, they represent a market the size of the United States, Brazil, Pakistan and Indonesia combined and a disposable income of... [more](#)

Businesses have long been drivers of social change. Across the globe, companies have begun acknowledging vital challenges and injustices such as climate change and pay gaps. Diversity and inclusion is one such defining issue, and, although huge progress has been made towards equality across boundaries of gender, race

and sexual orientation, one aspect of D&I is too often neglected: disability.

The [UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) defines those for whom it advocates as “people who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”

Although 90% of companies claim to prioritize diversity, only 4% consider disability in those initiatives, according to [a report](#) from the Return On Disability Group. And only a small subset truly serves customers with disabilities. We’d therefore describe even the most progressive organizations as “divers-ish.” That’s the word we used when we launched [our Valuable 500](#) campaign — a push for companies to commit to inclusion that encompasses people with disabilities—at the World Economic Forum Annual Summit last year.

Making this change should not be a chore. It is an opportunity. The World Bank [estimates](#) that there are more than one billion people worldwide – around 15% of the population – living with a disability. As consumers, they represent a market the size of the United States, Brazil, Pakistan and Indonesia combined and a disposable income of more than \$8 trillion, as noted by the Return On Disability Group. As workers, they can ease talent shortages and add to the organizational diversity that drives better decision-making and innovation.

If your company wants to show the world that it truly sees the value in everyone, there are plenty of steps leaders can take right away to improve disability inclusion in your hiring processes, in the accessibility of your workplace, and in the products and services you offer.

Be open to potential employees.

Start by understanding the barriers that discourage people with disabilities from applying to work for you – e.g. application format, online accessibility, and even the language of job descriptions. In some cases, companies will include generic requirements for physical tasks, such as driving, typing, lifting, or the ability to sit for long periods, even if the role does not actually demand them. These are coded descriptions that weed out anyone with a disability at the first step. Standard in-person interview practices can also disadvantage those with disabilities, and bias often creeps into hiring decisions.

There are several companies who are leading the way in disability inclusion, however. For example, Virgin Media has partnered with Scope to support one million disabled people in getting into and staying in work by the end of 2020 – a campaign titled Work with Me. Together, the two organizations developed an online hub designed to help users gain confidence and skills as they apply for jobs. Internally, Virgin Media created a disability awareness guide for line managers and works with its resourcing partners to ensure accessibility is considered throughout the recruitment process.

EY has a number of Centers of Excellence that have a specific hiring program focused on neurodiverse, specifically autistic, people, who tend to be technologically inclined and detail-oriented. Microsoft has an autism hiring program, too; the company's other initiatives include “ability hiring” events,

offering interview accommodations upon request, and disability etiquette training programs.

Create accessible workplaces.

In order to retain employees, accessibility and inclusivity must extend beyond the recruitment process. People with disabilities need to feel included in and comfortable with their physical working space, and office design needs to take this into account.

Peter Grauer, chairman of Bloomberg, said on stage at Davos this year that in the last 12 months Bloomberg has ensured that its 4.5 million square feet of real estate around the world is accessible to those with disabilities to ensure all colleagues can come to work every day. It has already rolled out disability awareness training to 1,000 of its 18,500 employees will bring the program to 6,000 team leaders and managers by the end of 2020.

Audi's approach to creating an accessible workplace includes flexible work schedules, transparent processes, such as reporting on their disability inclusion initiatives and ensuring they are held to account by external parties such as the charity Motability, and health promotion programs tailor-made for those with disabilities. In a similar vein, Atos works to improve the availability of assistive technologies, such as text-to-speech, in its core employee tools as an integrated part of its DigitalNow transformation program.

From the physical environment to work-day structure and technology, there are several ways to broaden accessibility.

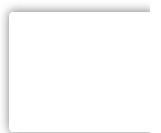
Embrace the new customer segment.

Consider reviewing your media and communication materials and how you might represent and speak to a broader spectrum of

people.

One company that is doing well in this regard is Barclays. On its website you can find a wide-range of support for people with different accessibility needs, from practical tools such as assistive technology for the visually and hearing impaired to advice on how to manage finances if you or a loved one has a disability. It also offers third-party bank accounts for those who may need additional support with accessing their finances, services to help with dyslexia and dyscalculia and those with dexterity challenges. This opens Barclays to a far broader customer base and boosts its reputation. It makes business sense.

Microsoft has also made a strong commitment to accessibility offerings in recent years, in part due to CEO Satya Nadella's experience of having a child who is severely disabled. In 2018, the company launched [AI for Accessibility](#), a \$25 million, five-year grant program that aims to "amplify human capability." The company's Seeing AI app reads text and describes objects aloud for people with low vision. Another example comes from Alea Technologies, which has developed an [IntelliGaze](#) communication system that allows people with mobility impairments to operate their computer with eye control.



The [Nike FlyEase](#) laceless shoe was inspired by a man with cerebral palsy but has been purchased by many more disabled and able-bodied customers. [MagZip](#), a system that enables zipping with one hand, was designed for a man who had dementia and is now used by brands such as Tommy Hilfiger, Moncler, and Under Armour, whose related jackets are favored by cyclists.

These three steps are a piece of the corporate social responsibility movement. As Paul Polman, CEO of Unilever and chairman of The Valuable 500, noted at the World Economic Forum this year: “About 65% of employees say if I’m going to work for this company, I want to be sure there is total diversity and inclusion in all its senses. We’ve seen employees walking out for climate change, we’ve seen employees walking out for the #Me Too movement, and employees are soon also going to walk out if you have discriminatory practices to people with disabilities.”

In taking the lead on this issue, your business will not only prosper from an ethical standpoint, but an economic one as well. Inclusive businesses are a magnet for talent, have a broader customer base, spur more innovation, and offer a better quality of life for all.



Caroline Casey is an award-winning social entrepreneur and founder of The Valuable 500, an organization that supports disability inclusion.



Read more on **Disabilities** or related topics **Diversity and inclusion**, **Neurodiversity**, **Personnel policies** and **Talent management**