

Diversity

The Case for Improving Work for People with Disabilities Goes Way Beyond Compliance

by Laura Sherbin and Julia Taylor Kennedy

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Summary. A new study from the Center for Talent Innovation found that, according to the 2015 US government's definition of disability, a huge portion of the white-collar workforce has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity: 30% of a... [more](#)

As Chieko Asakawa walks around IBM's campus, she explores new ways of getting from point A to point B. She recognizes the faces of colleagues approaching her and greets them. She reads snack labels and decides whether to eat them. Although she is blind, Asakawa doesn't need a human or canine companion to complete these tasks. She's helped invent a smartphone app that, as she explained in a recent TED talk, "understands our surrounding world and whispers to me in voice or sends a vibration to my fingers. Eventually, I'll be able to find a classroom on campus, enjoy window shopping, or find a nice restaurant while walking along a street."

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Asakawa has been able to turn her disability into a professional asset, to the commercial benefit of her employers. But many people with disabilities enter workplaces that don't enable them to do the same.

A new study from the Center for Talent Innovation (CTI) found that, according to the 2015 US government's definition of disability, a significant portion of the white-collar workforce has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity: 30% of a nationally representative survey of 3,570 white-collar employees. The numbers are similar across gender, race, and generation. Not only do employees with disabilities comprise a large talent pool, it's a remarkably innovative one: 75% of them report having an idea that would drive value for their company (versus 66% of employees without disabilities). Yet, we find, individuals with disabilities frequently encounter workplace discrimination, bias, exclusion, and career plateaus—meaning their employers lose out on enormous innovation and talent potential.

Many people are surprised to learn that such a high rate of employees have disabilities, because they generally assume that “disability” means having an obvious physical condition. However, close to two-thirds of the study's respondents have a disability which, while included under the federal definition, is invisible. These might include diseases like lupus or Crohn's, whose flare-ups are incapacitating; migraines, which can cause temporary blindness; mood disorders like depression; learning disabilities like dyslexia; developmental differences like autism; and other forms of neurodiversity. Some 62% say that unless they deliberately disclose their disability, most people have no idea it exists.

Counseled by family, friends, or even employment attorneys to keep silent for fear of discrimination, only 21% of employees with disabilities disclose to HR that they have one. And they're right to be so hesitant. More than a third of survey respondents with disabilities say they have experienced negative bias while working at their current companies—and the more visible the disability, the more likely the bias. Whether intentionally or not, people exclude their colleagues with disabilities by misjudging them and underestimating their intelligence, insulting them, avoiding them, or making them feel uncomfortable by staring at them or refusing to meet their eyes.

Employees with disabilities report strengths such as persistence, discipline, and willingness to commit, but feel employers don't see this potential. Among the 75% of employees with disabilities who say they have market-worthy ideas, 48% say their ideas went ignored by people with the power to act on them, 57% feel stalled in their careers, and 47% feel they would never achieve a position of power at their company, even when they know how to perform or qualified they are.

In interviews, we heard that individuals with disabilities face deep stigma and bias (whether conscious or not) from colleagues and managers. One millennial survey respondent confessed, “I've been



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here for six years without a promotion, even though my performance is excellent. I can't prove that my cerebral palsy has played into that, but the fact is, you never see executives with physical disabilities in the industry."

But there are ways to remove the challenges faced by people with disabilities and open up innovative opportunities. Our research shows that the same inclusive leadership behaviors that leverage diversity to drive innovation and market growth can enable managers to support individuals with disabilities. These behaviors include ensuring that everyone on a team gets heard, giving actionable feedback, empowering team members to make decisions, and making it safe to propose novel ideas. Employees with disabilities who have inclusive team leaders are 36% less likely to face bias (compared to those without such managers), 14% less likely to repress themselves at work, and 32% less likely to feel stalled in their careers. And they are more likely to have their ideas endorsed.

But teaching managers to display inclusive leadership behaviors is just the first step. Companies also need to create a culture of support and inclusion by doing the following:

- **Provide training.** Many new employees with disabilities need support to get up to speed, but their colleagues and managers may not know how to help them—or have the patience to do it. Companies should put systems in place to help not only individuals with disabilities, but their managers and peers as well. In its strategy to help employees with disabilities build long-term careers, Unilever partnered with Connecticut's Department of Rehabilitation Services and Southeastern Employment Services to launch a training and placement program. The program provides training for customer service analysts and regional distribution coordinators—two entry-level positions with frequent openings — as well as disability sensitivity training to existing employees to help them best support colleagues with disabilities. The goal is to train 20 to 30 employees with disabilities annually with a 50% conversion rate to full-time positions.
- **Offer leadership development opportunities to employees with disabilities.** Unconscious bias can cause managers to overlook people with disabilities for leadership programs. To combat this, managers can create development options specifically targeted toward these individuals—and include them in opportunities that already exist and are open to different talent cohorts. For example, Abilities in Motion, KPMG's employee resource group for employees with disabilities and those with family members who have disabilities, launched an initiative two years ago to give the firm's employees with disabilities an opportunity to hone their leadership skills. The initiative connects aspiring leaders with disabilities to senior leaders within the firm



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who offer advice and counsel. These individuals also attend KPMG’s “Inspiring Change, Influencing Inclusion” leadership development conference, where they participate in workshops and panels with senior leaders with a focus on building executive presence and leadership skills.

- **Provide role models.** A prominent executive with a disability makes it easier for others with disabilities to see themselves in leadership positions at their companies. For those who don’t have or have had less experience with people with disabilities, such role models help shape their perceptions and assumptions about what a leader looks like. Mark Bertolini, chair and CEO of Aetna, had a ski accident that severely damaged his spinal cord. After the accident, he insisted on returning to work, using a special chair to support his neck, a one-handed keyboard, a couch for rest when needed, and other accommodations. He continues to speak openly about the ongoing chronic pain caused by the accident to act as a role model and show others what’s possible.
- **Create allies in the organization.** Encourage employees to speak up and show their sympathy especially colleagues who are familiar with the challenges faced by people with disabilities either through personal relationships or caregiving. Shaun Kelly, global chief operating officer of KPMG International, makes a point of speaking publicly about being a caregiver to his daughter, who has Down Syndrome: “The stigma seems to go away because there’s somebody in a leadership role who is comfortable talking about it.”

For too long, companies have viewed employees with disabilities through the lens of compliance and accommodation. There’s no better time to start to look at disability through a different lens: of inclusion and infinite possibility.

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