

GENDER, RACE, ETHNICITY & DISABILITY = DIVERSITY

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A key objective of transforming an organisation is shifting workforce perceptions by adjusting the way they think and behave so that an organisation can move forward with one shared vision. The path of change often challenges the assumptions of an organisation's structures, how it operates and its environment. Part and parcel of an organisation's journey of transformation is embracing the role of workplace diversity in creating a culture that is responsive to broad opportunities, societal values aligned with embracing diversity that can adapt to competing demands for innovation; thus organically enhancing business performance. Having a diverse set of perspectives, cultures and experiences is critical to driving growth and prosperity. Therefore, it is essential for organisations to acknowledge that diversity breeds innovation and innovation breeds business excellence.

Generally, organisations invest heavily in diversifying their workforce in areas of gender, race and ethnicity. However, disability is not fully incorporated into a diversity plan or seen as a critical target area. Essentially, disability remains the 'poor cousin' of the diversity family with a sporadic or limited commitment to entrench the value of this form of diversity in an organisation's structures, policies, belief system or, most importantly, as a critical tool to drive innovation.

More often than not, disability is addressed with the best intention, but not in the inclusive manner in which it deserves to be tackled. The efforts for such well-intentioned interventions are often directed towards creating employment opportunities or Skills Development programmes. However, these interventions are often lacking in substance, which results in persons with disabilities having the perception that they are not significant contributors to the business. An organisation may achieve its diversity targets through recruitment processes; however, they will not realise the full value or potential until disability is included as an integral part of a diversified workforce.

The definition of diversity refers to a range of different things. Transformation refers to a marked change in form, nature, or appearance. Therefore a 'diverse' and 'transformed' workforce would not only incorporate the typical gender, race and ethnicity criteria, but that of disability as well. True unity only takes place when disability is included. However, incorporating disability more often than not requires a changed mindset. The following are non-exhaustive principles to guide organisations in driving disability inclusion as a critical part of their diversity agenda.

Lead by example

An inclusive business culture begins with leadership that leads by example and commits to creating an accessible culture where all are given a platform to perform equally and with dignity. Corporate leaders need to embrace disability as an integral part of their organisation's culture and communicate the value and potential of persons with disabilities in their workforce. To achieve this, corporate leaders must promote non-discriminatory recruitment policies and include mentorship and career advancement opportunities for persons with disabilities based on merit.

Check assumptions

Challenge the assumptions about what persons with disabilities can do – remember that 'disability' does not refer to a homogeneous community. Create consistent awareness around disability inclusion and ensure that the right stakeholders are on board to drive the process. Doing this will explore inbred perceptions of myths, stereotypes, attitudes and both conscious and unconscious discrimination.

Apply flexibility and creativity around reasonable accommodations

A 'reasonable accommodation' which has the effect of minimising the 'disabling barrier' is what usually stands between the success or failure of persons with disabilities. Whether a reasonable accommodation is in the form of an assistive device, flexible working hours or accessible facilities, each should be explored on a consultative basis with the person with a disability and, if necessary, with an expert in workplace disability to ensure accommodations are reasonable and cause no undue hardship.

Create a transparent and trusted workplace

Although there are persons with disabilities who have apparent disabilities, there are many with invisible disabilities who may not feel confident to disclose them. Being cognisant of how disability is communicated in an organisation can create an environment where an employee with a disability will feel safe to disclose their diagnosis. Critical to success is normalising 'disability speak', avoiding condescending phraseology, aligning the organisation's message with the social model of disability rather than the medical one, and providing 'disability relevant' information as part of 'general' topics to reflect respect and value.

Ensure that recruitment drives do not exclude persons with disabilities

What many organisations do not grasp is that there is a pool of talent and innovation in the form of persons with disabilities ready and more than capable of complementing an organisation's workforce. However, enticing and encouraging this talent to engage means organisations must make their point of contact and requirements accessible to all.

Online job application systems, websites, as well as sourcing processes, should be designed to invite candidates with or without disabilities to apply for employment. It would be beneficial for organisations to highlight their openness to reasonable accommodation and, most importantly, scrutinise job requirements to ensure that unnecessary barriers are not presented as a result of 'common but not essential' requirements.

Invite disability onto the corporate ladder

Employees with disabilities frequently get stuck in entry-level positions or Learnerships, often with little or no opportunity to move into permanent roles or up the corporate ladder. Witnessing employees with disabilities move up the career ladder contributes significantly to a culture shift surrounding the value and potential of this form of diversity. There are many mechanisms for identifying and developing potential. Mentorship programmes have the potential to facilitate such development by identifying skills gaps, opening training opportunities, and encouraging employees with disabilities to be considered for promotions. An organisation will make a bold statement by applying reasonable accommodation measures at each 'rung' of the career ladder.

Brand your company as disability inclusive

Persons with disabilities are more likely to apply for a job where they see themselves reflected in the brand of the organisation. Therefore, disability should be communicated as part and parcel of an organisation's diversity statement, as a part of the organisation's marketing and advertising campaigns, which reflect disability as just a 'normal' part of society's diversity.

Networking accessibility

Access is critical to inclusion. In all organisations there are occasions where meetings, conferences and networking or teambuilding events are held off-site. Organisations must habitually ensure the accessibility of the location and the infrastructure, specifically in terms of overnight accommodation and transportation. As a norm, event organisers and co-ordinators of events should take accessibility of materials and communication platforms into account and include all types of diversity into their event planning and activities.

In conclusion, I find that when organisations are addressing disability inclusion from anything less than a transformational perspective, its success tends to be hampered by unintentional ignorance that encourages continued exclusion. The founding principles of Bradshaw LeRoux Consulting are to unleash the potential of persons with disabilities through educating organisations to embrace disability as an integral and valuable part of their workforce. More often than not, the core reasons for an organisation not having a fully diverse workforce are the barriers they themselves erect. A key success factor to transformative inclusion lies in a multi-pronged, consistent approach which aligns with the principles of dignity and equality for all.