

The Question is...

Does Disability Disclosure extend beyond a Personnel File?



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It is a given that the work environment and culture impacts directly on the performance, motivation and retention of all employees. So it stands to reason that a work environment that fails to facilitate optimal performance, accommodation, motivation and retention of all its employees in their full profile of diversity impacts negatively on the advancement and retention of persons from Designated Groups as a result of barriers.

When it comes to disability as a form of diversity, the first step is creating a work environment and culture that makes it 'safe' for employees to disclose.

Imperative to such change is altering the approach to Employment Equity from one of 'tick the box' of compliance to one that implements transformative thinking as an integrated strategy. Doing this would support an enabling environment in which employees with a disability are managed effectively and are optimally supported to facilitate their growth and advancement in the shortest period.

A critical starting point in the disclosure process begins with understanding the experiences and perceptions of individuals with a disability in identifying the barriers. Often an employee's decision to disclose a disability is complex and fraught with personal and environmental considerations. Given that most organisations begin their 'disability disclosure' process with the distribution of the EEA1 form, where employees are required to tick the box next to 'disability' with little to no information provided on the purpose or consequence of disclosure, it is little wonder why few people choose to disclose their disability. Non-disclosure remains a common frustration for employers as often an employee with a disability is known to them, but the employee remains reluctant to disclose their disability.

So let's begin by understanding why an employee with a disability may be reluctant to disclose their disability to their employer. Based on numerous studies on this phenomenon, as well as my personal experiences as a Disability Inclusion specialist and a person with a disability, the following are key reasons:

- > Employees with a disability fear judgement and discrimination should they disclose. Research indicates that an employee's relationship with his or her supervisor is a significant factor in their decision to disclose. The more positive and supportive their relationship, the more likely they are to disclose their disability.
- > An employee with a disability are not aware that their 'condition' is considered a 'disability'. There is many different definitions and perceptions of what constitutes a 'disability'. It, therefore, stands to reason that the labour law definition is not the automatic 'go-to' in terms of understanding.
- > Employees do not want to be labelled as 'disabled' due to the stigmas and stereotypes associated with this form of diversity. The only way to combat this is to be part of shifting perceptions around disability away from 'different' or 'unfortunate' to 'normal' and 'valued'.

The consequence of employees failing to disclose not only impacts negatively on your Employment Equity Scorecard, but can be felt with less apparent consequences such as potentially higher absenteeism levels, lower productivity, or higher frustration levels, as employees struggle to manage the barriers or the impairment themselves without workplace support and reasonable accommodation. It may further impact on occupational safety and risk, as an employer cannot consider reasonable accommodation requirements for the individual in an evacuation or day-to-day operational context.

So what can organisations do to change this dynamic? Here are a few tips:

- > Foster visible leadership support and develop managers and supervisors who understand the value of this form of diversity to their business. This is a crucial success factor in developing a workplace culture that is inclusive and respects the dignity and equality of the individuality of its employees. Disability awareness training helps to decrease stereotypes and misunderstandings about the capabilities of individuals with a disability, as well as offering concrete suggestions to positive interaction with this form of diversity.
- > Change perceptions about 'disability' amongst all employees. This should be continuous and not through sporadic, once-off Disability Awareness Training sessions. The core is ongoing, consistent, stereotype-busting messages with the sole objective of changing the stigma associated with disability as a form of diversity.
- > There should be a solid post-disclosure process with underlining respect, confidentiality and pro-activity. All parties involved should be versed on the process, disability awareness and etiquette. It is further necessary to have access to resources that provide advice and support to employees around possible enabling and assistive solutions. However, essential to achieving this is the authority and budget to implement any reasonable accommodation measures to 'equalise' performance opportunities and inclusion.

A consequence of disclosure is that it is likely to be shared by that individual. Subsequently, a successful disclosure will build trust and confidence and encourage others to disclose.

- > Access to personalised support and advice for employees with a disability, their managers and teams from an easily accessible, independent resource that specialises in Disability Inclusion is an essential part of navigating stakeholders through the journey towards inclusion. For managers and supervisors, this could be in the form of discussions around workplace adjustments, managing the 'performance' vs the 'disability' scenario, promoting inclusion within the team, and other such 'sensitive' matters. For an employee with a disability, this could provide support and assistance in changing dynamics, such as advice on assistive devices required as their condition may progress, or how to respond to changing job demands or reasonable accommodation needs. For colleagues, this could contribute to becoming more educated about disability that would benefit their communities and family. Put another way; the benefits will reach beyond the workplace and enter society at large.
- > Commitment from an organisation's Communications Team will support inclusive 'disability speak' in all communication initiatives. Open communication will promote 'normalising' disability. Including disability in an organisation's diversity statement, including persons with apparent disabilities in the organisation's promotional material, and accessible use of the website and career portals' will show commitment. Recognising the value of disability to business in the organisation's branding contributes to building employee trust in the organisation's commitment to Disability Inclusion.

Benefits of "Disclosure done Right"

Benefits to the Organisation	Benefits to the Individual with a Disability
Contributes to an accurate picture of the demographic profile of the organisation.	Creates a safe space to discuss disability-related reasonable accommodation or other workplace support that may be required in collaboration with the employer.
Promotes the health and safety of all employees as potential risks from barriers within the workplace are identified, and reasonable accommodation solutions can be explored which support safety for all.	Creates an opportunity to receive targeted information about support or positive action initiatives, like development programmes for employees from Designated Groups.
Contributes to a more informed employer in meeting the diverse needs of employees such as training material options, accessible learning environments, amongst others. It will further tap into the diverse needs of clients in terms of accessible service innovations and/or products.	Employees with a disability may receive increased legal protection from discrimination, access to assistive devices and information from their employer such as disability related tax rebates, amongst others.
Contributes to enhanced performance and increases motivation of employees as the employer is seen to respect the dignity and value of all employees.	Contributes to enhanced performance and increases motivation as the opportunity to thrive surges through such support and the provision of equal platforms for success.

In conclusion, whether you are at the beginning of the path to inclusion, or already on the road, it is a worthwhile journey indeed. Be encouraged that there are solutions already out there to assist in making this journey easier. Initiatives that offer knowledge sharing and support platforms such as ODIN (www.odin4inclusion.co.za) provide online disability awareness training, personalised support, access to centralised information as well as logistical and resource-efficient solutions. And then there are people like myself who are always able to assist.

Contact lesa@bradshawleroux.co.za to find out more about solutions to support your organisational transformation towards Disability Inclusion.