

The Journey to Creating a Disability Inclusive Workplace Culture

WRITTEN BY

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Disability advocates Emily Ladau, Sofiya Cheyenne, Rachel Handler, and Ryan Haddad discuss best practices for an inclusive workplace culture during a panel co-presented by Easterseals in New York City.

Ready to begin your disability inclusion journey?



Guides, toolkits, and playbooks on disability inclusion in the workplace—they're everywhere! And that's great news, because we're passionate about making all places, including workplaces, more welcoming and accessible for all. But sorting through so many resources and figuring out where to begin can feel overwhelming. We get it, and we're here to help you figure out how to take action.

Since you're reading this, we know that you're already invested in fostering a more disability-inclusive workplace. That said, here's a quick reminder as to why it's so important: 1 in 4 adults in the United States has a disability. Globally, more than one billion people are disabled. People with disabilities are part of the beautiful, diverse fabric of our society, and their experiences and expertise can offer so much to our workplaces and communities.

Need a little more data?

A 2023 research report from Accenture assessed companies leading the way on disability inclusion and based on their criteria, found that those companies "saw 1.6 times more revenue, 2.6 times more net income and 2 times more economic profit" over a five-year period. Beyond that, in 2022, The Valuable 500 found that "the disabled community represents \$8 trillion a year in disposable income, according to estimates, and \$13 trillion when including friends and family."

So, we all agree that disability inclusion in the workplace just makes sense...but what needs to happen first so you're ready to make it happen? Before you can chart a path for shifting culture and implementing inclusive policies and practices, it's essential to have a solid foundation of disability knowledge. Consider this your friendly introduction to disability—a brief primer on what you should know as you embark on this important journey. Remember, we're in this work together. Let's get started!

How to Talk About Disability

Terms to Know

Disability

- According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)—a major civil rights law that protects the disability community from discrimination and requires that people with disabilities have equal access to opportunity—a disability is “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities.” While this definition may seem at once both broad and limiting, remember that it’s a starting point to understanding what “disability” actually means.
- There are many types of disabilities, including chronic illnesses, communication disabilities, hearing disabilities, vision disabilities, learning disabilities, mental health disabilities, physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and neurological disabilities.
- Disability does not manifest in any one particular way; it varies within each individual within the disability community.

Disability Community

- Disability isn’t just about diagnosis. For so many, disability is an identity with a rich culture and history behind it—a community.

Ableism

- Unfortunately, despite laws like the ADA, people still all too often encounter stigma and prejudice on the basis of disability—ableism. Ableism can be understood as attitudes, actions, and circumstances that devalue people on the basis of having or being perceived as having a disability.

Accessibility

- For an environment, product, or service to be accessible, it must be fully welcoming and usable for all people, regardless of disability.

Reasonable Accommodation

- As explained by the [ADA National Network](#) (scan QR code): “a reasonable accommodation is any modification or adjustment to a job or the work environment that will enable an applicant or employee with a disability to participate in the application process or to perform essential job functions. Reasonable accommodation also includes adjustments to assure that an individual with a disability has rights and privileges in employment equal to those of employees without disabilities.”



The term “disability” often evokes fear and uncertainty. Is it even okay to say the word “disability”? Yes! Many people with disabilities say it and celebrate it with pride. To learn more about the power of the word “disability,” check out the [D1\\$@B1L*tY is Not a Dirty Word](#) (scan QR code) campaign.



Now, you may be wondering if you should say “person with a disability” or “disabled person.” Which is correct? Both!

When you say “person with a disability,” you’re using “person-first language,” which intentionally emphasizes the personhood of someone with a disability by using the word “person” first. When you say “disabled person,” you’re using “identity-first language,” which intentionally emphasizes that disability is a part of a person’s identity. Many people prefer to use person-first language, while many prefer to use identity-first language. When in doubt about what terminology to use to refer to a person, the best thing you can do is to respectfully ask.

You may have heard terms like “special needs” or “differently abled” used as alternatives to the word “disabled.” Many people assume that these terms are more respectful, but in actuality, these euphemisms are widely out of favor with the disability community. All people have needs, and all people have different abilities, so the euphemisms don’t really make sense. Instead of avoiding “disabled” or “disability,” don’t be afraid to use these words!



How to Start a Cultural Shift

The foundation for a disability-inclusive workplace is a strong culture shift. This means moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach and embracing a work environment that celebrates and accommodates the unique needs and talents of all employees, with and without disabilities.

UNDERSTANDING THE EVOLVING WORKPLACE

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed how we work. Remote, hybrid, and flexible work arrangements are becoming increasingly common. A disability-inclusive culture needs to consider these changes and ensure accessibility extends beyond the physical office space.

INNOVATIVE AND CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

When it comes to disability inclusion, there's no single solution that works for everyone. A culture shift requires creativity and a willingness to explore new ideas. This could involve:

- Utilizing **assistive technologies** to support employees with disabilities.
- Implementing **flexible work schedules** to accommodate doctor's appointments, transportation schedules, or other access needs.
- Developing clear and accessible **communication protocols** for virtual meetings and remote work.

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

We all have unconscious biases, and these can create barriers to inclusion. A disability-inclusive culture actively addresses unconscious bias through training and open conversations.

SELF-IDENTIFICATION

Employees with disabilities should feel comfortable self-identifying without fear of judgment or discrimination. This can be fostered through a culture of open communication and by providing clear guidelines and support for requesting reasonable accommodations.

Here are some ways to achieve this:

- **Leadership Commitment:** Senior leadership needs to be vocal in their commitment to disability inclusion. This can be done through public statements, participation in disability awareness events, and actively supporting employee resource groups (ERGs) focused on disability.

- **Clear and Accessible Information:** Make information about disability inclusion readily available and accessible. This includes providing resources in various formats (e.g., Braille, audio recordings) and ensuring the company intranet and other internal documents are accessible to screen readers.
- **Confidentiality and Privacy:** Develop a clear process for disclosing a disability that prioritizes confidentiality and privacy. Employees should feel confident their information will be handled with respect.
- **Employee Resource Groups (ERGs):** Support the creation or expansion of disability-focused ERGs. These groups provide a safe space for employees to connect, share experiences, and advocate for their needs.
- **Disability Awareness Training:** Integrate disability awareness training into onboarding and professional development programs. This training should educate employees on different disabilities, appropriate language, and the benefits of a diverse and inclusive workplace.
- **Promote a Culture of Open Communication:**
 - Share real-world success stories of employees with disabilities within the company.
 - Highlight disability champions within the company who can serve as valuable resources.

By creating a culture of open communication, providing clear support systems, and normalizing self-disclosure, you can encourage employees with disabilities to feel empowered to advocate for themselves and contribute their talents to the workplace.

INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE CULTURE TRAINING

There are several ways to cultivate a disability-inclusive culture through training. Here are a few examples:

- **Listening Circles:** Create safe spaces for open dialogue where employees can share their experiences and concerns.
- **Accessibility Audits:** Regularly assess the company's accessibility practices, including physical workspace, communication methods, and online platforms. This will help identify areas for improvement.
- **Unconscious Bias Training:** Equip employees to identify and challenge unconscious biases related to disability.
- **Universal Design Principles:** Integrate Universal Design principles to create a more accessible work environment for all.
- **Empathy & Allyship Building:** Foster empathy and allyship among employees to support colleagues with disabilities.

By taking these steps, you can create a culture of psychological safety where employees feel empowered to disclose their disabilities and request support.

Take Action

You're well on your way to building a disability-inclusive workplace culture! Ready for next steps?



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Visit disabilitypride.com for insights on lived disability experiences.



Read and purchase *Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to be an Ally* by Emily Ladau.



Collaborate with and learn from **LaVant Consulting**.

Below are additional resources for you to continue your journey.



Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion



Job Accommodation Network



Digital Accessibility Toolkits - Partnership on Employment & Accessible Technology



Disability Inclusion Handbook for Employers - Indeed



Accessible Meetings, Events & Conferences Guide - ADA National Network



Small Business at Work Toolkit - Northeast ADA Center





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