

# Inclusion of People with Disabilities in the Workplace

Best Practices for HR Professionals



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HR6440 Executive Summary  
12-15-2016

More than ever, companies are focused on developing a diverse workforce. However, disability is an often forgotten minority group.<sup>1</sup> 1 in 5 people will acquire a disability in their lifetime, and individuals with disabilities are a major source of untapped talent due to social stigma that they can't or don't want to work.<sup>2</sup> While many companies are taking steps toward diversity, they often spend less time, energy, and resources on the inclusion piece.<sup>1</sup> In many organizations, Human Resources sets the Diversity and Inclusion strategy. There are several concrete, practical steps that HR leaders can take to enhance feelings of inclusion for people with disabilities in their workplace.

## Climate

Inclusion is about feeling like a person belongs in an organization. Ideally, employees should feel like they “belong” while at the same time being valued for their unique characteristics and perspectives (see appendix A).<sup>3</sup> However, employees with disabilities tend to be less satisfied with their organization and its workplace climate and also perceive fewer opportunities for advancement than their non-disabled colleagues.<sup>4</sup> These perceptions and well as perceptions of non-disabled of workplace disability inclusiveness can greatly influence both representation and disclosure rates among people with disabilities.<sup>5</sup>

## Disclosure

The Americans with Disabilities Act defines disability as an impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities.<sup>6</sup> Think about it – how many disabilities can you name that are not visible? It is easy to know if someone has a disability when they are in a wheelchair or blind or even deaf. It is not so easy to identify when a person's disability is anxiety disorder or Crohn's disease. As the workforce ages and the prevalence of disability increases, it is becoming more important for employers to create a workplace climate that encourages disclosure and reduces the likelihood of negative consequences for employees and applicants who disclose their disabilities.<sup>7</sup> Disability disclosure can help make sure that employees receive appropriate workplace accommodations which increases their likelihood of success on the job.<sup>7</sup> Several pieces of inclusion affect disclosure, including social inclusion employees with disabilities, workplace culture and an employer's perceived commitment to disability inclusion.<sup>7</sup> See Appendices B and C for further details on employee's with disabilities workplace perceptions around disclosure.



## Manager's Role

One of the most important factors in determining whether or not to disclose a disability is support from the employee's manager or supervisor. In fact, most people disclose to their



manager, therefore it is imperative for managers to be trained in disability issues.<sup>1,8</sup> General disability awareness training helps to decrease stereotypes and judgements about individuals with disabilities, and can also offer concrete suggestions for interacting with people with disabilities.<sup>7</sup> While employers should train both supervisors and employees more generally about disability, managers should also know about the personal and possible legal consequences of treating people with disabilities as less valued members of a workplace.<sup>7</sup>

## Internal Policy Initiatives

A disability-inclusive culture often will provide positive results for overall employee satisfaction and productivity among workers with and without disabilities. Here are some practical considerations for HR leaders in looking at your own policies and practices.<sup>9</sup>

### Staffing

- Make concerted efforts to increase the number of individuals with disabilities employed in all positions—professional, administrative, technical, clerical, and other categories.<sup>10</sup>
- Promote well-qualified and high performing individuals with disabilities into leadership roles across the business.<sup>9</sup>

### Accommodations

- People with disabilities feel more comfortable asking for accommodations when a climate is perceived as inclusive.<sup>5</sup>
- 50% of workplace accommodations cost less than \$50 and the majority (88 %) cost less than \$1,000.<sup>2</sup> A central fund means a manager doesn't have to make an accommodation decision based on their own bottom line.<sup>10</sup>
- Accommodations can benefit everyone. Establish a universal policy for workplace flexibility all employees, with and without disabilities, including telework options, if appropriate.<sup>10, 11</sup>

## Accessibility

- **Universal design** - structures, spaces, services, communications and resources that are accessible to a range of people with and without disabilities, without further need for modification or accommodation.<sup>11</sup>
- How do I implement universal design in my organization?
  - Provide manuals, materials and forms to all employees in a variety of digital formats that are accessible to people who use adaptive computer technologies. Don't forget applicants!<sup>10</sup>
  - Build workspaces accessible to people who use wheelchairs or other similar equipment.<sup>11</sup>
  - Make sure any events held outside of work are accessible.<sup>10</sup>

## On-Going Evaluation<sup>10</sup>

As with any HR initiative, evaluation is needed to ensure programs are making an impact.

### Employment-Related Activities

- Job posting, recruitment, advertising, and job application procedures, including testing
- Hiring, promotion, upgrading, awards of tenure, and layoffs
- Rates of pay and any other forms of compensation, including fringe benefits
- Job assignments, job classifications, job descriptions, and seniority lists
- Sick leave, leaves of absence, and other leave
- Training, apprenticeships, attendance at professional meetings and conferences

### Self-Assessment Data Points

- Information related to the provision of reasonable accommodations that could be used to assess the effectiveness of accommodations and the process
- Data relating to the representation of individuals with disabilities in the workforce to ascertain trends, including the efficacy of recruitment, hiring, retention, and promotion initiatives
- Complaint tracking and monitoring system to identify areas needing systemic improvements.



## Best Practices from Companies like Yours<sup>12</sup>



Partnership with the American Association for the Advancement of Science to source interns with disabilities in science, engineering, mathematics, computer sciences, and business.

Collaboration with Career Opportunities for Students with Disabilities to learn how to more effectively prepare students with disabilities for recruitment.

Merck's Employee Resource Group, Merck Allies for Disabilities (MAD), sponsors Disability Mentoring Day to promote career development for students and job seekers with disabilities through job shadowing and career exploration.

HR works with employees to develop a customized action plan that is in place prior to the employee's first day of work. The plan is updated throughout the employee's career with Merck.

Merck provides training resources to build awareness and help employees work more effectively with colleagues who have disabilities.

Through the Employee Resource Group, MAD, Merck sponsors leadership development and networking sessions for employees with disabilities.

Provides accommodations for people with disabilities in their own offices, at off-site meetings, and in the client locations where they frequently work.

Making internal communications, meetings, training, and tools accessible and easy to use.

Building an accessibility strategy for all web-based and online applications.

Leveraging assistive technologies for easier computer and communications use by people with disabilities.

Educating all employees on disabilities etiquette, language, and work habits.

Raising awareness of hidden disabilities and how to support people working with chronic health conditions, serious illnesses, mental health issues, nonvisible, and temporary disabilities.

## The Bottom Line

Research shows that inclusive workplaces don't just make employees happier and create positive feelings. Inclusive environment produce business outcomes including:

- Reduced expenses corresponding to reduced employee turn-over
- Increased worker commitment to and identification with organizational success
- Improved productivity
- Increased employee investment in work performance<sup>9</sup>

When employees feel confident and comfortable at work, everyone benefits.



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**Appendix A**

	Low Belongingness	High belongingness
<b>High value in uniqueness</b>	<b>Differentiation:</b> Individual is not treated as an organizational insider in the work group but their unique characteristics are seen as valuable and required for group/ organization success.	<b>Inclusion:</b> Individual is treated as an insider and also allowed/ encouraged to retain uniqueness within the work group.
	<b>Exclusion:</b> Individual is not treated as an organizational insider with unique value in the work group but there are other employees or groups who are insiders.	<b>Assimilation:</b> Individual is treated as an insider in the work group when they conform to organizational/ dominant culture norms and downplay uniqueness.

*Individuals experience feelings of inclusion when a high value is placed on uniqueness with a corresponding high value on belongingness*

Brewer, 1991.

**Appendix B**

Results of the question: “Please indicate how important each factor would be to you, or to an employee/applicant with a disability, when deciding to NOT disclose a disability to an employer”	Individuals with a disability (N = 598)	Less apparent disability (N = 384)	Very apparent disability (N = 204)	Disclosed in most recent job (N = 470)	Did not disclose in most recent job (N = 115)
Concern about being fired or not being hired	73	77.4	65.2	72.2	78.1
Concern that the employer may focus more on the disability than on actual work performance/abilities	62	64.2	58.8	60.6	67
Concern about losing or not receiving health care benefits	61.5	64.8	54.9	60.3	64
Fear that opportunities for promotion will be more limited	61.1	64.1	55.7	59.6	66.7
Concern that one’s supervisor would not be understanding/supportive	60.1	65.8	49	60	63.2
Concern about being treated differently by supervisor/co-workers	57.8	63.7	46.3	55.4	67.5
Concern about being viewed differently by supervisor/co-workers	53.8	61.2	39.7	51.3	62.6
A belief that the disability does not have an impact on the ability to perform the job	44	46.8	38.7	41.8	56.5
A desire to keep the disability private	27.9	31	21.6	24.3	42.6

Von Schrader, et al. 2013.



## Appendix C

Please indicate how important each factor would be to you, or to an employee/applicant with a disability, when deciding to disclose a disability to an employer. (% rating very important)	Individuals with a disability (N = 598)	Less apparent disability (N = 384)	Very apparent disability (N = 204)	Disclosed in most recent job (N = 470)	Did not disclose in most recent job (N = 115)
The need for an accommodation to perform a job or to take care of a health condition during working hours	68.2	65.8	72.7	69.9	60.3
An open and supportive relationship with one's supervisor	63.5	64.8	61.5	65	56.9
Knowing the employer has made concerted efforts to create a disability inclusive/friendly workplace	56.8	56	58.1	56	59.1
Knowing that the employer is actively recruiting and hiring people with disabilities	50.5	51	49.8	49.4	56
Knowing that other employees had disclosed their disability and were successful in the workplace.	49.9	52.2	45.8	48.7	54.8
Disability is included in the employer's diversity statement	48.9	50.1	46.8	48.5	51.7
The belief that disclosure will lead to new opportunities for promotion or training (e.g., programs to advance employees who are members of diverse groups)	40.7	44.8	33.5	39.2	48.7
A message of disability inclusiveness on the company's website or promotional materials (e.g., picture of people with disabilities)	38	39	36.5	36.9	43.1
A statement on recruitment materials inviting applicants with disabilities	37.8	38.4	36.8	36.1	46.1
An employee with a disability recruiting at job fairs or campus recruitment events	32.4	33	31.4	30.7	40.4
The existence of a disability employee resource group (ERG, affinity group)	26.1	29.7	19.3	23.3	35.7

Von Schrader, et al. 2013.