

A black and white photograph showing three people in a meeting. In the foreground, a person is seated in a wheelchair, looking towards the left. Behind them, two other people are seated and looking in the same direction. The background shows a window with light coming through. The image is overlaid with a large, dark, semi-transparent banner containing the title and author information.

# How executives can more effectively include **PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

*BY JILL HOUGHTON*

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## Leaders have an opportunity to do more to be inclusive of people with disabilities—their employees, customers, and the public.

Convincing leaders usually starts with the business case. The good news is there's a strong one.

When Disability:IN, a global organization driving disability inclusion and equality in business, co-created the Disability Equality Index with the American Association of People with Disabilities in 2014, we saw it as a benchmarking tool for our corporate partners to see how they stacked up against their peers. Over the years, the DEI has become the world's most comprehensive tool for companies looking to strengthen their disability inclusion journeys.

Accenture, one of our partners, used DEI survey data to show that companies that are champions of disability inclusion earn as much as 28% higher revenue, double their net incomes, and post 30% higher profit margins.

### ONE OUT OF FOUR PEOPLE HAS A DISABILITY

Sixty-one million Americans have disabilities—and anyone can join this group at any time. As a

segment, they represent the third-largest market after the Latine and Black communities. The discretionary income for working-age persons with disabilities is \$490 billion. One out of four employees has some form of a disability, with the majority of those disabilities being invisible, or non-apparent, such as dyslexia or autism.

The corporate case for disability inclusion goes far beyond what the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 set out to do, which was to provide equal access to opportunities through transportation, telecommunications, or employment. But the ADA can't legislate attitudes. People with disabilities still face systemic bias and discrimination about their ability to perform their jobs and are twice as likely to be unemployed versus their non-disabled peers.

Many companies ask us where to begin their corporate disability inclusion journeys. We're happy to share best practices across the enterprise, all the way up to the CEO's office. And while there is no easy or universal answer, DEI data has shown us that the following practices drive the most impact, beyond hiring:



contracting with disability-owned business enterprises, creating accessible tools and technology, and demonstrating to investors how the company is inclusive to people with disabilities.

### **TAKE THE LEADERSHIP BATON...**

Leaders have an opportunity to tell their own story and bring their lived experiences into the workplace to benefit others.

Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella co-wrote the 2017 book *Hit Refresh* and talked about the impact his son Zain, who has since passed on from cerebral palsy, had on him as a leader, teaching him about empathy and the power Microsoft has to create products that are accessible for everyone. We worked with Microsoft and Steve Gleason, the former NFL football player who has Lou Gehrig's disease, to develop eye gaze technology for Microsoft's Surface Pro tablet.

### **...OR BE AN ALLY**

If you don't have a personal story to share, consider being an ally by leveraging your influence to promote accessibility and inclusion. Start by learning about the different types of disabilities and learning from people who have them.

The disability community includes people who are affected physically, intellectually, mentally, developmentally, cognitively, sensorily, or a combination of more than one factor. You can empower workers to talk about barriers they're facing at work and in life and help eliminate them.

### **RECOGNIZE THE POWER OF MENTORSHIP**

Jeff Wissel, Disability:IN's chief accessibility officer, was a longtime certified financial planner at a major financial services company before coming to us. He has a degenerative eye disease and spent most of his time at that company hiding his disability, thinking it was a weakness. Seven years ago, he found a mentor there who had a similar disability and helped him embrace his low vision as his greatest strength.

Wissel says, "The power of embracing vulnerability is lifechanging. When you find your inner voice, you realize you were spending a lot of mental energy trying to hide something and not bringing your authentic self to work. And as a leader, that's not what you want out of your employee base. You want productive employees who bring diversity of thought so you can create better products and services to match your customer base."

### **INNOVATE PRODUCTS AND SERVICES**

Starbucks came to us because it wanted to reimagine the customer experience for people with disabilities. For deaf and hard of hearing customers, Starbucks added speech-to-text technology that provides a live visual display of speech for partners and customers to reference when placing or picking up an order. The company also added order readiness notifications through a customer order status



board that visually provides an update and confirms when an order is ready.

Since 2021, Starbucks has offered free Aira service, which connects people who are blind or have low vision to trained, professional visual interpreters who provide instant access to visual information about the customer's surroundings through a smartphone app. Starbucks also offers multiple menu formats, including large-print and Braille, in all U.S. and Canada stores.

Globally, the company operates 11 signing stores that provide a space for the Deaf and hard of hearing community to connect through sign language and celebrate Deaf culture. The Walt Disney Company recently added dolls using wheelchairs to the "It's a Small World" ride at Disneyland, as part of an ongoing effort by Disney to look for inclusion opportunities. The dolls are participating alongside their nondisabled peers instead of being depicted as limited or incapable because of a disability. Disney's move helps people with disabilities feel seen and represented.

We worked with Marriott to develop the "Room for All" concept. Marriott's goal was to create an inclusive hotel room that went beyond ADA code requirements, making hotel stays more enjoyable. The company wanted to develop a room that looked and felt good, since travel can be difficult for people with disabilities.

Housed in Marriott's Innovation Lab in its Bethesda, Md., headquarters, Room for All explores ideas for accessible and cross-disability features such as voice-activated technology controlling room temperatures or lights and room layouts that ensure mobility space for guests who use wheelchairs. Through the hotel chain's advocacy, the global standard for bed heights was lowered to be more inclusive to people of short stature or who have difficulty getting into a high bed.

## VIEW DISABILITY INCLUSION AS AN ESG TOOL

CEOs and investors are intensifying their focus on the "S" of ESG (environmental, social, and governance investing) activities, according to the latest Edelman Trust Barometer report. Leading

companies want to accelerate a culture of inclusion across race, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities so they can lead sustainable and resilient businesses.

And their leaders are taking action—from diversifying board composition to expanding targeted talent acquisition. Providing meaningful employment for the vastly underemployed group of people with disabilities epitomizes social purpose and benefits the bottom line.

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## MAKE IT EASIER TO SELF-DISCLOSE

What gets measured, matters. If people with disabilities aren't publicly represented in the workforce, it's harder for management to see this group as worthy of time and investment. Workers need to feel safe and comfortable to voluntarily disclose their disability. In the latest DEI, of the companies surveyed that answered the self-disclosure question (around 200), fewer than 5% of employees disclose a disability.

One easy way to improve your efforts is to make sure the diversity and inclusion statement on your website specifically includes disability. This will also help drive qualified disabled talent to your workplace. There are recruiting firms and job boards specific to folks with disabilities. You can expand your community engagement by sponsoring events and activations for disabled communities and educating your customers and others about disability.

## HAVE A GENEROUS ACCOMMODATIONS POLICY

A good accommodations process can help a person with a disability find and buy accommodations so they can perform their job without having to jump through hoops or figure out how to pay for it. Companies should share this policy with new hires, and train managers about what it means, with the understanding that someone might not want to share personal information about why they need assistive technology or an ergonomic chair. You can also set up enterprise-wide funds to pay for employee accommodations. The average accommodation costs no more than \$500. They are often free. The DEI found that 55% of 415 surveyed employers have a centralized accommodation fund or similar fund, up from 34% in 2019.

## BUILD ACCESSIBILITY INTO EVERYTHING

From real estate and facilities, to websites and mobile apps, to the ways in which you communicate with employees, accessibility is at the intersection of everything. When you commit to building an accessible environment,

you're creating a stronger culture of belonging for your employees, delighting your customers, and enhancing your public perception. Many individuals with disabilities use assistive technology on a daily basis to shop online, manage their finances, and enjoy social media. For their assistive technologies—such as screen readers, magnifiers, eye gaze technology, or switch devices—to work properly, they are dependent on the underlying code being implemented correctly. One of the best ways a company can use technology to meet the needs of customers with disabilities is to incorporate inclusive design into their core design principles. This involves ensuring that the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1 AA, or WCAG, are incorporated from the idea phase through design, implementation, and testing.

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## DISABILITY ISN'T A BAD WORD

Disability is a natural part of life. And if it's something that you haven't experienced yet, you likely will as you age. We say disability with pride, and it's why we lead our organization's name with the word disability. Disability is a strength. People with disabilities conquer hurdles every day that other folks might never consider. They navigate a world that isn't necessarily built for them, and they do so by applying a combination of creativity, agility, resilience, perseverance, and willingness to experiment. If you help this group succeed, you will soon see, in so many ways, how well it pays to be disability inclusive.

*Jill Houghton is president and CEO of Disability:IN. More than 400 companies partner with Disability:IN to build inclusion and equity into their organizations. Learn more at [disabilityin.org](http://disabilityin.org)*

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**+32 2 543 21 20**

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