

# Four Reasons Why Disability Needs to Be a Valued Part of Inclusion

With my firm, Diversity Inclusion, and as a proud member of the disability community, I am often asked to speak to business and other organizations on the topic of the business case for hiring individuals with disabilities. Inclusion of individuals with disabilities goes beyond just hiring. It speaks to a larger issue within our society and the right to full inclusion.

Individuals with disabilities are no longer a group to be isolated and segregated. We are growing as an empowered community whose impact and contributions are just starting to be recognized. As the largest single minority group and growing, smart businesses and organizations are proactively looking to how to include individuals with disabilities in all aspects of inclusion. Below are my top four reasons why disability needs to be a sought out, valued, and equal partner in any inclusion strategy.

## 1. Individuals with disabilities are the largest single community within the diversity spectrum

Latest estimates cite that there are now 54 million individuals with disabilities in the U.S.. People with disabilities are a larger community than the Latino and African American communities combined. Currently, around 10 per cent of the total world's population, or roughly 650 million people, live with a disability. As the population ages this figure is expected to increase. If you do not currently have a disability, you have about a 20% chance of becoming disabled at some point during your work life and a 50% chance of having one of your immediate family members becoming disabled.

Individuals with disabilities cross all racial, gender, educational, socioeconomic, and organizational lines. Discussion regarding diversity has often focused on gender and race. In contrast, there has been limited attention given to people with disabilities as the world's largest minority group.

Work force diversity has become a major management strategy for many employers because it makes good business sense. A diverse work force gives companies a competitive advantage by enabling them to better meet the needs of their customers, successfully compete in the global marketplace, and hire from an expanded labor pool which



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would include people with disabilities.

Managing diversity in today's business climate involves making business open, supportive, and responsive where diversity is acknowledged and valued. According to recent studies, America's work force is changing and rapidly growing more diverse. We as people with disabilities have to be prepared to be an added solution for the labor shortages facing American business.

In my opinion, the next big cultural group which deserves wide public con-

sideration consists of persons with disabilities. For persons with disabilities who come from ethnic minority backgrounds, we must acknowledge and respect all aspects of their diversity.

## 2. Individuals with disabilities have a valuable perspective

The civil rights movement taught the disability community valuable lessons which are still being put into practice today. With a similar history of oppression, segregation and marginalization, individuals with dis-

abilities are a group claiming their own identity in the world. Individuals with disabilities often offer a distinct perspective filled with unique problem solving abilities and foresight. Employees with disabilities bring employers unique experiences and understanding that transform a workplace and enhance products and services.

People with disabilities, in many cases, bring a distinct and special skill set and a perspective and vantage point rarely possessed by non-disabled candidates. Many people with disabilities, not all, but many, have developed perseverance, adaptability, and analytical skills not even fathomed by their non-disabled peers. They also bring a valuable perspective that employers can definitely capitalize on and use to gain market share.

## Individuals with disabilities have a valuable perspective.

## 3. Individuals with disabilities represent a substantial market share

Companies that include people with disabilities in their diversity programs increase their competitive advantage. People with disabilities add to the variety of viewpoints needed to be successful and bring effective solutions to today's business challenges. The American economy is made stronger when all segments of the population are included in the workforce and in the customer base.



Marketing to people with disabilities, their families, and friends presents significant growth opportunities for companies. Customers with disabilities and their families, friends and associates represent a trillion dollar market segment. They, like other market segments, purchase products and services from companies that best meet their needs. A large number of Americans also say they prefer to patronize businesses that hire people with disabilities.

According to Diversity Inc., people with disabilities have \$220 billion in discretionary spending power as three-quarters (73%) of people with disabilities are heads of household and nearly half (48%) of all people with disabilities are the principal shoppers in their household.

According to Simmons Market Research Bureau, individuals with disabilities exhibit strong brand loyalty toward products affiliated with disability-related causes. In order to tap into this brand loyalty, there must be a logical relationship between the company, its values, customer, community, employee and the cause.

## 4. The concept of having a disability being negative is changing



At the core of diversity and inclusion is acceptance and respect. This means understanding that each individual is unique, and recognizing our individual differences. These can be along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies. Moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of diversity contained within each individual needs to include disability.

Having a disability is not the same as being ill. A disability is something to which one adapts. It is an integrated part of the person's very identity. Being more active, supported by medical advances and a spirit of rehabilitation, people with disabilities are healthy in the context of their disabilities.

There are still negative perceptions and assumptions strongly held by much of society regarding disability. Often, these attitudes are fueled by the media and stereotypes given to us by Hollywood. Combine this with limited or negative experience and it is understandable why people often equate disability with inability. Society has long seen people with disabilities from a medical mindset and that of being broken, in need of fixing or in need of a cure.

For me, disability is about anything but being broken. People with disabilities often do things differently and sometimes better than those who do not have disabilities. In many cases, we simply need different tools or ways to get things accomplished. Our "difference" and disability should be valued and celebrated, not shamed or hidden.

As I mentioned, many in society base their assumptions on limited or no experience with disability. Per-

sonally, I know businesses that have one experience with an individual with a particular disability, e.g. someone who is blind or has cerebral palsy and assume that every experience after that will be the same for all individuals who have that particular disability or who have any disability. They forget that we are all individuals first and that our disability's effects can vary based on numerous factors, e.g. severity of the disability, environment, motivation, etc. It is erroneous to assume that all people with a particular disability will be the same or that all people with a disability will be the same.

It is time to embrace diversity in all aspects of society and for all people who are different, including persons with disabilities. We call ourselves a diverse society. I think it is time that we prove it. We must embrace, not fear, diversity in every aspect of our lives and within every element of our communities.

**Individuals with disabilities  
are the largest single  
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diversity spectrum.**