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The diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) movement in corporate America and internationally is gaining ground. There is a growing belief that diversity improves business success and creates a more positive work environment for employees. Diversity statements abound that are inclusive of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, disability, and more. Yet, when you dive in a little deeper, diversity efforts and diversity measurement is typically addressing just two categories: race, ethnicity, and gender. Disability is the largest minority group (World Health Organization, 2020). People with disabilities need to be valued and represented in the current DEI efforts.

## Disability and DEI A Glaring Omission



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## Introduction

People with disabilities have been marginalized by society historically and in present times (Derrick, 2020; Dorfman, 2017; Mitchell, 2018) and specifically in the workplace (Kocman et al., 2018; Phillips et al., 2018). People with disabilities represent 15% of the population and are the largest minority group in the world (World Health Organization, 2020). There have been several landmark legislative decisions that support the rights of people with disabilities in the workplace, including the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans with Disabilities Act passed in 1990. However, legislation has not resulted in the desired employment outcomes as people with disabilities are unemployed at much higher rates than their peers without disabilities (Department of Labor, 2020).

The value of diversity in corporate employment has been discussed for decades. Diversity improves financial outcomes (Gumbs, 2018), promotes creativity (Chae, Seo & Lee, 2015), and creates a more positive work culture where everyone feels they belong (Gaul, 2018). An entire movement under the moniker of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) has emerged as part of corporate infrastructure (Zelevansky, 2019). Influential voices have raised awareness of the need for racial and ethnic diversity (Siedelman & Howells, 2016; Turner, 2016), and gender equity (Laursen et al., 2015; Verniers, 2018). Inclusion of members of the LGBT community is also gaining visibility in securing their rightful place (Tacoma, 2020). Ethnic/racial minorities, women nor those who identify as LGBT have achieved equity in the corporate workplace. However, progress towards equity of these populations is lagging. Disability is left out of DEI work in the corporate environment (Gould, Harris, Mullin & Jones, 2020). Disability needs to take its rightful place in the DEI movement.

# Benefits of Disability Inclusion in the Workforce

Many large companies report their progress towards equity and diversity through their web presence, and diversity and inclusion reports for public consumption. A convenience sample of 10 companies, all on the Fortune 100 list, demonstrates that every company understands the importance of including people with disabilities and display this in their digital content related to DEI. An extensive study of disability inclusion in corporate diversity work was conducted in 2005 (Ball et al.), but more recent data were not able to be located. Many Fortune 100 companies in this convenience sample have Employee Resource Groups dedicated to supporting people with disabilities, and all had disability acknowledged through a narrative story of an employee with a disability, a picture of a person with a visible disability (e.g., an employee who utilizes a wheelchair for mobility) or some other indication that their workplace welcomes and includes people with disabilities. Yet, only one company, Google, included data regarding the number of employees who disclosed that they had a disability. The gold standard for disability employment is the number of people with disabilities who are employed. For Google, their data indicated that 6.1% of their employees had disabilities in 2019. Google should be commended in reporting this data but given that the World Health Organization estimates that 15% of the population has disabilities, this percentage is less than optimal. The majority of the companies within this convenience sample felt that gender and ethnicity were valuable data to collect and report.

Company	Disability Included in Diversity Statement/Web	Gender & Race/ Ethnicity Data Included <u>In</u> Public Diversity Data	Disability Data Included in Public Diversity Data
Google	Yes	Yes	Yes
Apple	Yes	Yes	No
Walmart	Yes	Yes	No
Costco	Yes	Yes	No
Wells Fargo	Yes	Yes	No
Boeing	Yes	No	No
Amazon	Yes	Yes	No
Johnson & Johnson	Yes	Yes	No
Pfizer	Yes	Yes	No
Tyson Foods	Yes	Yes	No

*Convenience Sample of DEI Representation from Fortune 100 Companies*

The business guru Peter Drucker's statement, "if you can't measure it, you can't improve it," might be applied to this lack of information regarding disability in the workplace. Disability can be measured in the workplace through something as simple as a self-disclosure campaign (Crotty, 2020). Federal contractors often perform this type of campaign as it is required to maintain some of those contracts, but nothing limits self-disclosure campaigns to other business environments. Indeed, some of the companies in this convenience sample are federal contractors, ergo would have the data to report, yet they did not choose to include their disability data in their DEI data on their websites.



# Benefits of Disability Inclusion in the Workforce

There is a growing business case for improving the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workforce. These benefits include improvements in profitability (e.g., profits and cost-effectiveness, turnover and retention, reliability and punctuality, employee loyalty, company image), competitive advantage (e.g., diverse customers, customer loyalty and satisfaction, innovation, productivity, work ethic, safety), inclusive work culture, and ability awareness (Lindsay et al., 2018). 87% of customers reported their preference to patron companies that routinely employ people with disabilities (Siperstein, Romano, Mohler, & Parker, 2006). Teams that include people with disabilities also foster creativity, innovation, and problem-solving skills (Varlander, 2012). Given these known benefits, it is curious that individuals with disabilities continue to have difficulty gaining and maintaining employment.

In addition to the known business benefits the current workforce is motivated to work for companies who are committed to improving the world. Gen Z is the first generation to prioritize purpose over salary (Aziz, 2020). Purpose driven companies have 40% higher levels of workforce retention (Deloitte 2020). Promoting an Inclusive culture that Includes diversity Is one way to demonstrate purpose.



# Call to Action

Solving problems of inequity is not easy. Other disenfranchised populations have been working for decades to gain a seat at the table. Women continue to be underpaid, undervalued, and underutilized. Ethnic and racial minority populations are underpaid, undervalued, and underutilized. The difference in these populations and people with disabilities is that companies have dedicated resources to address these inequities. Companies are also measuring the effectiveness of their interventions by publicly reporting their gender and race/ethnicity equity data within their corporation. People with disabilities are being left behind, again. The same effort should be placed on promoting equity for people with disabilities.

***Change Beliefs Through Training:*** Employees continue to harbor sincere yet ill-founded views about the work-related abilities of people with disabilities (Bonaccio et al., 2020). To promote greater success of people with disabilities, provide disability training to everyone in the workforce (Brooks, 2019). This mirrors the work conducted for sexual harassment, that has primarily harmed women, and the current requirement of 21 states that employers or a portion of employers (e.g., government agencies) provide sexual harassment training to their employees. This large-scale effort indicates the proliferation of the problem and the need for everyone to take action to address this issue of diversity.

***Connect the Disability Service Community and Industry:*** The social service sector and industry must develop a bidirectional relationship. Industry must inform social service providers what is necessary for employment success. Service providers must meet the needs of industry through the development of quality vocational training programs and vocational supports to the people for whom they are providing service. Each constituency must make an effort to learn about each other to build a talent pipeline. Businesses can reach out to the disability community through contacting local service providers, connecting with the local university and college student disability programs, and empowering the current workforce to support the connection to people with disabilities in the community. As 15% of the population has a disability, every organization will have employees that have family members and friends with disabilities. Empowering these employees to make those connections is powerful.

***Commit to an Inclusive Culture:*** Creating a culture where all people are respected and valued requires effort. Employee differences are valuable as they allow for creative ideas and alternative solutions to challenges (Brown, 2016). Leaders must give voice to the value of an inclusive culture through their words and actions. Dedicated resources to inclusivity such as employee resource groups, training and internal communication that demonstrate the value for differences are visible signs that inclusion is important to the company.

***Collect and Report Disability Employment Data:*** When something is valued, it is measured. One measure of diversity success is demographic data. Companies widely report demographic data to demonstrate their commitment and success for race/ethnicity and gender. Disability demographic data is not widely published for disability. This may imply that the data are not being collected or that the collected data are not being reported. If the data are not being collected a self-disclosure campaign can be deployed (University of Massachusetts, 2017). Self-disclosure of disability continues to be a hot topic in the workplace as discrimination of people with disabilities is a

continued reality (Dewa et al., 2020; Lindsay et al., 2018). Federal contractors who are required to collect and report this data recommend the following strategies for successful self-identification campaigns (Von Schrader, 2018):

1. Making self-identification form available when employees update personal information
2. Annual communication to employees encouraging self-identification
3. Communication from organizational leaders to employees about the purpose of self-ID
4. Spotlighting successful employees with disabilities
5. Making self-identification form part of the annual open enrollment process

The value of diversity in the workforce has been established. The time is now to act and ensure people with disabilities are included in the DEI movement.

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