

# 3 Steps to Build an Inclusive Workplace for People with Disabilities

People with disabilities have the skills, qualifications and legislation for employment. Yet, results have failed to live up to the expectations and needs of the disabled community. Dr. Armand Bam, University of Stellenbosch Business School, and Prof. Linda Ronnie, UCT School of Management Studies, explore why and offer a blueprint for effective disability inclusion strategy.

**Related research:**

*Inclusion at the Workplace: An Exploratory Study of People with Disabilities in South Africa, Armand Bam and Linda Ronnie: International Journal of Disability Management (2020), 15, e6, 1-9*



*An alliance with a purpose*

# THE 3 Ps IN A CoBS POD



## PERCEIVE

with a set of key takeaways



## PROJECT

with food for thought: on yourself, your organisation and the wider context



## PERFORM

by putting it all into practice using action tips





## ● PERCEIVE

### with a set of key takeaways

- Getting people with disabilities (PWD) into employment is one of the hotter social impact topics on the agendas of governments and corporations alike in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Despite laws and guidelines, the results of corporate initiatives for inclusivity have failed to reach the expectations and needs of the disabled community, as unemployment within this minoritized group rises.
- The researchers explore the case of South Africa and hit upon findings that can well-serve the rest of the world in a practical way when setting up and implementing initiatives for the employment of people with disabilities.
- Companies must rethink their definition of inclusion in terms of working experiences and integration rather than in numbers and ticks in compliance with the law. It is essential to go into the fine grain of the matter – the workplace and the employees themselves – in order to understand the challenges people with disabilities face.
- The induction process is of key importance to people with disabilities. The initial induction experiences gleaned from the study invariably had a lasting negative or positive impact on PWD employees' integration in the company.
- Participants' level of satisfaction and comfort rose when information sessions and induction workshops were informal in nature. This gave disabled newbies the opportunity to offer spontaneous responses rather than just listen to an expert's – often outsourced – opinion.
- Generic induction initiatives, often featuring an inclusion awareness dimension to them, appeared rehearsed and were seen as insincere by the participants who were experiencing the real-time complexities of onboarding a new working environment.
- Disclosure of their disability to co-workers was an aspect PWD wanted control over. Where disclosure was imposed or occurred without their consent, participants felt a sense of violation and discomfort.
- Wanting to be accepted by their managers and co-workers was a key criterion for PWD employees' assimilation into the company. And as such, employees with disabilities strove to be 'normal'. Doing more became a personal expectation even if their managers did not require it.
- The effect was doubled for the 'newly disabled' who, having a previous experience of 'normality', found it hard to accept their departure from this 'norm' due to their disability.
- Many found themselves spending extra time to do their job to keep up with deadlines and the performance of their non-disabled colleagues. This inevitably gave rise to frustration. Which in turn grew in intensity when they felt they were disadvantaged, or ill-equipped, and couldn't compete.
- In addition, management failed to understand the potential difficulties employees with disabilities could encounter when assigned work that took them out of the premises to different locations – travel, adapted facilities and the stress related to the change. This lack of resources and support, including the inclusion process itself, gave rise to an additional sense of vulnerability.
- Feelings of frustration and vulnerability often ended with the belief that the best option was to leave the company and seek employment elsewhere.
- A solid induction process is a win-win – it creates opportunities for new employees to gain insight into the company and for the company to learn much more about this group of employees and their needs.
- Developing practical strategies for the inclusion of people with disabilities in organisations is essential. To build a truly inclusive society, people with disabilities must be given a rightful place within the economy as bringers of value.



Read the full article on Dr Armand Bam and Prof. Linda Ronnie's research:  
<https://cobsinsights.org/2021/12/02/into-the-working-lives-of-people-with-disabilities/>





# ● **PERFORM**

## by putting it all into practice

### CHECKLIST

- (Re)Adjust the values, attitudes, and norms within the organisation to align with the commitment to offer an inclusive environment to people with disabilities.
- Assess company policies, procedures, and rules that encourage or discourage attitudes towards PWD and duly adjust.
- Set up a series of information sessions over time, ensuring that both non-disabled and disabled employee perspectives are considered. How can you make such sessions more informal and interactive?
- Ensure that the organisation sets up an effective process to hire, place and retain employees with disabilities. Upstream, identify the turnover rate of employees with disability and regularly measure variances in this rate as your inclusivity policy is rolled out, implemented, and gains in maturity.
- Instil a corporate mindset that views every employee as having unique needs and implement a safe speak-up system. This will widen the notion of what it is to be 'normal' and included within the workplace.
- Call in external expertise to audit and develop workplace design, including the design of office spaces and furnishings because companies themselves often lack the know-how. These changes will have a major impact on how employees with disabilities integrate into a company and how they perform their roles.
- Create the post of disability champion, ideally, a member of senior management, who has a say on the Board and is entrusted with developing disability inclusion and fairness in the company.
- Give specific focus on the key role of the manager and their positive effect on PWD team members: provide managers proper training in inclusivity and specifically on working with disabled employees; adjust how managers can be incentivised and rewarded; soften or disuse competitive reward systems; and adjust workloads according to capacities.
- Review the induction process, with managers actively involving PWD in shaping onboarding processes to address PWD needs more appropriately and develop more informed and durable inclusion practices.
- Encourage managers to engage early on with PWD and understand their needs before their arrival. This will contribute to disabled employees feeling more confident – as people and employees – and improve the chances of relational integration into their organisations.
- Set up mentoring or buddy systems to help boost skills, build relationships, and eradicate prejudice and discrimination.



# Getting involved

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