Institute of Directors | Disability@Work

The Inclusion Advantage: how employers can attract and retain disabled employees



Foreword



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Director General, IoD

I am delighted to introduce this landmark report, developed in partnership with the Disability@Work research group.

At the Institute of Directors, our mission is to support business to grow, innovate, and succeed. A core part of that mission is promoting inclusive, forward-thinking workplaces that enable all individuals to contribute and thrive. Reflecting this, in 2022, the IoD convened the Future of Business Commission to advance equity, diversity and inclusion in organisations, and in 2025 co-authored 'Progress Through Transparency' with Disability@Work, which set out a blueprint for mandatory disability employment and pay gap reporting.

Disabled people bring valuable skills, perspectives, and experiences that strengthen organisations and contribute to economic growth. Ensuring that employers can attract, develop, and retain disabled employees is therefore both a business opportunity and a strategic business imperative. Inclusive organisations are better positioned to access talent, foster innovation, and build resilience.

This report provides employers with a practical, evidence-based framework for embedding disability inclusion throughout the employment lifecycle, covering workplace adjustments, inclusive recruitment, career progression, leadership, and organisational culture. Its message is clear: disability inclusion should not be viewed as a standalone initiative, but as a fundamental component of effective people management and organisational success.

I encourage business leaders and managers across all sectors to act upon the report's recommendations. Together, we can create workplaces where disabled people can fulfil their potential and organisations can benefit from the full breadth of available talent.

Contents

Foreword 2
Introduction 4
Summary of Recommendations 5
Measurement, Monitoring and Accountability 7
Measuring progress and identifying priorities 7
The importance of declaration rates 8
Setting targets 8
Inclusive Recruitment 10
Sourcing: expanding access to disabled candidates 10
The application process 10
Assessment: initial screening, interviews, and tests 11
Onboarding 11
Workplace Adjustments, Accessibility, and Flexible Work 14
Providing effective workplace adjustments 14
Inclusive job design and flexibility 15
Building trust regarding adjustment requests 16
Retention, Development, and Career Advancement 18
Retaining employees who acquire disabilities 18
Return-to-work and rehabilitation 18
Ensuring equitable access to learning and development, and career progression 20
Embedding Disability Inclusion Through Leadership, Culture, and Governance 22
The essential role of line managers 22
Visible senior leadership commitment and accountability 22
The value of employee voice 23
Conclusion 25
Further Resources 26
References 27
About the Authors 34

Introduction

The proportion of the UK working age population that is disabled has grown significantly in recent years from 16.5 per cent in 2013 to nearly one in four today. Most organisations already have disabled employees within their workforce, and many of their employees will acquire a disability or long-term health condition during their working lives. Given this, disability inclusion is now a core workforce issue that employers cannot afford to overlook if they are to make full use of the skills and capabilities of their employees.

However, despite a growing body of evidence suggesting that disability-inclusive workplaces benefit from access to broader perspectives, greater employee engagement, higher productivity, better organisational resilience, and enhanced reputation,[1] disabled people often continue to encounter barriers to recruitment, retention, and progression. Disabled applicants are less likely than non-disabled applicants to be hired, often lack access to appropriate workplace support and reasonable adjustments once employed, and remain underrepresented in senior roles. Employees who acquire a disability during their working lives are at increased risk of sickness absence, falling out of work, and reduced career opportunities, if they do not receive the support they need.[2]

It is therefore essential for employers to implement effective disability-inclusive practices within their workplaces. As such, this report provides employers with evidence-based guidance on the practices that have been shown to improve the recruitment, retention, and progression of disabled employees, thereby helping employers make better use of disabled people's skills and capabilities. The evidence-based recommendations it sets out provide a practical framework for strengthening disability inclusion, removing barriers to employment and progression, and building workforce capability.



Summary of Recommendations

1. Measure disability employment outcomes and establish accountability

Measuring progress and identifying priorities:
Recommendation 1a: Collect workforce data regularly on the proportion of the workforce that is disabled, disability pay gaps, and the recruitment, retention, and progression of disabled employees, and use this information to monitor progress, identify areas requiring attention, and drive continuous improvement.

The importance of declaration rates:
Recommendation 1b: Monitor declaration rates as an indicator of employees' trust in the organisation's approach to disability inclusion and seek to increase declaration rates over time through visible leadership commitment, clear communication regarding the collection and use of disability information, and robust confidentiality safeguards.

Setting targets:
Recommendation 1c: Set clearly defined targets for the proportion of the workforce that is disabled, and for disabled people's recruitment, retention, progression, and pay outcomes; monitor progress towards these targets; and review and update them over time to ensure they remain appropriate and sufficiently ambitious.

2. Ensure recruitment and onboarding are accessible and inclusive

Sourcing: expanding access to disabled candidates:
Recommendation 2a: Expand access to disabled candidates through partnerships with disability employment and support organisations, supported employment providers, and educational institutions; and by providing supported internships, apprenticeships, and work trials.

Recommendation 2b: Ensure that job adverts clearly communicate that adjustments are available both in the recruitment process and once in employment, together with any flexible working arrangements associated with the role.

The application process:
Recommendation 2c: Monitor the proportion of applicants who are disabled; ensure that online application systems are accessible; and communicate clearly what support and adjustments are available during the hiring process, how they can be requested, and that requesting them will not place applicants at a disadvantage.

Assessment: initial screening, interviews, and tests:
Recommendation 2d: Ensure that selection processes enable disabled candidates to compete on an equal basis by:

- Monitoring the proportion of disabled candidates who are shortlisted, interviewed, offered a role, and appointed, to identify barriers at different stages of the hiring process
- Providing disabled candidates with appropriate workplace support, reasonable adjustments, and assistive technologies throughout the hiring process
- Separating information relating to disability status and adjustment requests from shortlisting and other screening decisions where possible
- Ensuring that evaluations of assessment test scores account for the reasonable adjustments disabled people would receive were they to secure the role, and using assessment methods that account for different ways in which roles can be performed
- Reviewing recruitment technologies regularly for accessibility, fairness, and potential bias, and making revisions where necessary

Onboarding:
Recommendation 2e: Ensure that disabled new starters are aware of how to make adjustment requests, how requests will be handled, and how any information they provide on their disability will be used; and transfer adjustments provided in the hiring process seamlessly into employment.

3. Provide workplace adjustments, increase accessibility, and enable flexible working

Providing effective workplace adjustments:
Recommendation 3a: Establish clear and accessible procedures for requesting workplace

adjustments, including information on who is responsible for considering requests, how decisions will be communicated, expected implementation timescales, and confidentiality arrangements.

Recommendation 3b: Work with disabled individuals to identify the specific work-related challenges they experience and the adjustments they need, and review these adjustments periodically to ensure they remain appropriate and effective.

Recommendation 3c: Embed accessibility into physical workplaces, digital systems, and organisational communications.

Inclusive job design and flexibility:
Recommendation 3d: Provide flexibility regarding working patterns, hours, schedules, and how work is organised and performed wherever practicable and preferred, and embed flexibility as a standard feature of work design for all employees, including new starters.

Building trust regarding adjustment requests:
Recommendation 3e: Ensure that employees feel confident requesting support by communicating adjustment processes clearly and establishing robust confidentiality arrangements; and reinforce to the whole workforce the importance of workplace adjustments in enabling employees to perform at their best, which is to the benefit of everyone within the organisation.

4. Support retention, development, and career progression

Retaining employees who acquire disabilities:
Recommendation 4a: Intervene early where employees acquire a disability, and work with the employee and relevant support services to identify and provide appropriate support and adjustments. Review support and adjustments regularly and adapt these as needs and circumstances change.

Return-to-work and rehabilitation:
Recommendation 4b: Establish return-to-work arrangements characterised by early intervention, regular communication, close coordination between managers and HR professionals, and timely provision of workplace adjustments.

Recommendation 4c: Integrate occupational health services into wider workforce, HR, and management processes. Make referrals promptly, share information effectively across relevant stakeholders, and implement recommendations without undue delay.

Ensuring equitable access to learning and development, and career progression:
Recommendation 4d: Review the accessibility of training platforms, learning materials, development programmes and external training providers, and ensure that disabled employees have equal access to stretch assignments, high-profile projects, and leadership development programmes.

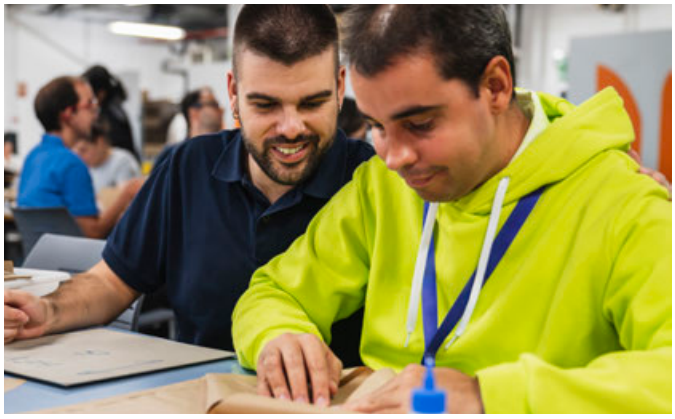
Recommendation 4e: Monitor leadership representation, promotion applications, and promotion outcomes by disability; and ensure that progression pathways are accessible, assessment procedures do not disadvantage disabled employees, promotion criteria are transparent, and higher-level roles can be performed flexibly where practicable.

5. Embed disability inclusion through leadership, management and governance

The essential role of line managers:
Recommendation 5a: Ensure that line managers have the skills to discuss disability-related issues, respond to adjustment requests, access resources within and beyond the organisation, and plan returns to work effectively; and that they understand their legal responsibilities.

Visible senior leadership commitment and accountability:
Recommendation 5b: Demonstrate visible commitment to disability inclusion, ensure disability considerations are integrated into organisational strategy and board discussions, review disability metrics regularly, and assign accountability to senior leaders for progress against agreed objectives and targets.

The value of employee voice:
Recommendation 5c: Actively involve disabled employees, disability employee networks, and other appropriate employee representatives in the development, implementation, monitoring, and review of disability inclusion policies and practices.



Measurement, Monitoring and Accountability

Why it matters

Like any other strategic business priority, progress in disability inclusion depends on setting clear objectives and measuring progress towards achieving them. With reliable data, employers can determine whether disabled employees are being recruited, retained, developed, and rewarded equitably. They can also monitor progress, assess whether investment in inclusion initiatives is delivering the intended results, and make better-informed decisions regarding priorities for action and where to target resources. Reliable data also helps employers to integrate disability inclusion into wider discussions regarding workforce strategy.[3]

Measuring progress and identifying priorities

An effective starting point is to understand the organisation's current position.

Central to this is understanding how many disabled people the organisation employs as a percentage of its total workforce. This is arguably the most important indicator of disability inclusion. Also important is for employers to monitor their disability pay gap. Understanding whether disabled employees are equitably represented in upper pay quartiles, for example, can help identify whether they are successfully progressing to higher organisational levels. Evidence shows that disabled applicants often receive lower recommended starting salaries than non-disabled people despite being viewed as equally employable and qualified.[4] Systematic monitoring of starting salaries by disability enables employers to detect and then address such disparities.

See Box 1 for recommendations on how to collect disability employment and pay gap data.

Box 1: Collecting disability employment data

A key issue employers often raise regarding the collection of disability employment data is the question they should use when asking employees about their disability status.

Disability employment data are most useful to employers if collected using a standardised approach across organisations. This would enable national and sectoral averages to be calculated, against which employers can benchmark themselves in monitoring their progress.

As such, we recommend that employers ask disabled people on an annual basis about their disability status using the same question as used in the government's Labour Force Survey. This question asks respondents: "Do you have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expecting to last 12 months or more?". If respondents answer in the affirmative, they are asked the follow-up question: "Does your condition or illness reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities?" (Yes, a lot; Yes, a little; Not at all). Respondents answering "Yes, a little" or "Yes, a lot" are defined as disabled.

We recommend that the data are collected on a 'confidential but not anonymous' basis, given that this will allow employers to connect the data to their pay records and thus calculate their disability pay gaps.

The government is currently planning the introduction of mandatory disability employment and pay gap reporting. It is expected the approach the government takes will be very similar to that outlined here.[5]

If employers also collect data on disabled people's recruitment, retention, and progression, this will help them to understand the barriers disabled people encounter in joining, remaining, and progressing within the organisation. This would then help employers determine where interventions are most needed and whether inclusion initiatives are having the intended effect.[6]

Reflecting the importance and effectiveness of such data, research shows that differences between disabled and non-disabled employees in both pay and pay satisfaction are smaller in organisations that monitor recruitment, promotion and pay.[7]

Recommendation 1a: Collect workforce data regularly on the proportion of the workforce that is disabled, disability pay gaps, and the recruitment, retention, and progression of disabled employees, and use this information to monitor progress, identify areas requiring attention, and drive continuous improvement.

The importance of declaration rates

Accurate measurement depends on employees feeling comfortable disclosing a disability. Research shows that employees are typically reluctant to disclose if they fear stigma, discrimination, or adverse career consequences. Fears of this nature remain common among disabled employees.[8]

However, employers can encourage disclosure by clearly communicating why disability information is being collected and the safeguards in place to protect confidentiality. Visible leadership commitment to disability inclusion, together with clear evidence that disability-related information will be used to improve workplace practices,[9] alongside the development of trust and psychological safety, will increase employees' willingness to disclose.[10]

As this implies, low declaration rates (i.e., where employees do not respond when asked about their disability status, or respond 'prefer not to say') might be viewed as indicating ongoing concerns among the workforce that disclosing a disability may result in stigma and adverse career consequences. Monitoring declaration rates alongside other measures of disability inclusion will therefore provide a useful indicator of the workforce's trust and confidence in their employer's approach to disability inclusion.

Recommendation 1b: Monitor declaration rates as an indicator of employees' trust in the organisation's approach to disability inclusion and seek to increase declaration rates over time through visible leadership commitment, clear communication regarding the collection and use of disability information, and robust confidentiality safeguards.

Setting targets

Measurement is most likely to drive improvement when linked to clearly defined targets. Where organisations establish measurable targets for the percentage of the workforce that is disabled, recruitment, progression, retention, and pay, and review progress towards these targets regularly, this will help ensure accountability, focus attention on priority areas, and direct organisational resources towards the activities most likely to improve disability inclusion.[11]

Also important to keep in mind in setting targets is that workforce demographics evolve over time (the percentage of the working age population that is disabled has increased significantly in recent years, for example). Employers can take this into account by reviewing their targets periodically and amending them to ensure they remain consistent with these wider workforce demographic changes.[12]

Recommendation 1c: Set clearly defined targets for the proportion of the workforce that is disabled, and for disabled people's recruitment, retention, progression, and pay outcomes; monitor progress towards these targets; and review and update them over time to ensure they remain appropriate and sufficiently ambitious.





Inclusive Recruitment

Why it matters

Disability inclusive recruitment practices have important benefits for employers as well as for disabled applicants. Employers who adopt such practices are able to access a wider range of skills and perspectives, which in turn supports organisational effectiveness.[13] Employers can therefore expand their access to talent and strengthen workforce capability through the inclusive recruitment of disabled people.

However, research consistently shows that disabled applicants are less likely to receive job offers than non-disabled applicants, even where they possess equivalent skills and qualifications.[14] This arises from a combination of inaccessible recruitment systems, selection procedures that disadvantage disabled candidates, misconceptions about disability, and limited knowledge among hiring managers regarding workplace adjustments throughout the hiring process.[15]

Employers can address these matters by seeking to ensure that applicant sourcing, job adverts, the application process, candidate assessment, and onboarding, are disability inclusive.[16] The following sections outline the practical actions employers can take at each of these stages.

Sourcing: expanding access to disabled candidates

By looking beyond traditional recruitment channels, employers can expand their access to disabled applicants who might otherwise be overlooked.

This can involve developing partnerships with disability employment and support organisations, supported employment providers (via the British Association for Supported Employment, for example), educational institutions, and specialist recruitment initiatives.[17] It can also involve providing supported internships, apprenticeships, work trials, and other transitional pathways into employment.[18]

Recommendation 2a: Expand access to disabled candidates through partnerships with disability employment and support organisations, supported employment providers, and educational institutions; and by providing supported internships, apprenticeships, and work trials.

Also important is inclusive advertising. Employers can increase their appeal to disabled applicants by making it clear in job adverts that workplace adjustments will be available throughout the hiring process and once the applicant is in role,[19] and including information about flexible working arrangements regarding where, when, and how the job can be performed, given the importance of such arrangements to many disabled people.[20]

Recommendation 2b: Ensure that job adverts clearly communicate that adjustments are available both in the recruitment process and once in employment, together with any flexible working arrangements associated with the role.

The application process

Many barriers in the application process arise unintentionally. For example, online application systems may not be fully compatible with assistive technologies, and candidates may be unclear about whether and when to request adjustments to the process, or how such requests will be viewed by employers.[21]

A key starting point is to monitor and review the percentage of applicants who are disabled, with a low percentage suggesting the application process may contain barriers to disabled people. There are a number of actions employers can then take to improve application process accessibility, including assessing (and addressing) the accessibility of online application systems, communicating clearly how applicants can request the support and adjustments they need to navigate the application process, and emphasising that making such requests will not place applicants at a disadvantage.[22]

Recommendation 2c: Monitor the proportion of applicants who are disabled; ensure that online application systems are accessible; and communicate clearly what support and adjustments are available during the hiring process, how they can be requested, and that requesting them will not place applicants at a disadvantage.

Assessment: initial screening, interviews, and tests

Experimental and field evidence shows that applicants who disclose disabilities often receive less favourable hiring evaluations even where they possess qualifications that are equivalent to those of non-disabled people.[23]

If employers monitor the proportions of disabled applicants who are shortlisted, interviewed, offered a role, and appointed, this can help them identify if barriers exist at different stages of the hiring process. Should employers identify such barriers, they can then seek to ensure the requisite support, reasonable adjustments and assistive technologies are available at each stage to help disabled candidates to compete on a level playing field.

Other actions employers can take include separating information on disability status and adjustment requests from shortlisting and other screening decisions, and ensuring that evaluations of assessment test scores account for the reasonable adjustments disabled people would receive were they to secure the role.[24] This involves recognising that roles can often be performed in multiple ways and thus not assessing candidates against rigid assumptions regarding how the role should be performed. In some circumstances, practical exercises, work samples and skills-based assessments may provide a more accurate indication of future job performance than conventional interviews, given they provide candidates with a more direct opportunity to demonstrate their ability to perform the role.[25]

The increasing use of artificial intelligence in recruitment creates additional accessibility and fairness considerations. While AI-enabled recruitment technologies may improve accessibility in some circumstances, they can also reproduce or amplify barriers for disabled candidates if they are not carefully designed. Employers can seek to mitigate this by reviewing recruitment technologies regularly for accessibility, fairness, and potential bias.[26]

Recommendation 2d: Ensure that selection processes enable disabled candidates to compete on an equal basis by:

- monitoring the proportion of disabled candidates who are shortlisted, interviewed, offered a role, and appointed, to identify barriers at different stages of the hiring process
- providing disabled candidates with appropriate workplace support, reasonable adjustments, and assistive technologies throughout the hiring process
- separating information relating to disability status and adjustment requests from shortlisting and other screening decisions where possible
- ensuring that evaluations of assessment test scores account for the reasonable adjustments disabled people would receive were they to secure the role, and using assessment methods that account for different ways in which roles can be performed
- reviewing recruitment technologies regularly for accessibility, fairness, and potential bias, and making revisions where necessary



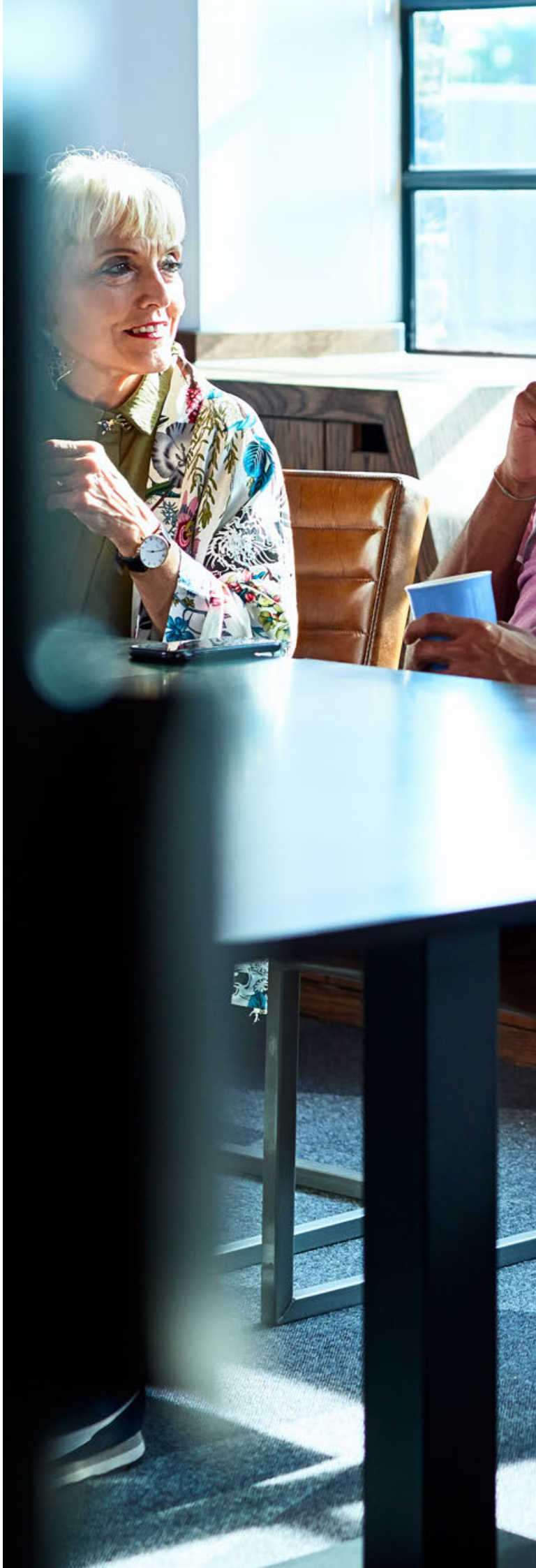
Onboarding

Early workplace experiences can be critical in supporting disabled employees' successful integration into the workplace. Research shows that early access to the support they need influences disabled employees' organisational learning, perceptions of inclusion, and intention to remain with the organisation.[27]

As such, employers can significantly improve the onboarding experiences of disabled new starters by ensuring that they understand how to request adjustments, how requests will be handled, and how information about their disability will be used. They can also reassure disabled new starters that seeking adjustments will not place them at a disadvantage in terms of their future career trajectory.[28]

In addition, employers can improve disabled new starters' onboarding experience by transferring adjustments provided to them in navigating the hiring process as seamlessly as possible into their job role, thereby preventing them from having to renegotiate these adjustments.

Recommendation 2e: Ensure that disabled new starters are aware of how to make adjustment requests, how requests will be handled, and how any information they provide on their disability will be used; and transfer adjustments provided in the hiring process seamlessly into employment.





Workplace Adjustments, Accessibility, and Flexible Work

Why it matters

For many disabled people, the most significant obstacle to employment arises not from their impairment or health condition, but from how work is organised and designed. Physical environments, technologies, working practices, and job requirements can all create unnecessary barriers to recruitment, retention and career progression. Removing these barriers enables employers to access a wider talent pool, retain valuable skills and experience, and make better use of employees' capabilities.[29]

Providing effective workplace adjustments

Evidence suggests that where employers provide disabled employees with timely access to workplace adjustments (changes to how the job is organised that remove or reduce work-related barriers), this can improve their job performance and wellbeing, thereby helping them remain and succeed in work, while enabling employers to make full use of their skills and experience.[30]

Workplace adjustments can take many forms (see Box 2). Research consistently finds that most adjustments involve limited financial outlay and are often highly cost-effective when compared with the costs of labour turnover and replacement hiring.[31] In many cases, relatively small adjustments can make a substantial difference to an employee's ability to perform their role effectively.[32]

Box 2: Examples of workplace adjustments

A range of different workplace adjustments have been shown to improve employment outcomes for disabled people, including:

- flexible working arrangements, including adjustments to work locations, working hours, schedules (e.g., start and finish times), additional breaks, or shortened working days[33]
- hybrid or home-working arrangements where compatible with business and operational requirements[34]
- modified duties or adjustments to how work is allocated and organised[35]
- phased returns to work following illness or injury[36]
- time off for medical appointments, treatment, rehabilitation, or disability-related support needs[37]
- specialist equipment, assistive technologies and workplace adaptations[38]
- support from interpreters, assistants or job coaches where appropriate[39]



However, research has found that many disabled employees who require workplace accommodations do not receive them.[40]

As such, it is important for employers to ensure that workplace adjustments are available, and that they introduce clear and accessible procedures by which adjustments can be requested. Employers can enhance these procedures by providing information on who is responsible for considering requests, how decisions will be communicated, and the timescales within which disabled people can expect to receive their adjustments.[41] Well-designed procedures that support timely decision-making and implementation will help employees access the support they need.[42]

Recommendation 3a: Establish clear and accessible procedures for requesting workplace adjustments, including information on who is responsible for considering requests, how decisions will be communicated, and expected implementation timescales.

There are no uniform adjustments that work for all disabled employees. Employees with different health conditions or impairments may require similar forms of support, while employees with the same condition or impairment may feel its effects differently, and hence require different forms of support. Employers can account for this by working with disabled employees to identify the work-related challenges they experience.[43] This might involve discussing the requirements of the role, the factors affecting their performance, and the forms of support they need, thereby enabling support to be tailored to the employee's individual circumstances.[44]

Finally, given that disabled employees' needs and workplace circumstances may evolve over time, it is important for employers to review adjustments periodically to ensure that support remains appropriate.[45]

Recommendation 3b: Work with disabled individuals to identify the specific work-related challenges they experience and the adjustments they need, and review these adjustments periodically to ensure they remain appropriate and effective.

Also important is that while individual workplace adjustments remain important, employers can often remove barriers by building accessibility into workplace design, technologies and systems from the outset rather than introducing individual adjustments later on.[46]

The accessibility-by-design principle can apply to physical workplaces, digital systems, and organisational communications. Examples include designing buildings that are physically accessible, developing software that is compatible with assistive technologies, and ensuring that key information is available in a range of formats to meet different needs.[47]

Recommendation 3c: Embed accessibility into physical workplaces, digital systems, and organisational communications.

Inclusive job design and flexibility

Flexibility regarding when and where work is performed, including remote working and adjustments to working patterns, hours, schedules, and the organisation of job tasks, can be extremely important to disabled people. It allows them to manage health conditions, treatment schedules, rehabilitation, and accessibility-related needs more effectively, while simultaneously meeting the performance requirements of their role.[48] Where employers make these forms of flexibility available to new starters as well as established employees, this can expand the talent pool from which they are able to recruit, given that some disabled people will be unable to enter employment in the absence of flexible working arrangements.[49]

It is important to recognise that flexibility in location, working patterns, and start and finish times are examples of good general employment practice. Hence, if such practices are introduced as the norm for all employees, this will not only benefit disabled people but also employees with caring responsibilities, while improving all employees' work-life balance. Employers will also likely receive fewer requests for individual adjustments because much of the flexibility disabled employees need will already be built into how work is organised.

Beyond flexibility regarding when and where work is performed, employers can also consider flexibility in how work is performed. There are typically multiple ways in which an employee might achieve the job outcomes expected of them. As such, rather than prescribing a

standardised way in which roles should be performed, employers can give employees discretion to organise and carry out tasks in a manner that suits them best. Flexibility of this nature can be extremely important in enabling many disabled employees to maximise their contribution to the organisation. Employers can also consider whether tasks can be distributed differently between workers or teams, thus further maximising disabled employees' contribution to the organisation by enabling them to focus on the tasks they are best able to perform.[50]

Recommendation 3d: Provide flexibility regarding working patterns, hours, schedules, and how work is organised and performed wherever practicable and preferred, and embed flexibility as a standard feature of work design for all employees, including new starters.

Building trust regarding adjustment requests

Central to maximising the effectiveness of employers' adjustment policies is ensuring that disabled employees do not fear stigma, negative career consequences, breaches of privacy, or unsupportive responses from managers as a result of requesting workplace adjustments.[51]



This requires employers to ensure disabled people trust that requests for adjustments will be handled fairly, constructively and positively. There are several practices that can assist with this, including communicating adjustment processes clearly, and establishing robust confidentiality arrangements. Also important is demonstrating visible leadership support for the adjustments process, including communicating to all employees that adjustments are not a perk or an example of favourable treatment but are essential in enabling disabled employees to contribute fully to the organisation, which is to everyone's benefit. This will help non-disabled employees understand the purpose of adjustments and their importance to organisational performance, and secure their support in helping ensure that adjustments are effectively implemented.[52]

Recommendation 3e: Ensure that employees feel confident requesting support by communicating adjustment processes clearly and establishing robust confidentiality arrangements; and reinforce to the whole workforce the importance of workplace adjustments in enabling employees to perform at their best, which is to the benefit of everyone within the organisation.



Retention, Development, and Career Advancement

Why it matters

Disabled people fall out of employment at more than twice the rate of non-disabled people.[53] For employers, this represents a substantial loss of skills, experience and organisational knowledge.

There are several reasons why this happens. Disabled employees often continue to experience challenges after entering employment such as difficulties in renegotiating adjustments as they move between roles or as their condition changes or worsens.[54]

A further key issue relates to disability onset, with 80% of disabled people acquiring their impairments during working age rather than being disabled at the point of entry to the labour market.[55] Employees who acquire a disability may experience uncertainty about their current role, their career prospects, and the challenges associated with managing health conditions alongside work responsibilities. If employees who acquire a disability cannot secure the adjustments they need, and leave work as a result, this represents a significant loss of human capital for employers.[56]

Also important in improving the retention of disabled employees is that they are not only able to remain in their current job, but also have opportunities to develop their skills, advance their careers, and progress into senior roles. Yet disabled employees remain underrepresented in senior positions. Research suggests that this may partly reflect both subtle and overt discrimination that limits access to developmental experiences, stretch assignments, and mentoring opportunities, as well as inaccessible promotion pathways.[57] Disabled people also often encounter inaccurate assumptions about their capability or aspirations.

However, supporting disabled employees' development and career progression is in employers' interests as it can help with the retention of valuable skills and experience, and strengthen leadership pipelines.[58] The following sections outline actions employers can take to improve disabled employees' retention, development, and career advancement.

Retaining employees who acquire disabilities

Employers are often well positioned to identify instances where employees' emerging health conditions or disabilities are starting to impact on their job performance. Early identification and intervention are key to preventing prolonged absence or employees leaving work altogether.[59] Timely, regular and supportive communication between employees, managers, and support services is therefore essential in identifying emerging needs and addressing workplace challenges constructively.[60]

The approaches employers can take to support employees who develop a disability are similar to those needed to support disabled people generally – workplace adjustments, flexible working arrangements, and appropriate supervisory support, for example.[61] However, it is also important for employers to review the support offered regularly, and adapt this support over time as necessary, to account for the possibility that the needs of employees with newly acquired disabilities may change particularly rapidly as their condition develops and their rehabilitation or treatment requirements become clearer.[62]

Recommendation 4a: Intervene early where employees acquire a disability, and work with the employee and relevant support services to identify and provide appropriate support and adjustments. Review support and adjustments regularly and adapt these as needs and circumstances change.

Return-to-work and rehabilitation

Periods of sickness absence can create significant challenges both for employers and employees. However, evidence suggests that well-designed return-to-work processes, together with supportive contact during periods of absence and carefully planned phased returns to work can improve return-to-work outcomes, reduce the length of sickness absence periods, and increase long-term employee retention.[63]

Effective return-to-work programmes focus not simply on getting employees back into the workplace quickly, or on medical recovery alone, but on facilitating a sustainable and successful return by ensuring the employee has the necessary workplace adjustments (assistive technology, flexibility regarding when and where work is performed, and adjustments to working hours and job design, for example).[64]

Occupational health services can also be central in this process. Their value lies not only in assessing the individual's health condition but also in helping employers understand the workplace adjustments, return-to-work planning and other forms of workplace support the employee needs.[65]

Considerable research has been conducted on effective return-to-work interventions. This is summarised in Box 3.



Box 3: Characteristics of effective return-to-work programmes

The return-to-work process following illness or disability can be challenging. However, research suggests that successful return-to-work arrangements are characterised by:[66]

- early intervention before periods of absence become prolonged
- regular communication between the employee and employer during the period of sickness absence about the support needed on return
- coordination between managers, HR, and occupational-health professionals in identifying and meeting support needs
- tailored support that takes individual needs into account
- workplace adjustments and flexible working arrangements that facilitate a phased return

Regarding the role of occupational health services, research shows their contribution is greatest when:[67]

- they are integrated into wider workforce, HR, and line-management processes rather than operating as a standalone service
- information is shared effectively across all the stakeholders involved in supporting the employees' return-to-work programme
- occupational health referrals occur promptly and recommendations are implemented without undue delay

Recommendation 4b: Establish return-to-work arrangements characterised by early intervention, regular communication, close coordination between managers and HR professionals, and timely provision of workplace adjustments.

Recommendation 4c: Integrate occupational health services into wider workforce, HR, and management processes. Make referrals promptly, share information effectively across relevant stakeholders, and implement recommendations without undue delay.

Ensuring equitable access to learning and development, and career progression

A further factor in determining the retention of disabled employees is ensuring they have equitable opportunities to develop their skills, expand their responsibilities, and progress in their careers. As well as helping disabled employees fulfil their career aspirations, this also benefits employers as it strengthens their talent pipeline and enables them to make full use of the skills and experience available within their workforce.[68]

Yet disabled employees remain underrepresented at senior levels in many organisations. This can be explained by both a lack of access to development opportunities and inequitable promotion processes and decisions, with research indicating that disabled employees often experience fewer opportunities for upward mobility and advancement than non-disabled employees even when they possess comparable qualifications and experience.[69]

There are several measures employers can take to ensure disabled employees have equal access to development opportunities, including reviewing learning and development systems (training platforms, learning materials, development programmes and external training providers, for example) to ensure they are accessible and inclusive.[70] Employers can also ensure that disabled employees have equal access to stretch assignments, high-profile projects, and leadership and career development programmes. It is important to monitor disabled employees' access to these assignments and projects, and participation in such programmes, and to take action to address any disparities relative to non-disabled employees.[71]

Regarding promotion processes and decisions, there are several actions employers can take to help ensure that disabled employees are able to compete fairly, including:[72] regularly monitoring and reviewing leadership representation, promotion applications and outcomes by disability; ensuring progression pathways are accessible; adapting promotion tests to account for the applicants' current or likely future reasonable adjustments; providing clarity regarding how progression decisions are made and the skills and experience required for advancement; and enabling higher-level roles to be performed on a flexible basis where practically possible.

Recommendation 4d: Review the accessibility of training platforms, learning materials, development programmes and external training providers, and ensure that disabled employees have equal access to stretch assignments, high-profile projects, and leadership development programmes.

Recommendation 4e: Monitor leadership representation, promotion applications and promotion outcomes by disability; and ensure that progression pathways are accessible, assessment procedures do not disadvantage disabled employees, promotion criteria are transparent, and higher-level roles can be performed flexibly where practicable.



Embedding Disability Inclusion Through Leadership, Culture, and Governance

Why it matters

The impact of many of the practices discussed in this report, including accessible recruitment, workplace adjustments, flexible working and return-to-work support, depends on their effective implementation by managers and leaders. It is therefore important that managers possess the skills they need to put them into effect.[73]

It is also important for employers to create an organisational culture in which disabled employees are valued and able to contribute, develop, and succeed, and in which disability inclusion is embedded in decision-making and day-to-day practice.[74] This enables organisations to make full use of their disabled employees' capabilities, perspectives and experience.[75] However, this requires not only leadership commitment but also governance arrangements that involve disabled employees meaningfully in organisational decision-making.[76]

The essential role of line managers

Line managers are often the most important influence on the day-to-day experiences of disabled employees. They play a central role in implementing workplace adjustments, supporting employees during periods of illness or absence, facilitating access to development opportunities, and responding to requests for support.

Research shows that line managers are better able to support disabled employees where they have the practical skills to discuss disability-related issues, respond to adjustment requests, access the resources available within and beyond the organisation, plan returns to work effectively, and understand their legal responsibilities.[77] These skills have been shown to help them hold constructive conversations, respond appropriately to employee needs, and apply disability-inclusive practices consistently and effectively.[78] Line managers can be equipped with these skills via training provided by HR specialists, occupational-health professionals, disability networks, employee relations teams or external advisers. Research shows that training in such practical skills is much more important than unconscious bias training, which is unlikely to deliver sustained behavioural change.[79]

Recommendation 5a: Ensure that line managers have the skills to discuss disability-related issues, respond to adjustment requests, access resources within and beyond the organisation, and plan returns to work effectively; and that they understand their legal responsibilities.

Visible senior leadership commitment and accountability

Beyond line managers' skill in managing and applying disability-inclusive practice, sustained progress also depends on visible commitment, oversight, and accountability from senior leaders. Where they communicate to the organisation that disability inclusion is a business priority, this can influence line management behaviour, resource allocation, and decision-making throughout the organisational hierarchy, thus helping ensure the translation of inclusion policies into day-to-day practice.[80]

Visible senior leadership commitment can take many forms, including supporting organisational initiatives, participating in disability-related events, and communicating and openly discussing the importance of disability inclusion for organisational effectiveness. Where appropriate, senior leaders can also share their own experiences of disability or long-term health conditions, thus helping to create a culture in which disability is recognised and valued, and open discussions about support needs are encouraged.[81]

Senior leadership commitment also involves disability inclusion becoming a boardroom-level concern. This might involve boards receiving and reviewing information on the progress of major inclusion initiatives, and the risks that may affect this progress. Where boards regularly receive metrics on disability employment rates, disability pay gaps, hiring, retention, and progression, for example, this will enable them to monitor progress and identify areas requiring further action. Disability metrics might also be incorporated into existing people and performance reporting, thus helping integrate boardroom-level discussions on disability into broader discussions regarding workforce strategy,

capability, and organisational performance, and helping ensure that disability inclusion efforts are aligned with organisational priorities.[82]

Also important is the establishment of clear board-level governance structures and accountability mechanisms.[83] This involves assigning accountability to senior leaders for monitoring progress, driving improvements in inclusion practices, and achieving agreed targets.[84]

Recommendation 5b: Demonstrate visible commitment to disability inclusion, ensure disability considerations are integrated into organisational strategy and board discussions, review disability metrics regularly, and assign accountability to senior leaders for progress against agreed objectives and targets.

The value of employee voice

Successful disability inclusion strategies are rarely developed in isolation. Research suggests that employers are more likely to identify and address workplace challenges effectively when disabled employees play an active role in shaping solutions and evaluating progress.[85]

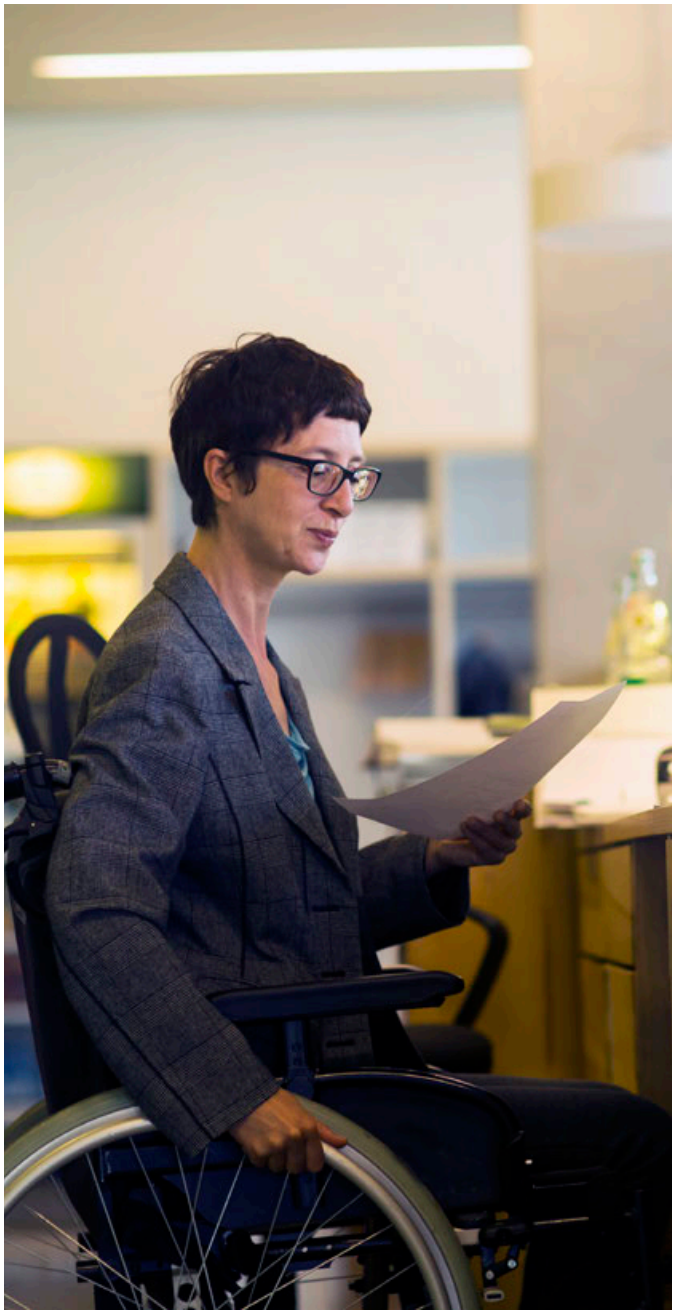
Disabled employees often have valuable insights into how organisational policies operate in practice and where opportunities for improvement exist. Their experiences can help employers identify barriers and opportunities that may not be immediately apparent.

Employers can provide disabled employees with regular opportunities to offer feedback through a range of channels, including employee surveys, focus groups, consultation exercises, and informal engagement mechanisms.

Employee disability networks, including staff forums and employee resource groups, provide an additional channel for employee voice as well as providing disabled people with opportunities for support and networking. When adequately resourced, these networks can help employers better understand disabled employees' experiences, and ensure that disabled employees' insights inform organisational decision-making, thereby helping improve disability inclusion practices.[86]

Employee representatives can also play an important role in supporting disability inclusion.[87] Research has found, for example, that consultation and joint problem-solving with union representatives can strengthen workplace equality initiatives and help ensure that employee views are reflected in organisational policies and practices.[88]

Recommendation 5c: Actively involve disabled employees, disability employee networks, and other appropriate employee representatives in the development, implementation, monitoring, and review of disability inclusion policies and practices.





Conclusion

The evidence reviewed in this report points to five interconnected areas on which employers can focus to strengthen disability inclusion. Collectively, the recommendations we outline provide a framework for improving disabled people's experiences and opportunities throughout the employee lifecycle, from recruitment and onboarding, through to retention, development, and career progression.

Employers that successfully attract, retain, and develop disabled employees, and provide them with career opportunities, will benefit from a wider talent pool, improved employee engagement, and retention of valuable skills and experience. Accordingly, disability inclusion should be viewed as a strategic workforce issue.

There is no single intervention that will ensure disability inclusion. Progress depends on sustained leadership commitment, the implementation of evidence-based practices, a willingness to review and improve organisational systems over time, and the co-production of organisational policies and practices with disabled employees. Employers that commit to these interventions will create workplaces in which disabled employees can contribute fully, realise their potential, and thrive throughout their careers. This in turn will strengthen workforce capability, improve organisational performance, and secure a lasting inclusion advantage.

Further Resources

Employers interested in developing more disability-inclusive workplaces may find the following resources useful. They provide practical guidance on implementing the recommendations outlined in this report.

Strategy, Measurement and Reporting

Institute of Directors and Disability@Work Progress Through Transparency: The Case for Mandatory Disability Employment and Pay Gap Reporting (Institute of Directors and Disability@Work 2025)

Workplace Adjustments and Employment Practice

ACAS Guidance on workplace adjustments, disability discrimination and inclusive employment practices: https://www.acas.org.uk

Access to Work factsheets and employer guidance
Information on workplace support and funding for adjustments:
https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work

Job Accommodation Network (JAN) (US)
A free, US-based resource offering practical guidance and tools to help employers identify, implement and review workplace adjustments.
https://askjan.org

Disability Inclusion and Employer Guidance

Disability Rights UK Resources on disability inclusion and employment:
https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org

Disability@Work Research and practical guidance on disability employment:
https://www.disabilityatwork.co.uk

People Management and HR Practice

CIPD Guidance on disability, health and wellbeing at work:
https://www.cipd.org

Legal Requirements and Regulation

Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC)
Guidance on employers' legal responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010:
https://www.equalityhumanrights.com

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Disability@Work was established in 2013 with the aim of conducting high quality policy-relevant research on disability in the workplace and the labour market, and to encourage governments and employers to use this research to inform workplace practice and labour market policy. It publishes its research as academic papers in highly-rated peer-reviewed international journals and also as briefs which it distributes widely to practitioners and policymakers. It is a founder member of the Disability Employment Charter, and regularly appears before Parliamentary Select Committees. It works closely with a wide range of stakeholders, including the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Disability Employment, the Centre for Social Justice Disability Commission, the Department of Work and Pensions, Disability Rights UK, and the Royal Society of Arts. For further information, please go to: www.disabilityatwork.co.uk

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