

Diversity and
inclusion for people
with disabilities
in the context of
COVID-19



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The year 2020 started out with many plans to advance diversity and inclusion (D&I) efforts for people with disabilities¹ in the business world. Disability awareness was prominently featured on the agenda at the World Economic Forum's Annual Meeting in Davos, for example. The COVID-19 pandemic and global recession have disrupted business plans, while presenting new opportunities and threats to D&I efforts directed at people with disabilities.

In 2018, EY published *Taking disability confidence global: Practical tips on how to increase disability confidence in organizations*. The report was based on the insights of representatives from global businesses and the public sector on topics such as the business case, recruitment, making workplaces accessible and the power of storytelling.

As the world is changing, we didn't want that effort to be a one-off, and to keep the conversation and learning going, we have produced this report which reflects on how the COVID-19 pandemic and economic shocks, are shaping the global disability agenda.

- 1 Caroline Casey, Founder of #valuable, notes that "Some people prefer the term 'people with disabilities' because it implies that people live and thrive with impairments. Other people prefer the term 'disabled people' as it points to the failure to remove the physical, business and social obstacles that disable and exclude so many people. Preferences differ around the world."

Throughout this document, we use both terms, with the recognition that, globally, there is not a perfect definition of "disability." When in doubt, ask people how they prefer to be described.



The business context: variation + change

The work and social environment for disabled people around the world varies tremendously. As noted in taking disability confidence global, several factors shape a company's appetite to employ people with disabilities. Such as government policy, legal mandates, medical understanding, changing perceptions of disability and human rights, and a clearer understanding of the business case for inclusion in areas such as talent, innovation, productivity, and market development.

COVID-19 has clouded the economical picture a bit. Some countries and regions have been greatly affected by the pandemic, while others have managed through the health crisis more effectively. Healthcare systems around the world have been reoriented to the coronavirus response, and many "non-essential" services have been curtailed or have shifted to alternative facilities and caregivers. As a result, in some regions, disabled people can find it more difficult to access services and support. Moreover, as some countries have sought to reopen their economies, surges in infections have created more questions about the future and added to business uncertainty and social stresses.

The global health crisis has catalyzed a global economic recession which has upended business plans. In June, for example, the International Monetary Fund forecast that the UK, the Eurozone countries, and Mexico would experience economic contractions of over 10 percent in 2020 – something not seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s. On the other hand, China and a handful of other countries in Asia are expected to grow modestly.

In addition, governments have taken vastly different approaches to combating the pandemic—in terms of both public health and economic measures. Policy variation is especially significant across Europe, Latin America, and the United States.

The varying duration and intensity of lockdowns have had tremendous impacts on the workplace and people. While some offices and operations have reopened under new health and safety regimes, others are expected to remain closed or operate on only a limited basis well into 2021. For many companies, especially smaller ones, survival is at stake. This will make D&I planning and implementation more difficult and uneven.

Finally, the pandemic is raising new questions about the future of work and the workplace. The pandemic has accelerated some long-term trends such as the shift to more virtual work practices and it has dramatically elevated the role of technology in communications, teamwork, and hiring. For large organizations, such as EY in EMEIA, the office will be one of a number of options for collaboration, cohesion, and community, but many of our people are saying that they intend to continue to work virtually for some of their working week.

Accounting for and managing across these variations and making sure no one is left behind is difficult but essential for sustaining disability confidence efforts in these times.

Implications for advancing disability confidence

Taking disability confidence global outlined six steps to advance the inclusion of disabled people in a global organization (refer to additional resources at the bottom of the page). These all remain valid in the context of the

pandemic. Below, we revisit several of those steps and we add some additional issues to consider, most importantly, on mental health.



Taking disability confidence global – so where do you start

- Step 1 > Developing the business case and securing sponsorship
- Step 2 > Connecting with your disabled community
- Step 3 > Ensuring your people are disability confident
- Step 4 > Make accessible technology a key consideration
- Step 5 > Recruitment – are we creating a level playing field for applicants with a disability?
- Step 6 > Consider how you communicate?



1. Develop the business case and secure sponsorship

Generally speaking, disability confidence is a newer item on businesses' diversity and inclusion agenda. If a company is new to the disability confidence journey, or the concept is not ingrained in a firm's culture and strategy, a crisis such as the pandemic creates the risk that disability programs get deferred in lieu of health and safety or business continuity concerns. Another risk is a zero-sum approach to inclusion: D&I efforts focused on Blacks, Asians, and other ethnic minorities have gained new urgency in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests, creating the potential to crowd out disability confidence.

As illustrated in *Taking disability confidence global*, there are a lot of data and case studies available in the public domain about the competitive gains from disability confidence –regarding, for example, promoting innovation and reflecting the market being served. These data points can be used to get management's attention at a time when there is intense focus on the near-term financial bottom line.

In recent years, Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) has risen on the agenda of companies, asset managers, and investors. The pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement have drawn attention to the "S" in ESG measurement and reporting efforts to improve management and investment decision making and boost accountability. Also, investor interest in socially-responsible firms has surged in the pandemic. Treating people well in the crisis is considered tantamount to sustaining and building a firm's long-term value. Accordingly, ESG metrics can be used to focus management on the longer term and help sustain disability confidence programs through the near-term ups and downs of the business.

Progress can also be sustained and accelerated when you have senior Partner Sponsors that can assure that disability stays on the leadership agenda. Carmine DiSibio, EY's Global Chairman and CEO, for example, has emphatically embraced disability confidence as part of his efforts to promote innovation and top talent in the organization.

2. Connect with your disabled community and ensure your people are disability confident

As documented in *Taking disability confidence global*, it is important to ask your disabled people what works well for them and what you could be doing differently – a task that is doubly important given the many workplace changes and stresses associated with COVID-19. One tool that human resources teams have at their disposal is the flash survey to better understand staff concerns and what kinds of support they may need.

Video conferences from the home – with family pictures, pets, and children in the background – have made business discussions less formal and more personal. These moments offer rich opportunities for disabled colleagues to bring their 'whole selves' into the

picture and provide a common frame of reference for colleagues to share experiences and show solidarity in crisis together.

If D&I is in peril, go outside the firm and connect with peers in similar organizations to understand how they have navigated challenges in the past. Community organizations and business consultants can also provide external support and guidance, for example, in making the business case for disability confidence, adjustments and technologies to aid working from home.

3. Embrace technology and ensure that it is accessible

Many offices around the world have reopened, but remote working will remain imperative in many jurisdictions for the foreseeable future – perhaps until a vaccine or therapies are developed and deployed. The shift to remote working has been a bonus for some disabled people and a challenge for others. In fact most people will tell you that the days can be relentless and draining with numerous video conferences, often scheduled for outside of working hours.

For some neurodiverse workers, working from home can be more amenable than an office, because, in theory, one has greater control over the immediate environment. However companies must also make sure that people with disabilities have access to proper lighting, desks, chairs, and assistive technologies.

Diversity and inclusion programs historically have been centered around in-person meetings and events to build

community and share experiences and insights. On the surface, office closures and travel limitations impede this, but transitioning to virtual work practices also has many upsides, such as increasing the frequency of online interaction and lowering logistical costs and the complexity associated with in-person events. Virtual has also lowered barriers to entry and opened doors to new members and allies: Disabled people in countries or regions that don't have disability-oriented activities suddenly have gained an opportunity to join the many virtual discussions, webinars, and events hosted by distant groups.

However there are limits. Without periodic face-to-face meetings, professional and social cohesiveness and the motivational energy of initiatives degrade over time. A sense of “videoconference fatigue” has emerged across businesses and this goes for disability confidence efforts as well.

4. Create a level playing field for applicants with a disability

Working virtually has the potential to level the playing field for people with disabilities. Those with underlying health problems and for whom travel and attending meetings is a challenge are better able to connect with team members and leaders from home. “Face time” in the office is no longer privileged.

One area of opportunity to emerge from the pandemic lockdowns is hiring. Many digital platforms and tools have existed to manage and facilitate the hiring process, including digital interviewing and assessment tools that reduce the impact of unconscious bias and help hiring professionals make better decisions. The shift to telework has dramatically accelerated the adoption of technologies such as in-person recruitment and interviewing observes Paul Scantlebury, EY's Recruitment Strategy Implementation Leader and, the Co Chair of EY Ability

Oceania, the employee resource network that supports disability.

Recruiters at EY, for example, have launched an initiative – MyExperiences – which harnesses platforms, such as Hirevue, that can help those with a disability have the necessary accommodations to present their best selves during interviews. For those with a cognitive or physical disability, such as autism or hearing loss, the opportunity to conduct an interview from home can be comforting, says Scantlebury.

The rapid shift to more flexible and remote working practices will persist as offices reopen. Disability confidence means that procurement and IT departments must keep pace and make sure options are available to ensure accessibility and flexibility for all.



5. Consider how you communicate

Non-stop video and voice conference calls have become the default communications channels in the telework era. Rupert Taylor, the Partner Sponsor for disability in the UK notes that people process information differently when they are online and important non-verbal cues can get lost – especially when one is staring at a dozen faces on one screen. Those with dyslexia may also struggle more with the shift from verbal to written communications. “We have to be more thoughtful about how we communicate,” says Taylor.

EY has circulated tip sheets to improve virtual communications and make them more accessible. For instance, on a video conference, raise your hand to be recognized to speak – either visually or via the chat function. Be sure to say one’s name, so everyone knows who is speaking and speak slower so that all colleagues can process what you are saying. Note that people with hearing and some cognitive disabilities can’t lip-read

or take in non-verbal cues. Take advantage of readily available live-captioning capabilities and screen-reading plug-ins, when possible.

In the tip sheet *Inclusive leadership in times of crisis*, EY advises its managers to “Leverage accessible tools and resources for meetings, create multiple avenues for all team members to voice ideas and contributions, and actively solicit input from those who may be less vocal.” Such tips don’t only apply to people with disabilities – they help improve all communications.

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We have to be more thoughtful about how we communicate.

Rupert Taylor

6. Build personal resilience

People with disabilities face many challenges in the workplace and they have developed resiliency and unique abilities to work around barriers.

“I believe that disability is a superpower,” asserts Paul Scantlebury. “People with disabilities are great problem solvers because they deal with challenges every day.” However these impediments also create stresses that have been compounded by the pandemic. Attending to mental health and wellness is critical in this context and the rapid adoption of virtual mental health offerings has been a bonus.

As noted above, building community is central to diversity and inclusion efforts and a top priority is to make sure people with disabilities feel connected and supported by their organization in these challenging times. For those with a disability, asking for assistance can be perceived as creating a burden and this feeling can be accentuated in a health and economic crisis. Virtual events such as online happy hours and help lines for affinity groups are one way to overcome this: Connecting with colleagues inside and outside the organization can build awareness and confidence in these new working situations.

For many disabled people, isolation is a mental health risk. In some geographies, tight living arrangements make going to the office or out on the town important social outlets. Personal support networks in real life are

especially important for helping younger professionals work through issues. For everyone, working from home requires the right balance between work life and personal life. As a result, it is important for managers to be attentive to how the crisis is affecting all team members including those with a disability.

On a positive note, we have been able to learn a lot from our disabled colleagues during this period – anyone managing some form of disability in their lives has been able to help others around things like personal resilience during these covid times. As an example, the UK ability network have run a really successful webcast series called ‘lets chat’ focussing on resilience.

The ultimate silver lining is that the common experience of people facing the challenges of COVID-19 will potentially result in a better awareness of the challenges for some of our disabled colleagues and have positive spillovers for disability confidence.

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People with disabilities are great problem solvers because they deal with challenges every day.

Paul Scantlebury

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Additional resources

[Taking Disability Confidence Global](#)