

Disability as a Source of Competitive Advantage

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La Casa de Carlota

Summary. Many companies realize the value of diversity, equity, and inclusion. But most focus on gender and ethnicity, paying less attention to people with disabilities. Employing people with disabilities is usually seen as a social cause—one best suited to nonprofits or the public... [more](#)

In recent years many companies have become sensitized to the value of diversity, equity, and inclusion. But in most organizations, DEI initiatives focus largely on gender and ethnicity. A group that has received less attention is people with

disabilities, and that has led to disparities in the workplace. In the United Kingdom, for example, the employment rate for people with some form of disability (who make up 20% of the working-age population) is just 53%, far less than the 81% rate for people without disabilities.

Employing people with disabilities is usually seen as a social cause—one best suited to organizations that are not-for-profit or in the public sector. That is a mistake—and more important, a missed opportunity. In many industries innovative companies are showing that the inclusion of people with disabilities can lead to real competitive advantage and long-term profitability.

Our research suggests that having employees with disabilities in its workforce can build a firm's competitive advantage in four ways: (1) Disabilities often confer unique talents that make people better at particular jobs; (2) the presence of employees with disabilities elevates the culture of the entire organization, making it more collaborative and boosting productivity; (3) a reputation for inclusiveness enhances a firm's value proposition with customers, who become more willing to build long-term relationships with the company; (4) being recognized as socially responsible gives a firm an edge in the competition for capital and talent.

Let's look at each of these advantages in turn.

Special Abilities

Distinctive or unusual skills frequently go hand in hand with disabilities. For instance, academics who study autism, notably Cambridge University's Simon Baron-Cohen, have found strong links between autism and aptitude at tasks requiring attention to detail. Managers at the international IT consultancy Auticon, which offers quality assurance and testing, report that their autistic consultants are often especially adept at recognizing patterns, which makes them better than others at seeing correlations and interdependencies in large amounts of data. Moreover, they can often stay focused for unusually long periods of time, even when doing work that is routine and repetitive.

Famously, the British intelligence service enlisted Alan Turing, who as one study concluded was most likely on the autism spectrum, to help crack the code produced by the German Enigma machine during the Second World War. A brilliant mathematician who was generally considered the founding father of computer science, Turing later would become one of the pioneers of artificial intelligence.

Recently major corporations like SAP, HP, and EY have been recruiting neurodiverse employees for specific tasks like quality control, cybersecurity, and code checking. And the British intelligence service still hires them too: Its Government Communications Headquarters unit enlists relatively large numbers of people with dyslexia to analyze surveillance data, because they're unusually good at spotting anomalies that others miss.

Dyslexia and autism aren't the only disabilities linked with special talents. Consider the Gran Estación shopping mall, in Bogotá, Colombia, which employs many people with physical disabilities in a variety of roles—for example, customer relations. People who want to meet with someone in customer service are often upset and angry. Disabled employees seem better able to

defuse such emotions, according to the mall's general manager. One customer service rep who was in a wheelchair told us, "As soon as they see me come in, they calm down." Her disability has proved to be an advantage in her line of work.

In some jobs aspects of a person's disability may actually be a good fit with the tasks at hand. At Gran Estación the team working in elevator shafts, which often can be very noisy, consists largely of deaf people. The mall outsources security to a company called Seguridad Burns de Colombia (now part of the multinational Securitas), which hires disabled people to work as security officers. A common problem at the mall is pickpocketing, particularly when it's crowded. As the managers at Gran Estación explained to us, guards in wheelchairs are significantly better at spotting these crimes because they have better visibility at pocket height. What's more, when they need to rush to a scene or chase a perpetrator, they can move faster than people on foot, and many have superior upper body strength, which helps them restrain thieves. Since 2007, Securitas has been introducing the concept of wheelchair security guards at many customers across Latin America.



HBR commissioned the team from La Casa de Carlota, Barcelona, to create the illustrations for this article. The group's work process begins with chaotic brainstorming among creatives with intellectual disabilities, design professionals, illustrators, and design school students. Little by little illustrations emerge that blend artfully with one another.

Examples abound of companies around the globe seeking out people with disabilities for specific tasks. In Spain, for instance, the design studio La Casa de Carlota puts people with intellectual disabilities, such as Down syndrome, and with autism on all its project teams because, as its creative director says, “these guys create details that are completely authentic and original.” The private health insurance company DKV employs only people with disabilities in its DKV Integralia call center because it found that satisfaction was much higher among customers helped by employees with disabilities—even though the callers didn’t know they were talking with disabled people. The center’s general manager says these employees “show exceptional levels of empathy and try to solve the problem as if they were helping someone from their own family.” The point is not that a disability is always an advantage but that with various types of jobs—probably more than most employers realize—certain types of disability may suit the work requirements.

Organizational Culture

In many companies we studied, employees consistently told us that working with disabled people fostered a more collaborative culture. Not only is such a culture a recognized source of competitive advantage, but it’s also difficult for rivals to imitate, which is why many businesses invest considerable resources and effort in trying to build one.

The challenge in nurturing a sense of community is overcoming people’s tendency to compete for status and recognition. Employing people with disabilities, however, can mitigate it. Because they may need active support and assistance with certain things, working with them can inspire their colleagues to develop more-cooperative habits and attitudes. Employees at the La Trappe brewery in the Netherlands, which hires people with disabilities for its production and hospitality teams, explained to us that having disabled colleagues made them realize the importance of helping one another out and being aware of one

another's needs and abilities. In addition, it let them see that it's acceptable and even desirable to *ask* for help themselves. "It gives us something special in the workplace," the former chief executive of the brewery, Thijs Thijssen, told us.

To investigate whether employers of people with disabilities in general saw a positive effect on their cultures, we worked with AESE, the Spanish Association of Supported Employment, which helps people with disabilities find and maintain jobs. Through it, we surveyed HR executives at 57 companies that had hired one or more people with disabilities about their experiences with those workers and about the effect they had on the organization as a whole. No fewer than 88% of the HR professionals agreed that the internal culture of their firms had improved significantly since they had hired employees with disabilities (with 70% in strong agreement).



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We then decided to dig a bit deeper into what that positive cultural change involved. We provided the HR executives with a definition of psychological safety, a concept developed by Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson: the belief that within a team, people can ask for help and share ideas, concerns, or feelings without risk of suffering adverse consequences, like being punished or humiliated.

When we asked the HR professionals about changes in psychological safety at their firms, 65% indicated that it had increased since the hiring of employees with disabilities. What's more, 74% observed that their teams had begun to work better together, and 75% indicated that the hires had enhanced the

general atmosphere in their organization. One respondent commented that having a disabled colleague on a team “immediately improves team cohesion and creates new routines for collaboration.” Another said, “Ever since a person with an intellectual disability started working in the company, all of us have behaved in a more humane way.”

Our case studies also suggest that colleagues of people with disabilities don't learn just to be more accepting of one another's limitations. Seeing coworkers with disabilities succeed can inspire other employees and make them realize that they, too, can elevate their performance. The HR director of Gran Estación observes, “The person who is next to the person with a disability gets motivated because he realizes that if someone with difficulties has such good performance, then someone who hasn't got them also should be able to deliver it.”

All of this results in high levels of employee engagement. Thijssen told us that La Trappe's employee attrition rate and absenteeism had fallen to all-time lows. People didn't want to leave the company and hardly ever called in sick. Other companies in our study had similar experiences: Twenty of the 57 firms that we surveyed reported a decline in absenteeism after their companies had started hiring people with disabilities.

Market Appeal

The employment of disabled people can be a significant part of a company's value proposition to customers. Consider the large, successful Dutch coffee chain Brownies&downies (B&D). It offers high-quality hot beverages and sandwiches at competitive prices in prime locations, just like its rivals Bagels & Beans and Starbucks. Yet there is one difference: Many of B&D's employees have Down syndrome.

That difference defines the company's marketing strategy. B&D avoids high-traffic locations, like train stations and business districts, where many customers just want a quick coffee. Instead

it focuses on places where people can sit down quietly and relax. Having people with disabilities prepare and serve the products may at times make the service a little slower, but it is one of the reasons some customers like to visit the chain. Indeed, we know from research that customers value not just the content of a product and its functionality but also how it is produced and by whom.

Distinctive skills frequently go hand in hand with disabilities. For instance, academics have found strong links between autism and aptitude at tasks requiring attention to detail.

To further explore how people with disabilities help firms strengthen their appeal, we set up a series of experiments, enlisting 200 individuals as participants. Half of them were asked to consider purchasing a customized mug online from a company that had received high ratings from its customers. The other half were asked the same thing but were also told that the company employed many people with disabilities. We then analyzed people's willingness to pay for the mug.

The fact that the company employed people with disabilities by itself didn't increase people's inclination to pay more for the mug. So we repeated the experiment with another group of 200 participants, who were asked to consider buying an engraved necklace. We found much the same result: The participants weren't willing to pay more (or less) for something that was produced by a company that employed disabled people. They also didn't rate the quality of the product any higher.

However, in both cases we also tested for general attitudes toward the company: Did people feel they liked the company? Did they perceive what in marketing is called a “communal relationship” with it, in the sense that they would like to see the company succeed, felt happy if it performed well, and were willing to actively support it? If the company employed people with disabilities, the answer was yes: Customers were significantly more likely to engage in a communal relationship with it than they were with a company in the control group.

Interestingly, our results clearly indicated that people’s willingness to pay was significantly higher for a company that they liked and felt a communal relationship with. So even though customers are not willing to pay more for a product or a service just because the seller employs people with disabilities—there is not a simple direct relationship—they are willing to pay more for a product or service if they feel a psychological bond with a company. And that bond is much more likely to form if a firm is known to have disabled employees. Thus, there is a strong indirect positive effect on people’s willingness to pay for a product or service. We also found some indication that customers would be more likely to make repeat purchases from the company.



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In another follow-up experiment—this time analyzing 177 new respondents' inclination to buy and willingness to pay more for a backpack—we examined why people feel a stronger relationship with a company that employs people with disabilities. Analyzing different potential motives, we found that it's because they perceive such a company to be more fair (for example, in its pricing) and because they feel that they're being helpful themselves by purchasing its product or service. It made them

feel good about themselves, which can be a powerful and persuasive addition to any firm's value proposition. So the general attitude of the public toward a company becomes more positive and supportive if it employs people with disabilities, which down the line significantly enhances the inclination to purchase from it, become a long-term customer, and pay more for its offering.

A related study by David Dwertmann of Rutgers University and several colleagues also points to positive connections. When they analyzed the attitudes of customers in a group of supermarkets in Lithuania who had been served by workers who were in wheelchairs or had a hearing impairment, they found that employing people with disabilities enhanced the reputation of the firm, making it viewed as more socially responsible.

These findings, however, do present some challenges for companies. If people value how something is produced and by whom, it implies that the company needs to show and communicate to customers about whom it employs. With a coffee chain, that's easy because the servers can be directly observed by customers. But with, for example, a factory, it will require a lot more thought.

Take the successful Spanish cooperative La Fageda, which runs a dairy farm and a gardening business and is well-known for its high-quality yogurt. It employs several hundred people who have intellectual disabilities or suffer from mental illness (many of whom might otherwise be in psychiatric hospitals), paying them standard salaries. By buying the cooperative's products and services, customers will help these people have productive and meaningful lives. However, supermarket consumers may not know about La Fageda's workers.

To address that problem, the cooperative opened a visitors' center, which, given its location in an area of natural beauty, attracts more than 40,000 visitors a year. "That is the best marketing we have," commented founder Cristóbal Colón.

“People go away not just liking the yogurt but also—after seeing the forest, the cows listening to their music, and the workers doing their jobs—as apostles.” People develop an emotional connection with the La Fageda brand.

Seeing coworkers with disabilities succeed can inspire other employees to realize that they, too, can elevate their performance.

Similarly, La Trappe, which is located on the grounds of a Trappist monastery, opened a tasting room on its premises that attracts more than 125,000 visitors a year. When they tour the brewery and taste its beer, they see the employees with disabilities at work. As La Trappe’s marketing director explained to us, “They become real fans and tell all their friends and family about it.”

Employing people with disabilities isn’t a substitute for good products or fine customer service, but it adds another dimension to a company’s value proposition, which can help differentiate it in a crowded market. It’s important, though, to be genuine about it rather than, for instance, recruit only a small number of employees with disabilities for PR purposes. If customers sense that the practice is not genuine and not really spread throughout the firm, it may not only be ineffective but even backfire: It could make them feel angry and manipulated and perceive the company as being exploitative rather than benevolent.

When hiring people with disabilities is implemented sincerely, however, it can generate another positive knock-on effect: attracting customers with disabilities and their family members, who form a considerable economic segment themselves. The managers of Gran Estación noticed that once they started hiring more people with disabilities, particularly in visible functions

such as security and information services, the number of disabled customers began to increase substantially. We ourselves have observed many families with disabled children in the mall. According to Andrea Hernandez, its coordinator of human resources, this is because they feel more at home in Gran Estación, which also makes them more likely to be return customers.

Access to Capital and Talent

Hiring people with disabilities can give companies an advantage with key stakeholders besides customers. Take the market for capital: Investing that targets ventures focused on environmental, social, and governance (ESG) issues has increased rapidly in the past several years. Bloomberg estimates that ESG-related assets topped \$41 trillion in 2022 and will reach \$50 trillion by 2025. According to CNBC, the assets of impact-investing index funds quadrupled from 2017 to 2020 and now compose 20% of the U.S. market. Employing people with disabilities makes a company more attractive to such investors.

In Europe venture capitalists have started taking ESG factors into account in their investment decisions, and a growing number of social impact funds are looking to put considerable sums into socially responsible start-ups. Employee diversity is an increasingly relevant consideration in those decisions. The European Venture Philanthropy Association, for example, reported in its “Investing for Impact Survey” that 36% of the investment focus of beneficiaries related to people with disabilities.

People with disabilities also are an untapped source of talent. They may not always be very skilled at the traditional process of finding and applying for jobs or at interviewing, but those skills may not correlate at all with the requirements of the jobs involved.

We know from research that customers value not just the content of a product and its functionality but also how it is produced and by whom.

Prejudice often deters employers from hiring people with disabilities, but that means it's easier for more-enlightened companies to snap up highly skilled people. In the United Kingdom, for example, high school graduates with disabilities are no more likely to have a job than people who left school before graduating—suggesting that there are many qualified disabled people available for employment. Auticon, for instance, has hired several with STEM PhDs for data science and analytics jobs who at the time were working as couriers and delivering pizza.

Moreover, hiring people with disabilities makes a company more likely to be seen as an attractive employer for people *without* disabilities. We saw this in an experiment we ran, which involved a simulated potential employer, a global firm with about 3,000 employees in financial services. We provided information on the company to 200 respondents (who were different from those in our previous experiments). With half of them, we mentioned that the firm had employees with a disability, but with the other half we did not.



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The results revealed that if a considerable proportion of employees at the company had a disability, job seekers liked the company much more, were substantially more interested in working for it, and thought they would simply be happier there. They even indicated that they would be willing to forgo a higher salary from another firm to join the company. That corroborates prior findings that having a positive impact on society is increasingly critical in the labor market. Recent surveys—by Gallup and Deloitte, for instance—consistently indicate that, particularly for Millennials, whether a company behaves in a socially responsible manner is an important criterion in choosing an employer.

Like employees and investors, other stakeholders— such as advertisers, unions, and alliance partners—are likely to value the employment of people with disabilities. For instance, it helps the coffee chain B&D attract franchisees.

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Employing people with disabilities is a worthy cause. But portraying it as such masks the fact that it can deliver real benefits to organizations. When Andrea Girlanda, the CEO of Auticon, sent his customary note thanking one of the firm’s large clients (the head of data analytics at a multinational pharmaceutical company) for making a difference in the lives of disabled people, he received a swift but concise reply: “Stop thanking me; I am not doing this from the kindness of my heart. Your consultants are great; we are doing things so much better than before.” The creative director of La Casa de Carlota holds a similar view. “Lots of people think that we are being kind by working with people who have autism or Down syndrome, but I don’t feel I’m being kind; I feel I’m being clever!” the director says. “I’m tapping into their unique form of creativity, which hasn’t been used to its full potential in the creative industries up till

now.” There is nothing wrong with wanting to do good in the world, but there is also nothing wrong with wanting to do well, and the latter is enough reason to employ people with disabilities.

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