

Disability: The Missing Diversity Category

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Disability and Diversity in Organisations

Disability is a diversity category that is usually ignored when people discuss diversity in organisations. People with disability (PWD) are [underrepresented in the workforce](#), yet evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that people with disability are [loyal, reliable and very productive workers](#). In particular, [disability is almost invisible in the leadership literature](#), even when the focus is on creating more diversity among leaders.

Why Organisations Employ PWD

The employment of PWD in contemporary western organisations was originally driven by the [Protestant Work Ethic](#) and its focus on being a good employer. This included helping the 'deserving poor' and providing work for them. PWD were employed, not because they were considered to be productive but because it was the Christian thing to do. As businesses became larger, more likely to be run by managers rather than owners and more secular, this charitable reason for employing PWD waned. The 1970s saw the argument being made that diversity of all types (including disability), was good for the [bottom line](#) – that business with a diverse workforce would be more profitable. However, this argument has less impact on organisations efforts to employ more PWD than it did for some other diversity group (such as women), probably because the employment of PWD was seen as being more problematic and requiring more effort. More recently, the argument that employing PWD is the right thing to do has re-emerged as part of the emergence of [business ethics](#) as an organisation consideration. Along with practices such as environmental sustainability and fiscal responsibility, having a diverse workforce is increasingly viewed as a political and legal consideration.

Ways Of Conceptualising Disability

Workers with disabilities in organisations have traditionally been looked at through the lens of what is called the [medical model of disability](#), and this is still the most common approach. This model frames disability as a medical issue, with its connotations of inferiority, illness and deficit. Managers in organisations with such views, conscious or unconscious, see workers with a disability as a liability rather than an asset.

The leads to a focus on the occupational health and safety issues raised by having PWD in the workplace, rather than the benefits. This has a significant negative impact on the way people with disability are treated in the workplace including their recruitment, career development and progression.

More recently, an alternative way of conceptualising disability has emerged. The [social model](#) conceptualises disability as being the impediments created by society, not by physical difference. Examples of impediments may include obvious barriers such as stairs, and, more critically, subtle barriers such as company policies, people's attitudes and social and economic structures. This model argues that if these barriers are removed, PWD will be treated equally and be employed in the same ways as their non-disabled peers. In relation to employment, this view of disability has been deemed to be idealistic and hard to apply in practice for businesses as they don't control all the variables such as the physical, economic and social structures in which they operate.

Whilst the social model depicts PWD in a more positive way than the medical model, it is problematic for both organisations and PWD when applied to a work setting. The material experience of PWD in the workplace is that, because of their physical impairment, they may need some adjustments to do their job effectively. Many do not cost much [with the average cost being about \\$500](#). PWD may also need some changes such as in the hours and place of work and generally more [flexible work arrangements](#). None of these issues is addressed by the social model.

An emerging and more proactive and pragmatic way of conceptualising disability in the workplace is [the interactionist model](#). This argues that adopting an approach that incorporates consideration of the physical, material, social and economic implications of disability with a focus on capability, adaption and inclusion would benefit people with disability who wish to work and also the organisations that employ them.

Such an approach requires organisations to take a balanced view of employing PWD, viewing it as not being an act of charity, nor an economic imperative. Rather, employees with disability should be viewed as bringing to the workplace a set of strengths and impairments that all need to be managed, in the same way, that the characteristics of all workers are managed. Furthermore, employers must recognise that many of the limitations experienced by disabled workers are not of their own making (or their disability) but are the result of the physical, psychological and social environment in which the organisation operates and therefore need to address these issues independently. PWD are not the problem.

A Positive Reading Of Disability

Adopting an interactional approach to disability has advantages for everyone. For the PWD, it creates more opportunities for meaningful employment, income and personal satisfaction. For the organisation improves diversity in thinking, problem solving and flexibility. PWD are inherently good at finding new ways to solve [problems](#) as they do it every day. People who are [neurodiverse](#) bring to organisations new and novel ways of thinking. Developing [flexible work arrangements](#) has been shown to benefit PWD and the entire workforce. In developing a way to accommodate the impairments of PWD, organisations can implement practices that benefit the entire workforce.

Implications and Disability Barriers

Addressing disability barriers in the workplace is a responsibility shared among employers, workers and society in general. The benefits are not one sided. Organisations benefit from improved problem solving and novel thinking. [Post COVID-19](#) staff are demanding more flexible work arrangements and using processes developed to accommodate the impairments of PWD, organisations can develop flexible work arrangements that will attract and retain skilled staff (who may or may not have a disability). Employing PWD is good for the bottom line and, most critically, it is the ethical thing to do.



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Carlene has worked at Australian Universities for almost 40 years. She is interested in how people experience difference in the workplace and how they engage in emotional labor to manage their relationships at work.