



---

# **Reimagining Diversity— Making People with Disabilities Part of Your Team**



Businesses are constantly looking for new ways to attract the best talent, with more and more businesses discovering the benefits to their bottom line when they focus on diversifying their workforce. Historically, gender and race have been at the forefront of diversity discussions in recruitment and employment, but recent trends show businesses beginning to embrace people with disabilities as a group to consider. While studies have shown that there are many benefits to disability inclusion, including improved safety and productivity, decreased absenteeism, and turnover, and improved company culture and overall morale, many companies are slow to adopt disability inclusion initiatives due to a variety of factors—fear and stigma, concerns about technology and site accommodations and misconceptions about disability.

### Problem:

Companies want to do the right thing and embrace diversity in all of its forms, but without proper support and guidance from inclusion professionals, they may find that their efforts at recruiting, hiring, retaining, and advancing people with disabilities are largely fruitless. Why? Conventional hiring practices and processes—the same ones that have traditionally been accepted as standard procedure – could very well be the reason that many qualified candidates with disabilities never make it in front of hiring managers.

### Solution:

The good news is that disability inclusion becomes a cost reduction endeavor since it enhances the work place and thus reduces the overall employee turnover. Big dollars! In fact, businesses will find that there are easy approaches to modifying existing hiring practices to make them inclusive and to ensure that your business finds and hires the best candidates. Here, we will examine a few of the most common hiring practices, explain what barriers they represent for job seekers with disabilities, and explore the most effective ways of making them inclusive to all job seekers.

**While it would be impossible to list all disabilities that fall under the ADA, some examples include:**

- ADHD
- Alcoholism
- Asthma
- Autism
- Cancer
- Cerebral palsy
- Depression
- Diabetes
- Heart Disease
- Migraine headaches
- Multiple Sclerosis
- Paralysis
- Thyroid gland disorders
- Loss of body parts

"Who Has a Disability under the ADA?"  
Who Has a Disability under the ADA?  
Illinois Legal Aid Online, 2017. Web. 05  
June 2017.

## What is “disability?”

Under the Americans with Disability Act (ADA), a person has a disability if they have at least one of the following:

- A physical or mental condition that substantially limits one or more major life activities;
- A history of such a condition; or
- A person is believed to have a physical or mental impairment that is not transitory and minor. *Americans with Disabilities Act (1990)*

One of the most common misconceptions about disability has to do with what disability actually is. And the truth is that disability can't be put in a box. No two disabilities are alike, and no two people with the same disability experience it the same way. For instance, many disabilities have varying degrees of significance and can impact different physical or intellectual functions depending on the person, like autism and multiple sclerosis. Because people with the same disability experience it differently, employers cannot assume that people with a certain disability are better suited for a certain job because someone else with that disability has done well with that type of work.

## History of disability inclusion

American businesses have been hiring people with disabilities for many years, but the approaches have evolved, as the perception of value in hiring these individuals has dramatically increased. A short history of employment for people with disabilities shows a gradual shift from sheltered workshops to supported employment in the 1980s and person-centered-planning in the 1990s—all of which focused on the individual and focused less on the needs of the business, leading to placement of individuals in jobs and environments that were not good fits. Today, we have arrived at the modern iteration—corporate disability inclusion—which focuses on the needs of businesses and the skills and experiences of individuals to make employment a match that works for both employer and employee.

Many would agree that the project that put corporate disability inclusion on the map was the effort led by then-senior vice president of logistics and distribution, Randy Lewis, for Walgreens. In short, personal experiences with disability inspired Mr. Lewis to take a chance on a large scale disability inclusion initiative in Walgreens' distribution centers. Starting with one distribution center in Anderson, South Carolina, Walgreens developed and implemented the “same job, same performance” model that has since spread across retail stores, distribution centers, support centers, and field operations.

The strategy for this model rests on the ideas that all jobs and expectations are the same for every employee, regardless of disability, and all employees will be held to the same work standards for the same pay. Walgreens achieved a high level of success with this project, proving that employing people with disabilities is not only possible, but profitable.

A study of the Walgreens distribution centers by the American Society of Safety Engineers determined that employees with disabilities had a lower turnover rate than their non-disabled peers and also had lower medical costs and time-off expenses.

Cann, S. (2012, November 26). *The Debate Behind Disability Hiring*. Retrieved March 21, 2017, from <https://www.fastcompany.com/3002957/disabled-employee-amendment>]

Walgreens may have been a pioneer in the adoption of large scale disability inclusion initiatives, but since their demonstrated success, many companies have developed and implemented similar disability inclusion strategies. The Disability Equality Index, a joint effort in the benchmarking of inclusion practices by the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) and the US Business Leadership Network (USBLN), includes companies such as AMC Theatres, Anthem, ATT, EY, Lincoln Financial Group, Mayo Clinic, Starbucks, and Wells Fargo among their top-scoring companies from the 2016 Disability Equality Index.

## **Why should companies consider disability inclusion strategies?**

People with disabilities have long flown under the radar when it comes to recruitment and hiring. With many companies focused on race and gender as the key diversity factors, people with disabilities were largely excluded from the picture. However, there are several reasons why companies should be and (to an extent are) utilizing disability inclusion as a competitive strategy:

**People with disabilities represent the largest minority in the US.**

# 1. ACCESS TO A LARGE, UNTAPPED (AND QUALIFIED!) LABOR POOL.



People with disabilities represent the largest minority in the United States, with **one of every five people** in the U.S. living with a disability (<https://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/fact/diverse.htm>).



Furthermore, people with disabilities consistently experience an inflated unemployment rate as compared with that for individuals without disabilities. In February 2017, the **unemployment rate** for people with disabilities was **10.2%** whereas the unemployment rate for individuals without disabilities was **4.7%** (<https://www.dol.gov/odep/>).



And data from 2014 shows that educational attainment is much closer between these two groups than employment numbers might suggest, especially among those who have completed high school and have some college or an associate's degree. Nearly **80%** of people with disabilities had **achieved at least a high school level of education**, meaning that they graduated from high school. **25.5%** had some college or an associate's degree, and **16.4%** had a bachelor's degree or higher.



Alternatively, **90% of individuals without disabilities had achieved at least a high school level of education**, **26.8%** had some college or an associate's degree, and **34.6%** had a bachelor's degree or higher.



United States. Department of Labor. Disability Employment Policy. Diverse Perspectives: People with Disabilities Fulfilling Your Business Goals. Office of Disability Employment Policy, n.d. Web. 05 June 2017. According to Office of Disability Employment as of May 22, 2017, Loy, Beth, Ph.D. "Accommodation and Compliance Series Workplace Accommodations: Lo

**2. Bottom line benefits.** As proven by the Walgreens study, businesses who employ people with disabilities experience many bottom line benefits, including, but not limited to: improved safety and productivity, decreased absenteeism and turnover, increased morale, and improved corporate culture. A 2007 study conducted by DePaul University found that people with disabilities stayed on the job longer than their counterparts without disabilities. The study also found that performance was nearly identical between these two groups, with evaluations showing that both individuals with and individuals without disabilities fall between "Meets Expectations" and "Exceeds Expectations"

McDonald, Katie. Exploring the Bottom Line: A Study of the Costs and Benefits of Workers with Disabilities. The Economic Impact Study. DePaul University, 2007. Web. Retrieved 22 May 2017

And in case businesses are worried about costly accommodations associated with employees with disabilities, it should be noted that the Job Accommodation Network has found that most employers report no cost or low cost for accommodating employees with disabilities. 59 percent of companies who reported on the cost of accommodations said that the accommodations needed by employees cost nothing. 36 percent experienced a one-time cost, which was typically around \$500.

Accommodation and Compliance Series Workplace Accommodations: Low Cost, High Impact." Workplace Accommodations: Low Cost, High Impact. Job Accommodation Network, 01 Sept. 2016. Web. 05 June 2017.

### 3. ACCESS TO AN EXTENSIVE, LOYAL CUSTOMER BASE WITH TRILLIONS IN DISCRETIONARY SPENDING.

According to Fifth Quadrant Analytics' Return on Disability Report, the **disability market represents 1.3 billion people globally**. It is equivalent in size to the population of China and represents an **annual disposable income of \$1 trillion** with \$544 billion in the US alone. When you include friends and family members of people with disabilities, this number increases by 2.3 billion people and nearly \$7 trillion. Consumer trends show that individuals who value inclusion are increasingly directing their dollars and loyalty to companies who demonstrate that they too value inclusion of people with disabilities.



Donovan, Rich. "What Is the Disability Market?" Disability Market. Fifth Quadrant Analytics, 3 Apr. 2013. Web. 05 June 2017.

**4. Fulfillment of federal contractor hiring goals.** In 2013, the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs revised the regulations of Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended. These new regulations established a nationwide 7 percent utilization goal for qualified people with disabilities, meaning that 7 percent of each job group or their entire workforce (if the contractor has 100 or fewer employees) should be comprised of people with disabilities. By recruiting, hiring, retaining, and advancing people with disabilities, federal contractors can satisfy their compliance requirements.

Regulations Implementing - Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act enacted by U.S. Department of Labor

**5. Qualify to receive financial incentives and tax breaks.** Businesses who hire people with disabilities may be eligible to receive a number of financial incentives, like the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, which is available to employers who hire individuals from certain target groups that have consistently faced barriers to employment. Employers can also access tax credits that help cover expenses tied to ADA-related accessibility improvements.

**6. Good PR.** Today's businesses would be remiss if they neglected the benefits of social responsibility. Most businesses dedicate efforts to a particular cause about which they are passionate—through volunteerism, grant funding, or advocacy. But social responsibility should be integrated in every aspect of a business—not only demonstrated through efforts in the community but also embraced in internal operations. By hiring people with disabilities, companies show their commitment to inclusion and a workforce that represents the diversity of their customer base.

### Could your hiring practices be screening out qualified people with disabilities?

**To find the most qualified person for the position, it is the company's hiring responsibility to make sure that all candidates are on equal footing throughout the hiring process.**

It's hard to deny the benefits of disability inclusion, which is why companies are increasingly adding disability inclusion strategies to their corporate tool box. But where should companies start, if they don't have experience in developing and implementing these strategies?

People with disabilities are people, so the most common place to start is with the department that manages the people in your company—Human Resources. When a company decides to actively recruit people with disabilities for their open positions, the hiring and onboarding process should be audited to ensure that any barriers to people with disabilities are removed. To find the most qualified person for the position, it is the company's responsibility to make sure that all candidates are on equal footing throughout the hiring process. Only then can a true, unbiased decision be made.

Here, we look at three common hiring practices, the potential, hidden barriers embedded in these practices that could threaten the success of candidates with disabilities, and simple actions that businesses can take to ensure that people with disabilities are not being unintentionally screened out.

### **Practice #1: Recruitment: Where you cast your net determines the fish you catch**

Recruitment is where it all starts for your business. You want to find the best candidates for your open positions, and your recruiting practices dictate the types and quality of candidates that you attract for these positions. Recruitment practices vary depending on the size, location, industry, and types of positions, but some of the most common ways to recruit include online job boards, industry-specific listservs, job fairs, hiring from within, and advertisements.

These methods are all tried and true, which is why recruiters stick with them. However, there is always room for improvement.

## **How do recruitment practices screen out qualified applicants with disabilities?**

**The Unconscious Bias:** Many recruiters have a general idea about the type of person who will best fill a position. But if recruitment staff members do not have experience in working with people with disabilities, fear and stigma about people with disabilities may be unintentionally influencing their recruitment strategies.

**Job Fairs:** Job fairs are a great way for companies to access a large number of jobseekers at one time. Job fairs are common and some target specific populations, like veterans or college students, or may even be industry-specific. Businesses may find some degree of success when attending the typical job fairs, but they may not be maximizing their potential to reach a large pool of candidates with disabilities if they don't tap into those recruiting opportunities that target this population. Community and educational partners can alert your recruitment team to job fairs reaching this demographic, including transition fairs at local high schools, and job fairs hosted by community colleges, community-based organizations, Vocational Rehabilitation, WorkOne, or other disability agencies.



**Advertising:** Job seekers with disabilities utilize many of the same resources as job seekers without disabilities, such as online job boards, college career services, industry-specific publications, and e-mail newsletters. One channel that businesses don't often consider is using disability service providers and schools to promote open positions. Partnering with these organizations allows your company to cast a wider net (often for free!) and reach a larger number of jobseekers with disabilities. These partnerships are valuable not only for recruiting purposes, but can also serve as valuable resources through every step along your company's disability inclusion journey.

## Let's make it better—Recommendations for success!

Companies can access a much larger pool of qualified jobseekers with disabilities if they expand traditional methods of recruitment to include strategies that target this segment of the population. Recruiters can enhance their current recruitment practices by engaging in the following:

1. Learn more about the disability community and services available to jobseekers with disabilities. Every state has organizations that are committed to helping jobseekers with disabilities achieve their employment goals. By building relationships with these entities, companies can access a larger pool of qualified people with disabilities.
2. Participate in job fairs hosted by local high schools, colleges, community-based organizations, Vocational Rehabilitation, or WorkOne. Many jobseekers with disabilities utilize these services.
3. When working with schools, connect with both their career centers and disability services.
4. Ensure that recruitment staff has received disability awareness and etiquette training so they are more successful in recruiting from this population.
5. Advertise your open positions on job boards or listservs that target people with disabilities. For instance, [WorkforceAccelerator.com](https://www.workforceaccelerator.com) is a matching tool built specifically to help businesses recruit qualified people with disabilities and make a sustainable employment match.

### Practice #2: Applications or assessments: Are they accessible?

It's probably safe to assume that nearly every person who has ever gotten a job has applied for that job—and in the digital age, the odds are good that they used an online application system. Many companies have a career portal on their website where interested jobseekers can find a list of their open positions and apply for positions that interest them.

Often, companies will utilize an online assessment tool in addition to the application. These assessments vary in their format, but the primary purpose is to determine an applicant's character and qualifications—Is the applicant honest? Does the applicant have the qualities that are needed to be successful in a particular industry or position? Does the applicant have a continuous work history?



Online application systems and assessments are largely used to help streamline the intake process and to pre-screen applicants so that only those who have the highest scores and who best align with a company's culture move on to the next step in the process. Depending on the number of positions open and the size of the company, there could be hundreds of applicants on any given day, which makes this practice a necessity—especially when it comes to preserving efficiencies.

There are a few reasons why a company may not want to alter this practice. One reason is that assessment systems are fairly new and ever evolving. Companies search for systems that best fit their needs and often have to make a large investment in this technology. Protecting their investment is a reasonable justification for sticking with this method. Companies also hesitate to switch from this method because efficiency affects the bottom line and utilizing online applications and assessments drastically decreases the amount of personnel time and effort needed—thereby allowing staff members to dedicate their time to other processes.

## How do online application and assessments screen out qualified applicants with disabilities?

**Digital Accessibility Matters:** Inaccessible technology is one way that applications, assessments, and websites deter or screen out applicants with disabilities. When a company reviews accessibility, it should be looking beyond the bricks and mortar. Physical accessibility is, of course, incredibly important, but in today's world, where so much of our business is conducted online, the importance of online accessibility cannot be understated. Not only is this critical for prospective employees, but think about your company's consumer base—improving accessibility for applicants will benefit “customers with disabilities and therefore, your bottom line.” If a website or online application is not compatible with screen readers or other assistive technology, then applicants who use those will be unable to move forward in the process.

**Mind the Gap:** Some assessments are programmed to screen out individuals with gaps in their work history or those with short terms at former places of unemployment. People with disabilities are more likely to have gaps and shorter term employment than individuals without disabilities, due to a variety of factors—least of which are their skills or ability to do a job.

**The Clock is Ticking:** Finally, many assessments feature strict time limits and a limited set of questions that are rephrased in several variations throughout the assessment. These factors tend to screen out individuals with ADD and ADHD, who are easily distracted and may be more likely to answer the same question in different ways throughout the assessment because they believe that is what an employer is looking for. The time limit may also be a barrier to some individuals with information processing disabilities or to those who utilize screen readers and need more time for navigation. Think about this: should the time limit be a requirement for all positions? Completing an assessment within a certain period of time may be a necessity for some positions, but not every position.

## Let's make it better—Recommendations for success!

It's possible to improve access for people with disabilities while still maintaining efficiencies and protecting your company's bottom line. Here are some recommendations for success:

1. Evaluate your current website, online applications, and assessments to ensure they conform to digital accessibility standards. Are the design and function compatible with assistive technology? Is the user interface easy to understand? Are questions easy to understand?
2. Provide a phone number for applicants to call if they need assistance with an application.
3. Offer helpful tips on completing the assessment so that applicants understand the purpose of the assessment and what to expect with the process.
4. Provide an opportunity during the application process to explain gaps in employment. Not only is this beneficial for people with disabilities, but also returning military veterans and mothers.
5. Make sure that any videos on your application or assessment are captioned so those who are deaf or hard of hearing can receive the appropriate information.
6. Offer troubleshooting instructions and ways for individuals to report accessibility issues to your company.
7. Build partnerships with local disability services organizations. When you promote your open positions to these organizations, they can direct qualified candidates to apply. They can also provide ongoing support as your company improves accessibility.
8. Add these same local disability services organizations as referral sources on your application, so that you can identify potential people with disabilities and can manually review their application and assessment.

As you can see, the above are practices that companies of any size or budget can adopt to remove barriers for applicants with disabilities.

### **Practice #3: The Ins and Outs of Interviewing: Are you focused on the essential functions of the job?**

Most companies would agree that interviewing practices are pretty standard across the board, due to the fact that human resources professionals are trained to conduct interviews with basic human resources standards in mind. However, there are myriad ways in which a candidate for employment might travel through the interview process and endless permutations in interview formats. Some businesses start with phone interviews and progress to one-on-one interviews with human resources. Some businesses prefer to take the peer group interview approach where an entire department interviews a prospective employee.

The point is that no two approaches are the same, but surely the goal with any approach is to find the best candidate for the position. Businesses employ their chosen interview tactics because they believe it will lead them to their next great employee. They want an employee who can do the job well, who will stay with the company, and who will work well with their team to meet and exceed the company's goals.

Businesses hesitate to change their practices primarily because of the legal issues that surround the interview process. Businesses may also hesitate to explore other approaches to interviewing if they believe that their practices are solid—that they consistently result in skilled, dedicated employees.

## How do interview processes screen out qualified applicants with disabilities?

With such a complex and variable process, there are plenty of opportunities for potentially qualified candidates to fall through the cracks. Here's a look at some common practices and how they screen out candidates with disabilities.

**Questions and Impressions:** Human resource professionals are trained to stick to the canon of legal questions. While this is a good thing from a legal standpoint, it doesn't allow for much latitude when looking for diversity. If human resource staff members aren't trained to adapt to applicants with disabilities, your diversity initiatives are dead in the water, as many of these individuals will be screened out when your staff members don't know how to effectively interview these candidates. Furthermore, even the best, most professional of interviewers fall victim to their unconscious biases. Who isn't swayed by the bubbly candidate who can look you in the eye, charm you with their sparkling wit, and convince you during an interview that s/he would be the best fit for your organization? Think about how many companies have hired that candidate only to find out the s/he was actually not the best candidate and then have to go back to the drawing board with the entire process—spending more resources on the hiring, onboarding, and training process. Alternatively, how many completely qualified and skilled applicants didn't make the cut because their social skills were lacking?

**Interview Checklists:** Yes, they still exist! Many companies use checklists to score or grade candidates in an interview—do they have a firm handshake, do they make eye contact, do they make a personal connection with the interviewer? If your company utilizes a similar system of grading candidates, is it based on an individual's skills and experience or their personality? If an interview checklist focuses more on someone's social skills, individuals with social disabilities are automatically going to be screened out. When they go up against a more relatable candidate, who may or may not be as qualified, they will be at a disadvantage.

**Peer Group Interview:** It is a fairly common practice for candidates to be interviewed by their potential colleagues after advancing through the initial interviews with HR. The problem is that most peer groups are less interested in job performance and more interested in how a prospective employee will fit in with the team. As an example, let's look at a person who is deaf interviewing for a job, receives high marks from human resources, and then moves on to a peer group interview. The HR interviewer was able to successfully communicate with the person and determine that they have the skills and experience to fill the position well. A peer group, however, may be more focused on how the dynamics of the team will shift if someone who is deaf joins the group—Will it be difficult to communicate? How will the team build a relationship with this person if we don't know American Sign Language? How will we include this person in lunchroom conversations? As with other facets of the hiring and onboarding process, it is difficult to ignore the “human factor,” which is a major reason that people with disabilities often get screened out—fear and stigma stand in the way of unbiased hiring decisions.

**One time trainings on inclusion are easy to forget if they aren't reinforced by the everyday culture and processes of an organization.**

### **Let's make it better—Recommendations for success!**

This section boils down to the importance of disability inclusion being woven into the fabric of your organization. There are numerous opportunities in the interview process to put more weight behind first impressions than an individual's demonstrated ability to successfully complete a job. Preparing your human resources team to interact with the full spectrum of job candidates will help you find the talent that is right for the job, regardless of whether the person has a disability.

1. Provide disability awareness and etiquette training to all employees involved in the interviewing process, including peer groups, if they will have a say in the final hiring decision.
2. Ensure that interview checklists contain items that are essential to someone's ability to perform a job. If you are hiring for position where the employee would be working independently or behind-the-scenes, is it essential that the person have top-notch social skills, good eye contact, and a firm handshake?

Companies want to do the right thing and improve the diversity of their workforces by hiring more people with disabilities. To be successful, a business must embrace disability inclusion by actually creating a culture that builds on the ADA compliance aspect of business and is championed by employees at all levels. Companies must go beyond simply telling employees to focus only on essential functions of the job and consider the role of accommodations. Though staff members may have the best of intentions, the actual brain process of not automatically excluding someone with a disability because they may lack the soft skills that HR staff members look for during an interview can be difficult to overcome, even with training. This is why a company's culture is so important. One time trainings on inclusion are easy to forget if they aren't reinforced by the everyday culture and processes of an organization.

## Case Study: Disability Inclusion in a National Retail Chain

### Situation

As more businesses explore disability inclusion as a competitive strategy, there is more need for guidance to ensure that best practices are identified and implemented. One national retail chain that had a strong history of workforce diversity recognized an opportunity to cast a wider net and target people with disabilities as an intentional component of their diversity plan. Not only did the retailer wish to improve upon already noteworthy diversity initiatives, but it also hoped to fulfill federal contractor requirements in its operations, including merchandise distribution, contact centers, and full-line stores.

### Assessing Operations:

Working through James Emmett, National Disability Consultant, the national retailer engaged the experts at **Tangram Business Resourcing (TBR)** to assist with developing and implementing a disability inclusion plan. This process began with an assessment of the readiness for disability and inclusion, workplace culture, and core roles in each of the operations mentioned above. The focus of this assessment was to gain a breakdown of the key skills and characteristics that make job candidates excellent fits for roles within the company. As part of the assessment, **TBR** also evaluated the company's overall readiness towards the goal of becoming an employer of choice for people with disabilities and developed suggestions for building a plan to overcome any barriers in the path to that goal. Included in this process was the assessment of physical and cultural environments within the company, in order to create efficient job accommodation and natural support systems.

### Disability Awareness and Etiquette Training

In the next phase, **TBR** worked with the retailer to identify the stores, distribution centers, and contact centers that would be included in the disability inclusion project. These were determined mainly based on number of open positions and turnover rates.

Employees at all locations included in the project received disability awareness and etiquette training, including:

- Facts on disability employment
- Creating mutual respect
- Types of disabilities: Visible vs. Non-Visible Disabilities
- Disability Etiquette: Person first language, avoiding assumptions, and best practices for interacting with people with various disabilities
- Supervisory concerns and strategies, including practical tips and providing support to new hires
- Communication and other strategies: Recruitment and Interviewing
- Fear and Stigma

### **Building Partnerships**

Another major part of this project was facilitating partnerships between the company and local community organizations. Over 200 partnerships were created with high schools, community colleges, disability services organizations, state vocational rehabilitation agencies, and more. These partnerships are key to the success of the project in many ways, but primarily because they provide a pipeline of job candidates. They can also provide ongoing support and resources to the company, making disability inclusion initiatives more sustainable.

TBR facilitated learning opportunities so that representatives from the partner organizations could tour company locations and meet with hiring managers to gain a better understanding of position requirements, work environment, and application process. TBR also provided trainings to the local organizations on the company, so that job coaches could better guide their clients through the application process.

### **Recommendations**

While the company already had a robust diversity initiative, TBR gave several recommendations to help the company achieve greater levels of success with disability inclusion. These included:

- Best practices for building partnerships with community organizations and schools as a way to increase recruitment options and secure ongoing resources.
- Familiarizing partner organizations with the application process so they can guide their clients through it successfully.
- Advice on creating natural supports to more organically and sustainably integrate people with disabilities into their workforce.
- Adding disability awareness training to orientation for all staff members to help both with building a strong team and improving service to customers with disabilities.
- Addressing fear and stigma at all levels by ensuring there are open lines of communication so that employees know they have someone to talk to about any concerns they have about working with people with disabilities.
- Providing tips to improve interviews and conquer unconscious bias.
- Continuing to support mentorship programs and foster the open and welcome culture.

## Results

Throughout this project, **TBR** engaged in the following activities built off their set of recommendations. These activities were the catalyst for many of the results the retailer achieved:

1. Developed a pre-training class in conjunction with a community college to train students with disabilities for contact center careers—a position that was targeted due to the historically high turnover rates.
2. Provided disability awareness training to hiring managers in five states (which increased to eleven states in 2017). This training is recognized as one of the most important aspects of disability inclusion because it provides an opportunity for hiring managers to have an open and honest discussion about fear and stigma, as well as an opportunity to learn to think differently about disabilities.
3. Facilitated over 200 introductions between the company, disability organizations, and other community partners, like schools, for recruitment.
4. Addressed fear and stigma related to hiring people with disabilities.
5. Educated the business on the proven bottom-line benefits of including people with disabilities in the workplace and marketplace.

In addition to the above, the retailer realized many bottom-line results by engaging in this project. Some of those include:

1. Increased number of applicants and hires with disabilities in the geographical locations included in the project, resulting in lower turnover for those hired.
2. Improvements to corporate culture and employee morale.
3. Enhanced training for existing and incoming staff members.
4. An expanded bank of recruitment channels and a strengthened ability to leverage community resources to support long-term sustainability of this initiative.

**In just three years of working with this national retailer, TBR was able to build a disability inclusion initiative in 11 states.**

In just three years of working with this national retailer, **TBR** was able to build a disability inclusion initiative and add in 11 states. **TBR** provided practical tools and sensible approaches to the company to support its goal of becoming an employer of choice for people with disabilities and realize a competitive edge in the marketplace.

## **Now it's Your Turn! Embracing Disability Inclusion within Your Company**

Disability inclusion can be a powerful tool for boosting your bottom line. Companies realize the competitive advantage that hiring people with disabilities has in the workplace, workforce and marketplace. Companies of any size that want to include people with disabilities have plenty of options for tapping into this under-utilized and qualified pool of jobseekers.

**Interested in exploring disability inclusion or learning more about TBR's proven, customizable consulting model? Contact Tangram Business Resourcing today at: [tbr@thetangramway.org](mailto:tbr@thetangramway.org) or (317) 968-9024.**





# Reimagining Diversity— Making People with Disabilities Part of Your Team



## **Addendum 1-**

Inclusion Considerations Specific  
to the Contact Center Environment



**Contact Center Technology  
That Exceeds Expectations**

**Newbridge Technology Solutions** is a technology company that focuses on how contact centers can better utilize technology to fit a contact center's requirements and the needs of their employees, while maintaining an emphasis on ROI, productivity, and quality. Steven Cramer, Senior Vice President of Operations for **Newbridge**, has extensive experience in working with contact centers and explains that there are strategies specific to the contact center environment that, when implemented, can result not only in an inclusive culture, but also improved client satisfaction rates, productivity, and quality.

Contact centers, once largely outsourced due to perceived cost reduction, are beginning to make a come-back in America. Companies are finding that, in the long term, outsourcing is not cost-effective, and in many cases, can damage a company's bottom line—a result of language barriers, soft-skills gaps, and the high price of overseas contracts.

Now, with the resurgence of contact centers in America, companies are facing a new problem: high attrition rates and the challenges of recruiting and retaining quality employees. To combat this, companies can implement **Tangram Business Resourcing's** recommendations for inclusive recruitment strategies, application processes, and interviewing practices. As with any industry, contact centers face unique challenges and may require industry-specific solutions.

## Recruitment

Contact centers face many unique challenges when it comes to recruitment. Here are some of the top challenges according to an HR Manager from a large retail firm with contact centers:

- **Increased competition from other contact centers:** Larger, more profitable firms are able to pay higher wages and offer stronger benefits packages that attract top performers from competing call centers. This is in direct relation to market performance of the better performing companies with access to more capital. This causes extremely high turnover rates within less profitable firms, as well as ongoing turnover with strong performing firms, as employees can "job hop" between a variety of contact centers that offer attractive compensation packages. Furthermore, recruitment is highly competitive in certain geographical regions due to the high volume of contact centers located within those regions. Arizona is a prime example of this, where a large number of contact centers all compete to draw from the same pool of candidates.
- **Fear of outsourcing:** Though more and more contact centers are choosing to remain in the U.S., there continues to be a trend of nationally based contact centers facing job elimination as their roles are being shifted to call centers other countries. This can cause applicants to hesitate to apply for a role that they feel may not offer sufficient longevity and tenure.
- **Lack of training opportunities:** Many applicants that apply to contact center roles do not have adequate skill sets necessary to be successful in a contact center where almost 100% of calls are from disgruntled, upset customers.

- **Background checks:** At times, and depending on the location and time of year, a high percentage of applicants may be rejected due to background check issues that make them ineligible to work in a contact environment with PCI compliance requirements.
- **Cultural shifts:** Today's job force has a large proportion of millennial applicants that value flexibility, independence, and work-life balance, but many firms have not modified their work culture to adapt to this new cultural shift. Hence, many contact centers have a difficult time attracting and retaining millennial applicants.

One way to solve many of these issues is for contact centers to cast a wider net and include more deliberate recruitment of people with disabilities. Studies have shown that employees with disabilities perform as well as or better than their peers without disabilities and have less absenteeism. Because people with disabilities represent a largely untapped pool of jobseekers, contact centers will benefit from targeting their recruitment efforts at this group. Increased recruitment efforts centered on people with disabilities will likely result in qualified employees who are eager to work and who, with proper training and support, are more likely to stay in their role long-term, thus reducing turnover and high costs associated with continuous onboarding caused by high turnover.

## Technology

An integral part of any contact center is its technology. Contact center operations require sophisticated technology and the ability to adapt quickly as new technological advances are made. When it comes to recruiting individuals with disabilities, many contact centers are hesitant due to fears about costly technological accommodations. "Many companies fear hiring employees with disabilities for contact center roles because they worry about the possibility of needing to invest in different software that is compatible with assistive technology. **Newbridge** understands this concern, but also recognizes the importance of diverse workforces. Because we own our own technology, we are able to adapt it as needed to simultaneously fit the needs of the company and its employees, including any accommodations they might require," says Cramer.

Cramer makes the following recommendations for contact centers as they embark on a disability inclusion initiative.

- Implement updated technology solutions that allow for flexibility and address the needs of both employees and customers.
- Assess online applications, telecommunication ACD platforms, and client effacing IVR technology to ensure they are fully accessible to both employees and customers.
- Ensure that the interview process does not limit a candidate's qualifications based on limitations of the contact center's current technology. For instance, don't automatically rule out someone who is blind or visually impaired just because JAWS (a screen-reading software) isn't compatible with contact center technology. If the person is able to perform the essential functions of the job, evaluate the possibility of alternative technology solutions.

Though there may be some investment associated with utilizing a technology option that can accommodate the individual needs of all your employees, that cost is undoubtedly outweighed by the dollars lost to consistently high turnover. The proven benefits to a company's bottom line when they invest in high quality, long-term employees are numerous.

## Environment

Due to the high turnover rates typically experienced by contact centers, there is not only a great need to recruit exceptional candidates, but also to retain those exceptional employees. For contact centers, that may mean focusing on an often overlooked aspect of business—physical environment. There are unique challenges caused by a traditional contact center environment, that, when addressed, can boost a contact center's ability to recruit, hire, advance, and retain high quality employees.

The **North American Customer Service Management Association's** study of national contact sites concluded that contact center environments are often bypassed for money and attention since they are spaces where employees work, not "public spaces." As a result, companies typically don't invest in the physical environment—the appearance, the furnishings, the style.

### Here are some attributes that are common to most contact centers:

- **They are high density:** The ratio of square footage to employee is dramatically compressed, which affects everything from parking to acoustics to washrooms.
- **They are stressful:** A high pressure environment coupled with repetitive tasks/conversations and strictly monitored performance can make it difficult for employees manage their stress levels.
- **They are ever-changing:** A contact center must be able to adjust to fluctuating staffing levels, to provide shared workstations among multiple shifts, and to maintain balance between privacy and collaboration.

Creating a productive, cost-effective, and inviting environment is challenging, but not impossible. Remember that the effects of a comfortable working environment trickle down to your customers. If your employees work each day in a pleasant environment with comfortable furnishings, they are more likely to maintain a patient, friendly attitude when interacting with customers than if they are working in a chaotic and hot environment with little aesthetic interest.

- **Create a showcase for the corporate image:** Corporate tours tend to wind through the contact center as contact centers become central to business strategy. Make the contact center look and feel great. Make it worthy of your employees' pride.
- **Value your employees:** Invest in contact center design, furnishing, and functionality. Companies send a clear message to employees about how their work is valued by the environment they provide.
- **Keep employees comfortable and content:** Contact center employees spend a lot of time tethered to their desks. The satisfaction and happiness of employees will shine through in each customer interaction—they will be more focused on making customers happy than on venting their frustrations and even sharing inappropriate comments with callers. Comfort is also psychological, since employees like to have control over their workspace (i.e. temperature control, decorations, desk, and lighting choices). The employee's ability to adjust the environment to their style and job requirements promotes high productivity and job satisfaction. Workers who are constantly distracted by making themselves comfortable are far less productive.
- **Invest in ergonomic furniture:** Contact center employees sit for hours on end, often in a high-pressure environment, making them prime candidates for aching backs, necks, and wrists. Aches and pains, in turn, can lead to absenteeism and costly injuries. The more employees sit, the better their chair should be. Providing options for keyboard trays and monitors is another way to increase comfort. Do employees currently share workstations, or will they in the future? The more sharing that goes on, the more adjustments you will need.
- **Keep accessibility in mind:** In addition to ADA requirements, there are many small changes that can be made to ensure that employees with disabilities feel safe and comfortable. For instance, make sure that employees who are deaf or hard of hearing are placed at a workstation where they are able to see the flashing lights of fire alarms and other safety signals. If employees with disabilities will be sharing workstations, put processes in place to ensure that workstation accommodations are maintained across shifts. Make sure meeting spaces are accessible for all employees and all office areas are well marked, and that lower desktops are available for individuals in wheelchairs.
- **Maintain open lines of communication and build a “culture of help.”** A corporate culture that recognizes and embraces the skill sets of people with disabilities is a company that will experience success in inclusion efforts. To ensure that all employees feel comfortable asking questions and communicating with their coworkers and supervisors, it is important to establish a culture of help wherein employees feel comfortable both requesting help and providing support to their colleagues.

It is important for companies to show that all employees are valued and that they are respected as individuals. Any positive modifications to the environment of a contact center will impact employees with and without disabilities.

## **Conclusion and Next Steps:**

Though contact centers face a variety of unique challenges, especially when it comes to recruitment, technology, and environment, many of these can be addressed with disability-inclusive strategies that will ultimately benefit the company's bottom line. Companies searching for innovative technology solutions that will allow for more accessibility can achieve results by partnering with companies like **Newbridge**. Companies interested in becoming disability-confident and developing a robust, cost-effective disability inclusion initiative can get customized training and consultation from the experts at **Tangram Business Resourcing**.

**Ready to take the next step? Contact Tangram Business Resourcing at (317) 968-9024 or [tbr@thetangramway.org](mailto:tbr@thetangramway.org).**