

Disability Inclusion Makes Financial Sense, Report Finds

By Matt Gonzales

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Or ganizations that implement disability-inclusive policies and practices tend to outperform their peers financially, according to a new report by Accenture in partnership with Disability:IN and the American Association of People with Disabilities.

Building on a 2018 report (<https://newsroom.accenture.com/news/2018/companies-leading-in-disability-inclusion-have-outperformed-peers-accenture-research-finds>) on disability inclusion in the workplace, the 2023 iteration (<https://www.accenture.com/content/dam/accenture/final/accenture-com/document-2/Disability-Inclusion-Report-Business-Imperative.pdf>) explored the topic amid major technological advances, changes in geopolitical dynamics and the effects of a global pandemic. This year's report looked at 346 U.S. companies that participated in the Disability Equality Index (<https://disabilityin.org/what-we-do/disability-equality-index/>).

According to the study, companies that incorporated disability-inclusive practices—such as using videos with captions and routinely seeking input from employees with disabilities—over the last five years experienced:

- 1.6 times more revenue.
- 2.6 times more net income.
- 2 times more economic profit.

Feedback

Furthermore, Glassdoor reviews of companies that participated in the Disability Equality Index between 2010 and 2021 mentioned disability inclusion in the workplace five times more than reviews of their industry peers, suggesting that employees are paying attention to their companies' inclusion efforts.

"Our landmark study demonstrated the relationship between business performance and corporate disability inclusion," said Reid Jewett Smith, director of research and policy at Disability:IN. "We were thrilled to discover that the relationship between performance and inclusion has only grown stronger in the intervening years."

The Role of Workplace Flexibility

Smith has cystic fibrosis, a degenerative, genetic lung disease that requires hours of respiratory therapy each day to maintain basic lung function. When she's sick, she administers IV antibiotics through a chest port three times a day.

Luckily, remote-work options have allowed her to satisfy both her health and work needs.

"With a generous, empathetic and smart flexible policy, I can meet my treatment requirements while working," Smith explained. "I don't get up three hours early to take care of myself; I multitask all day to meet the demands of my health and my work while avoiding dozens of potentialities for reinfection in crowded subways and office buildings."



The U.S. workforce has thousands of these stories: According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as many as 1 in 4 adults in the U.S. (<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>) have a disability. Companies that create disability-inclusive work policies can capture talent without having it hinge on whether someone is sitting in an office all day, Smith said.

Federal data cited in the report shows that the percentage of U.S. residents with disabilities in the workforce has swelled from 29 percent in July 2018 to 37 percent in July 2023. Researchers attribute this rise to more remote-work opportunities since the start of the pandemic that made it easier for people with disabilities to participate in the workforce, as well as a greater awareness and understanding of digital accessibility and inclusion in the hiring process.

Remote and hybrid working patterns have also helped make corporate disability inclusion more sustainable and have contributed to a boost in revenue and profits for organizations that prioritize it, according to the report.

But despite the increased employment rate of individuals with disabilities (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/global-and-cultural-effectiveness/pages/employment-rate-rising-for-people-with-disabilities.aspx), the labor force participation rate for these workers in 2023 was approximately half that of their counterparts without disabilities, the Accenture report found.

Five A's Can Improve Disability Inclusion

Craig Leen, an attorney with K&L Gates in Washington, D.C., and a former director of the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs, said the report confirms that disability inclusion is good for a company's bottom line.

"Workplaces that are open and accessible to people with disabilities tend to be open and accessible to everyone," said Leen, who has a daughter with disabilities. "Inclusive businesses are more successful while having less risk of legal liability. All organizations should take note and include disability and accessibility in their diversity-focused programs."

The report includes a five-part framework to help businesses become more intentional about disability inclusion:

- **Access.** Remove barriers and provide equal access to employment opportunities for people with disabilities, including in recruitment, hiring and career advancement.
- **Awareness.** Ask leaders to raise awareness about disabilities and foster a culture of empathy and respect, challenge stereotypes and promote a more inclusive mindset among employees.
- **Advocacy.** Create an environment for individuals to feel comfortable disclosing their disabilities to help amplify their voices and ensure their perspectives are heard.
- **Action.** By integrating various disability inclusion initiatives under a single umbrella, organizations can ensure that they work in harmony to create a more accessible and equitable workplace.
- **Accountability.** Employers can measure their progress and share what they learn to demonstrate their commitment and dedication to improving disability inclusion.

Leen added that disability inclusion is a fundamental civil and human rights issue that businesses should care deeply about.

"Most people will have a permanent or temporary disability at some point in life," he said. "It makes all the difference in the world to have an employer who cares and prioritizes disability inclusion and accessibility."

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