

Why you should hire a disabled person right now

One in five people in the UK live with a disability. People with disabilities are also almost twice as likely to be unemployed. It goes without saying that these statistics do not add up; and the fact that employers are willfully disregarding this diverse and skilled talent pool is most shocking of all.

Disability is nothing new. People have always and will always live with disabilities. Our disabilities or impairments – visible or invisible – are not what hold our community back. In reality, it's the way the world of work – its offices, hours and hiring processes – are designed as if disabled people simply don't exist. That and people's assumptions. This is our only real handicap.

Working structures are built around the needs of able-bodied workers, and the disability employment gap (28%) has lain stagnant for decades as a result. Not only this, but the pandemic is disproportionately impacting those with disabilities, for whom health and unemployment risks were already part and parcel of everyday life.

And yet, now more than ever, workers with disabilities have so much to offer

With the odds stacked against them, disabled workers have always relied on

their skill and expertise to field employment opportunities. They'll also know that when invited to interview, interviewers might be surprised to learn that they're disabled. They show up, demonstrate their skill and prove their worth in the face of prejudice, anyway.

Having been given no choice but to work around ableist structures and microaggressions up until now, disabled people are able to adapt in ways which could teach even the biggest businesses a lesson. It is this unique stock of resilience and resourcefulness which make workers with disabilities a force to be reckoned with; particularly during challenging and unpredictable times.

Not only this, but we currently face a wealth of new and knotty business challenges. The best solutions – the ones that last – will be the sum of different backgrounds, experiences and personalities, which make for the widest possible lens with which to approach the months ahead. Since workers with disabilities have to negotiate barriers every day which their able-bodied colleagues do not, they must be included in the conversation. Only diverse teams can consider all angles; and ensure that opportunities aren't overlooked.

What's more, disabled people represent a huge wealth of consumers. Over 14 million individuals are disabled in the UK, which equates to a huge amount of spending power supporting our economy. Without workers with disabilities having equal representation across teams, companies cannot hope to appeal to this chronically neglected market. And without such a significant section of society being in meaningful employment, we lose this group's power as the consumers of our goods, services and culture.

Economically empowered disabled people are as valuable to the economy (as consumers) as they are to companies as workers. Given the recession, closing the disability gap makes as much business and financial sense as it does for our social conscience. But this all hinges on how employers act now.

With infection levels continuing to rise, disabled people will continue to rely on flexible policies if they are to access safe employment opportunities. Many people with disabilities will be amongst the very last to stop shielding for health reasons; and even for those who are not classed as 'vulnerable', fears that offices and commutes are unsafe make them increasingly cut off from 'traditional' office life.

The pandemic could – and should – be the moment when the new ways of working we've been testing are cemented, forever, into inclusive working culture. But employers have historically pushed back on making allowances for a work routine outside the 'norm'. Accommodating additional needs – accessible equipment for example – is rarely a priority.

So if businesses hold onto their biases – even when presented with a window of

opportunity – there is a risk that another generation of talented disabled workers will continue to face impossible odds. As companies respond to the deepest recession on record, disabled people will be first in the firing line; even people with disabilities who had jobs prior to the pandemic are now twice as likely to lose them.

But there is a route out of this impending jobs crisis. And the way has already been paved. If the pandemic has taught us one thing, it's that failure to accommodate health needs is inexcusable. It can be a matter of life and death.

Business models were overhauled and remote operations set up in a matter of weeks to make them safe for workforces in the wake of COVID.

Where is this spirit of innovation and progression when it comes to making disabled workers comfortable and safe?

The time to act is now. We have a unique window of opportunity to make good on byproducts of the pandemic – such as working from home. Old ways of working are as deep-rooted as the biases which hold them up, but they're clearly not beyond digging up.

And once we do so, we will finally unshackle disabled people from the only real constraints which have been holding them back from fulfilling their enormous potential.

Liz Johnson is gold medal winning Paralympian and the founder of two organisations which aim to close the disability employment gap. The Ability People is the first disability-led employment consultancy, which works with companies to change the way they approach diversity and transform their operations to be authentically inclusive. And Podium is a unique jobs platform, connecting disabled freelancers to meaningful remote work which meets their needs.