

Making workplaces more accessible to people with disabilities

If you look at the world you see that one out of every seven persons has a disability. Some disabilities tend to be more visible than others in the form of allergies, mental health problems, walking disabilities, and other conditions. Others are more invisible to the common public, for example someone facing anxiety in ambient noise.

In the U.S., at least 10% of the country could be classified as having medical conditions that can be termed as invisible disabilities.

When creating an inclusive workspace in the truest sense, as a business you must prioritise accessibility for people with disabilities. By proactively addressing physical, communicative, and other challenges employees face, companies can create an environment where everybody can thrive. This makes the workplace more accessible.

Don't generalise disabilities

It is easy to fall into a common trap and to misunderstand what it means to live with a certain condition. The truth is two people with the same disability live

with two different experiences. Two people with migraines may show entirely different triggers. Similarly, a generalised anxiety disorder can include different symptoms that manifest in multiple different ways.

This means knowing about the disability/reading about it is very different than actually having to experience it. And what it looks like on the outside may not be the real lived experience of someone else.

As leaders, your role is to listen well. Spend time understanding what symptoms show for team members how those symptoms affect work and how you can support them. You should also train employees to be empathetic.

Research points us that leaders who listen to the team's experiences and accommodate their requests are more successful leaders.

Figure out how to help your team member succeed in their role

A broad disability approach without catering to an individual's needs doesn't always work. An umbrella policy that clubs everyone with a disability into a single group they don't necessarily identify with can be a problem.

It's important to work with a personalised approach and tailor that to your employees' needs and ensure they have the right resources. The best way to do this is to ask team members what kind of measures they need. This stops you from second-guessing and making bad decisions.

Research also shows that when someone(leaders) uses language that links individual needs to success at work it helps them voice their concerns more effectively.

If your team member wants quiet space or more flexible working hours or something that helps them manage doctor's visits/soccer games with their kids, then you may be accommodative of these requests. If you need to speak to higher-ups before you can approve these requests, let the team member know that you will get back to them as soon as possible.

Conduct a comprehensive accessibility audit

Begin by assessing the current state of your workplace. Engage with accessibility experts or consultants to conduct a thorough audit. Identify areas that may pose challenges for individuals with disabilities, including entrances,

workstations, restrooms, meeting rooms, and common areas. This audit serves as the foundation for creating an inclusive environment.

Ensure physical accessibility

Physical barriers can significantly impede the mobility and participation of individuals with disabilities. Implementing ramps, elevators, and wider doorways ensures that your workplace is physically accessible. Consider the installation of handrails and accessible parking spaces as well. Additionally, ensure that pathways within the office are clear and free of obstructions.

Provide accessible workstations

Customising workstations to meet the specific needs of employees with disabilities is crucial. This may involve adjustable desks, ergonomic chairs, and adaptive technology. Ensure that these adjustments are made in consultation with the employees to address their requirements effectively.

Invest in assistive technology

Technology plays a vital role in making workplaces more accessible and fostering workplace efficiency. Invest in assistive technologies such as screen readers, voice recognition software, and alternative input devices. These tools empower employees with disabilities to perform their tasks efficiently and contribute fully to the workplace.

Implement inclusive communication practices

Effective communication is the cornerstone of any workplace. Ensure that communication methods are inclusive, considering employees with hearing or visual impairments. Provide written materials in accessible formats, such as large print or electronic documents compatible with screen readers. Encourage the use of plain language in written communication.

Foster a supportive and inclusive culture

Creating an accessible workplace is not just about physical modifications; it also involves fostering a culture of inclusivity. Train employees and management on disability awareness and etiquette. Encourage open

communication and dialogue about individual needs, making it clear that *diversity and inclusion* are core values of the organisation.

Develop flexible work policies

Recognise that employees with disabilities may require flexibility in work arrangements. Implement flexible work hours, remote and *hybrid work options*, and telecommuting policies. This not only accommodates diverse needs but also contributes to a more inclusive and supportive work culture.

Establish a clear accommodation process

Have a well-defined process for requesting and providing accommodations. Employees should feel comfortable discussing their needs with HR or management, knowing that their requests will be handled confidentially and promptly. This proactive approach promotes trust and inclusivity within the workplace.

Avoid centring activities around food

Food is an integral aspect of modern workplaces and celebrations. It fuels networking events and otherwise long hours building friendships, belonging, and breaking barriers. But for someone with food allergies, the workplace food invite can be a minefield to transcend.

A good percentage of millennials with food allergies experience anxiety at work because of this.

As managers don't rely on employees to explain to you the consequences of their food intolerances. Managers who are open to listening to their employees talk about food intolerances can appear as good leaders and are seen more approachable as a result. However, this doesn't happen without you giving them a safe space where they can openly share deeply personal issues stemming from their allergies.

This improves loyalty and employee engagement.

Ideally, if there are office parties centred around food, always include someone who has food intolerances in the organising team. This makes it easy to create a more inclusive menu. And you can also get employees to talk to you about their food allergies making supporting them easy.

Establish an inclusive community

Ninety percent of people with disabilities in our survey did not feel a sense of belonging at work. When there are peer support networks at work, people have the space to share their experiences without the fear of shame or reprimand.

As a leader create and advocate for safe spaces and make people more comfortable about joining them. Another idea is to use surveys for employee feedback on inclusion. This helps leaders where the organisation can improve and shows genuine care and intent from your end.

Educate employees on inclusivity

Conduct regular training sessions to educate employees on the importance of inclusivity and the specific needs of colleagues with disabilities. Address common misconceptions and stereotypes to foster a more understanding and supportive work environment.

Collaborate with disability advocacy organisations

Engage with local disability advocacy groups and organisations. Seek guidance and partnership to enhance your accessibility initiatives. These organisations often provide valuable insights and resources to create a workplace that goes beyond compliance, embracing true inclusivity.

Conclusion

Making your workplace more inclusive for employees with disabilities isn't too complicated. If you're a new manager know that you can take action and better your team culture to be more inclusive.

As a result, you create a better and more inclusive workspace for everyone.

Making workplaces more accessible to people with disabilities is not just a legal requirement; it is a commitment to creating environments where everyone can contribute their best. By implementing these practical steps, businesses can not only comply with accessibility standards but also cultivate a culture that values diversity and empowers all employees to reach their full potential.

