Handshakes, Not Handouts: Building the Business Case for Inclusion

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The need to increase employment among people with disabilities is more critical than ever. Cornell University reports that the employment rate for people with disabilities is 36.9 percent compared to 79.7 percent for those with no disability (Bjelland, Erickson, and Lee, 2008). Government programs have done little to increase employment for people with disabilities, and certain policies, including asset limits on public programs that strip employees of their benefits when they reach a certain income level, are proven disincentives to work. Legislation has recently been introduced to raise these asset limits, but it is too early to tell whether the bill will have enough support.

Major companies that otherwise promote diversity in their hiring strategies have, for the most part, long neglected this sector. Decades ago, legal and political activism broke down many of the barriers hampering the advancement of women and racial minorities in the workplace. Fearing lawsuits, fines, and boycotts, corporations complied with new Civil Rights laws. Few corporations are as worried about activism or legal reprisals from the fragmented community of people with disabilities, in part because there is so little "bite" in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)—only 10 percent of complaints have been successful, and settlements have been small. The ADA Amendment Act of 2008 is likely to foster additional employment for people with disabilities, but it is too early to assess the scale of its effects. In addition, the fragmentation of the “disability community” has all but ruled out the potential for boycotts or other consumer-based measures that other minorities can wield as a stick to threaten corporations.

Existing and new public policy, public programs, and philanthropic programs will not be enough to bring people with disabilities into the economic mainstream. Businesses choosing to employ more people with disabilities will play a crucial role. But private companies should not do this simply because it is “the right thing to do.” Businesses can consider strategies to hire and integrate employees with disabilities successfully into the company as a means to reach the large, largely untapped disability market. This is a strategy aimed at increasing revenues and keeping an organization on the cutting edge of innovation. Below I describe the size of the disability market and make suggestions for developing a disability-inclusive strategy that informs hiring practices, product design and marketing, public relations, and, ultimately, corporate culture. These suggestions can help businesses as well as the community-based organizations supporting companies’ efforts to employ people with disabilities.

The Business Case for Targeting the Disability Market

The carrot of sales, more than the sticks of regulation and reprisal, makes a compelling case for a commitment to diversity. Businesses have long understood the value of tapping new minority markets to expand revenues. Based on the demographics of the disability population, there is reason to believe there are large untapped revenues here as well. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the 54 million people with disabilities represent approximately $1 trillion dollars in aggregate income and $220 billion

in discretionary spending power. To put the numbers into perspective, they add up to more than the African-American, Latino, and gay markets combined. The disability market offers double the fabled spending power of teens and more than 17 times the spending power of tweens (8- to 12-year-olds), two of the most avidly pursued demographic groups. The American Association of People with Disabilities and Public Opinion Research Inc. report that more than 70 percent of members choose to buy from retailers that support people with disabilities, while a similar survey from the Center for Social Development and Education at the University of Massachusetts at Boston noted that 92 percent of participants with disabilities felt more favorable toward companies that hire individuals with disabilities, and 87 percent would give their business to those companies (Siperstein et al. 2006).

This is too big a phenomenon to be styled a "niche." In addition, customers and applicants with disabilities participate in three major consumer movements: the rise of the knowledge worker as predicted by Peter Drucker, the demand-driven consumer rights revolution, and the Baby Boomer generation with its large economic clout. In terms of size, disability is the largest minority market. In terms of growth, between 1990 and 2000 this group increased 25 percent, faster than any other minority group, including the rapidly growing Latino demographic.[1] Companies are beginning to notice and line up for their part of the pie. Here is the pitch as Karen Quamenn of Medtronic and the Business Advisory Committee to the National Spinal Cord Injury Association delivers it: "If I held up five $20 bills and said this one is from the black community, this from Latino, this from gay and lesbian, this from women, and this from people with disabilities, which of these is any less valuable than the other?"[2]

There is also potential payoff to being the first to tap a massive market in terms of customer loyalty and profits. IBM continues to score high on disability consumer trend reports, because they were among the first to establish a comprehensive strategy to hire people with disabilities. They discovered that moving into the vanguard on the employment front brings a powerful group of dedicated customers and workers. “Doing the right thing” in terms of meeting the need of customers with disabilities can have real payoff in other ways. Consider AT&T, which, according to insiders, was successful in securing regulatory approval for a multi-billion dollar merger in 2005 partly by demonstrating it was way out in front of its target company, BellSouth, when it came to serving deaf cellular users. This case is emblematic of the high-stakes outcomes that investors and directors cannot afford to ignore. A stronger corporate image is also a part of the opportunity package, and an increasingly important consideration in light of activist consumers and investors.

Strategy

How does a business tap this market? One way is to develop a comprehensive diversity strategy that affects all aspects of a company’s activities, from hiring to product design and marketing. The comprehensive nature of the strategy promotes success in hiring and integrating people with disabilities into a company, as well as helping the company develop products that successfully meet the needs and

[1] Author’s interview with Tari Susan Hartman-Squire, June 2004.
[2] Personal interview with the author, October 2005.

preference of the disability market. Such a strategy includes a public relations effort to get the word out about the company's commitment to diversity.

Hiring

The names of companies with disability-forward hiring strategies are well-known, especially to the disability community: IBM and Microsoft have matched product launches to job programs; Merrill Lynch, Bank of America, and SunTrust sign up new clients from the same communities where they hire. These positive reputations were not gained by accident. They involved the step-by-step development of a diversity strategy that starts with hiring and goes beyond.

Where do you start? The most successful corporations go to the sources. They find candidates at employment fairs for applicants with disabilities. The best-attended of these are sponsored annually by Gallaudet University, the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, Career Opportunities for Students with Disabilities (COSD) based at the University of Tennessee, the Job Accommodation Network, the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) of the Labor Department, and the career services offices of universities with a strength in the disability area, such as the University of Minnesota and University of California system. Resumes received through these sources can legally be coded by a recruiter for diversity based on the intermediate source.

Some company names pop up again and again in conversations on disability and employment. Among the strongest are those in the tech, telecommunications, and banking sectors—partly because they have the tools to make knowledge-focused jobs accessible and partly because they discovered long ago the profits that accrue from recognition within the disability community. According to company annals, IBM hired its first employee with a disability in 1914. Four decades later the company invented remote-controlled keyboards and voice-activation tools, and has been churning out assistive technology products ever since. Today it is considered one of the most aggressive recruiters in the disability community. Right alongside IBM is Microsoft, which has a massive cultural commitment to disability and has posted strong numbers in terms of hiring.

The basic literature on hiring people with disabilities is straightforward and little changed since the passage of the ADA in 1990. The caveats have been in place for nearly two decades, so HR interviewers are by now familiar with the constraints that the ADA stipulates, particularly the proscription against asking directly about a disability or medical condition. Companies that have moved to more advanced thinking on disability address the mindset of the interviewer. Interviewers may incorrectly assume that people with disabilities are incapable of handling certain jobs, and there is a tendency among many who have little experience in this area to assume that the company might not have any jobs that would be right for a person with a disability. The trouble with this prejudice is that it ignores the fact that a job is a job, and then it categorizes the interviewee as someone who needs to be put into a "special" spot.

It would be pointless to instruct interviewers not to be judgmental—their job is in part a moment-by-moment string of judgments that must be made quickly, but these should not be *medical* judgments, for which most recruiters are unqualified. Along these lines, the Department of Justice's Office of

Disability Employment Programs recommends that non-disabled interviewers keep a lid on their imaginations and emotions, including the tendency to indulge in amateur medical diagnoses or psychotherapy when meeting a person with an unknown but apparent disability. As compassionate as these suppositions might seem, they pull the focus away from the skills and capabilities of the interviewee and focus on the medical condition. The ODEP checklist also warns: “Don't speculate or try to imagine how you would perform a specific job if you had the applicant's disability.”

Recruiting begins even before a position opens. Web sites and printed materials that offer job postings should be in alternative formats that are accessible, and efforts should be made to link or forward postings to service sites with disability constituencies. Employers big and small ought to develop a rapport with the local disability organizations, training programs, and government offices where employment counseling is offered. Most universities now have a well-staffed office of disability services, dedicated in part to adjudicating requests for note-takers or extra time on exams. These would be perfect liaisons for corporate recruiters, who could rely on the campus connection to identify interviewees. Internships and other on-campus recruiting efforts can help create a pipeline of employment candidates. Along these lines, major corporations can become familiar with the colleges that attract strong students with disabilities because of their particular academic programs or services for such students.

Other strategies companies can take include directing executive search firms to go through the employment nonprofits mentioned above or use subcontractors that employ people with disabilities—many large corporations set the standards for their subcontractors when it comes to whom they hire, how much they pay, and the conditions under which the work is to be done.

Product Design and Marketing

Companies looking to develop products that appeal to customers with disabilities start by assembling demographics to understand what market segment (the specific disability, customer age, income level, etc.) offers the highest potential consumer demand or otherwise makes the most sense for the company to appeal to. The company can partner with a disability service organization that provides coaching on the customer base and relationships to its membership. Disability-specific focus groups and market research can inform preferences around products as varied as cell phones, cars, and soap. Internal design and marketing teams get up to speed on disability codes, including linguistic etiquette. The special characteristics of the product are trumpeted to the disability community and other sympathetic consumers. Crossover possibilities for multiple uses of the technology or other special characteristics of the product can be explored. A marketing campaign is launched. The press is alerted and retail outlets are encouraged to get on the bandwagon with their own image-boosting, disability-friendly efforts. Advertising and promotion crafts a message that will attract the community’s approval. The company’s commitment to customers and employees with disabilities itself becomes part of the message.

Public Relations

The public relations strategy is part of building a disability presence, candidly affirming the ends-driven motivation behind accommodating both employees and customers. It complements the marketing initiative in cost-effective ways that managers instantly recognize. It offers a way to complete publically the internal project of articulating the company's disability agenda. Word-of-mouth conveyed via social networks, blogs, list-serves, and specialty press are key to disability marketing. In 1998, Mattel scored with Share-a-Smile Becky (Barbie's companion in a wheelchair). Just a few weeks after CNN had aired its unusually lengthy two-minute piece about the product launch, the doll was sold out. Now good news is spread through social media (e.g. Facebook) and should include information about accessibility and disability-forward hiring as a way to build loyalty and interest in the community.

Conclusion

A comprehensive diversity strategy ultimately contributes to the strength and affects the very culture of a company. In finding ways to effectively integrate employees with disabilities into the company and promote their success, the business must refine its focus to draw on the expertise and experience of the new employees. Two concepts are particularly useful for helping change a company's culture around diversity and inclusiveness of employees with disabilities: the architectural term "wayfinding" and the anthropological and economic paradigm of a "trading zone."

An important aspect of integrating employees with disabilities into the company involves building an accessible workplace. The older version of accessibility involved meeting ADA-directed guidelines for entrances, bathrooms, and fire exits. A more useful approach is to elicit the input of "user-experts," people with disabilities who participate in the design process, to create workspaces that provide employees with disabilities the same types of access and space available to other employees.[3] Businesses can also adopt a principle known as "wayfinding." The term was introduced by architect Kevin Lynch in his 1960 book *The Image of the City*, and rapidly gained popularity in the Universal Design movement because of what it offered to architects designing spaces for blind users. It emphasizes legibility and ease of movement through space. In the built environment this involves the comprehensive deployment of materials, technology, light, sound, form, and texture to guide, for example, a blind colleague along the corridors and offices of the building. While there are options like infra-red-based systems delivering aural directions to headphones (similar to a museum Acoustiguide), some options are cleverly low-tech as well. It is not simply a matter of getting someone through the front door. Once inside, it is important that a person with a disability is offered choices and guidance along the same number of routes any other colleague might pursue.

[3] One of the most successful ideas used at organizations like Microsoft, Bank of America, and Northwestern University is the cultural-affinity group. These groups depend on self-identification and meet regularly to discuss complaints as well as other issues. Microsoft has three such affinity groups for people with disabilities (blind, deaf, and ADD/ADHD, the largest). The hope is that the on-campus presence of these groups makes workers feel more confident about gathering and discuss concerns and opportunities.

A focus on wayfinding goes beyond design of the physical space. It is an integrated, multi-pronged organizational approach, calling on human resources, management, marketing, finance, and information technology (the interface between virtual and real design for many workers with disabilities, at least half of whom rely heavily upon computers). Good wayfinding literally and figuratively invites employees into the heart of the company. A route must accommodate the disability, but it should not be marked at each turn as specific to the disability, like the designated wheelchair seat on the bus. Nothing is more damaging than the assumption that people with disabilities must be relegated to a desk job, out of sight.

A second key concept is that of a "trading zone," where people from different disciplines within a company meet to exchange information about strategies to hire, retain, and promote people with disabilities. The equation depends upon the perception of disability as a culture that can be pursued as a market and talent pool. The trading zone, as in the anthropological and economic examples, is a focus of translation and exchange for symbiotic relationships. As groups begin to trade, the more frequently they interact, the more freely they communicate. Over time, contact yields understanding, leading to fluency in the lingua franca and the trust essential to successful business.

Trading zones do not in and of themselves solve the equality problem, but they embody an implicit faith in the value of trading information, and the process of trade brings the partners closer together. Corporations are redefining their identities in terms of maximizing the meaning of what they do and enhancing their reputations in terms of accountability. Where is the trading zone? It must be in both the workplace and the marketplace. Who is in on it? Both the entry-level job seeker and the chief executive officer must be involved. All the different departments of the corporation, from human resources to marketing to public relations to legal have to be there, as well as managers and supervisors. So should the nonprofit service providers, the government policymakers, and teachers who prepare the workers of the future. The ideal trading zone is an accessible place of visibility for both people with disabilities and their non-disabled business partners. It is a place for handshakes, not handouts.

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Agenda

Sell to the community from which you **hire**
Communicate your commitment in labels, advertising, packaging, press campaigns
Know the customer's needs and comfort level
Pitch the people or products, not the disability
Enlist the expertise of the nonprofits and the support of top brass
Avoid patronizing or insulting language and images
Make your Web site accessible and ensure alternative formats for promotional materials
Edit your copy for Web sites, sales materials, media kits, and presentations to ensure people-first language
Have a lineup ready of trusted in-house sources with disabilities who can represent the company
Avoid using philanthropy to deflect discrimination accusations from the press and advocates
Audit the workplace for design shortcomings based on a range of disabilities

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