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Diversity and Intersectionality in the Disability Community

Intersectionality in the Disability Community

It's common to look at the DEIB world as a set of isolated communities: LGBTQIA+, BIPOC, and Persons with Disabilities (PwD), and more. Although these boxes can be useful when it comes to structuring DEIB programs and initiatives, they often restrict our perspective of the diversity that exists within each of these groups.

The PwD community is perhaps the most diverse and complex of globally historically underrepresented groups. This is partially due to the broad spectrum of disabilities that exist and to the combination of other oppression markers that affect the individuals that make up the community. When we fail to consider these intersectionalities, we fail to recognize the stories of PwD that are also Black, Indigenous, or LGBTQIA+, for example. And those stories are crucial for representation. A lack of representation is just one of the challenges that PwD face.

In practice, intersectionality is about where differences transverse and combine. When talking about gender, for example, we shouldn't speak of women as if all women were the same and went through the same problems. We must also talk about and consider the experiences of trans women, Black women, and women with disabilities.

Without an intersectional approach, the mission to leave no one behind will remain aspirational. And isolated inclusion initiatives will generate more frustration than change. Any program or initiative that is attentive to intersectionality cannot think only of isolated actions, categorized by communities or identities. Instead, they should take into account all of the types of diversity and experiences that could be represented in that group. So, an event focused on LGBTQIA+ Pride should also consider the struggles and contributions of BIPOC and neurodivergent people who are also part of the LGBTQIA+ community. The idea here is to acknowledge the social dynamics and diverse needs that are present within each community.

Understanding the importance of intersectionality can lead us to ask ourselves who is left behind, why, and under what circumstances. In this guide, we'll explore some practical applications of intersectionality within the PwD community. We will briefly go through different intersections and take a look at some of their developments, to help you create more inclusive solutions within your organization and in your life. So let's dive in!

Age and disability

Persons with disabilities face a number of obstacles in their daily lives, including attitudinal, environmental, and institutional barriers that prevent them from having full and equitable participation in different aspects of work life. Often older PwD are among the most adversely affected, facing further age-related barriers in society.

The intersection between disability and age is huge, and has even bigger repercussions, including around the future of work. Let's understand why with some stats from the Department of Economic and Social Affairs at the UN.

46%

of older persons (aged 60 and over) have disabilities and more than 250 million older people experience moderate to severe disability. (United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Disability. Ageing and disability.)

- Currently, it's estimated that 15% of the population worldwide, or some 1 billion individuals, live with one or more disabling conditions.
- According to data from World Population Prospects: the 2015 Revision (United Nations, 2015), the number of older persons has increased substantially in recent years in most countries and regions, and that growth is projected to accelerate in the coming decades.
- Between 2015 and 2030, the number of people in the world aged 60 years or over is projected to grow by 56%, from 901 million to 1.4 billion.
- By 2050, the global population of older persons is projected to reach nearly 2.1 billion.

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There's a close relationship between disability and aging, as a result of accumulated health risks across an increasing lifespan of disease, injury, and chronic illness. The combination of global trends in aging populations and the higher risk of disability in older people is likely to result in further increases in the older population affected by disability. At the same time, the values of a labor market that privileges youth, and the accelerated pace of technological transformations making professions and tools obsolete overnight, have placed limits on the inclusion of older people in the workforce, and even more so when they have a disability.

Higher disability rates among older people urge companies and governments to review and further explore the how to redress and approach aging and disability. One way to deal with this challenge is to create a safe space for people to disclose their disabilities at work. Additionally, you can reassess hiring and retention policies so that the experience of older people is not discarded in favor of technical skills, especially those related to new technologies.
We need to develop an inclusive mindset within our organizations, where no one is left behind, including elderly and disabled people. By doing this, we will not only be helping to create a society that meets the needs and capacities of all users, but also expanding our potential for innovation and productivity through a diverse and inclusive work environment.

There is a huge market to be explored for products and services that serve these populations. And for that to happen, their participation in the creation and development of innovative and inclusive solutions is essential. In a society that excludes elderly and disabled people, offering them suitable working conditions is an invitation for your employees to feel a sense of belonging. In this scenario, there is a clear need to start articulating policies and programs that connect disability and aging, taking into consideration intersectionalities and ensuring that programs and facilities are designed to meet their needs simultaneously.

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Class and disability

Perhaps the most explicit intersection between social markers is between disability and class, due to the disproportional rate of poverty that affects a the PwD population, and also to the lack of access to personal and professional opportunities this community faces. It helps us understand how socioeconomics plays into what different populations within disability communities have access to. For instance, lower-income neighborhoods tend to have fewer sidewalks, accessible pedestrian signals, and marked crosswalks. The same goes for accessible health services, security, education, etc.

Although the Americans with Disabilities Act assures equal opportunities in education and employment for people with disabilities and prohibits discrimination, people with disabilities remain overrepresented among America's poor and undereducated populations.

Despite the existence of federal government assistance programs (SSDI and SSI) and other forms of assistance, persons with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed and live in poverty. This high incidence of poverty among PwD raises doubts about the sufficiency of public and private assistance to these individuals and incentives to help people return to work.

20.1%
Is the participation rate in the workforce for people with disabilities aged 16 and over. For people without disabilities at the same age, the participation rate is 68.6%
(According to the Office of Disability Employment Policy from the U.S. Department of Labor.)
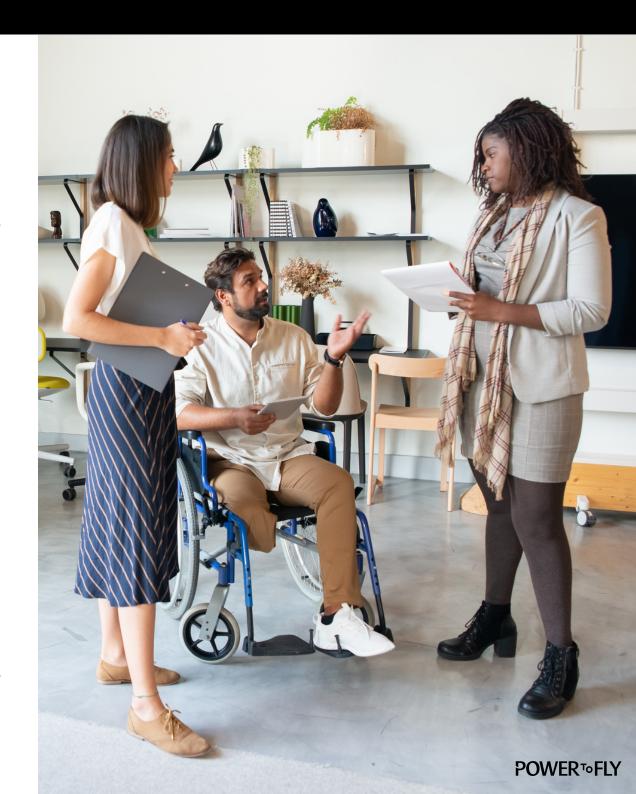
2 out of 3
2 out of 3 people with disabilities are of working age and want to work.
(estimate from American Association of People with Disabilities)

It's also important to consider that disabilities among children and adults may affect their entire family's socioeconomic stability, creating a domino effect that starts with the exclusion of PwD and expands with greater intensity in low-income households. This leads us to a pertinent question, especially when we consider the role of the workplace in this. How can we create training programs and accessible environments capable of including and retaining low-income PwD?

There is no easy answer in this case, as the solution involves a series of priorities that permeate a number of departments and stakeholders.

- Investing in attracting diverse talent, and explicitly sharing that people with disabilities are welcome to apply along with the accommodations available to them, is essential, so talent from these communities are able to see themselves working in your company.
- Internal campaigns to raise awareness about disability and how to combat ableism are essential to create a more inclusive work environment.
- Offering training or social programs focused on PwD inclusion can also be an effective way to contribute to social change while advancing your initiatives from an intersectional perspective. This type of measure may serve other intersections as well.
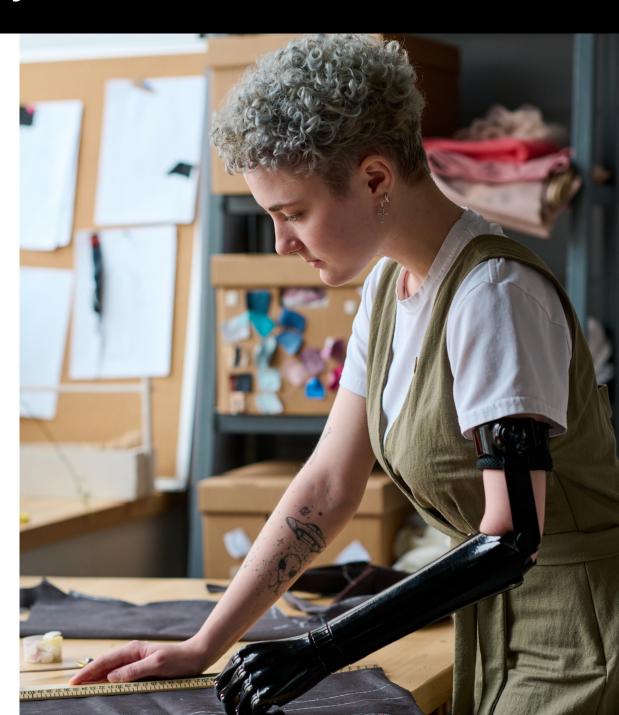

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LGBTQIA+ and disability

An estimated 3-5 million LGBTQIA+ people (out of 9-11 million in US) have disabilities. This number shows that this community is more likely than the general population to have a disability and face systemic challenges finding employment, community, and more. Research shows that out of more than 26,000 transgender people, 39% reported having a disability. And one in three lesbians and one in three bisexual women report having a disability in a population-based survey in Washington.

But the relationship between these two oppression markers cannot be fully understood through numbers. There are many additional barriers that make life difficult for LGBTQIA+ people with disabilities.

3-5 million

3-5 million LGBTQIA+ people (out of 9-11 million in the U.S.) have disabilities.
(Movement Advancement Project, Center for American Progress's Disability Justice Initiative and LGBT Research and Communications Project, National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR), National LGBTQ Task Force. LGBT People with Disabilities.)

Let's explore some of them to better understand how to combat them within the workplace.

1. Limited access to LGBT-inclusive and fully accessible services: Accessing affordable, accessible, and inclusive healthcare, community or government services, and access support services is challenging for LGBTIA+ people with disabilities.
2. Barriers to employment: People with disabilities report astonishingly high rates of employment discrimination and unemployment. This discrimination is compounded by other factors such as sexual orientation and gender identity, race and ethnicity, etc. As a result, LGBTIA+ people with disabilities face more difficulties to find and keep jobs and to access support services such as unemployment insurance, leaving them and their families economically vulnerable.
3. Invisibility within both communities: LGBTQIA+ people with disabilities often report that it is challenging to have their identities fully recognized. Inside the PwD community, their unique experiences as LGBTQIA+ people may not be recognized. And in LGBTQIA+ spaces, services, and facilities may not be inclusive or accessible, such as not having accessible buildings or restrooms, ASL interpretation and/or CART captioning for deaf or hard of hearing people, and more.
4. LGBTQIA+ people are more likely to experience mental health conditions: Mental health conditions may be considered a disability in the eyes of the law, medical professionals, and/or the individual living with that condition. Research finds that LGBTQIA+ people are more likely to have a mental health disorder in their lifetimes, including mood disorders such as depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders. A growing number of researches point to discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, as well as race, ethnicity, disability status, prejudice, barriers to competent health care, lower rates of health insurance, poverty, experiences of violence, and more to these health disparities.

After accessing this information, it's important to take time to think about what to do with it. How do these issues affect your team? How about your company? What can be done to improve inclusion policies aimed at PwD and LGBTQIA+ people? Creating a welcoming culture for people to disclose their disabilities at work or show up as their full selves might be the first step to creating a more inclusive and intersectional approach.

Race and disability

According to research, one-fifth of the 61 million individuals with disabilities in the US are people of color. Data suggest they are among the most marginalized, often living "below the bottom rung of the economic ladder," as a National Disability Institute report concluded.

The combination of racism and ableism results in profound and violent processes of exclusion. Black and African American disabled people are at greater risk for poorer health outcomes, including misdiagnosis and undertreatment. And the racial disparities in education, employment, and financial security grow deeper when disability is an added factor. According to ADA Compliance Division of the Department of Civil Rights, only 28.7% of working-age African Americans with disabilities are employed while 72% of working-age African Americans without disabilities are employed. Approximately 40% of African Americans with disabilities are living in poverty compared to 22% of African Americans without disabilities.

To build truly disability-inclusive workplaces, we must recognize and learn about the ways in which racism and ableism are deeply linked. As explained by Isabella Kres-Nash and lawyer and racial and disability advocate Talila Lewis:

Isabella Kres-Nash

"Racism and ableism are often thought of as parallel systems of oppression that work separately to perpetuate social hierarchy. Not only does this way of looking at the world ignore the experiences of people of color with disabilities, but it also fails to examine how race is pathologized in order to create racism. (…) Society treats people of color in specific ways to create barriers, and these poor conditions create disability. The concept of disability has been used to justify discrimination against other groups by attributing disability to them."

Talila Lewis

"Any attempt to rid the nation of racism without doing away with ableism yields practically nothing. The same is true in reverse. Disabled communities attempting to rid the nation of ableism find themselves having made very little headway because they are still practicing racism."
Race and Disability: A New Reckoning. Disability & Philanthropy Forum.

With this information in hand, it's clear that for an organization to implement PwD inclusion, it should be done from an intersectional approach. The same goes for diversity initiatives that do not tend to think of disability as an aspect of diversity. A non-intersectional view of the issue will be biased and disabled people of color will be stuck in the middle because their needs cannot be met through a single-issue lens.

Some good ways of supporting disabled people of color are:
- Creating policies that connect racial equity and disability.
- Discussing intersectionality in the workplace.
- Focus ongoing disability advocacy and inclusion work on race. And vice-versa.
- Make everything you do — programs, events, communications, grant applications, and more — accessible.
- Bring on individuals with disabilities as well as BIPOC as advisers and partners.

40%
of Black Americans with disabilities live in poverty, compared to 24% of White Americans with disabilities. (Disability & Philanthropy Forum. Race and Disability: A New Reckoning.)

36%
36% of Latino adults with disabilities don't have a high school degree, compared to 16% of White adults with disabilities (Disability & Philanthropy Forum. Race and Disability: A New Reckoning..)
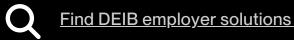
8 Key Takeaways

1. Encourage a welcoming culture for people to disclose their disabilities at work and show up as their full selves at work. This is the first step to starting a more intersectional approach in your organization.
2. Fulfill the law. This means improving access to good jobs, accessible housing, inclusive and competent medical care, and public spaces through enforcement of and education about existing laws such as the ADA and state nondiscrimination laws.
3. Create intersectional spaces and policies inside your company. Every person affected by more than one marker of oppression ends up living in an in-between place, unable to belong or fully participate in any of the communities with which they identify. By doing that, people will feel respected and valued.
4. Intersectionality is a key concept for every inclusion-based initiative. So discussing and sharing knowledge about this matter is an important way to educate and draw people's attention to it.
5. Use data and stories to illustrate the impact of these intersections on people's life and elicit empathy.
6. When creating events or meetings, following the DEIB calendar, seek to explore intersectional possibilities, like inviting an LGBTQIA+ person with a disability to speak during Pride Month for example.
7. Stimulate discussion about intersectionality within the ERGs in your company. This can be an excellent chance to connect different ERGs.
8. Reassess hiring and retention policies, implementing a more intersectional approach. This'll help your company achieve its full potential for innovation and productivity through a more welcoming and diverse work environment.
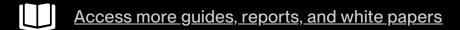
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