

# Is Your Company Truly Diverse?

*By Nadine O. Vogel*



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The dictionary defines diversity as “the state or fact of being diverse, difference, or unlikeness”. Yes, yes, you say, we all know that. I agree. Most folks understand the definition of diversity. I also believe, though, that many fail to truly comprehend the underlying concept of diversity, to sincerely accept and respect those differences—especially when it comes to people with disabilities.

Though the Americans with Disabilities Act celebrates its 20th anniversary this year, the unemployment rate of people with disabilities is still startlingly high. According to the federal Current Population Survey (CPS) in December 2009, the employment-population ratio for persons with a disability (non-institutionalized civilians age 16 and older) was 18.6 percent, compared with 63.3 percent for persons with no disability.

## The World's Largest Minority

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This inequity becomes even more significant when you realize how many people are included in this group. It's the largest minority group in the world. There are more Americans with disabilities than there are Canadians, with or without disabilities. Twenty-three million parents have one or more children with special needs under age 16. It's estimated that nearly 20 percent of the U.S. adult population has a disability, and that community is growing. As our baby boomer population ages and more veterans return from war, the number of people with disabilities is expected to double in the next 20 years.

Despite the large and increasing numbers of people with disabilities, for some reason, they are often omitted from the diversity discussion. It's strange, since they fit the definition of diversity in many ways. How? I address this issue in my new book, *Dive In, Springboard into the Profitability, Productivity, and Potential of the Special Needs Workforce*:

First of all, people with disabilities come from all walks of life. Advocates are fond of saying that the disability community is the “only equal opportunity minority”—the only one where anyone can join at anytime. It's also the only minority that is inclusive of people of every race, creed, culture, and gender.

In addition, individuals with disabilities have great diversity of experience, dealing with situations that “typical” people never face. Most of us, when faced with a flight of stairs, don't have to wonder how we're getting to the top. We don't have to wonder, when presented with a video, how we're going to know what's being shown, or said, on screen. People with disabilities often have unique experiences and creative solutions that they can bring to your company table, as do the parents of children with special needs, who are used to troubleshooting, and older workers, who have years of experience under their belts.

Wait, we're not done yet. There's also diversity within disability. There are the obvious differences: some people are blind, some people are deaf, and so on. Then there's the not-so-obvious diversity within even specific disabilities. For example, people lose their sight at all different ages, from birth to old age. That not only changes their experience of the world, but also changes the means they use to experience it. People who become blind at a younger age might learn and use Braille (as well as technological advances like screen readers), whereas people who lose their vision later often learn just enough Braille to get by, or never use it all.

There's more. Let's continue to use the example of people with vision impairment. Some may see the world as through a filmy cloth, others may have "holes" in their field of vision, and yet others may only be able to sense light and dark. The fact that they experience the world in such obviously different ways may help us (and our companies) to understand that everyone sees the world through different lenses. These diverse life experiences can contribute to diversity of thought, which can lead to innovation, but only through inclusion.

In my book, I include parents of special needs children in what I call "the special needs workforce". As a parent of two daughters with special needs, I know that we also have to think "out of the box" in order to get what we need for ourselves or our children. Whether it's healthcare or daycare, accommodations for work or for school, or transportation dilemmas, we often have to come up with creative solutions to everyday situations.

## The Diversity-Inclusion-Innovation Equation

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As professionals know, diversity can breed innovation. People with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and ways of thinking can positively change your products, your services, even your company. People with disabilities have a well-deserved reputation (backed up by research) for innovation. Accustomed to adapting to a variety of situations, they are often quick to troubleshoot, formulate new ideas, and adopt cutting-edge solutions. Shelley Kaplan, Director of the Southeast Disability Business Technical Assistance Center (DBTAC), when interviewed for *Dive In*, gave the following illustration. "We had a technical assistance specialist who answered our hotline. He had no functional use of his extremities. To answer the phone, he rigged up a switch on his power chair. When he moved it with his finger, it would lift the phone off the receiver, automatically place the call in hands-free mode, and he could answer it. It was a low-cost and one-of-a-kind accommodation."

People with disabilities, like anyone, will only risk being innovative if they feel included, welcomed, and comfortable. Let's say your company hires a young man with a disability, but that your company culture prevents him from feeling included. He may turn out to be a good employee, but is he going to come to you with his great new ideas? Probably not.

How do you know if your company is truly inclusive of people with disabilities? Ask yourself the following questions:

- ◆ When you provide diversity training, do you include people with disabilities in the discussion? Do you provide training about disability-specific topics like etiquette and awareness?
- ◆ Do you actively recruit employees with disabilities?
- ◆ Do you support you employees with disabilities? How? Besides reasonable accommodations (which are required by law), do you provide other resources, like work-life groups or benefits counseling? What about parents of children with special needs? Are they included and supported?

## Three Steps toward Inclusion

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If you answered “no” or even “I’m not sure…” to any of the above questions, I’d like to offer three basic steps that can help lead you company toward true diversity.

### 1. Educate

Exclusion is often based on misunderstanding and or fear. By providing customized trainings that suit your corporate culture, you can teach people the best ways to handle common situations. You can provide disability-friendly language that makes everyone feel comfortable. You can allow your employees the chance to ask questions in a safe environment, and dispel many of the myths that surround disability. Who should you train?

- ◆ People managers: Even though most of these folks are wonderfully skilled at managing people many have little or no experience with disability in the workplace.
- ◆ Front-line staff: You need to ensure that all of your employees who deal with the public respond to every situation appropriately. They’re indirectly marketing your company to both customers and potential new hires.
- ◆ Recruiters: A well-intentioned but inappropriate remark from a recruiter can quickly end a relationship with a great potential candidate.
- ◆ Corporate executives: They set the stage for your corporate culture.
- ◆ Human Resources personnel: If an issue arises, your employees will go to Human Resources. Enough said.
- ◆ Everyone else: You never know when someone is going to need this information. Prepare and empower your employees, both with and without disabilities.

### 2. Recruit

When you actively recruit people with disabilities and parent’s of children with special needs, you’ll not only meet some wonderful potential employees, you’ll also show all recruits that you value diversity and support difference. But how to reach this community?

- ◆ Partner with disability organizations: Your company may already have some partnerships with disability-related non-profits. Let them know you’re interested, not only in supporting them through fund-raising, but in supporting the disability community through employment.
- ◆ Provide mentoring and internship opportunities: These opportunities can help you to see beyond disability to the great applicant with the skills you need
- ◆ Recruit from within. It’s estimated that half of all Americans know someone with a disability. Let your employees know that you’re embracing disability as part of diversity.

- ◆ Don't forget college grads: Make sure that your recruiters connect with university and college Disability Student Service Centers, and institutions tailored to meet the needs of student with disabilities.

### **3. Support**

Valued and supported employees are engaged employees. How best to support “the special needs workforce”?

- ◆ Accommodate: Many employers fear that employees with disabilities will need costly accommodations. In reality, a 2006 survey conducted by the Job Accommodation Network (JAN), reported that 46 percent of the employers surveyed said the accommodations needed by employees and job applicants with disabilities cost absolutely nothing.
- ◆ Create a Reasonable Accommodation Committee (RAC): A RAC takes the onus off local managers, and ensures a timely response for accommodation requests.
- ◆ Provide additional support: Work Life groups, employee resources, celebrations of disability culture – all of these extras can help to show your employees that when you say “inclusion” you mean business.

## **True Diversity is Good Business**

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This overlooked community, “the special needs workforce”, has great potential for your business. By moving beyond tolerance to understanding, by supporting differences, and by celebrating the many dimensions of diversity, you can reap the immeasurable benefits offered by the diverse community of people with disabilities and parents with special needs. This enormous, untapped talent pool is ready and willing to work—for companies who truly embrace diversity.

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