Approximately 25 percent of Americans have some form of disability, making them the largest minority group in the United States. And yet many disabilities – including cognitive and mental health challenges – are hidden. According to one estimate, up to 76 percent of workers cover their disability, often due to fear and stigma. When employees can’t be transparent about their unique identities, their engagement and productivity decline and they report feeling nervous, anxious and isolated.
On the contrary, Accenture research finds that “employees who do disclose their disability at work are 30 percent more engaged — in terms of career satisfaction and aspirations, confidence, and a sense of belonging—than those who don’t.” For these reasons, businesses must commit to creating more disability-inclusive cultures.

Further research shows that disability inclusion can help companies gain access to new talent pools and reap rewards related to innovation and profitability, yet only 31 percent of people with disabilities in the U.S. are employed compared to 75 percent of non-disabled people.

Solutions for workplace disability inclusion should start in the C-suite and cascade throughout the organization. Senior executives can start by disclosing their own disabilities, normalizing vulnerability, and modeling transparency. Managers can provide employees with signals of support, getting to know their employees better, discussing accommodations, and demonstrating that they are allies for disability by actively participating in employee resource groups for those who are disabled.

Leading companies are working to create more equitable pathways at work, beginning with recruitment. Organizations can remove interviewing barriers in a variety of ways, such as: allowing job candidates to apply via a tailored email and skip the first-round phone screening; giving candidates a practice interview; or utilizing exercises designed to test teamwork and technical skills in place of a standard interview.

A new report from the Center for Women and Business at Bentley University highlights further inclusion strategies, such as expanding the scope of accommodations to improve productivity, expanding mental health benefits (including onsite mental health support), and offering disability inclusion training to help all employees serve as better advocates for disabled coworkers.

The same report identities unique hiring strategies that such firms as Fidelity, Biogen, Microsoft, and others have adopted. These include recruitment strategies aimed specifically at neurodiverse candidates, internships, and mentoring. At SAP, team members across the company — including the diversity and inclusion officer and chief medical officer — meet regularly to innovate around mental health initiatives.

Still other companies, including Genentech, Starbucks, Brown Brothers Harriman, and Pinterest, include virtual forums where employees from all levels of the company can share their mental health challenges. They have also embedded mental health awareness into organizational processes, including onboarding.

A recent survey found that 56% of accommodations for disabilities cost absolutely nothing and that little more than a third require only a one-time cost. Of those accommodations that do have a one-time cost, the median expenditure is about $500. For example, a business can purchase a foot mouse, speech to text software, and a foot mat to support a worker limited in using their hands for a few hundred dollars.

Organizations like The American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) and Disability:IN can provide vital knowledge to support employers’ in their mission to forge supportive and effective workplaces for those with disabilities. It’s also essential to include employees with disabilities in planning and implementation of any inclusion initiative. Disability activist Andrew Pulrang notes, “While there are many specific improvements disabled people need, what we need most is agency and a voice.”
Finally, businesses should tap the energy and passion of younger generations of employees. The New York Times reports that younger generations have grown up "knowing the A.D.A. (Americans with Disabilities Act) as a birthright." As a result, they are a galvanizing force behind changing attitudes and behaviors. These newer members of the workforce are crucial to sustainable forward momentum for disability inclusion.

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