

Companies are leaving neurodiversity out of their DEI conversations—and that’s a mistake

Only 4% of companies that say they value diversity consider disabilities. Even fewer include learning and thinking differences.

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Words and conversations matter, particularly when it comes to tough issues. So *not* having a conversation, or leaving important components out of one, also matters, especially around topics like inclusion.

As companies work to build or improve their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs, it has been noted that people with disabilities have not been included in these critical diversity conversations. According to [Return On Disability Group](#), although 90% of companies claim to prioritize diversity, only 4% consider disability in those initiatives. If these companies are truly looking to embrace diversity and break down bias, people with disabilities need to be taken into consideration.

In order to have truly holistic conversations around DEI, companies also have to consider invisible disabilities. It falls on all of us—and every business leader—to better understand and talk about the one in five people that are navigating life with a “learning or thinking difference.” If you’ve never heard of a “learning and thinking difference” before, you are not alone. Many aren’t even aware of what learning and thinking differences are.

Invisible disabilities

Learning and thinking differences are lifelong, brain-based behaviors that can affect a person’s reading, writing, math, organization and focus. In essence, a learning and thinking difference is a variation from what is accepted as the norm—an invisible disability, per say. These differences can be anything from ADHD, dyslexia, dyscalculia, and more. They’re often cited as neurodiversities.



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These differences affect many. One in every five people in the U.S. have learning and thinking difference. That means you are likely working with someone who has a learning and thinking difference whether you’re aware of it or not.

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While the numbers are staggering, the data around this lack of awareness is even more concerning. Data from the National Center for Learning Disabilities shows that approximately 51% of people think that learning and thinking differences are the result of laziness, and many don’t believe they even exist. Another misperception around learning and thinking differences is that they can be fixed—whether it be through medication or additional educational support or by children growing out of it. In fact, close

to half of all parents in the U.S. (48%) incorrectly believe that kids grow out of learning and thinking differences.

This lack of awareness has profound ramifications for our society. School dropout rates are higher: those with learning and thinking differences dropout of high school at three times the rate of their neurotypical classmates. Lower wages, higher unemployment rates, homelessness, and jail are all increased possibilities when a person with learning and thinking differences isn't set up to thrive.

In fact, without the necessary support, unemployment is two to three times more likely, and twice as many end up in poverty. This impacts more than just the individuals and their families—it comes at a cost of \$500 billion to our society.

Awareness, understanding, and conversations around learning and thinking differences, even within the context of disabilities, can move the needle for these 70 million people who live with them. Better recognition can lead to better work and learning spaces, and environments where *all* can thrive.

What companies can do

Looking at workspaces more deeply, it's not enough for companies to say they welcome neurodiversity or people with disabilities. There needs to be more onus on business leaders to be transparent on how their hiring process—from application to interviews—in terms of how they create accessible facilities, and how they support and empower their employees everyday.

As companies begin to return to the office and emerge from the pandemic, the opportunity is now to optimize their offices and facilities for those with learning and thinking differences. Business leaders at this time should be reminding employees what their accommodation policies are, and in turn, asking employees what they need. Time away from the office has given people clarity on what they need to be productive, and those accommodations should be taken into consideration.

While prior to the pandemic, a small percentage of the workforce disclosed their disabilities to their employers, as we all return to working out of our offices, there could be an increase in employees disclosing disabilities. This increase in disclosures will mean that any return to the office program will also require accommodation and support of these employees.

Another realization coming out of the pandemic was that many offices did not provide flexibility for employees to work at their best. These choices are imperative for neurodiversity. Employees, especially those with learning and thinking differences who have trouble focusing, for example, are best served with more options for work spaces, like common and quiet areas.

And beyond their office spaces, companies need to be mindful of their marketing and communications practices. Whether in-store or online, people with learning and thinking differences need to be considered – from research and design to development and implementation. The lack of accessibility in our society has become normalized, but again, the time is now for every business leader and marketer to change that. Content on digital platforms should be inclusive, accessible, and useful for everyone, including the 70 million people with invisible differences.

For example, for someone with a learning and thinking difference, shopping online or interacting on social media could be daunting, even exhausting. Whether it's too many pages or menu options, or ads that interfere while viewing content digitally, there is an opportunity to better optimize marketing and communications for the one in five. Something as simple as making your typeface clear and distinguishable—literally “minding your p's and q's”—can shift the experience for those with learning and thinking differences, and in turn affect the perception of your brand.

Immediate actions to take right now involve starting conversations with the people in your organization—particularly with those who have requested accommodations. Get an understanding of what they need. Then go the extra step beyond compliance measures with efforts like adding closed captioning on your Zoom calls, providing pre-read materials, or providing breaks for employees who may have ADHD and trouble focusing, for example. These steps will go a long way beyond those with neurodiversities and benefit everyone.

People's neurological differences are a part of our humanity, as much as differences in shape, size, height, or skin color are. The fact is, one in five people are likely working with us in the workforce today so a better understanding of what they are facing and accommodations would improve their lives immensely. It's time for your organization to help build more inclusive environments for those with learning and thinking differences. Be a conversation starter.

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