

Perceived Inclusion of Differently Abled Employees

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By Prof Apurva Sanaria

Disability inclusion is increasingly becoming popular among a variety of organizations. Research has shown that disability inclusion in the workplace can result in higher organizational commitment of employees as well as competitive advantage for the organization. However, companies trying to launch disability inclusion initiatives have been observed to lack sensitivity to some key aspects of this phenomenon.

Most organizations are focusing on increasing diversity, a clearly measurable and publicly presentable metrics. Many of these organizations are unable to successfully implement initiatives to enhance perceived inclusion. Perceived inclusion is an employee's feeling of being included and accepted in the workplace. Enhanced diversity, in the absence of perceived inclusion, can create more problems than it solves.

To address this lacuna, we encourage organizations to understand the concepts of disability identity ableism. These aspects influence the perceived inclusion of a differently abled employee within an organization.

Disability identity refers to the unique work identity developed by the differently abled employees in workplace. The disability identity is influenced by four different categories of factors – intra-individual factors, inter-personal factors, organizational factors and extra-organizational factors.

Intraindividual factors include the personal experiences of the differently abled employees as well as their perceptions about their own abilities in the context of the workplace. Interpersonal factors include the attitudes of managers and colleagues towards differently abled employee. Organizational factors include compatibility of job to employee's abilities and facilities provided to enhance the accessibility of job resources for the differently abled employee. Extra-organizational factors include the cultural stereotypes faced by the differently abled employees outside the organization, the medical and legal aspects supporting the differently abled employee.

If these employees gain positive inputs from these four factors, they would tend to have higher self-confidence and better wellbeing, resulting in better perceived inclusion and enhanced performance in the workplace. A deficit in these factors could lead to detrimental physical as well as mental wellbeing. This could undermine the employee's performance as well as perceived inclusion in workplace.

refers to the ideas, practices, institutions and social relations that operate with the presumption of able-bodiedness within an organization. Organizations functioning with high ableism tend to discriminate or disregard the needs of differently abled employees. This would manifest in negative interpersonal experiences as well as lack of organizational facilities of differently abled employees. Also, higher ableism in organizations can encourage stereotyping of differently abled employees.

Such stereotyping of differently abled employees can negatively impact their performance. This would be detrimental for developing a positive disability identity and perceived inclusion. This would tend to undermine the organizational commitment as well as the work performance of the employee.

Therefore, while enhancing diversity in organizations, we need to prioritize enabling a positive disability identity and enhancing the perceived inclusion of differently abled employees. Organizations can take many steps to ensure this.

Organizations can conduct sensitivity training for all employees to avoid assumptions and beliefs leading to higher ableism in the workplace. One of the most impactful aspects for disability identity and perceived inclusion is the attitude of supervisor and colleagues. Organizations need to be cognizant of the attitudes of the immediate supervisor and teammates towards differently abled employees, before deciding their placement in specific teams.

Further, organizations can ensure that the skills and abilities required for the specific job are matched with the abilities of the differently abled employee. Also, appropriate facilities and additional resources should be provided to the differently abled employees for enabling adequate work performance.

The intra-individual factors and extra-organizational factors are often relatively difficult for organizations. To address these aspects, organizations can take some actions. Beyond the organizational boundaries, the disability identity is also influenced by cultural stereotypes and norms, as well as the medical and legal provisions enabling the employment of a differently abled employee. These are expected to influence the policies of the organizations, which in turn would influence the perceived inclusion of the employee in workplace.

Therefore, organizations should align their internal policies and processes with the medical and legal provisions, while avoiding any negative influence of the cultural stereotypes and norms. Organizations can also try boosting the confidence of differently abled employees, so that they can interpret their experience within the organization as well as outside the organizational boundaries in more positive manner. This can be aided by providing

mentoring, coaching, and training inputs, including emotional intelligence, cognitive restructuring, stress management, and psychological detachment. These would help differently abled employees to enhance their mental wellbeing and enhance their sense of perceived inclusion.

The combined focus of organizations on increasing diversity as well as enhancing perceived inclusion of differently abled employees would lead to many positive outcomes. The employees would benefit from improved wellbeing and better perceived inclusion. The organizations stand to gain from enhanced performance of employees.

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