

# Disability in the new workplace: What companies need to know and do

## More than one in four adults in the United States is disabled,

and the numbers are growing as we age and as we deal with the long-term effects of Covid-19, racism, and climate change. Disability and its likelihood are a significant part of our community and workplaces. So are bias and systemic discrimination against disabled people (ableism). We surveyed almost 3,000 people across the globe and 1,964 people (70%) identified with at least one or more disabilities; we analyzed the data, read some of the many works on disability justice, and interviewed five disability activists for more insights as a follow up to our [initial report](#) on how Covid has impacted harm in our workplaces. We found ableism rooted in distrust and causing real harm in workplaces.

Solving problems for disabled people has many benefits. First, the solutions often help all of us. The curb-cut effect is a real-life example. In the early 1970s, a Berkeley activist poured concrete to make a small ramp from the curb to the street for better wheelchair access. As the ramps became more broadly adopted, many people appreciated, including parents with strollers, travelers with rolling luggage, shoppers with carts, workers with trolleys, and skateboarders and rollerbladers. Bringing disabled people into our workforce is an obvious benefit, too, that unfortunately still needs to be pointed out. Inclusion of disabled people improves corporate performance; an Accenture study showed companies that are inclusive of disabled workers had 28% higher revenue, double the net income, and 30% higher profit margins.<sup>1</sup> Yet disabled people are still twice as likely to be

**It wasn't a me problem, it was the system that was set up against people like myself.**

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unemployed as non-disabled people, with an unemployment rate of 9.7% compared to 4.5%.<sup>2</sup>

Distrust was one of the biggest themes that surfaced. Our society doesn't trust disabled people to know what they need, to have a clear understanding of their capacity, and to know the ways their disability impacts their everyday lives. As Haben Girma stated, "Nearly every disabled person has been told at one time or another, 'you're faking it.'"

One result of this distrust is accessibility gate-keeping: Companies usually force workers to disclose their disabilities and then provide "proof" to access accommodations and medical or disability leave. Managers also exhibited ableism in the form of increased micromanagement and surveillance of disabled people. Since Covid-19, expectations of longer work hours and more availability affected most workers, but impacted disabled people even more, and especially Asian, Black, Latinx, and multiracial disabled people, and women and/or nonbinary disabled people.<sup>3</sup> We learned of many disabled people quitting their jobs since the pandemic because of these negative experiences. Many opted to take on freelance work even though these jobs often paid less and offered less employment security and medical coverage or none at all.

In addition to distrust, we found disabled people were more likely to experience increased harassment and hostility since Covid-19 than non-disabled people, and women and nonbinary disabled people were even more likely. We found that harassment

Some of the things that I find to be extremely frustrating about the discourse on returning to in-person work are the failures to account for the ways that Black and Brown disabled folks have a whole different set of challenges that we navigate. As people talk about compelling return to the office, whatever that means, questions arise for me about the amount of time that we just forfeit as a result. I reflect on the extent to which we, as disabled workers of color, are much more likely to live further away from the place we are commuting to than white non-disabled folks in our organizations, who are more likely to be part of the leadership structure trying to bring people back into the office. I'm also thinking about people who work irregular schedules or don't know their schedule in advance and how absolutely difficult and challenging that is in normal circumstances, let alone in a pandemic. And the extent to which disabled workers and workers of color who are overrepresented in those kinds of sectors and work impossibly long and irregular hours face real adverse health effects as a consequence and face real barriers to being able to meet their own needs—and as a consequence, experience higher rates of burnout, depletion and other adverse outcomes.

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of disabled people often included statements of distrust, especially questioning the credibility of disabled coworkers around their level of disability and need for accommodations. It often came up in the form of challenging whether they were able to do more of a work activity—ranging from flying on a plane to commuting to work to walking without a wheelchair—because they had shown an ability to do the activity at some point at some level once.

This systemic ableism and the stigmatization of disabled people makes it harder for disabled people to trust their coworkers and companies. It is a significant factor that prevents many disabled people from disclosing their disabilities with others, especially coworkers, managers, and HR. There's a substantial differential between the number of disabled people in the population and the number of disabled people actually in the workforce. A number of respondents shared having to go out of their way, take on exhausting, difficult tasks that push their body past its limit in order to mask their disability and be taken seriously at work.

This lack of trust also means that while disabled people are more likely to have experienced harassment, they are unlikely to report it. Only half as many disabled people reported harassment compared to the number of disabled people who experienced it. One third of disabled people (33%) shared that they did not have company support to call out harm or harassment at work in the first place.

**Some people do not self-identify as disabled; even though 70% of survey takers said they had one or more specific disabilities, only 9% self-identified as disabled. 16% of survey takers did not answer one or more of the three survey questions about disabilities.**

**And, as Haben Girma told us, “Many of those who are in the workforce feel terrified of employment discrimination, and are often hiding their needs for fear of discrimination.”**

## **We share a list of solutions we encourage companies, leaders, and managers to adopt. Core to those solutions are:**

Rebuilding culture. Fairness requires dismantling ableism and rebuilding trust. Dispelling societal myths and false assumptions is important. So is education on the systemic nature of ableism and solutions that are needed. Companies, managers, and HR teams need to trust disabled people and earn the trust of disabled people, so in turn disabled people can trust companies. Representation is key to fairness and dismantling ableism.

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Solutions and accommodations should be personalized and flexible to empower workers to choose what works best for them. There is no one-size-fits-all or global blanket solution.

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Accommodate all needs and accessibility as a default. Remove the gates that prevent all workers from getting what they need to do their work most effectively.

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Communicate better. Manage better with fewer meetings and more open information sharing. Again, more flexibility and individual level solutions are important.

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### **Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> Accenture, "[Getting to Equal: The Disability Inclusion Advantage.](#)"

<sup>2</sup> For the working age population defined as 16 to 64 years of age in September 2021. Bureau of Labor Statistics, current population survey, "Disability Employment Statistics."

<sup>3</sup> We used the broad category of "multiracial," because we did not have enough respondents to analyze work experiences at the granular level of specific multiracial groups, such as Asian Black, Black Indigenous, or Black Latinx people. Read Language and Methodology Updated.