



Enabling Change

Getting to Equal 2020: Disability Inclusion

Meenakshi (Meena) Das remembers what it was like to grow up with a severe stutter. Teachers silenced her throughout much of her education; in high school, she was excluded from the debating society because she took too long to speak.

In college, however, the organization Disability:IN helped Meena secure a rewarding internship at a large telecommunications company. Subsequently, she interned with Microsoft. Now she is earning a master's degree at Auburn University in Alabama; after graduation, she will rejoin Microsoft as a software engineer.

Meena is delighted to be returning to Microsoft, in part because she is keenly aware of its purposefully inclusive culture. Citing just one example from her days as an intern, she says: “My manager and mentor both made it really clear to everyone that I would be using the chat function on Teams meetings, so they should pay attention to the chat stream.” Their actions enabled Meena to contribute easily to her team—and enabled the team to benefit from her input.

Introduction

Now that companies are more committed than ever to strengthening inclusion and diversity and have a robust [business case](#) for doing so, leaders need to look beyond the obvious fixes to see what really matters to employees and prospective talent.

We uncovered eight such factors through our latest Getting to Equal research which draws on a global survey of companies across industries of almost 6,000 employees with disabilities, 1,748 executives (of whom 675 have disabilities) and 50 video interviews. It highlighted a perception gap between what leaders think is happening and what employees with disabilities think is the reality—a disconnect that underscores a lack of openness on both sides. And we calculated the impact of improving workplace culture on the confidence and engagement levels of persons with disabilities and on companies' potential for growth.

This report—part of the ongoing [Getting to Equal](#) series—explores the powerful culture of equality that results when all of these eight factors are brought to bear in an organization. (As Meena's experience attests, big steps toward inclusion need not be expensive.)

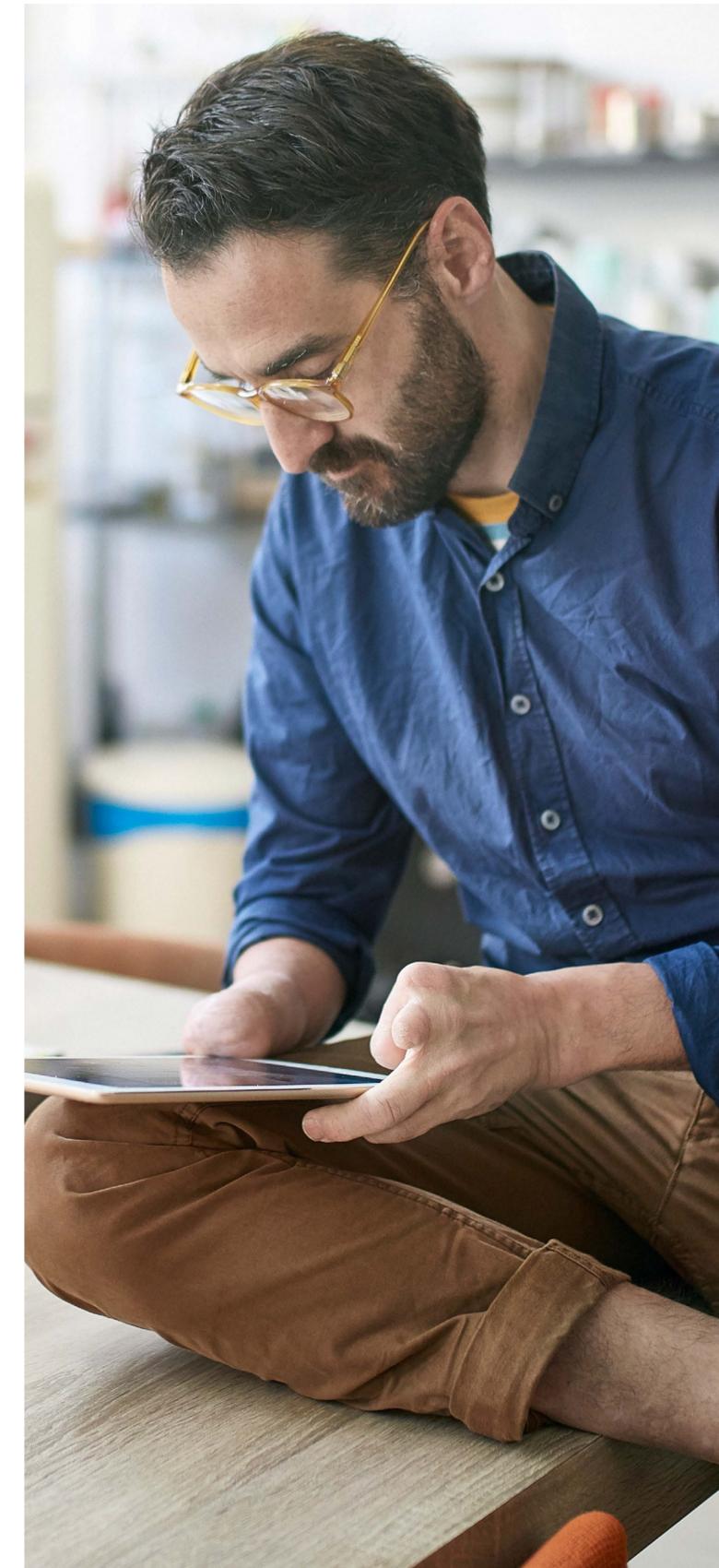
Our findings further indicate that progress toward that goal correlates with [greater advancement](#) potential for all employees and with an organization's ability to [innovate](#) and accelerate growth.

Among the companies in our study, the organizations most focused on disability engagement are growing sales **2.9x** faster and profits **4.1x** faster than their peers.

The Eight Factors

Workplace factors
that unlock inclusivity

- 01 **Clear role models**
- 02 **Employee resource groups**
- 03 **Parental leave**
- 04 **Fair and transparent pay**
- 05 **Training**
- 06 **Flexible working options**
- 07 **Freedom to innovate**
- 08 **Mental well-being policies**



Persons with disabilities
are a large, untapped
source of talent.



Persons with disabilities represent about 15% of the world's population. But their participation in the workforce is disproportionately low. Worldwide, estimates hold that up to 80% are not employed.¹

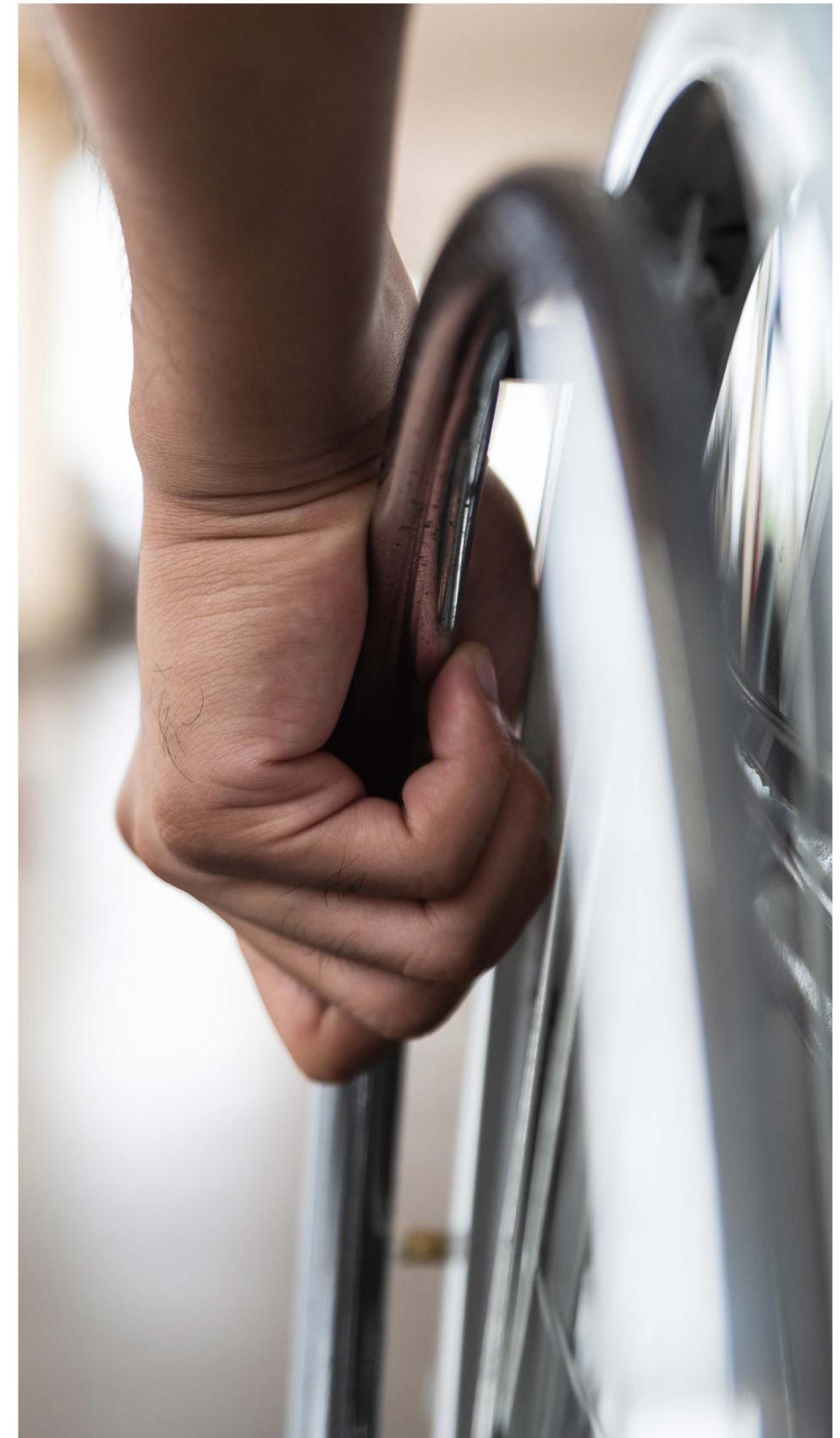
In higher-income countries, the employment rate of persons with disabilities is estimated at 44%; in lower-income countries, it falls to as low as 10-20%.²

In the US, for example, 31% are employed, compared with 75% of their peers,³ while in the UK, roughly half of persons with disabilities were in employment (53.2%) in 2019 compared with about four out of five nondisabled people (81.8%).⁴ In China, just 6.5% of persons with disabilities are estimated to be employed; the number rises to 25% in India.⁵

This low representation in the workforce is not for lack of desire, but of opportunity. A YouGov poll in 2019, for instance, found that more than 1 million people

living with a disability in the UK were able and willing to work but unable to find employment.⁶

And COVID-19 has exacerbated this employment gap. While the pandemic has shown us that remote working and reasonable accommodations at scale are possible, that hasn't been the case for persons with disabilities whose economic and employment prospects have worsened. Accenture's COVID-19 Impact survey, which included almost 2,000 persons with disabilities in seven countries, found that the proportion of employees with disabilities confident in their job/income security fell from 73% to 40% in the six months prior to August 2020.⁷





I think employers are missing a massive trick. There are some seriously talented individuals who are just consigned to the scrapheap because employers don't make necessary adaptations. They are missing out on these talents and these incredible people who can provide an amazing service for customers.



Employee with a disability, UK, age 53

How we define disability

Our survey categorized respondents as persons with disabilities if they reported that they have difficulty performing day-to-day activities (e.g., walking, communicating, hearing, seeing even if wearing glasses) because of a mental, intellectual, sensory or physical health condition that has lasted, or is expected to last, at least six months.

Since 80% of disabilities are acquired between the ages of 18 and 64, it's crucial to remember that anyone could become a person with a disability at any time; there is no "us" and "them."⁸

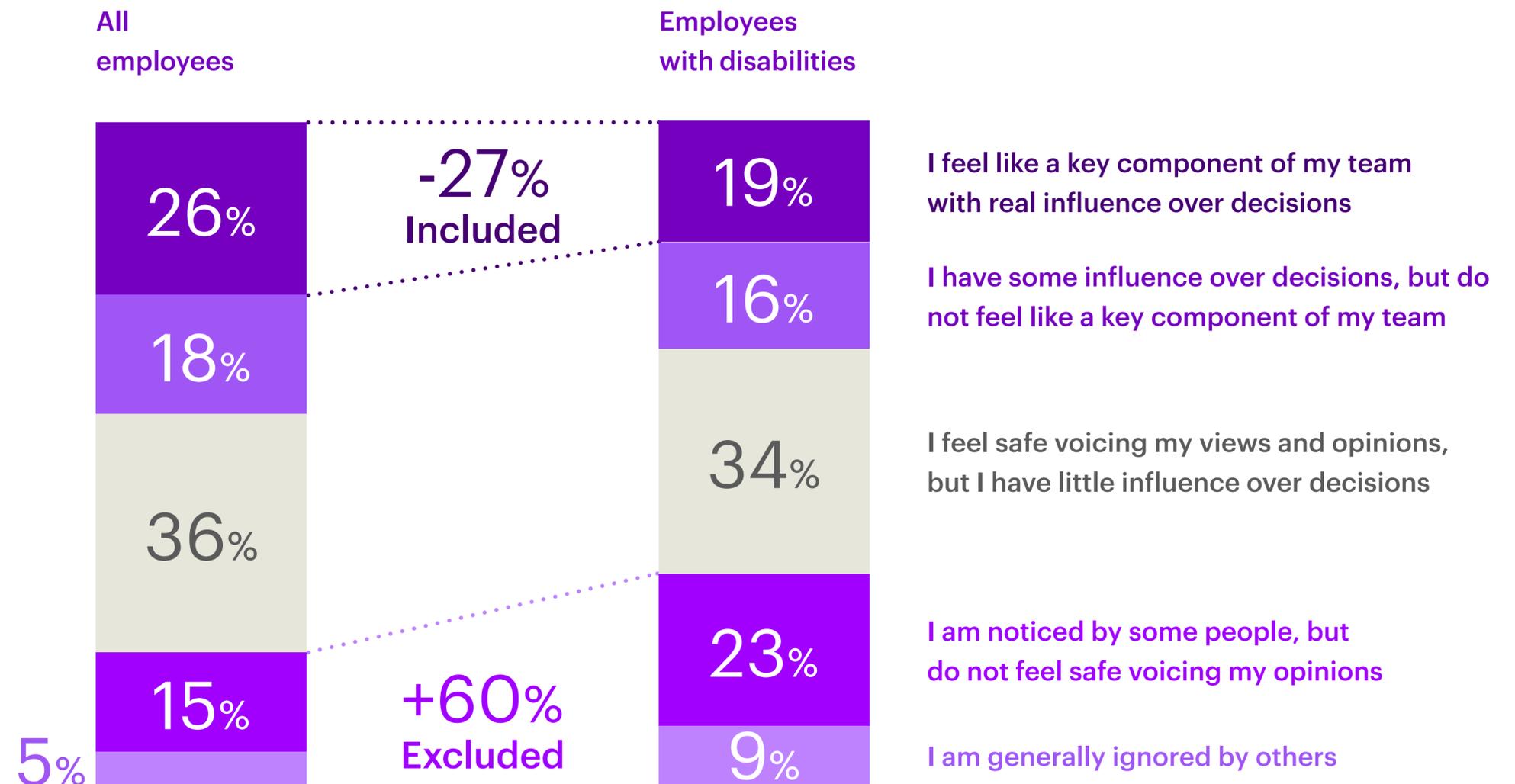


Even if companies have hired persons with disabilities, many aren't nurturing their talents or helping them reach their potential.

Our research shows that while persons with disabilities are even more aspirational than their peers, they are **1.6x (60%) more likely to feel excluded in the workplace.**

Indeed, their sense of feeling included and being a key member of their team with real influence over decisions is **27%** lower than that of their peers.

Which of the following statements best describes how you feel in your team/organization?



Source: Accenture, 2020; Total employees N=30,282, Employees with disabilities N=5,870

Persons with disabilities are staying quiet at work. And so are their bosses.

In many workplaces across the globe, employees don't perceive organizational support for persons with disabilities, so they don't open up about their own needs. As reasons for staying silent, they cite a lack of trust, the fact that some disabilities are invisible and therefore easy to ignore or hide, and a wish to not be made to feel different.

Even leaders with disabilities aren't always transparent, denying employees the role models who could inspire and mentor them.

In fact, this survey found that the majority of employees (76%) and leaders (80%) with a disability are not fully transparent about it.

Our analysis of public statements shows that the number of companies speaking openly about creating environments in which persons with disabilities can thrive has doubled since 2015.⁹ However, this still represents fewer than 1 in 20 of the companies we analyzed—an indication that improving the workplace for employees with disabilities remains a challenge for most.



Workplaces suffer from a lack of transparency and trust

How important are the following factors in helping you to thrive in the workplace?

77%

Having the freedom to be the same person at work as I am at home

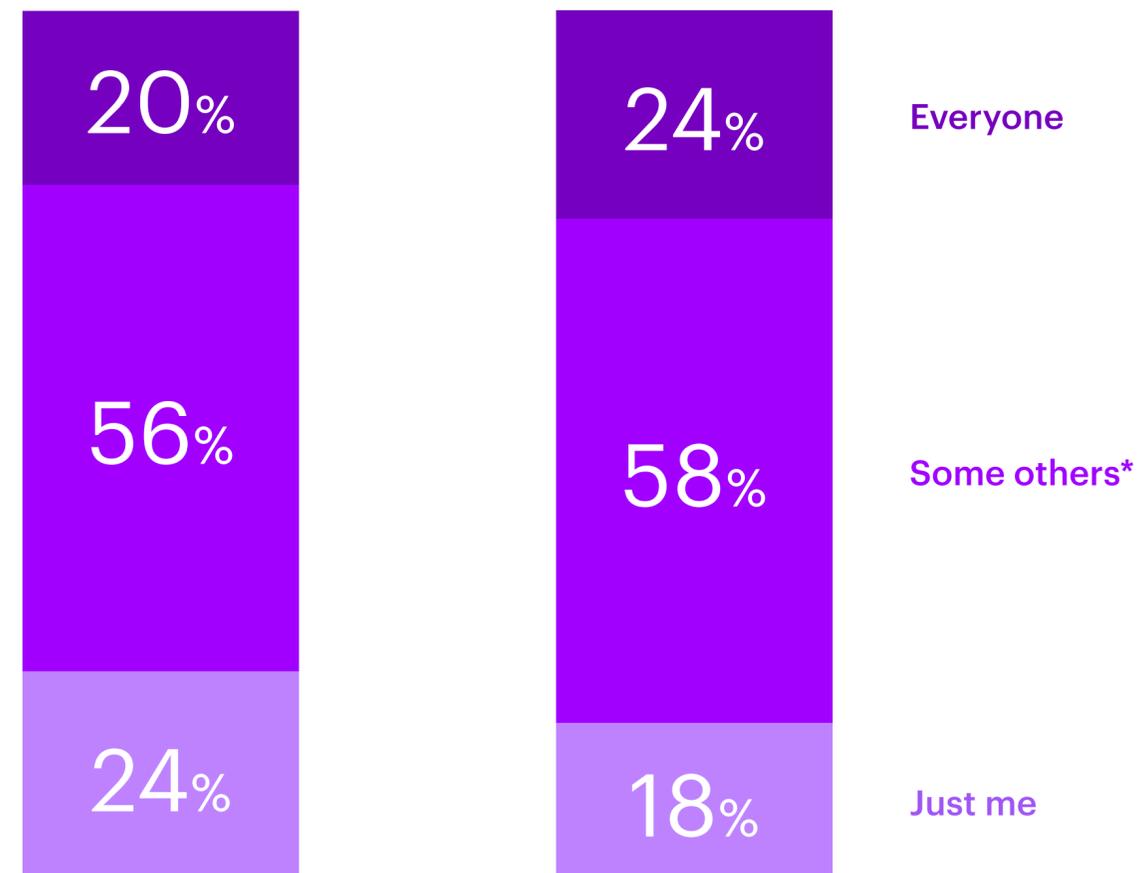
71%

Seeing people like me in senior leadership positions

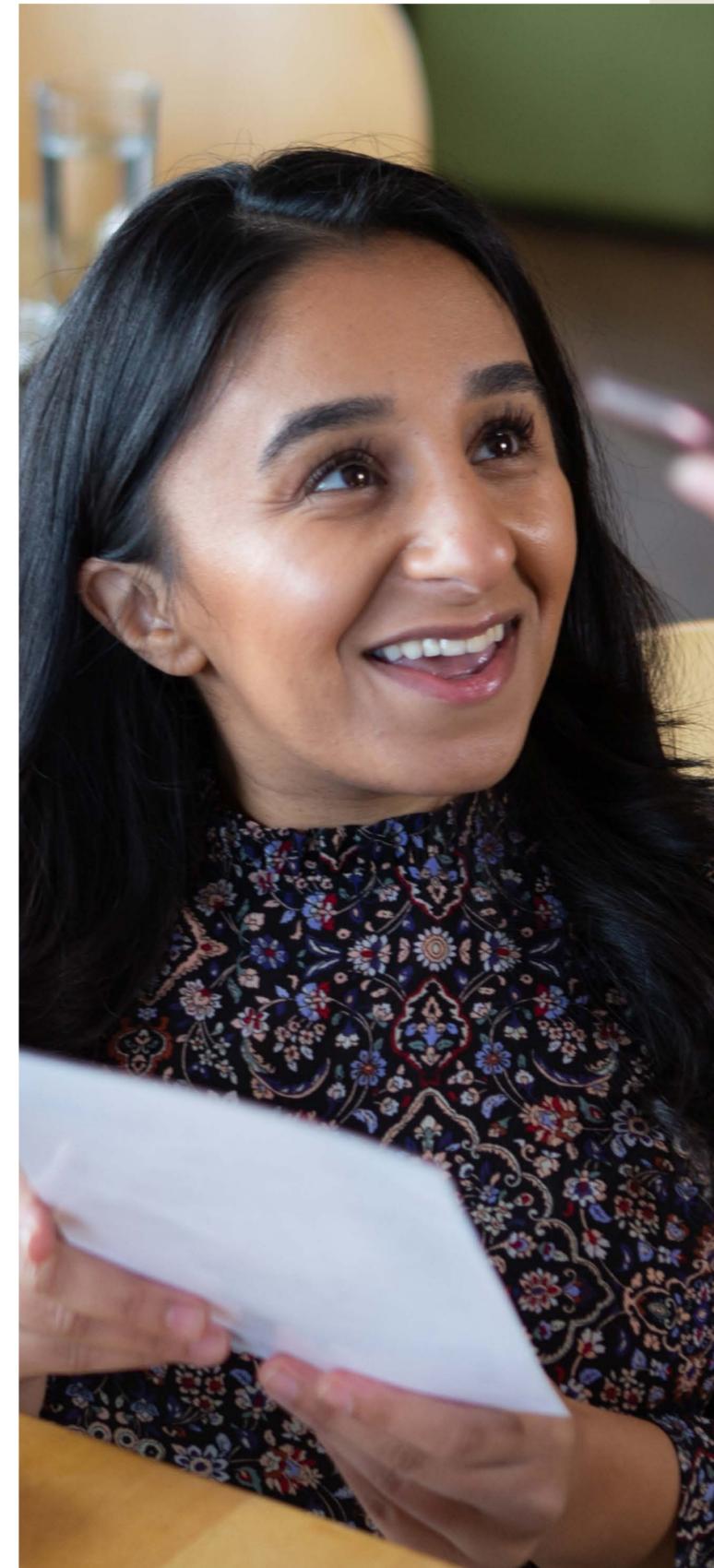
Who at your organization is aware of your health problem / disability?

Executives with disabilities

Employees with disabilities



Source: Accenture, 2020; Executives with disabilities N=641, Employees with disabilities N=5,511 (Excludes respondents who answered 'Prefer not to say') *Some others includes a close colleague, a supervisor/line manager or HR





“Employers should have a healthier communication environment, which allows employees and workers to speak out without fear of reprisal. In the case of my employer, it was precisely this fear of reprisal that prevented me from talking about the situation.”

Employee with a disability, Brazil, age 30



Such a widespread lack of openness has led to a massive perception gap between how well business leaders feel they are doing with regard to providing enabling accommodations for employees with disabilities and how well they are actually doing. While 67% of leadership believes their technological set-ups and cultures are supportive, just 41% of employees with disabilities agree. And only **20%** of employees with a disability feel the organization is fully committed to supporting them.

Executive: To what extent do you believe employees in your organization feel safe to..

Employee: To what extent do you feel safe to...

% Quite / Completely safe

Be open about a physical disability	84%	65%
Tell a manager/supervisor that they/you are not coping with the pressure at work	81%	63%
Raise a concern about the behavior of a senior colleague	82%	63%
Be open about a neurological condition	79%	61%
Raise a concern about mental health	81%	60%
	Executives	Employees with disabilities

Source: Accenture, 2020; Executives N=1,748, Employees with disabilities N=5,870

Meanwhile, executives are about **1.3x** more likely to believe that employees with disabilities feel safe raising sensitive issues than employees with disabilities themselves believe. Because executives are overestimating how inclusive their organizations are, they don't convey urgency around changing the culture and making sure that employees with disabilities aren't just hired, but are also motivated to stay and move up the career ladder.

What's behind the fear, the perception gap and the failure to thrive? A subpar workplace culture.

When employees with disabilities feel less sure that their talents are being utilized, they are less likely to thrive. If bosses aren't speaking out about inclusion, if accommodations aren't being made, and if employees don't feel they can raise concerns about how they're treated, then secrecy reigns and both employees and organizations can't reach their potential.

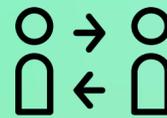
What's a culture of equality?

Workplace culture is complex and fluid—hard to define and articulate. One way to try to capture it, however, is by breaking down factors that contribute to culture and asking employees to weigh the importance of each one. Over the past three years we have surveyed more than 70,000 employees in more than 30 countries to measure their perception of factors that contribute to the culture in which they work. Out of more than 200 personal and workplace factors—such as policies, behaviors and collective opinions of employees—we identified three categories of factors that are statistically shown to influence advancement.



Bold leadership

A diverse leadership team that sets, shares and measures equality goals openly.



Comprehensive action

Policies and practices that are family friendly, support all genders and are bias-free in attracting and retaining people.



Empowering environment

One where employees are trusted, that respects individuals and offers the freedom to be creative and to train and work flexibly.

Accenture uses the presence and strength of these categories to determine how “equal” the workplace culture of every survey respondent is. A culture of equality is correlated with greater advancement for everyone and with an organization's ability to innovate.

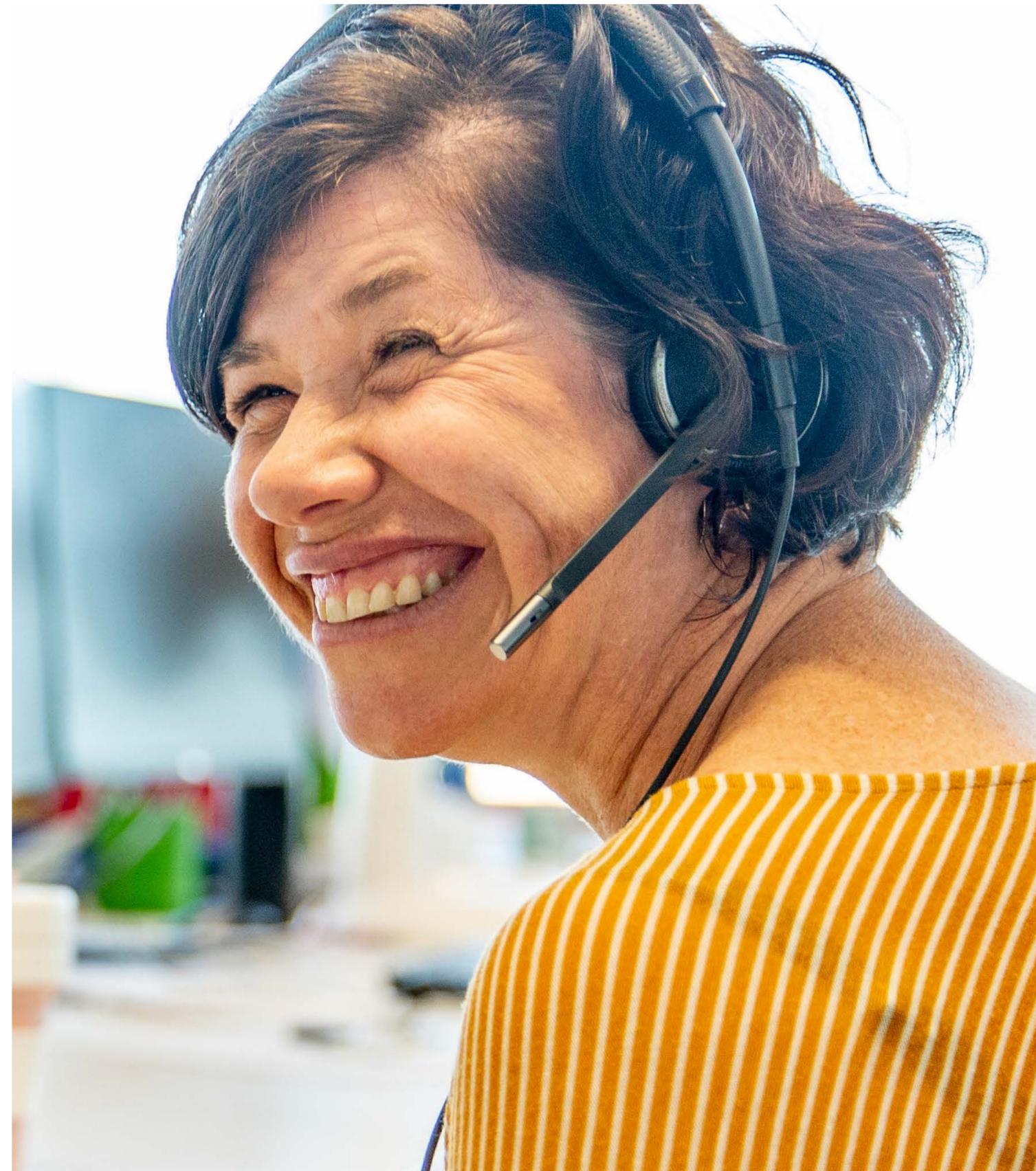
So how can companies help persons with disabilities advance? By improving their culture.

We conducted this research to help organizations build, strengthen and sustain environments in which persons with disabilities can thrive. To that end, we surveyed almost 6,000 employees with disabilities in 28 countries.

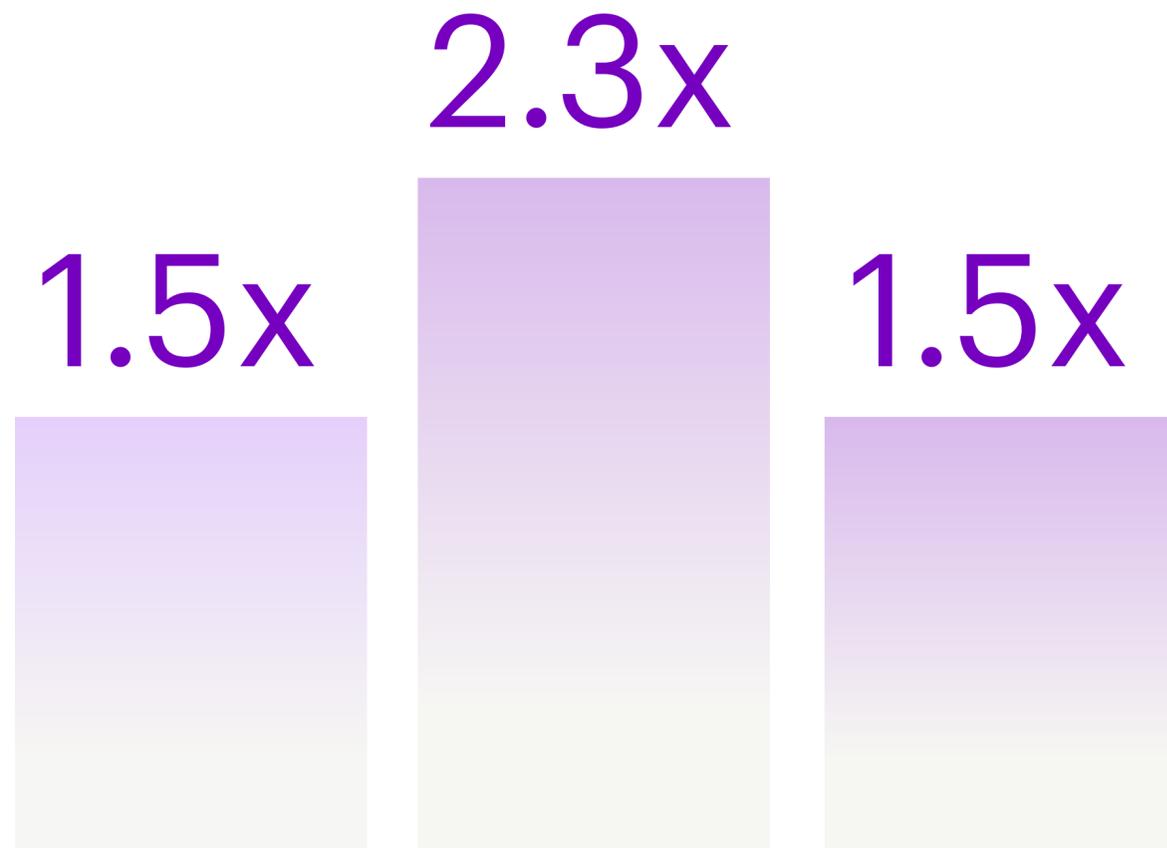
We asked respondents to assess their levels of engagement in the workplace in terms of their career satisfaction and aspirations and their sense of confidence and belonging.

We then mapped their answers against the presence and strength of more than 200 workplace culture factors to identify those that have a significant and positive effect on the likelihood of employees with disabilities thriving.

The factors we identified are: **clear role models, employee resource groups, parental leave, fair and transparent pay, training, flexible working options, freedom to innovate (for employees) and mental well-being policies.** We call the top 10% of workplaces—where those eight workplace factors are most common—“more equal” cultures.



If all organizations were as inclusive as the top 10% in our study. . .



Engagement levels of employees with disabilities would be up to 1.5x higher

Career aspirations of employees with disabilities would be 2.3x stronger

Confidence levels of employees with disabilities would be 1.5x higher





I think for me the biggest thing is just for them to say that you allow your employees to be open and honest about what's going on in your life. You feel free to be yourself, talk about any issues, and I've got that flexibility. They allow you to work from home on days where it's more convenient to do that. I like flexibility in terms of start-finishing times, that sort of thing, you can still get your work done and still feel fully productive.

Employee with a disability, Australia, age 46

[My employer] just helped me out and made me feel better about myself, and to know that I can actually be a productive person. To me, that always helps to have that encouragement to work, to have that extra help to find devices or software or just things to help you do your job better.

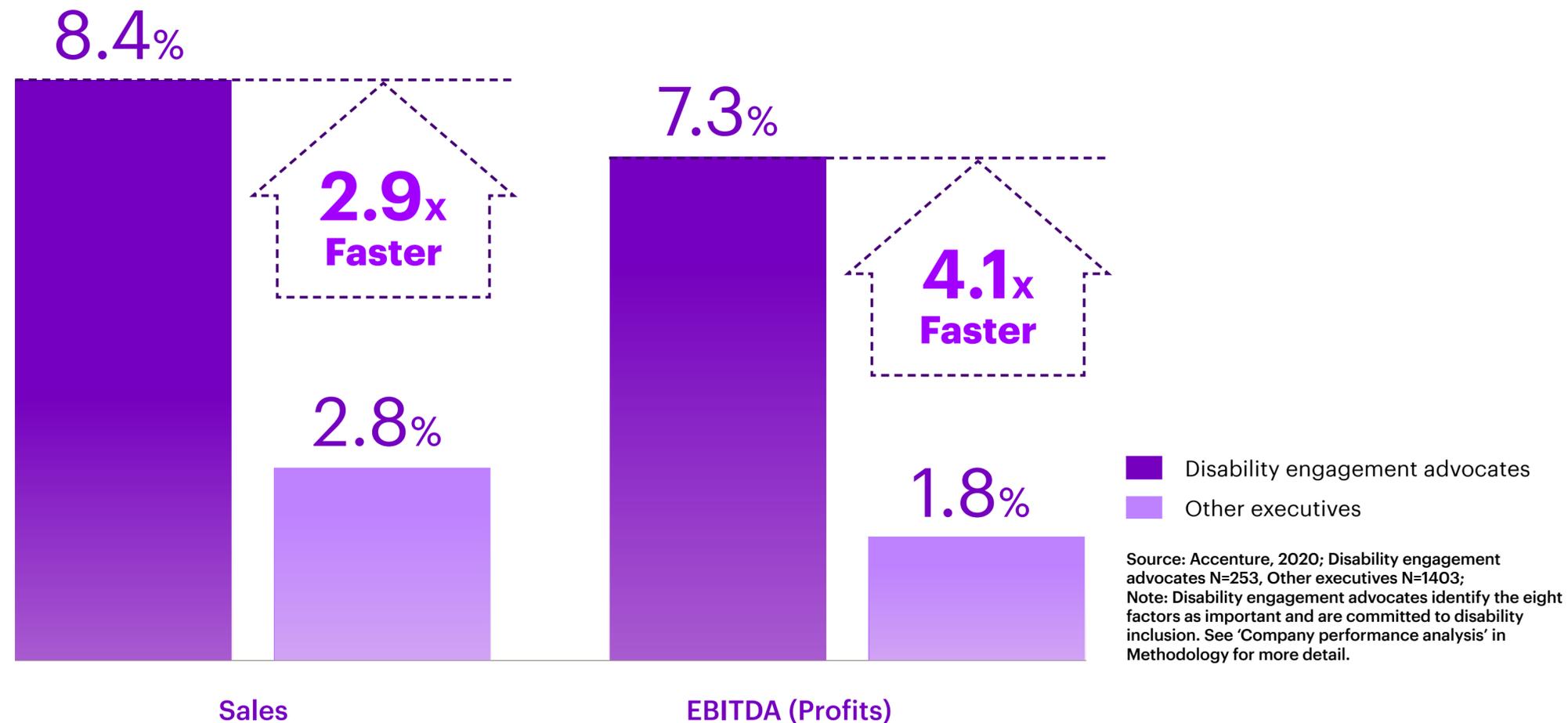
Employee with a disability, US, age 35



What inclusion could do for your business

A range of studies have shown that teams are more productive when employees are engaged¹⁰ and, as noted at the beginning of this report, our analysis shows that companies led by executives who are focused on disability engagement are growing sales (**2.9x**) and profits (**4.1x**) faster than their peers.¹¹

How would you describe the typical annual growth profile of your company over the past 3 years?
(Average growth rate)



Strategize for inclusion; nurture the best talent

As Meena embarks on a promising tech career, she worries about some of the challenges she will likely face. As she told us: “At first, I won’t be expected to drive meetings or talk to stakeholders, so using the chat function is fine. But as I start progressing in my career, I will have to speak up and present more. I don’t want my speech impediment to stop me from doing that. The biggest problem is myself, my internalized fear. It’s a feeling that I would be wasting people’s time if I take too long to speak, so I should just stick to a non-speaking role.”

Her fears notwithstanding, Meena plans to speak up: She will talk to her new manager early on about her concerns so they can together brainstorm ways for her to lead meetings once the time arrives.

Like so many in the community of persons with disabilities, Meena is full of career aspirations and talents. Living with a speech impediment has helped make her more creative, thoughtful, sensitive and determined. Now it’s up to her future employers to provide strong leadership, flexible policies and inclusive environments so that she and other persons with disabilities can develop confidence, fully belong and truly soar.

Accessibility at Accenture

At Accenture, we’re enabling change with a central Accessibility Center of Excellence to proactively meet the needs of our people with disabilities, along with Accessibility Centers in seven different locations around the world. The goal of the centers is to provide a space where persons with disabilities can interact with accessible technology, demonstrating our accessible design leadership and best practices.

We invested in our applications to ensure that the vast majority are accessible, and we have supplemental resources to navigate additional accessibility requirements. For example, through our Adjustment Request Tool, any employee with disabilities can easily ask for an accommodation such as assistive technology, flex work arrangements, sign language interpreters, screen readers and more.

And to inspire growth, we launched Abilities Unleashed, a unique internal development program for persons with disabilities to become authentic leaders and effective role models and to explore career paths and development opportunities.

The Inclusion Playbook: The Eight Factors at Work

Digital accessibility and other workplace accommodations are clearly important areas of focus for any organization looking to include persons with disabilities. This research has uncovered other, perhaps less intuitive, ways to build a culture that lets persons with disabilities flourish. Here's a rundown of companies that have implemented the eight factors to great success.



Microsoft

Saqib Shaikh, a software engineer who leads Microsoft's [Seeing AI](#) team, has had a lifelong relationship with advancing inclusive digital technology. Throughout his 15 years at Microsoft, he has channeled his own experience as someone who is blind to champion and drive product accessibility by exploring how AI can empower people with disabilities to become more independent in their daily lives.

His vision began with a dream to build eyeglasses that could observe and describe the world around him. This dream evolved into a collaborative research effort with fellow Microsoft colleagues that resulted in Seeing AI, a smartphone app that uses computer vision to audibly dictate menus and documents, product barcodes, currency, and recognize people – even their facial expressions.

As Microsoft continues to build its culture of inclusion, several other [members of leadership](#) have recently opened up about their disabilities and discussed how their unique perspectives enable them to develop products that work better for everyone.¹²

Bounteous

Bounteous seeks to ensure that inclusivity is intrinsically embedded in its core values and understands that a diverse workforce is more empathetic, collaborative and innovative. An important way it cultivates inclusivity is via flexibility: The company offers flexible work-from-home schedules and take-what-you-need paid time off. For team members who want to work from one of the collaboration centers, the company ensures that the physical space is also comfortable, safe and accessible.

Consider the recent Chicago headquarters expansion: In addition to adjustable desks, hoteling and private spaces, gender-free restrooms, and mother's rooms, the company purchased new ADA-compliant equipment, lowered countertops in kitchens and bathrooms and added handles to all doors. By co-innovating with clients and employees alike, Bounteous makes both schedules and physical spaces more accommodating and flexible.¹³

GlaxoSmithKline (GSK)

In 2020, GSK signed up to the [Valuable 500](#) pledge as part of their ongoing commitment to creating an inclusive workplace which enables their people to thrive. They're also members of the UK government Disability Confidence Scheme and signatories to the UK Department for International Development's Charter for Change, joining other organizations with a common aim to ensure rights, freedoms, dignity and inclusion for people with disabilities.

GSK leaders also serve as role models throughout the organization. For example, Tracy Lee Mitchelson, Training, Disability Inclusion Director, co-leads the company's Disability Confidence network. According to her, "With the help of others, I launched the Disability Confidence Network (DCN) as a GSK Employee Resource Group. DCN is a trusted internal resource that partners with our businesses to focus on the ability in disability and enable all GSK employees to reach their true potential at work. We're advocates for those with disabilities, and we've helped individuals navigate their own particular challenges."¹⁴



Fair pay



Parental leave



Freedom to innovate

GINgroup

The GINgroup, based in Latin America, is committed to including people with disabilities in the economic market in a dignified way.

The GINgroup developed the GINcluyete Program as a professional services platform for the employment and inclusion of persons with disabilities in direct jobs or through outsourcing, complying with labor regulations like fair pay and accessibility standards, reasonable adjustments, and compatibility of jobs with disabilities. The program includes a web platform and mobile application for attracting talent and job vacancies for people with disabilities, advice to interested companies, evaluation of persons with disabilities using soft skills and more.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) selected the GINcluyete program as one of 12 projects that will be replicated in other countries.¹⁵

Intuit

Intuit, a California-based software company, offers its employees a range of options that give them time away from work to rest, recover from illness or take care of personal matters.

Intuit offers four weeks of family support time to provide care and support for a family member who has a chronic condition. The company also offers its employees around the globe access to the Rethink Benefits, which offers an e-learning-style platform that teaches parents how to teach their special-needs and verbally challenged child.

Intuit also partners with Cognition Builders, a firm that works with adults and children with developmental delays to help them devise daily routines and gain greater independence through life-skill planning.¹⁶

Sony

Japan-based Sony endeavors to create inclusive working environments that enable employees to build successful careers regardless of any disabilities they might have. Sony hopes to be a place in which people of all backgrounds can flourish, resulting in new and exciting innovations and value creation for the company and society at large.

As one Sony employee with a disability said, “I get the impression that Sony is a workplace where nobody pays attention to whether people have disabilities or not. Some 20 people joined the information systems division when I entered the company, but we all worked together naturally during training, and people provided support as a matter of course when I needed it. I was also impressed by efforts to establish facilities that took disabilities into consideration.”¹⁷



Mental well-being policies



Training

Accenture

Accenture offers a program called Thriving Mind, created in partnership with Stanford Medicine and Thrive Global, to focus on better understanding the impact of stress and steps we can take to build brain resiliency.

Thriving Mind is a self-directed learning journey leveraging cutting-edge brain science to teach recharge strategies especially when we find ourselves under cumulative negative stress.

In addition, Accenture has mental health ally programs in 24+ countries with more than 5,000 employees who are volunteers trained to listen, provide nonjudgmental support and point our people to the right resources for help.

Lemon Tree Hotels

Lemon Tree Hotels Limited, the largest hotel chain in India in the mid-priced segment with 82 hotels, employs approximately 550 persons with disabilities, accounting for 11-12% of its workforce. Lemon Tree hires people with a range of physical, intellectual/developmental and special learning disabilities across nearly every department.

Training is infused throughout the organization for all disability types. For example, new recruits must take an introductory sign language course so they can communicate with non-hearing colleagues, and managers receive higher-level courses. Employees undergo training on how to work with colleagues with disabilities, for example by avoiding making too many last-minute changes to schedules, since advance planning is often key to an employee with a disability's successful navigation of daily life and work.

It's clear that extra training has contributed to the success of the chain and of individual employees. In housekeeping, hearing-impaired staff have been more productive than their hearing colleagues, while hearing-impaired restaurant workers are often far quicker to notice customers who are trying to attract a waiter's attention.

Lemon Tree's commitment to hiring persons with disabilities and training everyone to work well together is a source of pride that generates high morale among all its employees.¹⁸

About the Authors



Laurie Henneborn

Laurie Henneborn is an Accenture Research Managing Director who leads research and thought leadership development focused on raising awareness and taking actions pertaining to disability inclusion and equality in the workplace. To this end, she led the research for this study and for the 2018 [Getting to Equal: Disability Inclusion Advantage](#) study, a collaborative effort between Accenture, Disability:IN and American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD). She is also on the board of directors for AAPD and sits on the Disability Inclusion Advisory Council at Accenture. Laurie is especially passionate about coaching and mentoring colleagues with “invisible” disabilities drawing from her own experience since being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2004.



Chad Jerdee

Chad Jerdee is a Senior Managing Director at Accenture and is the Executive Sponsor for Accenture’s global Disability Inclusion initiatives. He serves on the Board of Directors for Disability:IN and for the Challenged Athletes Foundation, a non-profit organization that supports adaptive sports athletes and all people with physical challenges to lead active, healthy lifestyles. Chad is an adaptive sports athlete and enjoys downhill skiing, backpacking, running, cycling and swimming. As an amputee who lost his leg from the knee down from a collision caused by a drunk driver, Chad is focused on paying it forward to the persons with disabilities community.

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Methodology

Survey

The findings in this report are based from two online surveys fielded in 28 countries during October and November 2019. The executive survey was completed by 1,748 senior leaders (C-suite and direct reports; 675 with a disability) in companies with 50+ employees. The employee survey was completed by 5,870 persons with disabilities in companies with 5+ employees.

The questionnaires were constructed after extensive research (academic papers, literature search and drawing on Accenture's experience with clients) into the personal and workplace factors that are believed to influence the likelihood of employees advancing at work.

Defining disability

Survey respondents were asked: Do you have any difficulty in performing day-to-day activities (e.g., walking, communicating, hearing, seeing even if wearing glasses) because of a mental, intellectual, sensory or physical health condition which has lasted, or is expected to last, at least 6 months?

And they were given the following response options: No; Yes, some difficulty; Yes, a lot of difficulty.

Any respondent who answered 'Yes' was defined as having a disability.



Model

We used an econometric modeling methodology developed over the past three years of Accenture’s Getting to Equal research series to quantify the relationship between 200+ workplace culture factors and the levels of engagement of employees with disabilities. We define engagement using the following variables from the survey:

Career	Confidence
Satisfied with advancement to date	Feels contributions are appreciated, and respected by peers
Confident of being able to advance at desired pace in the future	Feels contributions are appreciated, and respected by manager/supervisor
Aspires to be promoted	Feels comfortable asking questions
Aspires to senior leadership position	Does not feel questions/ concerns are ignored
Likely to be working for current employer in 12 months	Does not feel like an outsider

In addition to empirically connecting these outcomes to each of the culture factors, the modeling framework facilitates the measurement of the links between these outcomes and employee exposure to more (in the top 10% of the distribution) and fewer (bottom 10%) factors that drive workplace inclusion (“More equal” and “Less equal” organizations). Each model

controls for a range of workplace and employee background characteristics such as organization size, industry, age, gender and education, which could also impact the outcomes.

For more information see [Getting to Equal 2020: The Hidden Value of Culture Makers.](#)

Company statement analysis

We collated over 30,000 public statement transcripts from 1,131 Forbes Global 2000 companies in the period 2015-2019. Using Natural Language Processing and a predetermined set of keywords relating to disability engagement, we identified a small group of companies that have spoken publicly about including employees with disabilities in their workforces.

Employee interviews

We conducted 50 interviews with persons with disabilities. Respondents were either in employment when interviewed or had been in employment in the last six months. Respondents were based in five geographies (Australia, Brazil, South Africa, UK, US) and were contacted via the VoxPopMe platform.

Company performance analysis

To understand the commercial benefits associated with a focus on disability engagement, we segmented the responses of executives leading for-profit companies (N=1656). We identified executives who both identify the eight factors as important in helping employees to thrive and who are actively focused on helping employees with disabilities thrive.

Actions specifically related to employees with disabilities: have spoken out publicly on rights for persons with disabilities; have hiring targets; have an employee resource group; believe employees feel safe to be open about physical or neurological conditions; have the right technology, environment and support in place.

We then compared the average sales and EBITDA performance reported by the n=253 executives who met these criteria with that of their peers.

About Accenture

Accenture is a global professional services company with leading capabilities in digital, cloud and security. Combining unmatched experience and specialized skills across more than 40 industries, we offer Strategy and Consulting, Interactive, Technology and Operations services—all powered by the world’s largest network of Advanced Technology and Intelligent Operations centers. Our 506,000 people deliver on the promise of technology and human ingenuity every day, serving clients in more than 120 countries. We embrace the power of change to create value and shared success for our clients, people, shareholders, partners and communities. Visit us at www.accenture.com.

About Accenture Research

Accenture Research shapes trends and creates data-driven insights about the most pressing issues global organizations face. Combining the power of innovative research techniques with a deep understanding of our clients’ industries, our team of 300 researchers and analysts spans 20 countries and publishes hundreds of reports, articles and points of view every year. Our thought-provoking research—supported by proprietary data and partnerships with leading organizations, such as MIT and Harvard—guides our innovations and allows us to transform theories and fresh ideas into real-world solutions for our clients. For more information, visit www.accenture.com/research

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