

TURNING DEI PROMISES INTO ACTION: WHAT ABOUT DISABILITY?

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Is inclusion measured by promises... or by actions? Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) policies are gaining ground in companies. Their aim is to create workplaces where everyone feels they belong and can work without constraints. Beyond the moral and legal arguments, investing in inclusiveness fosters creativity, innovation and organisational performance.

However, there is still a gap between intention and reality. Organisations are committed to reducing discrimination and inequality, but the results remain uneven, particularly for people with disabilities, who are at the heart of this research. Currently, 1,3 billion people, representing 16% of the global population, are living with a disability. But even today, these employees have less access to opportunities (promotions, career development, etc.) and organisational resources (accessible workspaces, adapted technologies, etc.).

This study explores the challenges faced by organisations when translating their DEI policies into concrete actions, as well as the strategies employed to overcome these obstacles. Between 2021 and 2023, the author conducted 29 interviews with members of human resources, managers and employees with disabilities in companies in Belgium and France, where rights are protected by a legal framework. Despite these protections, “minority” employees continue to experience exclusion and discrimination. In the case of disability, for example, this is reflected in spaces and facilities that are not accessible to people with disabilities.

The interviews revealed that all the companies surveyed are committed to an inclusive and fair workplace... but all, without exception, are encountering difficulties in moving from principle to practice.

THREE MAIN CHALLENGES

Organisations face three main barriers when it comes to adapting the workplace for people with disabilities:

1. **Lack of commitment.** Mobilising line management to apply DEI policies remains complex. Many managers resist significant change and think primarily in terms of cost and productivity.
2. **Limited or inaccessible information.** It is often difficult to know precisely how many people are disabled and what their exact needs are. However, this identification is a prerequisite for the implementation of appropriate adaptations. Invisible disabilities further complicate prevention and proactive management. What's more, some HR tools for gathering feedback, such as online surveys, are not accessible to everyone, which reduces the quality of the data collected.
3. **Increasing complexity of work.** In the companies surveyed, work is increasingly based on intellectual tasks and intensive use of technology. This opens up opportunities for people with reduced mobility, such as teleworking, but creates obstacles for those with intellectual or cognitive disabilities. The increasing cognitive skills required make inclusion more difficult for these groups.

THREE FACILITATORS TO LINK POLICY AND PRACTICE

Alongside these challenges, the study highlights what really helps to bridge the gap between rhetoric and actual experience:

1. **Strategic partnerships.** Joining forces with organisations specialising in the employment of people with disabilities makes it possible to identify, recruit and support the talent concerned. Companies can also involve their suppliers and other stakeholders in the process: requiring their products and services to be accessible and encouraging the recruitment of people with disabilities, particularly when the positions available internally require cognitive skills that are difficult to adapt.
2. **Active support from managers.** Managers play an essential role in making policies operational. They help to identify specific needs, adapt tasks and tools, facilitate reasonable accommodation and support an inclusive team culture.
3. **Streamlined communication.** Setting up accessible, two-way internal channels enables employees to express their needs, concerns and ideas for improvement. This feedback feeds into ongoing adjustments.

In conclusion, having a DEI policy, even a demanding one, does not guarantee inclusiveness. The gap between intention and action persists, particularly in the area of disability. Despite the ban on discrimination, people with disabilities still encounter obstacles in accessing opportunities and do not always obtain the necessary reasonable accommodation. A policy, however restrictive, is not enough to remove systemic barriers or transform organisational mindsets. Being inclusive is not a matter of what is written, but of what is actually experienced.