

Building a Fairer City action plan

2nd October 2023, 1:30pm to 4:45pm

City Hall, Kamal Churchie Way, London E16 1ZE

Accelerating the pace of change in developing an inclusive workforce: Disabled People

Learning Note

On the 2nd of October 2023, the Greater London Authority, in collaboration with East London Business Alliance (ELBA) and Shared Intelligence, ran an event focussed on how organisations can accelerate the pace of change in developing an inclusive workforce. This event was part of a series of three challenge events focused on particular protected characteristics, specifically race and gender. This event was centred around a specific provocation:

“Is disability the forgotten protected characteristic? How can we, as the leaders in promoting employment and progression of disabled people, accelerate the pace of change”

The discussion with attendees at the event and the presentations of key speakers highlighted three key areas that must be considered by all organisations in accelerating the pace of change:

1. Understanding the experiences of disabled people to make positive and relevant change.
2. Improving structures to empower employees
3. Leveraging on the network of best practice to best develop initiatives and support organisations.

Improving experiences of existing disabled staff

Currently there is more of an emphasis on increasing the numbers of disabled people in the workforce, rather than understanding the experiences of staff when they are in the organisation. There is a need to re-think the priorities of organisations in order to ensure staff are supported and have fair access to opportunities to progress. To retain talent, organisations need to consider these questions:

1. How are the experiences of disabled people being measured and who by?
2. What is the story behind our retention rates?
3. How does quick and simple access to workplace adjustments impact productivity and the wellbeing of our staff?

There is a recommendation that all policies that affect the workforce are co-produced with the workforce. This will reinforce the important principle that

can ensure lived experience shapes corporate policies, both for existing staff and in recruitment. The experiences of disabled people within the workforce needs to be embedded in all policy decisions within organisations. There is a tendency to work with expert agencies to understand the needs of disabled people and what they want from their employer rather than providing opportunities for disabled people within the workforce to get their voices heard. Empowering employees.

Embedding a culture of diversity and inclusion requires ongoing commitment and effort at all levels of the organisation.

Improving structures to empower employees

Affinity groups

There is a recommendation for Staff Networks and Affinity groups to be properly resourced both in budget and dedicated time. Affinity groups and staff networks play a valuable role in providing a platform for disabled people to share their experiences. They advocate for inclusivity, raise awareness of issues, and help to drive positive change within the organisation. Often, participation in staff networks is voluntary and in addition to employees existing job roles. Staff networks can therefore be under-resourced, and members can be over-burdened with competing priorities. For staff networks and affinity groups to fulfil their potential and be empowered, they need to be properly resourced. For example, through additional paid hours for participation and designated budgets to take action.

Training

There is a recommendation for there to be appropriate staff training that aligns with their job responsibilities so that they can relate to the needs of the workforce. There are many types of training that organisations use in order to educate and develop the understanding of the wider workforce around the different needs of the workforce. But these can be ineffective if they fail to encourage staff members to relate their learning to their own work and the tasks they must undertake. It is therefore important to ensure the training can help staff link their learning to the values of the organisation, and more specifically, their own role and relationships they have with others in the team. Toolkits offer guidance on a range of areas in the workplace. The Business Disability Forum, for example, offers toolkits to businesses on topics including, recruitment, people management, mental health, neurodiversity and occupational health.

Language

There should also be a shift in how organisations perceive disabled employees in the workforce to foster inclusivity. Language holds significant influence within organisations and current phrases such as 'disclose and declare' create negative perceptions of what it means to have a disability. Using alternative words like 'tell and share' instead of 'disclose and declare' foster inclusivity and create a more welcoming and supportive environment. This can then encourage disabled employees to comfortably share their information and feel confident in seeking necessary adjustments.

Connecting employers to best practice

There is a recommendation for a London-based employers forum focused on sharing good practice on creating more inclusive workforces for disabled people. There are pockets of innovation within organisations in London, but few discussion forums designed particularly for SMEs, DPO's and large corporations to share experiences about challenges they are facing in their own organisations and how to improve inclusion in the workforce for disabled people.

There is a recommendation to explore how best to support SMEs in creating more inclusive workforces for disabled people, and highlighting entrepreneurship as a viable option for disabled people. In many ways, SMEs are more likely to be able to provide conditions that are conducive to the needs of disabled people. For example, they can often be more adaptive to the needs of their employees by offering flexible hours and ways of working. On the other hand, they are more likely to be time and resource constrained than larger employers so may struggle to fully support their workforce. Having the mechanism to share these challenges with a range of organisations, but also learn about the different and innovative ways other businesses in the sector are successfully supporting their workforce would be beneficial.

Self-employment and entrepreneurship are also valuable employment options for disabled people. Better championing and promotion of initiatives and more connection of communities to resources can spread awareness of these routes as viable options in promoting economic independence and diversity.

Key Takeaways:

- Organisations must be willing to actively listen to the experiences of their current staff in the workforce and work together to ensure lived experiences shapes corporate policies, both for existing staff and in recruitment.
- It is essential that changes and adjustments are made to create an environment where employees have the resources and support they need in the workplace. This includes working with affinity groups to understand their needs, delivering appropriate training that aligns with the needs of the workforce to produce effective change, and shifting organisational language to empower disabled employees.
- There are few discussion forums designed particularly for SMEs, DPO's and large corporations to share experiences about challenges they are facing in their own organisations and how to improve inclusion in the workforce for disabled people.

Key Recommendations:

Improving experiences of existing disabled staff

- All policies that affect the workforce should be co-produced with the workforce. This will reinforce the important principle that can ensure lived experience shapes corporate policies, both for existing staff and in recruitment.

Improving structures to empower employees

- Staff Networks and Affinity groups to be properly resourced both in budget and dedicated time.
- There is a need for appropriate staff training that aligns with their job responsibilities so that they can relate to the needs of the workforce.
- There should also be a shift in how organisations perceive disabled employees in the workforce to foster inclusivity, including through inclusive language.

Connecting employers to best practice

- Employer forums are important to share good practice on creating a more inclusive workforce for disabled people.
- There needs to be an exploration on how best to support SMEs in creating a more inclusive workforce for disabled people, and a focus on entrepreneurship as a viable option for disabled people.

Helpful Resources

Website: [Benefits of Living Wage accreditation](#). The Living Wage Foundation's website includes resources and information on the independent movement of businesses and people that choose to pay a real Living Wage based on the cost of living.

Accreditation scheme and guidance: [Mayor of London's Good Work Standard](#). The Good Work Standard brings together the best employment practice with links to resources and support.

Toolkit: [Workforce Integration Network](#). A suite of resources to help employers address the underrepresentation of young black men in the workplace.

Toolkit: [Toolkits - Business Disability Forum](#). A number of resources aimed to help businesses identify barriers in their recruitment process and design jobs with disability inclusion in mind.

Programme: The Workforce Integration Network (WIN) Design Labs
<https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/communities-and-social-justice/workforce-integration-network-win/workforce-integration-design-lab>

Website: [The London Progression Collaboration](#) supports businesses to create new apprenticeship opportunities, including helping large organisations to transfer unspent apprenticeship levy to smaller businesses in London.

Website: The London Anchor Institutions' Network
<https://www.anchors.london/>