

10 Steps Toward a More Inclusive Workplace

An **IMAGO WORK** article by Michael Beard

1. Start small and keep moving

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step,” Lao Tzu taught. The idea of becoming an inclusive workplace might feel overwhelming. Thinking of all the changes that could be implemented to your physical environment, HR policies, staff development, hiring practices, training and so on can leave you feeling like a deer in the headlights. The the path toward becoming more inclusive workplace is all about taking the first steps. Identify one or two quick wins you can easily implement and go from there. Just getting started is half the battle. As the English poet William Wordsworth once said, “to begin, begin.”

2. Connect with a local vocational training program

Vocational training programs are a wealth of information, assistance and coaching. Many programs spend a lot of effort trying to find workplaces willing to partner with them. So, they will usually be very eager to hear from you. After all, the more businesses that embrace inclusion increases their ability to place trainees in meaningful jobs.

3. Organize or sponsor events that promote awareness

One of the best ways to raise awareness among your staff and customers is to organize or sponsor events that promote awareness. Local, national and international organizations working with people who have disabilities are always looking for corporate sponsors. These are usually win-win relationships. The organizations working with people with disabilities increase their capacity through corporate sponsorship and businesses benefit from the positive PR.

4. Make your products more accessible

What small changes can you introduce to your products and services to make them more accessible to people with disabilities? For example, redesign your packaging to accommodate people with physical limitations. Or, enhance the auditory and visual elements of your products for people with hearing and visual impairments.

5. Seek accessibility consulting

Find a consultant who can help you think through redesigns to your physical workspace that can make it more accessibly to people with various types of disabilities. If you can't find or afford a consultant right away, ask for feedback from customers and others people in your community with disabilities. Ask for direct and practical advise like, “What are three things can we change in our business that would make use more accessible to people with physical or developmental disabilities?”

6. Create jobs for volunteers or interns with disabilities.

Every company has tasks that people with varying abilities can perform. Breakdown routine activities into smaller activities and group them by abilities needed to perform each task. Then identify groups of activities that people with special challenges could perform. Prepare an

internship job description, for example, filled with tasks that someone with a developmental disability could learn to do at your workplace.

7. Modify job descriptions toward inclusion

In many cases, people with physical disabilities are not considered for specific positions simply because one or two of the responsibilities in the job description would be challenging or impossible due to their specific disability (even though they are capable of 95% of the rest of the job description). In these situations, it's quite easy to modify the job description by simply making one or two small changes.

8. Include people with disabilities in your marketing collateral

Make sure your marketing collateral reflects inclusive values. All too often marketing images and messages don't include people with disabilities. However, the world is not made up of "perfect" people. Gerber baby food, for example, recently chose little Lucas Warren who has Down syndrome to represent the brand as an official "Gerber Baby." Not only did this marketing message communicate a sense of dignity toward people with Down syndrome, but it was met with very positive feedback from Gerber's customer base.

9. Inclusion training for staff

The successful implementation of any new strategy often depends on quality staff training. Inclusiveness is no exception. If you want your staff to embrace inclusiveness and help you move the company forward then training is key. Your staff will benefit from awareness and sensitivity training as well as training in skills for working alongside people with specific types of disabilities.

10. Hire someone with a disability.

Probably the quickest way to get started is to just dive right in and hire someone. You can even ask your new hire to help you identify and implement changes to make your workplace more inclusive.