Unconscious Bias – Disability:

Resources for participants of the Disability & Work in Canada conference, 2019

prepared October 2019 by Abdou Saouab

This document includes publications relevant to our discussion at the conference. For each publication, we identified the source where we copied it from. Title of each publication includes the link to the publication source.

Table of Contents

[**Implicit Biases & People with Disabilities** 2](#_Toc23240768)

[Introduction 2](#_Toc23240769)

[Overview 3](#_Toc23240770)

[What Is Implicit Bias? 3](#_Toc23240771)

[Where Do Implicit Biases Originate? 4](#_Toc23240772)

[How Can We Measure Implicit Biases? 4](#_Toc23240773)

[How Are Implicit Biases Harmful? 4](#_Toc23240774)

[Implicit Disability Biases: Questions to Ask Yourself 6](#_Toc23240775)

[Reflect on each of the questions below. Consider whether and to what extent your response may be influenced by stereotypes and biases about people with disabilities and/or informed by objective facts and evidence and actual experiences with them. 6](#_Toc23240776)

[Specific Disabilities 7](#_Toc23240777)

[Scenarios For Discussion 7](#_Toc23240778)

[Scenario 1 7](#_Toc23240779)

[Scenario 2 8](#_Toc23240780)

[Scenario 3 8](#_Toc23240781)

[Glossary 8](#_Toc23240782)

[End Notes 9](#_Toc23240783)

[**Unconscious Bias Towards People with Disabilities in the Workplace** 11](#_Toc23240784)

[What is Unconscious Bias? 11](#_Toc23240785)

[Statistics: 11](#_Toc23240786)

[Tools: 12](#_Toc23240787)

[Build Awareness 12](#_Toc23240788)

[Sparking Conversation 12](#_Toc23240789)

[Taking Action 12](#_Toc23240790)

[Links: 13](#_Toc23240791)

[**The Case for Improving Work for People with Disabilities Goes Way Beyond Compliance** 14](#_Toc23240792)

[Executive Summary 14](#_Toc23240793)

[Article 14](#_Toc23240794)

[**How does unintended or unconscious bias affect students with disabilities?** 17](#_Toc23240795)

## **[Implicit Biases & People with Disabilities](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/diversity/disabilityrights/resources/implicit_bias/)**

*By: ABA Commission on Disability Rights*

*January 07, 2019 Implicit Bias Guide*

## Introduction

Most of us believe that we are fair and equitable, and evaluate others based on objective facts. However, all of us, even the most egalitarian, have implicit biases—also referred to as unconscious biases or implicit social cognition. They are triggered automatically, in about a tenth of a second, without our conscious awareness or intention, and cause us to have attitudes about and preferences for people based on characteristics such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, and religion. These implicit biases often do not reflect or align with our conscious, declared beliefs. Notably, they influence our decisions and actions and can predict our behavior.

Implicit biases about persons with disabilities are pervasive. One study found that “[p]reference for people without disability compared to people with disabilities was among the strongest implicit and explicit effects across the social group domains” (e.g., gender, race, religion, sexuality, weight, political orientation, etc.), with only age showing more implicit bias. Significantly, 76 percent of respondents showed an implicit preference for people without disabilities, compared to nine percent for people with disabilities. Even test takers with disabilities showed a preference for people without disabilities. 1 *[endnotes are available at the end of this publication]*

The American Bar Association’s Commission on Disability Rights has created this resource to increase awareness of implicit biases, both in general and in particular with regard to persons with disabilities, and to offer techniques to help mitigate these biases. We begin with an overview of implicit bias, in particular what is implicit bias, where do such biases originate, how can we measure them, why are they harmful, and how can we mitigate them. This is followed by a series of questions and scenarios that will allow you to examine your implicit biases about persons with disabilities.

## Overview

### What Is Implicit Bias?

Implicit or unconscious bias is defined as “the process of associating stereotypes or attitudes toward categories of people without our conscious awareness.” 2

All of us have a natural human tendency to sort people into groups based on characteristics such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, and religion. These unconscious responses allow our brain to process vast amounts of information about one another at lightning speed. We process approximately 200,000 times more information each second unconsciously than consciously. 3

Having to process everything about each person we meet would be both overwhelming and likely incapacitating. Sorting is a type of cognitive shorthand. 4

We then associate feelings and traits, both positive and negative, with anyone categorized as being from a particular group. We pay attention to facts that confirm our associations and ignore or screen out facts that contradict them. We tend to see an individual as a representation of a particular group rather than as an individual.

Further, we tend to favor, prefer, and associate positive characteristics with members of the group to which we belong—people who are like us. This is known as in-group favoritism or in-group bias. 5

All of us belong to cultural groups defined by traits such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability, sexual orientation, national origin, family, or social or professional status. In-group bias is so strong that, even when randomly assigned to a group, people report a preference for that group. 6

Accordingly, we tend to associate negative characteristics with or disfavor members of groups to which we do not belong. This is referred to as out-group bias 7

All of these tendencies are the foundation of stereotyping, prejudice and, ultimately, may result in discriminatory decisions or actions, even if those decisions or actions might not be what we consciously intend or acknowledge.

### Where Do Implicit Biases Originate?

Implicit biases are shaped by our personal experiences, the attitudes of family, friends and others, living and working environments, culture, the media, movies, and books. Implicit biases develop over the course of a lifetime, beginning at an early age. 8

### How Can We Measure Implicit Biases?

It used to be that if we wanted to know a person’s biases, we asked. However, we now know that self-reports of biases are unreliable due, in part, to the fact that we are often unaware of our biases, believe we are not biased, or may modify our responses to align with what is regarded as socially acceptable. 9

The Implicit Association Test (IAT) is one of the most well-known, popular, and widely used tools for measuring one’s implicit biases, and has been responsible for introducing the concept of implicit bias to the public. There are numerous IATs (over 90) that assess implicit biases across a wide range of characteristics, including race, disability, sexuality, age, gender-career, religion, and weight.

Introduced in 1998 and maintained by [Project Implicit](http://implicit.harvard.edu/)—a consortium comprised of researchers from Harvard University, the University of Virginia, and the University of Washington 10 —the IAT is a web-based test that measures the strength of associations between concepts (e.g., “Disabled Persons”, “Abled Persons”) and evaluations (e.g., “Bad”, “Good”). Test takers are asked to quickly sort words and images/symbols into categories (e.g., Good, Bad, Disabled Persons, Abled Persons) by pressing the “e” key if the word or image/symbol belongs to the category on the left, and the “i” key if the word or image/symbol belongs to the category on the right.

An individual’s IAT score is based on how long it takes (speed) the individual, on average, to sort words and images/symbols when the categories are combined, such as Good or Disabled Persons and Bad or Abled Persons and vice versa. The IAT recognizes that most of us identify words and images or symbols more quickly when they originate from what we perceive as closely related rather than unrelated categories. For example, if you are faster to categorize words when “Disabled Persons and Good” share a response relative to when “Disabled Persons and Bad” share a response key, you would have an implicit preference for “Disabled Persons.”

### How Are Implicit Biases Harmful?

Implicit biases influence our perceptions, judgments, decisions, and actions and can predict behavior. 11

Implicit biases can lead to microaggressions. These subtle, but offensive comments or actions, which are often unintentional and reflect implicit biases, unconsciously reinforce a stereotype when directed at persons based on their membership in a marginalized group. 12

Unlike explicit discrimination, microaggressions typically are committed by people who are well-meaning. For example, a waiter may ask the person accompanying a blind person or wheelchair user what he or she would like to order, sending the message that a person with a disability is unable to make decisions independently. These “small” slights are cumulative and significant over time. 13

Social scientists point to mounting evidence that implicit biases can lead to discriminatory actions in a wide range of human interactions, 14 [Teaching Tolerance: A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, Test Yourself for Hidden Bias.](http://www.tolerance.org/Hidden-bias)

from education to employment, health care, housing, and criminal justice. When we look at some of the disproportionalities (i.e., the differences between a group’s representation in the population at large and its over- or under-representation in specific areas) that have plagued us for so long, despite society’s best intentions, it is hard to explain them.

For example, we know that students with disabilities achieve in school at a lower rate than others and are far more often and more severely disciplined in school. 15

Most of us believe that teachers and school administrators act in good faith and have good intentions. If we were to ask them whether they intentionally and explicitly intend to treat students with disabilities with lower expectations and discipline them more severely than students without disabilities, most if not all would say that was not their intent, and believe that they are making decisions based on objective facts. Yet, it is difficult to understand the disproportionate results. One possible explanation is that these decision-makers are indeed acting in good faith, but are responding with implicit biases. 16

How Can We Mitigate Unconscious Biases?

Acknowledging the difficulties of controlling biases that are unconscious and automatic, the good news is that implicit biases are malleable and their effect on behavior can be managed and mitigated. 17

 Although nearly all of us have implicit biases, we can take steps to minimize how often they are activated and how much they affect our perceptions, decisions, and actions. The first step is to acknowledge that we have implicit biases. To learn what those are, we can take the Implicit Association Test or other tests that measure implicit responses. Once aware, motivation to change and to manage your biases is critical. 18

Researchers have developed various de-biasing interventions to counter the negative effects of implicit biases by building new mental associations. 19

To reinforce these new associations, these interventions must be consistently and continuously reapplied. These interventions include:

* *Intergroup Contact*: Meet and engage with individual members of outgroups. Getting to know people one-on-one and engaging in positive meaningful relationships can help you build new positive associations and reduce stereotyping.
* *Counter-stereotypes*: Develop new associations that counter your stereotypes. Expose yourself to or think about exemplars who possess positive traits that contrast with your stereotypes. For example, read about blind judge Richard Bernstein who sits on the Michigan Supreme Court.
* *Individuation*: Consider the attributes of the individual apart from his or her group. For instance, when you meet someone who has a mental health condition, focus on his or her individual characteristics, traits, interests, and preferences rather than stereotypes about persons with these conditions.
* *Perspective Taking*: Take the perspective of the person. Try to understand from their perspective what they encounter and what adaptive techniques they might use to function successfully.
* *Deliberative Processing*: Reflect on your perceptions, judgments, behavior, decisions, and actions to better understand which ones are worthy of a more thoughtful consideration rather than a split-second reaction. We tend to act on our stereotypes when we have a lot of information to process in a short amount of time and feel stressed.
* *Common Ground*: Focus on what you have in common with the individual members of the groups you are stereotyping.
* *Education*: Participate in trainings and other educational programs aimed at raising awareness about implicit biases and their impact.
* *Self-Monitoring*: Continuously self-monitor your perceptions, judgments, behavior, decisions, and actions for the influence of implicit biases.
* *Accountability*: Hold yourself responsible for the negative influence that implicit biases have on your perceptions, judgments, behavior, decisions, and actions. Do not dismiss your accountability simply because implicit biases are triggered automatically without our conscious awareness.

## Implicit Disability Biases: Questions to Ask Yourself

### Reflect on each of the questions below. Consider whether and to what extent your response may be influenced by stereotypes and biases about people with disabilities and/or informed by objective facts and evidence and actual experiences with them.

1. When you think of a person with a disability, do you focus on the things the person can do or cannot do? Where do you get the information on which you base your views? Did you ask or observe the person with a disability?
2. Do you think of a person with a disability as working in certain careers? If so, which careers and why?
3. When you think of a person with a disability, do you have sympathy or feel pity for the person?
4. When you meet a person with a disability, do you see the person’s disability before you see the person?
5. Do you think about people with disabilities as a group or as individuals? If as a group, what characteristics do you think people with disabilities share?
6. Do you consider people with disabilities as different from people without disabilities? If so, how are they different?
7. Do you believe that the lives of people with disabilities are different from the lives of people without disabilities? If so, how are they different?
8. Do you use terms (e.g., “normal” or “able-bodied”) to differentiate between people without disabilities and people with disabilities?
9. Do you speak to and interact with people with disabilities differently than you do with people without disabilities? If so, how and why?
10. Do you perceive people with disabilities as dependent compared to people without disabilities? Do you base your belief on personal experiences or other sources? If the latter, what are the sources?
11. Would you describe persons with disabilities as brave, courageous, inspirational, superhuman, and heroic? If so, why?
12. Do you perceive people with disabilities as productive or competent as people without disabilities? If so, why?
13. Do you view people with disabilities as too costly for employers to hire? If so, please explain.
14. Do you view disability as an abnormality or sickness or as a challenge that needs to be overcome or corrected? When you see a person with a disability, do you automatically want to help them?
15. Do you think workers with disabilities receive special advantages or are held to a lesser standard than workers without disabilities?

### Specific Disabilities

1. Do you perceive persons with mental illness as violent or dangerous? If so, based on what information?
2. Do you view people with intellectual disabilities or developmental disabilities as being
3. dependent on others to care for them? As being kind and generous? As being
4. innocent and sweet-natured?
5. Do you think all blind people have a keener sense of smell and hearing?
6. Do you think people with cerebral palsy have cognitive impairments as well?
7. Do you view people with hidden impairments such as learning disabilities, arthritis, and heart conditions as having a disability?
8. Do you think all blind people read braille?

## Scenarios For Discussion

### Scenario 1

Nicole, who uses a wheelchair for mobility, is interviewing for an associate position in the litigation department at a “big law” firm. The partner asks Nicole whether she has considered working in other departments that do not involve going to court, and whether she is able to represent clients effectively in court. Nicole responds that her passion is litigation, pointing out that she won several moot court competitions and has courtroom experience through a pro bono project and a legal aid clinic. The partner informs Nicole that he would initially meet with her clients to ensure that they are comfortable being represented by an attorney in a wheelchair.

What implicit biases does the partner have about Nicole?

What message is the partner sending her?

What message is given to clients if the partner proceeds as he suggests?

What could the partner have done differently?

What questions are appropriate to ask in this situation?

### Scenario 2

Robert, who has depression, works at a large public relations firm. At times, his depression worsens. When this occurs, he requests a flexible schedule—to arrive at work late rather than early morning—as an accommodation. Robert’s supervisor assembles a team to work on an important project for the firm. She decides, based on the long hours this will require, the numerous tight deadlines that need to be met, and the team meetings involved, not to assign Robert.

What assumptions did the supervisor make about Robert’s abilities?

Were the supervisor’s reasons for not including Robert on the team reasonable?

What questions should the supervisor have asked Robert before making her decision?

### Scenario 3

Judge Thompson is presiding over a custody battle involving three-year-old Sean. The boy’s mother is blind, and his father does not have any disabilities. Judge Thompson must determine the best interests of Sean, namely what environment will foster and encourage his happiness, safety, mental health, and development.

What factors should the judge consider in making his decision?

Does being blind necessarily impact the mother’s parenting capacity? If so, how?

What types of evidence should Sean’s mother present?

What types of evidence should Sean’s father present?

## Glossary

*Attitude:* The tendency to like or dislike, or to act favorably or unfavorably toward, someone or something. 20

*Bias:* A prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way that is considered unfair. 21

*Debiasing:* Methods, techniques, and strategies employed to ameliorate implicit biases and develop new associations to counter our subconscious stereotypes.

*Disability:* A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a record of such an impairment, or being regarded as having a disability. 22

*Discrimination:* Behavior that treats people unequally because of their membership in a group. Discriminatory behavior, ranging from slights to hate crimes, often begins with negative stereotypes and prejudices. 23

*Implicit Bias:* The process of associating stereotypes or attitudes toward categories of people without our conscious awareness. 24

*Microaggressions:* Subtle, but offensive comments or actions directed at persons based on their membership in a marginalized group that are often unintentional or unconsciously reinforce a stereotype. 25

*Prejudice*: An opinion, prejudgment, or attitude about a group or its members (“out-group”) that stems from a preference or favoritism for the group to which one belongs (“in-group”) 26

S*tereotype:* Making a favorable or unfavorable association between a group and a characteristic or trait —a generalization that allows for little or no individual differences or social variation. Stereotypes can be positive, negative, or neutral. They can be based on personal experiences and portrayals in mass media, and can be passed on by parents, peers, and other members of society. 27

## End Notes

* See Brian A. Nosek et al., *Pervasiveness and Correlates of Implicit Attitudes and Stereotypes*, 18 Eur. Rev. Soc. Psychol. 36, 54 (2007) (the study examined data obtained between July 2000 and May 2006 from more than 2.5 million test takers who completed the Implicit Association Test and self-reports across 17 topics).
1. [Rachel D. Godsil et al., *The Science of Equality, Volume 1: Addressing Implicit Bias, Racial Anxiety, and Stereotype Threat in Education and Health Care*9 (Perception Institute 2014).](https://equity.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Science-of-Equality-Vol.-1-Perception-Institute-2014.pdf)
2. [*Unconscious Bias*(Shire Professional Chartered Psychologists, 2010).](http://www2.cipd.co.uk/NR/rdonlyres/666D7059-8516-4F1A-863F-7FE9ABD76ECC/0/Reducingunconsciousbiasorganisationalresponses.pdf)
3. [*Enhancing Justice: Reducing Bias*15 (Sarah Redfield, ed., American Bar Association, 2017).](https://shop.americanbar.org/eBus/Store/ProductDetails.aspx?productId=279580409&term=Enhancing+justice)
4. Cheryl Staats, *State of the Science: Implicit Bias Review 2014*17 (Ohio State University, Kirwan Institute).
5. [Redfield, *supra*note 6, at 18](https://shop.americanbar.org/eBus/Store/ProductDetails.aspx?productId=279580409&term=Enhancing+justice).
6. [*Id.*at 16](https://shop.americanbar.org/eBus/Store/ProductDetails.aspx?productId=279580409&term=Enhancing+justice).
7. [National Center on State Courts, Helping Courts Address Implicit Bias: Frequently Asked Questions 1-3.](http://www.ncsc.org/~/media/Files/PDF/Topics/Gender%20and%20Racial%20Fairness/Implicit%20Bias%20FAQs%20rev.ashx)
8. Staats, *supra*note 7, at 17.
9. *See*<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/iatdetails.html>.
10. Brian A. Nosek et al., *Implicit Social Cognition: From Measures to Mechanisms*15 Trends Cognitive Sci. 152 (2011).
11. [Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions: More Than Just Race*, Psychology Today, Nov. 2010.](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201011/microaggressions-more-just-race)
12. [Redfield, *supra* note 6 (*Framing the Discussion*).](https://shop.americanbar.org/eBus/Store/ProductDetails.aspx?productId=279580409&term=Enhancing+justice)
13. [Teaching Tolerance: A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, Test Yourself for Hidden Bias.](http://www.tolerance.org/Hidden-bias)
14. *See, e.g.*, Sarah E. Redfield & Jason N. Nance, *Reversing the School to Prison Pipeline*, 47 U. Memphis L. Rev. 1 (2016).
15. *Id.* at 108-09.
16. Staats, *supra*note 7, at 17.
17. Katharine T. Bartlett, *Making Good on Good Intentions: The Critical Role of Motivation in Reducing Implicit Workplace Discrimination*, 95 Va. L. Rev. 1893 (2009).
18. Staats, *supra*note 7, at 17; [Redfield, *supra*note 6.](https://shop.americanbar.org/eBus/Store/ProductDetails.aspx?productId=279580409&term=Enhancing+justice)
19. Anthony G. Greenwald & Linda Hamilton Krieger*, Implicit Bias: Scientific Foundations*, 94 Cal. L. Rev. 945, 948 (2006).
20. *Oxford Dictionary*.
21. [42 U.S.C. § 12102(1)](https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/42/12102).
22. [Teaching Tolerance, *supra*note 16.](http://www.tolerance.org/Hidden-bias)
23. Godsil et al., *supra*note 4.
24. [Sue, *supra* note 14.](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201011/microaggressions-more-just-race)
25. [Teaching Tolerance, *supra*note 16.](http://www.tolerance.org/Hidden-bias)
26. [*Id.*](http://www.tolerance.org/Hidden-bias)

# [**Unconscious Bias Towards People with Disabilities in the Workplace**](https://abilitymagazine.com/unconscious-bias-pwds-workplace/)

By: Shelly Maciuje, Ability Magazine

[Listen](https://app-na.readspeaker.com/cgi-bin/rsent?customerid=8726&lang=en_us&readid=rspeak_read_8861&url=https%3A%2F%2Fabilitymagazine.com%2Funconscious-bias-pwds-workplace%2F)

## What is Unconscious Bias?

Every day all of us make countless decisions without even realizing we are doing it. At any given moment, we can be assaulted with 11 million pieces of information. Because our brains can only process about 40 items efficiently, we need to rely on shortcuts and past knowledge or experiences to make safe assumptions. This creates what we call ‘unconscious bias’.
(Wilson, Timothy *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious. Harvard University Press, 2004)*

## Statistics:

* Despite substantial progress, disabled people remain significantly less likely to be in employment than non-disabled people.
* Over a third (36%) of people tend to think of disabled people as not as productive as everyone else.
* Unconscious bias against disabled people appeared to be higher than any other social group.
* Over one in three people show an unconscious bias against those with a disability, higher than levels of bias on the basis of gender or race.
(*Disability: A Research Study on Unconscious Bias*. ENEI 2014, [www.enei.org](http://www.enei.org/) Accessed 3.11.17)
* In 2015, 34.9% of people with disabilities in the US ages 18-64 living in the community were employed compared to 76.0% for people without disabilities – a gap of 41.1 percentage points.
* Employment rates vary by type of disability. Employment rates are highest for people with hearing (51.0%) and vision disabilities (41.8%) and lowest for people with self-care (15.6%) and independent living disabilities (16.4%).
* According to 2015 data, the median earnings of US civilians with disabilities ages 16 and over was $21,572, about two-thirds of the median earnings of people without disabilities ($31,874).
* An earnings disparity of over $10,000 in median earnings between those with and without disabilities has existed since at least 2008. The disparity has increased in magnitude since 2013.
(Kraus, Lewis. (2017). 2016 Disability Statistics Annual Report. Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire)

## Tools:

### Build Awareness

* Trainings, Seminars, Podcasts, etc.- Go online and do some digging. There is a lot of information out there. Ask questions and find what works for your group.
* Story Sharing- everyone knows someone with a disability. Be open to really listening to co-workers.
* Group Community Activity- Go to a day program, cancer ward, or a place that translates text to audio or braille. Find out what is going on in your own backyard. Assign different team members to create a project each month, 6 months, or what works for your team

### Sparking Conversation

* Person Centered Approach- Be open to looking at each and every individual in your group. What can help each person, regardless of disability or not, do their best job?
* Ask The Team- Find out how your team would approach a situation. Ask, don’t tell, them how to help their co-workers get beyond something perceived as a barrier.
* Hear From Clients/Customers- Ask customers for their take on having someone with a disability work with them or for you. Be willing to listen and make adjustments. Have they had better or worse service? Did they wait longer? Have they even noticed? Perhaps it makes your company even more favorable in your customer’s eyes. One thing is certain, you won’t know unless you ask.

### Taking Action

* Interior Design- It can be as easy as moving a few chairs, lowering a light switch or making a plug more accessible. It’s really about productivity and less about the cost. Again, ask. People with disabilities are just like everyone else: individuals. And being so, there is no ‘set solution’.
* Involve IT- could your accommodation be technology related? Chances are each person will already use technology and working with their devices may enhance their job performance. You’ve heard the expression ‘There’s an App for that’, be willing to explore. You may come across a solution you weren’t even looking for.
* Job Share- Could you block out tasks to create or make more useful positions? Does it take each sales person 15 minutes each week to shred documents taking time away from calls or emails? Could shredding be added to a position? Do you have multiple locations? Or do you know other business owners who complain about one skill taking away from another? Could shredding become a job? This is very simplified, but creativity can be your guide. Just because ‘it’s always been like that’ doesn’t mean it has to stay like that.

*Proven Strategies for Addressing Unconscious Bias in the Workplace* CDO Insights 2008, Volume 2 Issue [cookross.com](http://www.cookross.com/) Accessed 3.11.17

## Links:

[U.S. Small Business Administration](https://www.sba.gov/managing-business/running-business/human-resources/hiring-people-disabilities)

[ODEP Office of Disability Employment Policy](https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/Accommodations.htm)

[ADA Americans with Disabilities Act](https://www.ada.gov/)

# [**The Case for Improving Work for People with Disabilities Goes Way Beyond Compliance**](https://hbr.org/2017/12/the-case-for-improving-work-for-people-with-disabilities-goes-way-beyond-compliance)

By Laura Sherbin; Julia Taylor Kennedy, Harvard Business Review

DECEMBER 27, 2017

## Executive Summary

A new study from the Center for Talent Innovation found that, according to the 2015 US government’s definition of disability, a huge portion of the white-collar workforce has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity: 30% of a nationally representative survey of 3,570 white-collar employees. Not only do employees with disabilities comprise a large talent pool, it’s a remarkably innovative one: 75% of them report having an idea that would drive value for their company (versus 66% of employees without disabilities). Yet, individuals with disabilities frequently encounter workplace discrimination, bias, exclusion, and career plateaus — meaning their employers lose out on enormous innovation and talent potential. For too long, companies have viewed employees with disabilities through the lens of compliance and accommodation. There’s no better time to start to look at disability through a different lens: of inclusion and infinite possibility.

## Article

As Chieko Asakawa walks around IBM’s campus, she explores new ways of getting from point A to point B. She recognizes the faces of colleagues approaching her and greets them. She reads snack labels and decides whether to eat them. Although she is blind, Asakawa doesn’t need a human or canine companion to complete these tasks. She’s helped invent a smartphone app that, as she explained in a recent [TED talk](https://www.ted.com/talks/chieko_asakawa_how_new_technology_helps_blind_people_explore_the_world), “understands our surrounding world and whispers to me in voice or sends a vibration to my fingers. Eventually, I’ll be able to find a classroom on campus, enjoy window shopping, or find a nice restaurant while walking along a street.”

Asakawa has been able to turn her disability into a professional asset, to the commercial benefit of her employers. But many people with disabilities enter workplaces that don’t enable them to do the same.

A [new study](http://www.talentinnovation.org/_private/assets/DisabilitiesInclusion_KeyFindings-CTI.pdf) from the [Center for Talent Innovation](http://www.talentinnovation.org/) (CTI) found that, according to the 2015 US government’s [definition of disability](https://www.dol.gov/odep/faqs/general.htm#3), a significant portion of the white-collar workforce has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity: 30% of a nationally representative survey of 3,570 white-collar employees. The numbers are similar across gender, race, and generation. Not only do employees with disabilities comprise a large talent pool, it’s a remarkably innovative one: 75% of them report having an idea that would drive value for their company (versus 66% of employees without disabilities). Yet, we find, individuals with disabilities frequently encounter workplace discrimination, bias, exclusion, and career plateaus—meaning their employers lose out on enormous innovation and talent potential.

Many people are surprised to learn that such a high rate of employees have disabilities, because they generally assume that “disability” means having an obvious physical condition. However, close to two-thirds of the study’s respondents have a disability which, while included under the federal definition, is invisible. These might include diseases like lupus or Crohn’s, whose flare-ups are incapacitating; migraines, which can cause temporary blindness; mood disorders like depression; learning disabilities like dyslexia; developmental differences like autism; and other forms of neurodiversity. Some 62% say that unless they deliberately disclose their disability, most people have no idea it exists.

Counseled by family, friends, or even employment attorneys to keep silent for fear of discrimination, only 21% of employees with disabilities disclose to HR that they have one. And they’re right to be so hesitant. More than a third of survey respondents with disabilities say they have experienced negative bias while working at their current companies—and the more visible the disability, the more likely the bias. Whether intentionally or not, people exclude their colleagues with disabilities by misjudging them and underestimating their intelligence, insulting them, avoiding them, or making them feel uncomfortable by staring at them or refusing to meet their eyes.

Employees with disabilities report strengths such as persistence, discipline, and willingness to commit, but feel employers don’t see this potential. Among the 75% of employees with disabilities who say they have market-worthy ideas, 48% say their ideas went ignored by people with the power to act on them, 57% feel stalled in their careers, and 47% feel they would never achieve a position of power at their company, no matter how high-performing or qualified they are. In interviews, we heard that individuals with disabilities face deep stigma and bias (whether conscious or not) from colleagues and managers. One millennial survey respondent confessed, “I’ve been here for six years without a promotion, even though my performance is excellent. I can’t prove that my cerebral palsy has played into that, but the fact is, you never see executives with physical disabilities in the industry.”

But there are ways to remove the challenges faced by people with disabilities and open up innovative opportunities. Our research shows that the same [inclusive leadership behaviors](http://www.talentinnovation.org/_private/assets/IDMG-ExecSummFINAL-CTI.pdf) that leverage diversity to drive innovation and market growth can enable managers to support individuals with disabilities. These behaviors include ensuring that everyone on a team gets heard, giving actionable feedback, empowering team members to make decisions, and making it safe to propose novel ideas. Employees with disabilities who have inclusive team leaders are 36% less likely to face bias (compared to those without such managers), 14% less likely to repress themselves at work, and 32% less likely to feel stalled in their careers. And they are more likely to have their ideas endorsed.

But teaching managers to display inclusive leadership behaviors is just the first step. Companies also need to create a culture of support and inclusion by doing the following:

* **Provide training.** Many new employees with disabilities need support to get up to speed, but their colleagues and managers may not know how to help them—or have the patience to do it. Companies should put systems in place to help not only individuals with disabilities, but their managers and peers as well. In its strategy to help employees with disabilities build long-term careers, Unilever partnered with Connecticut’s Department of Rehabilitation Services and Southeastern Employment Services to launch a training and placement program. The program provides training for customer service analysts and regional distribution coordinators—two entry-level positions with frequent openings — as well as disability sensitivity training to existing employees to help them best support colleagues with disabilities. The goal is to train 20 to 30 employees with disabilities annually with a 50% conversion rate to full-time positions.
* **Offer leadership development opportunities to employees with disabilities.** Unconscious bias can cause managers to overlook people with disabilities for leadership programs. To combat this, managers can create development options specifically targeted toward these individuals—and include them in opportunities that already exist and are open to different talent cohorts. For example, Abilities in Motion, KPMG’s employee resource group for employees with disabilities and those with family members who have disabilities, launched an initiative two years ago to give the firm’s employees with disabilities an opportunity to hone their leadership skills. The initiative connects aspiring leaders with disabilities to senior leaders within the firm who offer advice and counsel. These individuals also attend KPMG’s “Inspiring Change, Influencing Inclusion” leadership development conference, where they participate in workshops and panels with senior leaders with a focus on building executive presence and leadership skills.
* **Provide role models.** A prominent executive with a disability makes it easier for others with disabilities to see themselves in leadership positions at their companies. For those who don’t have or have had less experience with people with disabilities, such role models help shape their perceptions and assumptions about what a leader looks like. Mark Bertolini, chair and CEO of Aetna, had a ski accident that severely damaged his spinal cord. After the accident, he insisted on returning to work, using a special chair to support his neck, a one-handed keyboard, a couch for rest when needed, and other accommodations. He continues to speak openly about the ongoing chronic pain caused by the accident to act as a role model and show others what’s possible.
* **Create allies in the organization.** Encourage employees to speak up and show their sympathy especially colleagues who are familiar with the challenges faced by people with disabilities either through personal relationships or caregiving. Shaun Kelly, global chief operating officer of KPMG International, makes a point of speaking publicly about being a caregiver to his daughter, who has Down Syndrome: “The stigma seems to go away because there’s somebody in a leadership role who is comfortable talking about it.”

For too long, companies have viewed employees with disabilities through the lens of compliance and accommodation. There’s no better time to start to look at disability through a different lens: of inclusion and infinite possibility.

[Laura Sherbin](https://hbr.org/search?term=laura%20sherbin&search_type=search-all), PhD, is co-president of the Center for Talent Innovation. She is an economist who specializes in the creation of competitive advantage through inclusion and diversity.

[Julia Taylor Kennedy](https://hbr.org/search?term=julia%20taylor%20kennedy&search_type=search-all) is the Executive Vice President at the Center for Talent Innovation (CTI), driving cutting-edge research into the issues impacting today’s professional workforce. She’s led CTI’s *The Sponsor Dividend* research and co-authored *Disabilities and Inclusion*, *Mission Critical: Unlocking the Value of Veterans in the Workforce*, and *The Power of the Purse: Engaging Women for Healthy Outcomes*.

# [**How does unintended or unconscious bias affect students with disabilities?**](https://www.washington.edu/doit/how-does-unintended-or-unconscious-bias-affect-students-disabilities)

By: Disabilities, opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology (DO-IT)Printer-friendly version

Date Updated: 4/29/19

Unintended bias or unconscious bias refers to stereotypes or beliefs that affect our actions in a discriminatory manner. Most bias related to students with disabilities groups is unintentional. Stress, distraction, and other factors can make someone more likely to be biased in a given situation.

Assuming students with disabilities are less able to be successful in their education or careers is a common bias. Examples of situations resulting from such bias include:

* Assuming that a student with a disability will be unable to complete a lab course or other class activity.
* Asking a student with a disability to take on a specific role (e.g., notetaker) during group work because of the assumption that it is the only way the student will be able to contribute.
* Offering unrequested adjustments or support to a student with a disability because of an assumption that they will not perform well in a class.
* Not engaging a student with a disability in a class discussion in order to avoid calling attention to them.
* Not providing accessible bathrooms in a science or engineering building.

With effort, unconscious bias can be reduced. Strategies to do so include:

* Becoming more aware of our own biases and changing our own actions. The [Implicit Association Test](https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html) is one way to become more aware of your own biases.
* Speaking up when you see actions that imply unintended bias.
* Modeling equity in your actions.

For more information about unintended bias, watch [Recognizing and Addressing Unintended Bias in Engineering Education](https://www.wepan.org/page/UnintendedBias) or [Managing Unconscious Bias](http://managingbias.fb.com/).

**The Case for Improving Work for People with Disabilities Goes Way Beyond Compliance**

**The Case for Improving Work for People with Disabilities Goes Way Beyond Compliance**