Make it Count

Measuring for Disability Inclusion in Your Workplace

Presidents Group

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Potential Barriers and Pitfalls When Measuring for Disability

03

As with any new organizational initiative, there are issues you might run into when measuring disability in your workforce. The Presidents Group conducted primary research to figure out which barriers are most common amongst employers already measuring for disability. The challenges and solutions presented below were identified through interviews with companies in our Community of Practice with pre-existing measurement practices.

While not an exhaustive list, the potential barriers that follow emerged as common patterns across our membership. We believe other businesses are likely to run into similar challenges as they work towards measuring in their own workplaces.

The "Who," "Where," & "Why" Barriers of Measuring for Disability: Your Organizational Context

Successful gathering of disability data relies on an environment that supports accurate and meaningful results. Your organizational structure and the context laid by the diversity and inclusion work you have done to date will determine how you should engage and survey your staff and leadership on their disability status. Barriers related to your organization itself can be challenging or time consuming to address. However, the positive impacts of taking action on or understanding organizational barriers extend far beyond a successful measurement initiative.

Organizational Culture and Trust

Keep in mind that in asking staff to disclose their disability status, even confidentially, you are requesting a certain level of vulnerability from your employees. The context for how individuals feel about disclosure extends beyond your organization to societal factors and their past experiences. Around the world, the stigma and biases against people with disabilities are major barriers to employment and advancement. As a result, people with disabilities tend to face more obstacles to getting hired and promoted.

Understandably, people with disabilities, especially invisible ones such as a mental health or pain related condition, may wish to keep their status private from their employer. Many have well-founded concerns that bias could impact their opportunities for professional advancement or their treatment at work; they might even have personal stories about how it has in the past.

70%
of disabilities are invisible[29]

90%
of disabilities are hidden at work[30]

While you certainly want employees to take the measurement initiative seriously and participate in good faith, the onus rests on the employer to build a culture of trust. There is always a power dynamic in employment relationships. If the level of trust in your organization is low and the culture is not wholly inclusive, employees are less likely to self-identify as having a disability. (Obviously, there are other reasons to improve organizational trust, such as job satisfaction,

productivity, and the comfort that comes from a safe and inclusive work environment.)

Therefore, demonstrable steps need to be taken to ensure that survey data remains confidential (or better yet, anonymous) and that results will not be used against staff that self-identify. Tactics for measurement in a lower trust environment will be discussed in the next section.

There are, however, actions related to creating a more inclusive organizational culture and building trust within your workplace that you can take to improve your results both in measuring and in your business at large. Leaders shape an organization's culture through their priorities, their behaviours, and how they create relationships.[31] Inclusion denotes a workplace where everyone feels welcome and able to contribute and participate on an equal basis with others. A shift to a more inclusive culture relies on leadership intentionally steering the effort to cultivate connection, uniting the team around a common purpose by founding it on clear values, and empowering staff to co-create the culture. Opportunities for staff and leadership to get to know one another help everyone to see each other as individuals, and lead to better working relationships. The process also requires opening pathways for feedback and being willing to act on staff suggestions, which improves trust and participation in the initiatives put forward by leadership.

Building relationships with your staff means creating a two-way dialogue. Empowering employees requires communicating values and expectations, articulating each individual's role in achieving common goals, as well as listening closely to feedback. Employers can also arrange opportunities to learn about and celebrate diversity to more deeply integrate diversity and inclusion into their culture. Opening the discussion helps everyone in an organization see new perspectives, and when done well, understand their own biases and behaviours.

One way organizations create dialogue is through Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). ERGs are groups created around a specific identity or experience within the workplace, such as living with a disability. These groups provide an avenue for staff with that identity to connect, support one another, and grow through personal and professional development opportunities. ERGs can also be valuable feedback tools for employers seeking to address barriers for a given group, and can help draw attention to your measurement initiative. Another way organizations can promote an inclusive culture is by soliciting the support of employees who are passionate about diversity and inclusion or those unofficial 'leaders and influencers' in the workplace who can encourage others to engage with company-wide diversity and inclusion initiatives.

Case Study

Employee Resource Group Builds Awareness and Provides Support

By collaborating with employees through Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), ICBC is working to remove barriers and build a supportive and inclusive corporate culture that is responsive to important needs, including persons living with a disability.

An important goal of the Disability Inclusion ERG is to raise awareness among employees that disabilities can be visible or invisible. The ERG is also working towards providing employee access to resources that support those living with a disability. This employee-led group also provides ICBC with a sounding board as it works toward its vision of being a leader in accessible employment.

Lesson to apply

ERGs provide access to expertise specific to certain identities and experiences, so it is important to consult your ERG for employees with disabilities, if you have one, in the design of your survey. ERGs are also a credible peer voice in the workplace and their endorsement of your measurement initiative will support you in getting the word out. Be sure to communicate results and discuss what next steps will be taken as a result of the feedback received from employees with your ERG after the survey is completed.

Creating a more inclusive culture is a goal all organizations should work towards, but it doesn't happen overnight. While such steps are underway, an option can be to look at your organizational structure and see where strong relationships already exist. For example, communicating your measurement initiative through team managers leverages closer working relationships and can boost engagement.

Some organizations expressed the related challenge of clearly aligning their organizational culture and values with their measurement initiatives. A critical step in the process is gaining an understanding of *why* you want to measure for disability and how the process fits into what you have already done around diversity and inclusion.

Perhaps measurement cleanly fits within your articulated organizational values or aligns with how your Board of Directors interprets results. For instance, some organizations pride themselves on being data-driven and see their emphasis on basing all decisions on hard data as a competitive advantage. They might value how data decreases their reliance on bias in decision making, so these teams can focus on using disability data in the same way—to improve their decision making around staffing.[32] Alternatively, your organization may have recently undergone unconscious bias training and your measurement initiative can be framed as a way to uncover and counteract biases in hiring. The context will vary from company to company. The key is to analyze what is already in play for your organization, and build that into the "why" statement you will use to communicate the initiative.

Solutions

- Build relationships and create social connections.

- Create Employee Resource Groups to provide support and resources for groups like people with disabilities, then leverage them to champion the survey.

- Identify unofficial leaders and influencers and recruit them as champions.

- Offer more opportunities for staff to connect with leadership.

- Build staff and leadership awareness about diversity and inclusion and create space for discussion.

- Align your measurement initiative with your organizational values.

Decentralized and Diverse Workforce

Your organizational structure also plays into how you measure disability. 36% of the organizations interviewed referenced the challenges their decentralized and diverse workforces pose to their measurement initiatives. Larger organizations tend to have multiple locations and departments, with dispersed staff and distinct chains of command. Many also have variety in the types of working arrangements or kinds of roles their employees fill. For instance, remote workers or those working in the field often miss out on in-person meetings and training. Meanwhile, onsite staff with roles that do not require them to regularly access email at work may not receive written communications. Such conditions require creativity in rolling out and communicating company-wide diversity and inclusion initiatives.

When your employees have a variety of needs based on where and how they work, it is especially important to question your assumptions about how a measurement or engagement methodology will land in your organization. While an online survey may be the simplest request to make of employees who spend their day sitting at a computer, it may be a challenge for retail staff, janitorial staff, or servers. Initial approaches often inadvertently leave someone out, so organizations must be willing to iterate and learn from each annual survey to find the best method for their workforce.

Communicating and Surveying at Key Touchpoints with Staff

With its large, diverse, and dispersed workforce, TransLink must be deliberate with both its communications and surveying strategies. In the first year of the Pledge to Measure, TransLink chose to include questions on disability within its biannual inclusion survey, administered by a third party vendor. Coast Mountain Bus Company (an operating company) drew upon internal expertise from its Communications and Labour Relations teams to edit the survey questions prior to distribution to ensure they were well suited to their approximately 6,000 operationally-focused, unionized employees.

The survey was scheduled to coincide with the quarterly "Sign-up period" for Transit Operators, in which bus drivers visit their respective depots in-person to sign up for the route(s) they will be driving for the next 3 months. Sign-up period is a key opportunity to interact with Transit Operators and share information, as 40% do not visit the depot on a daily basis, and do not have associated work emails.

In advance of the survey launch, Depot Supervisors and Managers were provided with posters to advertise the survey, explain what information would be collected, and highlight why it was important. Surveys were printed and placed in a sitting area at the Sign-up location. Due to COVID restrictions, instead of the EDI Team handing out the surveys, supervisors and managers handled the task. They also went one step further, making drinks and snacks available to foster a comfortable environment where Transit Operators would be more likely to take the time to fill out a survey.

When completed, surveys were placed in locked metal boxes and sent to the external vendor for analysis.

Lesson to apply

Examine workflows and operations to find key touchpoints with staff who are not in the office regularly. Adding perks for participation can boost employee engagement.

Staff surveys often fail to get employee engagement because of how the initiative is communicated, or due to a lack of communication altogether. A more decentralized workforce often results in less direct communication and collaboration between different parts of the organization. Messages that feel several steps removed from an employee's day-to-day responsibilities and chains of command are less meaningful. To survey a decentralized workforce, many organizations will improve engagement if they rely on localized channels and existing relationships to communicate the importance of the results and how they will be used.

Who Holds Social Influence and Finding Points of Connection

The University of British Columbia (UBC) is a dual campus and multi-city university comprising numerous academic and administrative departments. It is a large and dispersed organization with notable diversity in staff roles.

To account for its organizational structure, UBC's Equity & Inclusion Office opted to involve Department Heads and Deans in communicating the data collection initiative directly to their staff, rather than sending the message from the Associate Vice President of Equity & Inclusion or from the University's President. Their team noted that staff tended to take the request more seriously when coming from their direct supervisor, rather than a department they may have limited interaction with.

Lesson to apply

Messaging from the top may not be the most effective strategy. Consider who really holds social capital in your organization.

UBC's workforce also includes employees with roles in operations, food services, cleaning services, and residences, many of whom do not have an associated work email. They also do not have regular access to a computer through which they could complete an online survey.

To better engage with employees in this category, UBC tasked surveyors with attending team meetings to speak with staff about the survey and positioned surveyors at shift change locations to collect responses in-person. The result was an increase in response rate from 22% to 48% for this category of employees, as well as an increase in awareness and use of services offered through the University's Equity & Inclusion Office.

Lesson to apply

Low tech surveys can still get strong results. It requires more labour, but can also provide a valuable touchpoint for you and your dispersed workforce.

Organizations interviewed described various strategies to improve the inclusion of and sense of community among remote workers, as well as how these activities supported measurement of disability. With improvements in technology, including remote team members is easier than ever, but often requires added thought to ensure those opportunities to connect are frequent and inclusive.

As an example, BCAA holds virtual "town halls" where the CEO speaks directly to employees over videostream. Employees based at various locations and those working from home are also brought to headquarters in-person for key meetings.

Another example is SAP Labs Canada, which has held virtual training sessions on diversity and inclusion and encourages managers to schedule social check-ins with their employees. Such initiatives lay a strong foundation of trust, which supports surveying on disability. Trust makes it easier to communicate what your organization is surveying on and why, as well as to get accurate results.

Solutions

- Engage decentralized staff through localized channels.

- Survey staff in ways that fit into their daily workflows.

- Question your assumptions about how to survey and take it as an occasion to build community.

- Create opportunities for connection with remote workers—build a sense of community and facilitate communication of your measurement initiative.

Buy-In from Governance and Leadership

Leaders drive organizational culture. Unless diversity and inclusion initiatives have backing from leadership, they often lack the funding, legitimacy, or energy to succeed.[33] Therefore, generating buy-in from your board of directors and leadership teams creates the necessary foundation for measuring disability in your workforce. If you're a leader and you're reading this, great—we hope you're on board! If, however, your leadership is not on board, you may have some work cut out for you in terms of explaining why collecting employee demographic data is a best practice your organization should follow.

Drawing upon the business case for inclusion and measurement of disability (discussed in Sections 1 & 2) is a key way to garner support from your organization's leadership table. While the social case may be of interest to some leaders from a values-driven perspective, it is always important to explain how leadership will see concrete positive results if they invest in a diversity and inclusion initiative like measuring for disability.

Building a business case relevant to your leadership team requires finding alignment between the measurement initiative and your organization's values and brand. An intimate understanding of what values your company promotes will help you to identify clear parallels.

If, for example, your brand and key organizational values include exceptional customer service, you could draw a direct line to how a diverse workforce can better understand and meet the needs of your diverse customers. It would follow that conducting a demographic survey would support your team in confirming you have employees with disabilities who can relate to the 20.5% of the population of British Columbia that people with disabilities represent.[34] If your organization already has a diversity and inclusion strategy and considers promoting diversity a key value, you will have an easier time explaining to your leadership team how important it is to establish a baseline and measure progress towards goals that support their long-term diversity and inclusion objectives.

Having clear goals connected to your survey will also help communicate the value of a measurement initiative to your leadership team and board of directors. The goals should be tailored to support your organization's strategic objectives, even if that is increasing revenue or shareholder value.

In Section 4, we'll cover how to articulate your organization's "why"—the fundamental reason for your measurement project—which you can use as the basis for your short-term and long-term goals.
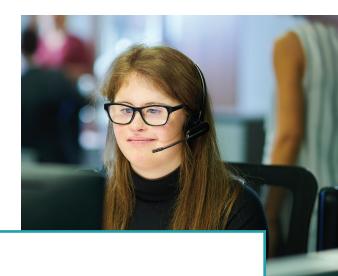
Promoting Accountability at BC Hydro

In addition to their demographic survey, BC Hydro has introduced diversity and inclusion related performance measures for managers who are required to have an objective related to inclusion on their performance plans. BC Hydro gains manager buy-in on the D&I performance measures by focusing messaging coming from the leadership team on the business case, not social justice language. A clear advantage of setting diversity and inclusion performance metrics and goals for managers comes from connecting their roles with survey outcomes, because it helps demonstrate the benefits of the survey for staff.

Lesson to apply

Holding your managers accountable through diversity and inclusion related performance metrics can improve staff buy-in for your survey.[35]

Senior leaders have an opportunity to use their support of measuring disability to enhance the legitimacy of all diversity and inclusion programs. In addition to the added legitimacy, employees have more confidence that tangible improvements will follow from their time and energy investment, which is part of the reason why leader-led diversity programs tend to stimulate higher staff engagement.[36] So, once you have the leader buy-in, ensure they champion the measurement initiative and their support is communicated to staff.

Pledge to Measure Data

35
senior leaders self-identified as having a disability at TransLink.

12
senior leaders self-identified as having a disability at ICBC.

Further, because of the stigma and barriers that people with disabilities face in getting hired and promoted, it is important to measure the rate of disability in your senior leadership team, as well as in your staff more generally.

When a senior leader shares their disability status, they powerfully combat the stigma people with disabil-ities face. They show they have built a successful career despite the barriers. Their courage makes space for others to speak openly about it too. Our interviews told us that when senior leaders have been open about, for instance, their struggles with mental health, there is a positive impact on organizational culture and diversity initiatives also have more buy-in from staff.

Case Study

Leading by Participating at BCAA

BCAA is a great example of a workplace where visibility of mental health disabilities and leadership buy-in promoted a more inclusive workplace culture.

BCAA launched an awareness campaign during Mental Health Awareness Week to prompt employee discussion.[37] The campaign kicked off with a "Mental Health in the Workplace" presentation that was available for all employees to attend, and was mandatory for all BCAA leaders. The presentation included a video featuring BCAA employees talking about steps they took to support their mental health and stay balanced.

A new, customized wellness area of BCAA's employee intranet was launched as a central hub containing information and real-life stories.

One very successful element of the website has proved to be an online discussion area where numerous employees have chosen to share personal challenges they've set themselves to work on their mental wellness and work/life balance, along with tips and ideas.

Through a major storytelling initiative, several employees shared their mental health experiences in their own words in a series of intranet homepage feature stories. Their personal accounts of journeys through challenges, including anxiety, depression, and grief, highlighted uplifting recovery stories and the importance of speaking out and seeking help. These stories attracted high levels of engagement, with hundreds of 'likes' and comments posted by colleagues.

Lesson to apply

Participation and vulnerability of your leadership team encourages staff engagement. The opportunity to share stories increases awareness, builds trust, and even shifts attitudes in the workplace.

However, a top-down approach will not automatically kindle staff buy-in. Employees should be able to see clear benefits in the goals of the measurement initiative and feel their own experiences and values are reflected in the process and outcomes.

That's why your survey cannot be developed or rolled out in a vacuum. Ask for input and feedback from leadership and staff on the questions and definitions. Brainstorm possible applications of results.

Solutions

- Articulate the business case for measurement of disability and reference statistics.

- Communicate how measuring for disability aligns with your organizational values.

- Clarify and present the goals of your measurement initiative.

- Demonstrate senior leadership's support for your diversity and inclusion initiatives in tangible ways.

Having Never Tackled Disability Before

For many organizations, disability is the last piece of the diversity puzzle to tackle. We often hear employers say, "We've been doing diversity and inclusion work, but we haven't been thinking about disabilities." In fact, a global survey found that even though 90% of employers say diversity and inclusion is a priority, only 4% were working to become more inclusive of the disability community.[38] Since one in five Canadians have a disability, chances are that most of your employees know someone who does.[39] Given the prevalence of disability, your employees may appreciate being given the space to talk about their personal experiences and their knowledge gaps related to disability.

To address any hesitancy around taking action due to a lack of understanding of the needs of this demographic at work, make sure to tap into the many resources the Presidents Group has developed to support employers. Our website holds many checklists, case studies, and tools you'll find helpful in your journey to disability confidence.
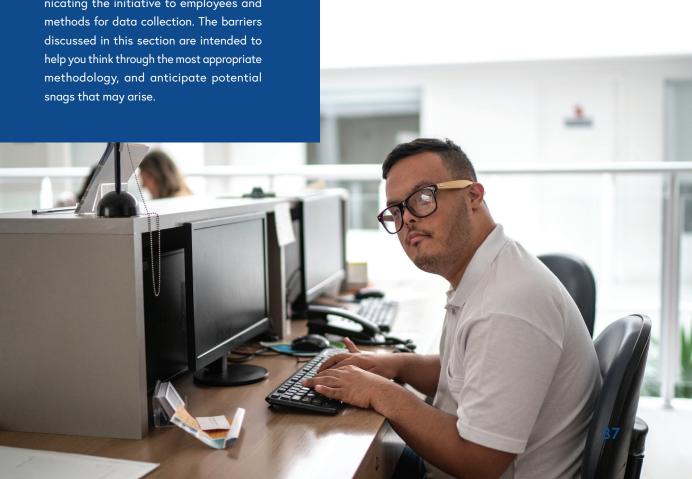
Since one in five Canadians have a disability, chances are that most of your employees know someone who does.

If you are just starting your disability focused diversity and inclusion work, now is a great time to establish a baseline. Understanding the level of representation in your workforce can help track your progress as you implement new initiatives to support people with disabilities.

Solutions

- Educate your HR or diversity and inclusion team on disability, and spread that knowledge throughout your workforce.

- Use your organization's lack of work on disability inclusion as an opportunity to establish a baseline.

The "How" Barriers of Measuring for Disability: Your Measurement Initiative

When your company decides to undertake a measurement initiative you need to make a number of decisions about how—and how often—you are going to survey your employees. Such practical considerations include choosing strategies for communicating the initiative to employees and methods for data collection. The barriers discussed in this section are intended to help you think through the most appropriate methodology, and anticipate potential snags that may arise.

Employee Survey Fatigue

Several of the employers we interviewed expressed fears around employee survey fatigue and worried that regular surveying would lessen engagement. It is true that if the number of survey responses is low, the results will not be representative of your workforce, and therefore, not produce reliable data. We'd encourage you to think of the response rate as another piece of data that can help you improve how you conduct future surveys and engage your staff. Most companies that begin measuring have a low response rate in their first years. Through sustained efforts, norms and expectations will shift in a workplace. You will likely discover ways your approach can be adjusted to achieve better response rates over time.

However, fears around survey fatigue might be unfounded. BC Hydro, for instance, reports a consistently high annual survey engagement rate. The key takeaway is that the willingness to participate depends on how you survey.

Two strategies you can employ to avoid survey fatigue striking your organization include:

1.   Listening and reporting back;
2.   Building surveying into pre-existing processes.

Initiatives that take employees away from their core responsibilities can be met with resistance. Much like with your leadership and governance teams, you need to put some effort into bringing employees on side with measurement. For employees, that means ensuring their information is protected, and that outcomes from your initiative have clear benefits they can see and track.

That's part of the reason why listening and reporting back are so important. If you are listening, you will understand employees' workplace concerns and how measurement can help address that. By reporting back, you demonstrate that the initiative is not an arbitrary task they need to complete, but that your team derives value from each person's engagement and is taking action based on the results. As discussed in the section on organizational culture and trust, when you ask employees to provide personal information or add diversity and inclusion engagement to their to-do list, your responsibility is to take their feedback and show they have been heard.

Your employees' time is valuable and your survey's design should acknowledge that. New initiatives that require a time investment tend to encounter more resistance than those that are folded into things your employees already have to do. Employers looking to measure for disability can scan through their HR touch points with employees to identify opportunities to integrate the collection of demographic information.

Two members of the Presidents Group's Community of Practice have found streamlined ways to connect measuring disability with other activities or to limit the time commitment required.

EY Canada updates personnel data on an annual basis, capturing any changes to employees' addresses, contact information, dependents, or emergency contacts. Instead of circulating a separate survey, EY has found it most effective to ask staff to fill out a demographic survey at the same time that they update their personal information.

Vancity, on the other hand, has an internal HR portal where employees can update their personnel data at any time. Each year, Vancity runs a two-week campaign called iCount, during which employees are encouraged to update their demographic data on the portal. At Vancity, the data is collected in aggregate and not shared with anyone outside of the HR team. The iCount campaign is accompanied by significant engagement activities, meetings, and communication pieces, and has achieved an 80% participation rate. While there is a lot of energy around the campaign, which helps staff understand the purpose and value of having diversity data, employees are only asked to respond if they have had a change to their demographic data, such as an acquired disability or a gender transition.

Solutions

- Listening and reporting back to underscore the value of your measurement initiatives.

- Think through creative ways to build measurement into other processes.

Data Protection Concerns

When you tell staff you are measuring for disability in your workplace, the first questions you are likely to hear—after 'why are you collecting'—will be around data protection. Who will see this information? Where will my information be stored? Will my privacy be protected? Will I somehow be treated differently if I self-identify? The need to manage this information in an ethical and transparent fashion is arguably the most important responsibility of an employer collecting any personal data from employees.

We have already established that promoting a culture of trust within an organization is the basis for measuring disability. Data sharing is one place where trust will really pay off. If your employees are not confident that you are being transparent or that you will keep their disability status confidential, they will be less willing to self-identify. And why should they? Just like you had to be sold that measuring for disability was important, you need to think about how to sell it to your staff, and what works with the organizational culture you have established.

The communications piece, again, is important. You need to explain how the data will be collected, processed, and stored, as well as who will see it. You must also adhere to strict data protection standards and make sure employees understand what those are.

In most highly regulated industries, companies pursue one of two options depending on organizational capacity: 1) hire a third party collector; or 2) ensure anonymity by not collecting their disability status alongside any information that could be used to identify your employees.

A third party collector helps remove the concerns that managers will learn an employee's disability status or that the survey could impact an employee's career prospects. Using a third party collector can encourage your staff to feel comfortable disclosing, and possibly provide more sophisticated data analysis than your internal resources would allow. The downside of using a third party to conduct your employee survey is that you miss the opportunity to start building trust with your employees by engaging more directly.

Who will see this information? Where will my information be stored? Will my privacy be protected? Will I somehow be treated differently if I self-identify?

Creating Some Distance from the Data to Build Trust

Having contracted a third party provider to collect demographic data for their workforce, BCAA does not have direct access to the information disclosed by employees. Instead, they receive regular reports based on their data, which empowers them with the information they need to make better business decisions and understand the makeup of their workforce. They believe the distance offered by a third party managed survey helps employees feel more comfortable disclosing their disability status.

Lesson to apply

While a third party data collector might not be right for you, it can address concerns about disclosure impacting an individual's treatment at work.

Employers who would rather manage the survey internally can opt for collecting anonymous data. The survey can be conducted in paper ballot format or online. The important point is to ensure employees' responses cannot be traced back to them. That means not asking for a name, employee number, or email address on the survey. It also requires employers to not track click-throughs on the company listserv, which could be used to track participation.

As discussed later, some companies, like Vancity, elect to run the survey internally and tie data to their Human Resource Management Systems. An organization choosing to go this route needs to ensure the parameters around who sees the data and in what format is clearly communicated to promote trust in the initiative. In the case of Vancity, demographic data is only available to the HR team in aggregate form and nothing is shared with managers or colleagues. Details around data access are communicated through a two week engagement and educational campaign in advance of the survey.

Finally, participation must be voluntary. If employees do not feel comfortable participating, they should have every opportunity to opt-out of disclosing. Ensure the survey includes a 'decline to answer' option. If you see a large percentage of 'decline to answer' responses, you can use that as a data point, which may suggest an unclear question or low trust in the initiative and its data protection.

Solutions

- Be transparent about how the information will be used and processed.

- Adhere to strict data protection standards and communicate those to employees.

- Collect anonymous data to ensure responses cannot be traced back to employees.

- Ensure participation is voluntary and you have a 'decline to answer' option. (For an example of what that looks like, check out the Pledge to Measure Toolkit in Appendix B.)

Acquired Disabilities

A frequently identified barrier is the difficulty of capturing acquired disabilities, impairments that an individual is not born with, in their workforce through a survey. The rate of disability is higher in older age groups, because many people acquire disabilities throughout their lives. In fact, 83% of disabilities are acquired, not present at birth.[40] They often occur through the onset of disease, such as Multiple Sclerosis (MS), a mental illness, sustaining an injury or trauma, or through the aging process itself.[40]

Your employees' disability status or their under-standing of that status might change over time. Such changes won't be captured by employers that only collect demographic data as a part of their onboarding processes, so their official number of staff with disabilities could be artificially low. In addition, given the stigma and biases employees with disabilities experience, new employees might not feel comfortable disclosing their disability status. The perceived risk of self-identification may be highest for new employees, as they are unsure of the organizational culture and have few pre-existing relationships in the workplace. The uncertainty may stoke concerns that they would be treated differently if they disclose. Unless a new hire absolutely requires accommodations to do their job,

employers are unlikely to hear about their disability at the outset of the employment relationship.

83%

of disabilities are acquired, not present at birth. Conducting an annual survey takes into account that lives and identities are not static.

Conducting an annual survey, however, as some employers do, takes into account that lives and iden-tities are not static. Other companies, like Vancity, have an open-ended survey on their HR platform that employees can update at any time throughout the year. Both options help mitigate the uncertainty new employees might feel around disclosure, and gives employers the chance to earn their trust. From a data standpoint, conducting an annual survey keeps your numbers accurate and relevant, as well as aligned with the rhythm of other metrics, so you can use them to support decision-making. When scheduling your survey period, consider your company's budget writing cycles, annual reports, and conferences.

It is also valuable to capture data on how many people go on short-term disability leave in your organization, and how many accommodations are provided to new or returning employees. Some organizations have a return-to-work program to support injured employees in reintegrating into their former or adjusted roles with whatever accommodations are needed, but the program might be housed under a distinct department, such as risk management. Coordination between all departments that support your employees with disabilities is key for maintaining reliable data and ensuring staff receive the support they need. Employees returning to work may or may not have experienced a change in their disability status. To align your return-to-work program with your measurement initiative, employees returning to work should be reminded to update any changes to their personnel information or to participate in the next survey.

Solutions

- Survey annually to capture any acquired disabilities in your workforce.

- Sync your Return to Work programs with your measurement initiative.

Self-Identification

In measurement initiatives, employers use surveys to ask staff to self-identify, as in stating whether or not they identify as having a disability. This method opens up employers to a few challenges.

First, employees with conditions classified as disabilities may not identify that way and therefore, do not count themselves on the survey. To counteract this, further education is often needed about what falls into the definition of disability.

In other cases, individuals do not feel like their condition results in barriers to their full and equal participation, and therefore, do not believe themselves to have a disability. Employers might find such situations frustrating, especially when providing accommodations to those employees.

A US study of white collar workers by the Center for Talent Innovation found 30% of workers in the country had a disability, but only 3.2% of them self-identified to their employers.[42]

Second, different demographics may respond to survey questions differently. Everyone understands their identities in a unique and contextualized way. What employers can control is the wording of questions and definitions they use in their surveys. Employees may, for instance, be turned off by a poor representation of their identities, and decline to answer.

That is why the definition of disability you use is important. Employers should strive to be as inclusive and thoughtful in their approach as possible, which may require requesting and iterating off of feedback from staff. It is prudent to test definitions and consult an expert—you can also borrow or adapt our definition from the Pledge to Measure Toolkit in Appendix B.

In year one of our Pledge to Measure, nearly 2,000 employees and senior leaders self-identified as having a disability.

Third, individuals may choose not to self-identify for any number of reasons. As already discussed, they may not self-identify because of a lack of trust in the organization, or in the security of the data protection. Employees might also have personal reasons for not self-identifying, and their choice should be respected.

Solutions

- Educate staff on disability to improve their understanding of whether or not they should self-identify.

- Conduct testing on the wording of survey questions and definitions to ensure inclusivity.

- Respect the choice of employees to self-identify or not.

Maintaining Confidentiality in a Small Business

In small businesses, confidentiality is often a challenge. Having a smaller team increases familiarity between staff members, and when paired with a high trust culture, people might share a lot. In a measurement context, staff might be able to determine who amongst them self-identified as having a disability when results are reported back. Businesses may find some staff ask their colleagues how they responded to the survey on disability.

It's important to guide your staff in establishing rules around confidentiality and respect for privacy. Someone's disability status is their story and their story alone to share. While the topic of disability should not be treated as taboo, leaders should set the expectation that fellow staff members treat disability status and disclosure with respect and dignity.[42]

How to Talk About Disability: Tips for Staff

1. **The best thing to do is ask directly.** If you're not sure how to talk about someone's disability, ask them what language or terminology they prefer to refer to disability. Not everyone with a disability, or even the same disability, feels the same way about language. And some don't really have a preference—that's okay too.

2. **Do not use disability-related terms as slurs of insults.** These terms are outdated and should not be used at any time, whether around employees with disabilities or not. Language like "that movie was stupid" or "are you blind (or deaf)?" can be hurtful and have long-lasting effects.

3. **Speak *to* people with disabilities, not about them.** People with disabilities want to be treated like anyone else, and are equal participants in the workplace and community.

4. **If you make a mistake, apologize and move on.** People with disabilities are often used to educating others about their experiences and language preferences. As long as you're learning from your mistakes, people will typically be patient and understanding.

However, there is also the question of how data is presented. Many diversity and inclusion survey tools have a minimum threshold before the data is shared. Regardless of how your company is collecting data on disability, it is important for any data sharing to be general and aggregate.[44] That means not providing breakdowns by department or role type to avoid employee speculation. Small businesses may choose to join together with a few partners and report out on their numbers collectively to further guarantee their employees' privacy. Such partnerships might also provide added accountability towards their goals of increasing employment of people with disabilities, as businesses connect annually to review their aggregate numbers.

The same logic applies to protecting senior leaders, though some leaders may choose to take the survey as an opportunity to champion the cause. Imagine a small business having two senior leaders, and one of them has an invisible disability. If their survey on disability also asks respondents to identify whether they are a senior leader, and reports those findings back, staff could speculate as to which leader has a disability. Such situations ask leaders to lead by example and be courageous about their position.