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Tapping PwDs' potential

India Inc must do more to foster inclusivity

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World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) constitute about 16% of the world's population.

However, official Indian statistics show that PwDs constitute only about 2.2 percent (27 million) of the total population. WHO estimated in 2019, there were 135 million PwDs in Europe. In 2021, America listed about 18 percent PwDs in a total population of 332 million.

But the percentage of PwDs may be much larger than official figures suggest and they need serious consideration.

Integrating PwDs into the workforce holds immense potential for enhanced efficiency, innovation, and overall corporate growth. India lags behind major countries in embracing this potential.

The notion that PwDs are less efficient is a misconception. PwDs often bring unique perspectives and experiences to the table, fostering better problem-solving and creative solutions.

This diversity of thought can be crucial in a rapidly evolving business landscape. Research shows that PWD employees feature a high retention rate of 98 per cent and an average tenure of 12+ years against three years for non-PwDs as well as the significantly higher Innovation Quotient. They also tend to be highly motivated and loyal employees, valuing the opportunity to contribute and be included.

Inclusive practices that champion diversity resonate well with customers, improving brand image and fostering loyalty. This is especially true for millennial and Gen Z consumers who prioritize social responsibility.

Accenture, in partnership with Disability: IN and the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD), found in 2023 that companies that lead in disability inclusion drive more revenue, net income and profit. The World Economic Forum

reveals that companies with more inclusive workforces are 15% more likely to experience above-average revenue growth.

Despite these benefits, India's progress in inclusive employment leaves much to be desired. Only a meagre number of 34 lakh PwDs are employed across sectors. The 2022 workforce data from Nifty 50 companies, only five out of 50 have over 1 per cent employees with disabilities, and, of these, four are public sector companies (which are anyway mandated to reserve 4 per cent).

However, organized retail, technology and IT services, and banking & financial services-each of these employ thousands of PwDs. But these numbers are mere drops in the ocean. For our country's size and demographics, the employed PWD numbers in different segments need to be in millions, not thousands.

We need to overcome the attitudinal barriers and societal and employer biases about capabilities of PwDs. Accessibility has to be improved since workplaces often lack essential infrastructure and assistive technologies, making them inaccessible to PwDs. Existing legislation like the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) probably lack stringent enforcement measures, limiting its effectiveness.

SUGGESTED STEPS

India can unlock its potential by strengthening enforcement of existing legislation, conducting awareness campaigns and workshops to educate employers about the benefits of inclusivity and address their concerns

investing in accessibility at workplaces, transportation, and technology, providing tailor-made training programs for PwDs focused on in-demand skills to bridge the employment gap. Public-private partnerships can accelerate progress through joint Initiatives and resource sharing India Inc needs to appreciate that employing PwDs isn't just about social responsibility; it's a strategic investment in its and India's economic future. By dismantling barriers, embracing diversity, and fostering an inclusive culture, India can tap into a vast pool of PwD talent and build a truly equitable society.

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