Occupational Health & Safety and Diversity, Equity & Inclusion: A Framework to Enhance Workplace Safety for People with Disabilities

Laiana Rando Porpeta Garcia

DOUGLAS COLLEGE

ABSTRACT

In 2022, 27% of the Canadian population reported one or more disabilities, facing challenges such as negative perceptions regarding their capabilities, inaccessible buildings, workplaces, and tools, as well as systemic barriers (Government of Canada, 2023). This can lead them to experience more hazardous working conditions.

 Previous research suggests that the convergence of a global pandemic, a movement for social justice, and an increasing demand for businesses to safeguard workers and the public has created a leadership opportunity for Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) managers. This societal shift also presents an opportunity for OH&S to be recognized as a core business process. Consequently, Safety and Health advisors need to be equipped to address hazards and risks faced by vulnerable people.

OBJECTIVES

 This research aims to provide an overview of the barriers to inclusion and safety faced by people with disabilities.
The intention is to develop an OH&S framework for risk management and prevention for vulnerable groups to help OH&S advisors and organizations improve their practices and tools to ensure inclusion and safety in the workplace for vulnerable groups.

METHOD

A comprehensive review of literature and organizational practices through web searches, industry reports, and analyzing scholarly articles and cases.

THE BARRIERS TO INCLUSION AND SAFETY FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

The seven most common barriers, often experienced at a time, according the Center for Disease Control and Prevention: are **Attitudinal, Communication, Physical, Policy, Programmatic, Social, and Transportation.**
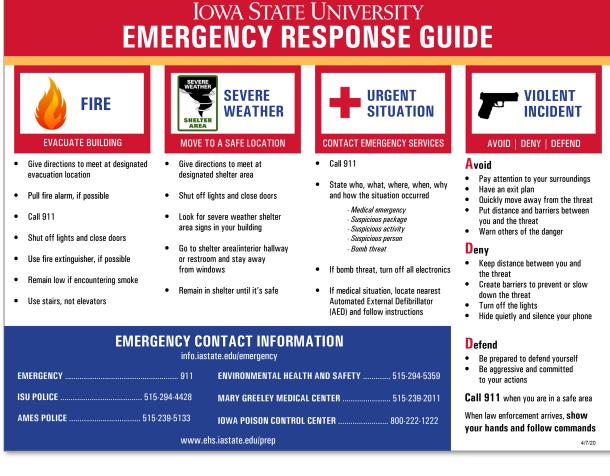
EXAMPLES OF BARRIERS TO INCLUSION AND SAFETY FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

Physical barrier – Non-accessible places:

([Physical barrier for people in well chair], n.d.)

Communication barrier - Non-inclusive Emergency poster:

(Iowa State University, 2020)

Attitudinal barrier - Stereotyping / Ableism:

([Ableist attitude], (n.d.)

EXAMPLES OF PRACTICES RECOMMENDED TO ELEVATING WORKPLACE CONDITIONS FOR EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES

At the organizational level:

Implement disability awareness program within the management level, clarifying its potential impact on workers with disabilities to obtain management's support for the program.

Review organizational return-to-work policies to guarantee adequate prevent work-related disability and reintegration plans for disabled workers as well.

Create a safety or risk management committee, if not existent.

At the workgroup level:

Examining the workplace accommodations specific to a worker's disability to ensure that they are appropriate. "Accommodation may include modifying equipment, installing mechanical aids, restructuring jobs, modifying work schedules, providing assistive devices, redesigning workstations, and providing additional training or conditioning" (Matt. & Butterfield, 2006).

Engage in meetings with workers and supervisors to debate disability awareness concerns.

INDUSTRY BEST PRACTICES IN CORPORATE DISABILITY INCLUSION POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

3M:
Disability Awareness Network is an employee resource network that "makes a difference in the 3M community by supporting people with disabilities and those whose lives are touched by them. They also aim to promote a workplace that embraces people with disabilities and seek to increase awareness and education on disability issues in our workplace." (3M, 2024).
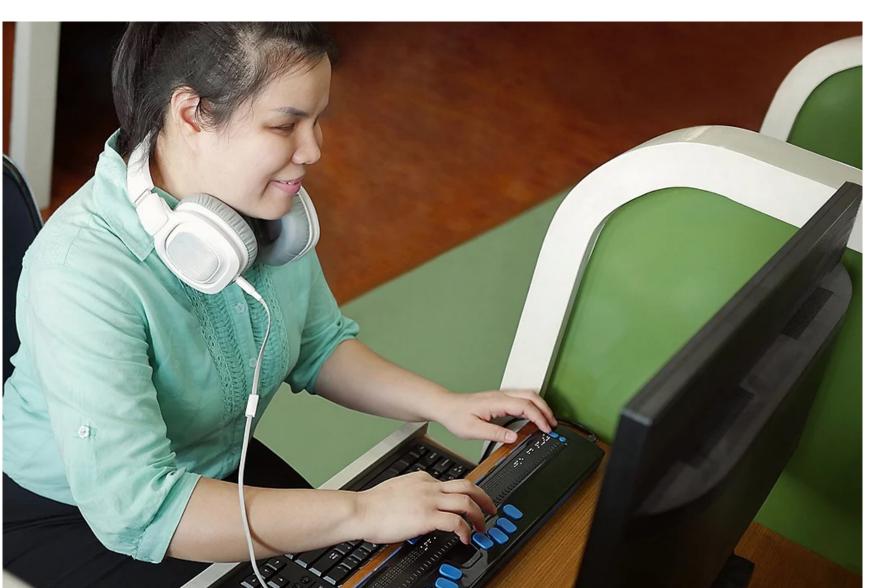
AbbVie:
Ability at AbbVie is an employee resource group that "provides support and information for employees and caregivers alike. They collaborate, gain new perspectives, and work together to enhance company culture and provide opportunities for employees with diverse life experiences."

(AbbVie, 2024).

Accenture:
Specifically for disabled workers, Accenture is "constantly enabling change so everyone can contribute equally. Their people with disabilities have access to the latest technology, resources, and training for a barrier-free workplace." (Accenture, 2024).

([VR Technology for people using a wheelchair] (n.d.)

([Technology for people with visual impairment] (n.d.)

CONCLUSION AND RECCOMENDATIONS

Organizations should foster a disability-inclusive climate by implementing several key strategies:

- **Establishing Policies and Practices:** Create and enforce policies that promote equity and awareness for all employees. Ensure that supervisors are committed to the inclusion of disabled individuals by providing training and support.
- **Creating Employee Resource Groups:** Establish employee resource groups that give a voice to disabled employees. These groups can help tailor accommodations to meet the specific needs of disabled individuals.
- **Leveraging Technology:** Use technology to eliminate barriers and enhance safety for workers with disabilities. Develop accessible emergency preparedness plans using tools such as text-to-audio converters for people with visual impairments and vibrating alerts for those with hearing impairments. These technologies ensure that emergency alerts are accessible to all employees, regardless of their disabilities.

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