

# Inclusion As A Performance Lever: The Untapped Power Of Disability Diversity In Operations And Supply Chains

Sajeev Abraham George<sup>i\*</sup>

<sup>i</sup>S.P. Jain Institute of Management and Research

\*Corresponding author, [sajeev.george@spjimr.org](mailto:sajeev.george@spjimr.org)



## Problem of practice

Employees with physical, sensory, neurological and short-term disabilities can offer organisations unique strengths that result in process innovation, defect reduction and team resilience. This form of diversity – aka disability diversity – spans both visible and invisible disabilities and remains one of the most underleveraged assets. These assets can be utilised in logistics, manufacturing and service operations. But poorly matched job roles, inaccessible workflows, communication hurdles and limited investment in assistive technologies can restrict employees with disabilities from performing at their best. So, how can Chief Operating Officers (COOs), Chief Sustainability Officers (CSOs) and senior supply chain leaders make the most effective use of disability diversity hires in their operations? [Recent research](#) by Ying Zhang, Sriram Narayanan, Tharo Soun, Kalyanmoy Deb and Dustin Cole found that disability inclusion can deliver measurable gains in productivity.<sup>1</sup> To do so, the research recommends integrating disability inclusion into operational architecture, shifting it from a narrow focus on accommodation and compliance to a lever for productivity, resilience and long-term value creation

<sup>1</sup> The article 'Maximizing disability diversity, language diversity, and productivity: A study in apparel manufacturing' by Ying Zhang, Sriram Narayanan, Tharo Soun, Kalyanmoy Deb and Dustin Cole, featured in Volume 32, Issue 12 of *Production and Operations Management* talks about how workplaces can integrate employees with disabilities while maintaining or improving production performance

## Untapped opportunity

Nearly 1.3 billion people, which is about 16% of the world's population, live with some form of **disability**, yet labour force participation among such remains substantially low.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, **76%** of supply chain and logistics organisations report labour shortages, highlighting a major opportunity to tap into this underutilised talent pool.<sup>3</sup>

A 2023 industry **report** found that companies that championed disability inclusion saw 1.6 times more revenue, 2.6 times more net income, and 2 times more economic profit.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, people with disabilities represent an important, and often underutilised, **source** of talent, particularly in the context of ongoing labour shortages and excluding this potential labour force can **cost** low and middle-income countries up to 7% of their GDP.<sup>5,6</sup> Thus, their inclusion becomes not only a business imperative but also a social priority and is explicitly **recognised** in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>7</sup>

## Unpacking disability diversity

While the focus of disability discussions has historically been on physical impairments, there is growing recognition of **invisible disabilities** – conditions that are not immediately apparent but can significantly affect daily life.<sup>8</sup> These include mental health conditions, learning disabilities, neurodivergence, autoimmune illnesses and neurological disorders such as ADHD, dyslexia, epilepsy and certain types of hearing impairment.

In mature markets such as the United States, programs for disability inclusion are becoming more common, with leaders like **Microsoft**, Bank of America, Walgreens and JP Morgan embedding **disability inclusion** into their

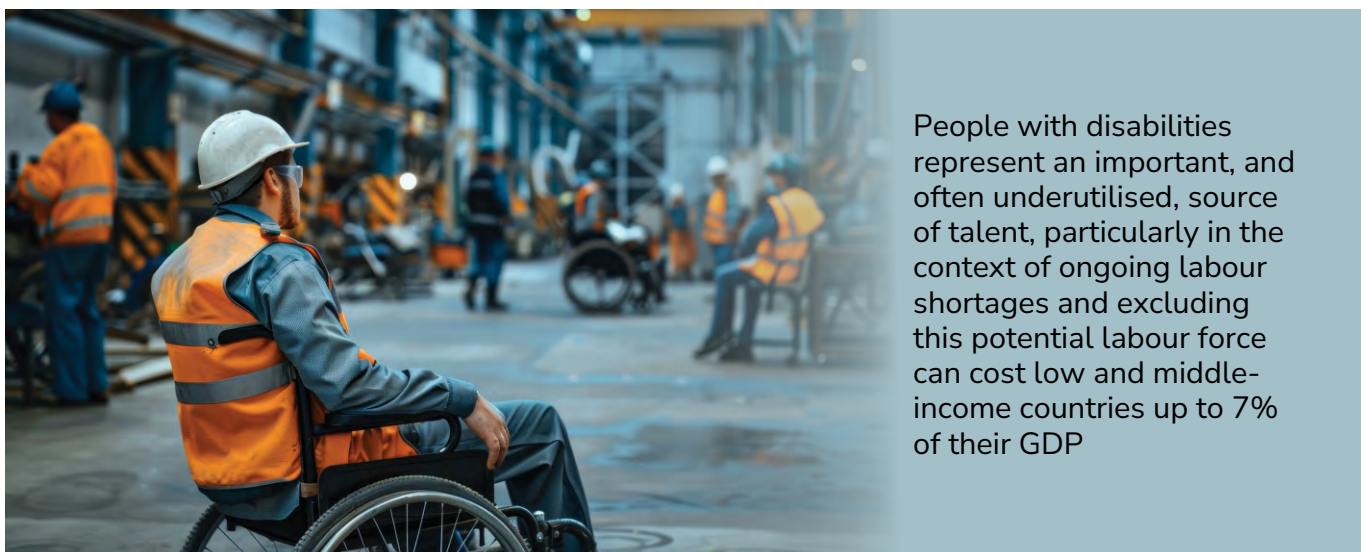
talent and operations strategies.<sup>9,10</sup> However, in many countries, disability is still perceived as a **barrier** to employment.<sup>11</sup> Such individuals face **common challenges** such as negative attitudes, exclusionary hiring practices, limited access to assistive technologies and a lack of disability awareness within companies.<sup>12</sup>

## Operational asset

Emerging **research** on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in management shows that by aligning ethical mandates with performance goals, organisations can transform disability diversity into a competitive differentiator and a driver of operational excellence.<sup>13</sup>

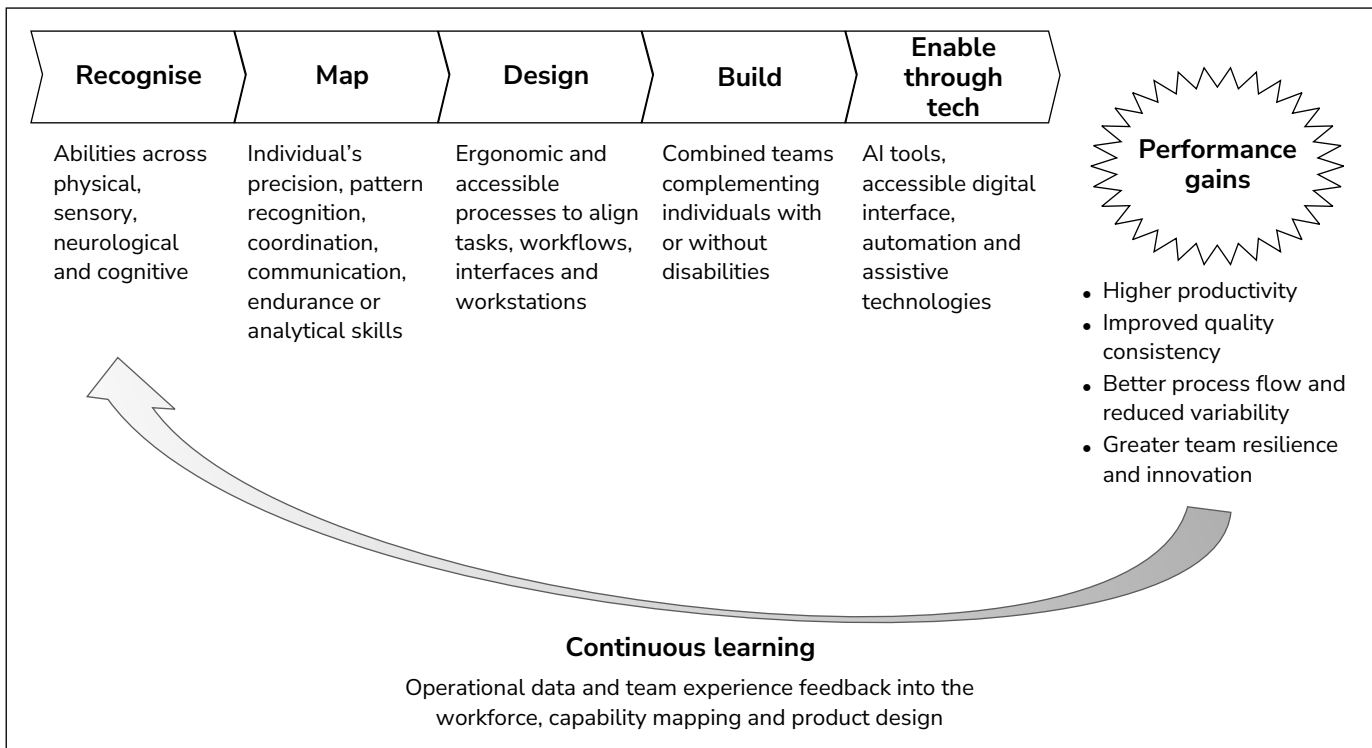
Research by Zhang et al. shows that homogeneous work groups, where all members share the same type of disability, tend to be less productive than heterogeneous groups comprising workers with different types of disabilities. When teams combine individuals with cognitive, physical and sensory impairments, they bring together complementary strengths. Such teams demonstrate greater creativity, are more effective at problem solving and are more adaptable than those limited to a single way of approaching tasks.

In manufacturing settings, this translates to measurable operational gains. A production line which is staffed by individuals representing multiple disability categories can achieve higher optimal productivity. Studies also showed that when team leaders have **disabilities**, their teams, especially those with more individuals with disabilities, show improved productivity and higher quality.<sup>14</sup> This positive effect has been attributed to enhanced empathy, shared experience, and stronger leader-member relationships, which help navigate workplace complexities more effectively.



People with disabilities represent an important, and often underutilised, source of talent, particularly in the context of ongoing labour shortages and excluding this potential labour force can cost low and middle-income countries up to 7% of their GDP

**Figure 1: Leveraging disability diversity for operational excellence**



Source: Created by the author based on Ying Zhang et al., “Maximising Disability Diversity, Language Diversity, and Productivity: A Study in Apparel Manufacturing,” *Production and Operations Management* 32, no. 12 (2023): 3783–800, <https://doi.org/10.1111/poms.14073>

## Rethinking team composition

The long-standing practice of grouping employees by a single type of disability needs to be re-examined. From an operational standpoint, the focus should shift to task redesign and the creation of dynamic processes that align with each individual's work environment and strengths.

So, how can managers use these insights to get the best productivity? They can leverage the 3Rs for smarter task allocation to deliver better results (see Figure 1):

1. **Redesign work around capabilities:** Managers can rethink role–task alignment to match operational needs with the employees' strengths. A good example is [Specialisterne](#), a Danish social enterprise that helps train people with autism and places them in roles tailored to their strengths.<sup>15</sup> They ensure that these people are not assigned tasks that require high social interaction.
2. **Remove barriers to performance:** Leaders should identify and eliminate accessibility bottlenecks in layouts, workflows, communication systems and digital platforms. One notable case is [Mahindra Logistics' Mobility Business Control Tower](#), which is operated by people with disabilities.<sup>16</sup> The company





helps strengthen the productivity of people with disabilities through vocational training and skill development programmes. Companies can also invest in assistive and AI-enabled tools that amplify capability and reduce friction. [Microsoft](#) developed Seeing AI, which uses computer vision to describe text and objects, enabling visually impaired employees to work independently.<sup>17</sup>

- 3. Reinforce inclusion through results:** The companies should embed disability diversity and inclusion into core operational metrics such as productivity, quality, error rates and safety to be managed as a performance driver. [Walgreens](#) standardised processes, tracked productivity for all employees, including those with disabilities and measured accuracy and error rates in order fulfilment, finding that employees with disabilities performed at equal or higher productivity levels.<sup>18</sup>

The takeaway is clear: Firms that actively recruit and support individuals across a spectrum of disabilities and integrate them with non-disabled peers are better positioned to achieve both higher productivity and deeper inclusiveness.

## Designing for inclusion

When the workflow design starts to reflect capability and strengths of individuals with disabilities, inclusion

---

### Managers can leverage 3Rs for smarter task allocation

1. Redesign work around capabilities
2. Remove barriers to performance
3. Reinforce inclusion through results

shifts from a team-level intervention to an enterprise-level performance strategy. The overall performance can increase when there is a deliberate fit between worker capability and task characteristics. Hence, the next step for managers is redesigning operational systems.

- Managers in labour-intensive sectors such as [apparel](#), auto components and electronics assembly can start by designing workflows that match employees' strengths – organising tasks, tools and checkpoints.<sup>19</sup> Hence, work becomes easier and more accurate.
- In warehouse and 3PL environments, [process redesign](#) can incorporate accessible scanning systems, visual dashboards and ergonomic layouts that improve throughput while minimising strain.<sup>20</sup>
- Supply chain control operations such as [Flipkart](#)

can assign analytics, tracking and exception-management tasks based on cognitive strengths rather than generic job descriptions.<sup>21</sup>

Inclusive team design is not separate from operational excellence; it leads to smoother operations, improved line efficiency and better quality control. Disability need not be a barrier to economic contribution; With the right operational, social and institutional enablers, it can instead become a springboard for innovation, resilience and self-determination.

## Strategic inclusivity

The workplace must move beyond symbolic diversity hiring towards strategic inclusivity, where teams are intentionally designed to leverage the strengths of individuals with disabilities. This approach not only uplifts historically neglected groups but also enhances business outcomes by providing a richer pool of skills, perspectives and problem-solving capabilities.

Rather than adopting a single archetype of ‘the ideal disabled employee’, organisations should embrace diversity within disability. For instance, employees with neurological disabilities can be assigned tasks that require focus in repetitive tasks, pattern recognition and quality control. People with physical disabilities can be assigned supervisory duties or operating automated machinery and people with sensory disabilities can be assigned tasks like digital design with assistive software or assembly tasks with tactile guidance. Employees on the autism spectrum can be leveraged for their unique problem-solving skills, creativity and attention to detail.

Emerging technologies such as AI-enabled systems can reduce task-related barriers and enable individuals to perform functions they couldn’t before due to physical, sensory, or cognitive constraints. Automation of certain repetitive tasks could help employees focus on higher-order tasks that require judgment, coordination and creativity. Technology can act as a capability amplifier, boosting employees’ abilities and making operations more inclusive.

## Pitfalls to avoid

However, these opportunities come with risks. Here are some pitfalls that the managers need to keep in mind:

1. If tasks are not matched to worker capabilities, productivity can drop.
2. Organisations may hire employees with disabilities just for compliance reasons, but if they fail to integrate them into core operations, it can lead to underutilisation of talent and lower morale.

3. Managers sometimes assume that workers with disabilities are less productive, but such biases may prevent effective task assignments.
4. Without deliberate planning, automation may displace vulnerable workers, widen skill gaps or introduce algorithmic biases that unintentionally reinforce exclusion.

Companies must provide continuous training and upskilling to ensure that employees with disabilities can keep up with technological changes. Organisations should ensure that the use of AI and automation preserves and expands meaningful employment rather than replacing it. Ultimately, the goal is inclusive transformation, where technology strengthens diverse human capabilities and enables sustainable economic participation.

## Strategy, not charity

Organisations can create inclusive strategies that are not only socially responsible but also operationally beneficial by studying comparative models, industry



best practices and future trends. When inclusivity is integrated into the DNA of workforce planning, it fosters innovation, strengthens productivity and reaffirms the organisation's role in building an equitable society. Disability inclusion is not charity; it is a strategy, and people with disabilities bring untapped skills, fresh problem-solving approaches and resilience.

To further strengthen inclusivity in the workforce, the organisation needs to build operations and supply chain

teams and processes that embrace the full spectrum of disabilities, using automation and assistive tools to amplify human capability. Such inclusion strengthens responsiveness to disruptions while advancing equity and dignity at work. In the decade ahead, the most resilient and socially sustainable supply chains will be built by organisations that treat disability inclusion as a driver of agility and innovation.



---

**Sajeev Abraham George** is Professor in the Operations, Supply Chain Management and Quantitative Methods department at SPJIMR. You can reach out to him at [sajeev.george@spjimr.org](mailto:sajeev.george@spjimr.org)

---

*This article may contain links to third-party content, which we do not warrant, endorse, or assume liability for. The author's views are personal*

---

We welcome your thoughts – drop us a note at [mpi@spjimr.org](mailto:mpi@spjimr.org)

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Ying Zhang et al., 'Maximizing Disability Diversity, Language Diversity, and Productivity: A Study in Apparel Manufacturing,' *Production and Operations Management* 32, no. 12 (2023): 3783–800, <https://doi.org/10.1111/poms.14073>.
- <sup>2</sup> WHO Team, Disability, WHO Factsheet, 7 March 2023, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health>.
- <sup>3</sup> Descartes, *Descartes' Study Reveals 76% of Supply Chain and Logistics Operations Are Experiencing Notable Workforce Shortages*, Descartes, 30 January 2024, <https://www.descartes.com/resources/news/descartes-study-reveals-76-supply-chain-and-logistics-operations-are-experiencing>.
- <sup>4</sup> Julian McBride and Allyce Torres, *Companies That Lead in Disability Inclusion Outperform Peers Financially, Reveals New Research from Accenture* (Accenture and American Association of People with Disabilities, 2023), <https://newsroom.accenture.com/news/2023/companies-that-lead-in-disability-inclusion-outperform-peers-financially-reveals-new-research-from-accenture>.
- <sup>5</sup> Sriram Narayanan et al., "Disability Inclusion in Operations," in *Responsible Business Operations: Challenges and Opportunities*, ed. Jayashankar M. Swaminathan and Vinayak Deshpande (Springer International Publishing, 2021), [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51957-5\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51957-5_6).
- <sup>6</sup> Global Disability Summit, "Global Disability Inclusion Report – ISPO," (2025) <https://www.ispoint.org/resource/global-disability-inclusion-report/>.
- <sup>7</sup> Martin Samaan, "The Sustainable Development Goals," *United Nations Sustainable Development*, 17 May 2018, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-goals/>.
- <sup>8</sup> Shikha Bhardwaj et al., "Underrated yet Successful! A Framework of Invisible-Disabled Underdog Entrepreneurs," *Journal of Business Research* 168 (November 2023): 114199, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.114199>.
- <sup>9</sup> Caroline Casey, "Inclusive Leadership Fuels the Fight Against Disability Exclusion," *Careers, Forbes*, 26 June 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carolinecasey/2024/06/26/inclusive-leadership-fuels-the-fight-against-disability-exclusion/>.
- <sup>10</sup> Laurie A. Henneborn, *The Disability Inclusion Imperative*, 2023, <https://disabilityin.org/resource/the-disability-inclusion-imperative>.
- <sup>11</sup> Tobias Krause, *Disability Discrimination: ZipDo Education Reports 2026* (2026), <https://zipdo.co/disability-discrimination-statistics/>.
- <sup>12</sup> Sriram Narayanan et al., "Disability Inclusion in Operations."
- <sup>13</sup> Lee Matthews et al., "Broadening the Scope of Operations and Supply Chain Management Scholarship on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Justice, Paradox, and Dialectical Lenses," *Production and Operations Management* 34, no. 4 (2025): 820–28, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10591478241243384>.
- <sup>14</sup> Dustin Cole et al., "Does Leader Disability Status Influence the Operational Performance of Teams with Individuals with Disabilities? An Empirical Study in the Apparel Industry," *Journal of Operations Management* 70, no. 3 (2024): 459–81, <https://doi.org/10.1002/joom.1289>.
- <sup>15</sup> European Social Fund Plus, *Specialisterne Foundation (on-Going)*, European Social Fund Plus, 11 May 2022, <https://european-social-fund-plus.ec.europa.eu/en/social-innovation-match/case-study/specialisterne-foundation-going>.
- <sup>16</sup> Yumna Mobin, "Disability Inclusion in Workplace: Best Practices, Success Stories from Leading Companies," *Workplace-4-0/Diversity-and-Inclusion, ETHRWorld.Com*, 10 December 2024, <https://hr.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/news/workplace-4-0/diversity-and-inclusion/disability-inclusion-in-workplace-best-practices-success-stories-from-leading-companies/116026139>.
- <sup>17</sup> Brad Smith, "Doubling down on Accessibility: Microsoft's next Steps to Expand Accessibility in Technology, the Workforce and Workplace," *The Official Microsoft Blog*, 28 April 2021, <https://blogs.microsoft.com/blog/2021/04/28/doubling-down-on-accessibility-microsofts-next-steps-to-expand-accessibility-in-technology-the-workforce-and-workplace/>.
- <sup>18</sup> Sriram Narayanan et al., "Disability Inclusion in Operations."
- <sup>19</sup> *Creating 100,000 Jobs & Becoming One of the Largest Apparel Exporters*, 2025, 56:25, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6zmeEYAwkyk>.
- <sup>20</sup> Anastasiya Simsek, *How DHL Is Redefining Inclusion at Scale - Air Cargo Week, ACW*, 23 February 2026, <https://aircargoweek.com/how-dhl-is-redefining-inclusion-at-scale/>.
- <sup>21</sup> Roshni Balaji, "How Flipkart's Inclusive Workplace Policies Are Empowering the Differently-abled," 22 August 2019, <https://yourstory.com/socialstory/2019/08/startup-flipkart-inclusive-workplace-policy-disabled>.

### Article Information:

Date article submitted: Aug 18, 2025

Date article accepted: Mar 18, 2026

Date article published: Mar 31, 2026

Images courtesy : [www.freepik.com](http://www.freepik.com)