

OLIVIA

INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY AS ENGINES OF CHANGE

Organizations must attract, develop, and retain a workforce as diverse as the communities they operate in. To this end, they must breed the conditions necessary to incorporate talents with different skill sets.



Rodolfo Neuhaus Wiese was born in Lima, Peru, in 1953. At that time, children with disabilities found it very difficult, if not impossible, to integrate into society. And in Peru, there was no school for the deaf — a fact that affected Rodolfo directly. Upon realizing he had difficulty hearing, his parents reached out to specialists in the United States and Mexico. When Rodolfo was diagnosed with profound deafness, his parents founded the first school for deaf children in Peru, the Peruvian Center of Hearing, Language and Learning (CPAL).

Rodolfo ended up going to schools for deaf children in Mexico, Peru, and Argentina. Eventually, he was able to enroll in a regular school with the help of the Belgian priest Hubert Lanssiers, who believed Rodolfo would be able to adjust. Later on, Rodolfo went to the La Molina National Agrarian University before transferring to Florida International University in Miami. There, he graduated with honors in Telecommunications Engineering. Yet his studies were not yet over: he went to the University of Michigan, where he graduated in Digital Systems Engineering. He worked for five years, then enrolled in ESAN University, one of the most prestigious in Peru, where he finished his MBA. His thesis, for which he partnered with two other classmates, was called: “The competitive advantages of Valle Mantaro products for International Commerce.”

Rodolfo went on to serve as Information Technology Consultant and occupy roles as programmer, analyst, and systems administrator at IBM in Latin America. He was eventually promoted to Consultant and Post-Sales Support for ERP packages for IBM clients.

Throughout his career, the company helped Rodolfo communicate fluidly with clients. **Integration led to transformation and success for both parties: the employee and the company.**

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It is estimated that 1 billion people — around 15% of the world population — have some kind of disability, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). The amount of people with a disability is only rising, due to the prevalence of chronic diseases and the gradual aging of the population. It is likely that nearly all human beings will experience some form of disability during their lives, either temporarily or permanently.



The advantages of an inclusive organization

There are plenty of reasons for companies to have diversity and inclusion strategies. According to a report published by the International Labor Organization, these benefits are:

- **Access to talent:** If companies focus on competences and not stereotypes, they can access an untapped source of talent.
- **Greater innovation:** Employees with diverse experiences mean equally diverse approaches to solving problems.
- **Greater sense of belonging and employee retention:** Employees that feel integrated are more loyal, enthusiastic, and committed to the company's objectives.
- **Better public image:** Consumers value companies that are committed to inclusion.
- **Benefits for all:** Everyone benefits from a more inclusive workplace, not just people with disabilities.

According to the Job Accommodation Network, in 58% of cases, adapting a job position to people with disabilities requires no cost whatsoever. In 37% of cases, the cost is only a one-time investment. *“My house and my workplace have been made accessible for me. Computer experts have supported me with an assisted communication system and a speech synthesizer which allow me to compose lectures and papers, and to communicate with different audiences. But I realize that I am very lucky, in many ways,”* wrote British astrophysicist Stephen Hawking in the 2011 World Report on Disability, published by WHO and the World Bank.

In the same foreword, Hawking added: *“Disability need not be an obstacle to success. I have had motor neurone disease for practically all my adult life. Yet it has not prevented me from having a prominent career in astrophysics and a happy family life.”*

Today, organizations are beginning to realize the importance of having inclusive and diverse teams, even from a business perspective. More than ever before, companies can attract people with disabilities as consumers, clients, employees, and leaders. Including them as part of the company staff benefits everyone: companies, individuals, and society as a whole.

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“The visibility of people with disabilities in our societies has changed radically over the last decades. While still much remains to be done, the perception by society as well as the expectations of women and men with disabilities are fundamentally different. More and more companies are not only increasing their disability inclusion practices, but also including this information in their corporate sustainability reporting, realizing that people with disabilities are part of their workforce, client, and customer base, and are also among their external stakeholders. It is, therefore, in the interest of companies to become more disability-inclusive. I see disability-inclusion not only as a business opportunity but also as a key component of effective corporate

leadership,” says Vladimir Cuk, Executive Director of the International Disability Alliance. As suggested in an article published by IDB Invest, every company should attract, develop, and retain a workforce that is as diverse as the communities they operate in. “This is crucial, because having diversity within their teams will allow them to better engage employees, understand and serve customers, strengthen employer brand and generate creative ideas,” explains the article.

In other words, a diverse workforce can be the source of innovation and creativity, and can open the doors to new perspectives due to the proliferation of cultures, life experiences, and job skills.



The importance of starting with nothin

When Rodolfo Neuhaus Wiese was diagnosed with profound deafness, his mother, Grimaneza Wiese, did not back down. *“How can I rehabilitate him?”* she asked her doctor, who responded: *“In a school, obviously.”*

The term “school,” in this context, meant a special school, with professionals who could attend to the special needs of children with disabilities. These kinds of places were not common in Latin America back then, half a century ago. Instead of lowering her shoulders, Grimaneza pulled up her sleeves and transformed her reality. Thus, she created the Peruvian Center of Hearing, Language and Learning, the first institution in the country to offer an interdisciplinary and clinical approach that served the educational needs of children like Rodolfo. She started out with two doctors, two teachers, and 12 children. Today, the CPAL has 350 employees across two schools and two institutes, which attend to 1200 people every day.

Over 60 years ago, Grimaneza was a pioneer in the arena of inclusion. Faced with a situation that affected her family, she found a way to help. And just like her, Ximena Otero today collaborates, through the Vuela Colibri Association, to generate more inclusive spaces and companies.

Otero studied communication and worked for almost 20 years at IBM, occupying different roles. She eventually became Marketing Manager for Peru. Her career would continue facing new challenges – but her personal life would bring her even tougher challenges: in 2001, her son

Santiago was born with a complex neurological condition. Doctors warned her the child would hardly survive past his third year. Nevertheless, thanks to the efforts of a multidisciplinary team, and great doses of love and care, Santiago lived to see his 17th birthday. *“He gave us the gift of time. And he showed us that the sky’s the limit. He made us immensely happy,”* said Otero.

After his son passed away, she recognized she needed “a change of heart.” She quit her job at IBM and, in 2018, founded Vuela Colibri to champion equality and give people with disabilities more opportunities, focusing on recreational and cognitive accessibility, and speaking out about the value of diversity.

Companies can greatly improve in these last two areas. As an example, Otero points to a Chilean retail company that specializes in home improvement. *“They have an equality, diversity, and violence prevention plan. They have policies, systems in place to promote equality, support channels with psychologists and a legal team that employees can trust in,”* she explained.

And that’s not all: the company has also developed several programs around minorities or diversity, valuing different cultures, beliefs, and ethnicities. They even have a specific program for people with disabilities, which seeks to give opportunities to — and develop the careers of — all collaborators.

To Otero, spreading the word about the value of diversity is not a minor issue: *“It’s not simply about filling a quota. There has to be a real commitment to include people with disabilities in the workforce. Companies need to drive integration, incorporate values such as plurality, respect, and solidarity into their very DNA, promoting teamwork and improving workplace culture.”*

“It’s not just about filling a quota: there has to be a real commitment to include people with disabilities in different roles, so that companies can attract the best talent.”

In order for companies to understand the importance of hiring diverse talent, Vuela Colibri suggests that people with disabilities who have been integrated into the workforce be given a stage to discuss their experiences and points of view.

To bring about real change, what is necessary is a holistic approach that works on two fronts: company leaders must understand how to integrate people with disabilities; and people with disabilities, meanwhile, must have access to the right tools and training to settle into their roles.

“It’s each person’s responsibility to learn the skills required to enter the workforce. Companies, in turn, must identify the appropriate roles to make inclusion possible. Success depends on adapting roles appropriately, giving collaborators the tools and strategies they need, and monitoring the situation,” said Otero.

To determine whether inclusive hiring has been successful, companies must follow up. “Employees are measured by results. In the same vein, companies need to track performance to validate the processes and challenges of inclusion. This is not just about the employee’s results, but also about how the company deals with the obstacles along the way. That’s where the role of leaders, as facilitators of integration processes, are essential,” she concluded.

The impact of the pandemic

COVID-19 has had a strong impact on people with disabilities, not just because of its health risks, but also because of the social exclusion and changes in habits it has brought about.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, developed by the United Nations, points out that disability should not deprive people of access to development plans and the enjoyment of their human rights. This Agenda includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals, out of which seven refer explicitly to people with disabilities, while six others refer to people in vulnerable situations, which includes people with disabilities.

FOESSA Foundation’s VIII Report on Social Exclusion and Development in Spain, published in 2019, already warned that 6 million people – the population living in vulnerable conditions – could find themselves in a state of social exclusion if the economy saw even a slight downturn. At the start of 2021, with the health crisis fully underway, it was estimated that those 6 million people might soon be joining the 8.5 million already suffering from exclusion, for a total of 14.5 million people. That would mean 31% of the Spanish population, compared to 18.4% before the pandemic, according to a report by the Adecco Foundation.

In this uncertain context, people with disabilities are among the most vulnerable in the workforce. Hiring rates among this population plummeted by 26% in 2020. And people with disabilities continue to face the same stereotypes and prejudices they already dealt with before the pandemic, further complicating their integration into the workforce.

The Adecco report, based on a study by Odismet, reveals that people with disabilities have widely suffered the ripple effects of COVID-19. 37% were affected by a Record of Temporary Employment Regulation (or ERTE, by its Spanish acronym), a legal procedure by which a company,

under extenuating circumstances, can obtain authorization to lay off employees, suspend work contracts, or reduce work hours, typically when facing technical and organizational difficulties that put the company at risk of closure. 7% have had to cut down on their work hours, another 7% were forced to exhaust their vacation days, and 2% were laid off.



Best practices

To successfully incorporate people with disabilities, companies need a holistic and process-minded strategy. As pointed out in a report by the United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention, they require “practices and policies designed to identify and remove barriers such as physical, communication, and attitudinal, that hamper individuals’ ability to have full participation in society, the same as people without disabilities.”

In a broad sense, this means: that people with disabilities are treated fairly by others; that products, communications, and physical spaces can be utilized by the greatest number of people possible; that processes and systems are modified to allow people with disabilities to use them to the fullest; and that stereotypes are eliminated.

IBM supported Rodolfo Neuhaus Wiese throughout his career, bridging and facilitating his communication and integration with clients. Integration, then, was the result of transformations and efforts from both parties: the employee and the company.

“On my end, I developed the know-how and the professional skills necessary for the company to place its trust in me. First, by letting me work beside my colleagues on internal tasks; and later on, as I became more comfortable in my role, by sending me to work with clients. My manager would take care of introductions and let clients know how they should communicate with me. Finally, I started working at local and even foreign client branches”, explained Rodolfo.

Rodolfo reads lips and speaks with an unfamiliar accent. But it doesn't take long for other people to get used to his way of communicating. He simply needs others to face him and speak slowly, as if they were writing down their words. That way, he can understand them easily. Rodolfo communicates fluidly via email, digital documents, chat, and WhatsApp.

North Carolina State University has developed seven principles of universal design. Its objective is to simplify the lives of people with products, communications, and physical spaces that are easier to use. Thus, their principles can be helpful for companies:

1

Equitable Use

The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities. (For example: sliding doors with motion sensors.)

2

Flexibility in Use

The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities. (For example: ATMs with improved displays, in terms of how they're seen, felt, and heard by people with visual or hearing disabilities; wide slots for credit cards; hand support for those with movement disabilities, etc.)

3

Simple and Intuitive Use

Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level. (For example: instruction manuals with clear illustrations and no text.)

4

Perceptible Information

The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities. (For example: alarm systems configured to both be seen and heard.)

5

Tolerance for Error

The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions. (For example: GFCI outlets that reduce the chances of electrocution in bathrooms and kitchens.)

6

Low Physical Effort

The design can be used efficiently and comfortably and with a minimum of fatigue. (For example: easy-to-use handles that allow people of all ages and abilities to easily open doors.)

7

Size and Space for Approach and Use

Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of the user's body size, posture, or mobility. (For example: access ramps or reception desks that are sufficiently low to be reached by anyone.)

In the same vein, the Network of Pro-Diversity Enterprises – which includes corporate, academic, and civil organizations, as well as expert advisors, and is coordinated by the Space for Inclusive Businesses, part of the School of Business at Torcuato Di Tella University – presented a handbook in 2015 titled, “Inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace: a guide for companies.”

Following the results of a qualitative study, the handbook details the main barriers faced by people with disabilities in the workplace, that is, the factors that limit both their access and performance in all companies, whether these are actively tackling the problem or not. Special emphasis is given to the mental models of leaders, collaborators, and people with disabilities, which often block possibilities for insertion or integration.

As the handbook explains, these barriers and mental models can appear within the company or outside of it. Examples include: lack of knowledge about disabilities, poorly accessible architectural spaces, and a non-inclusive organizational culture. Nevertheless, these barriers can be dealt with, as demonstrated by companies that are taking steps to include people with disabilities into the workplace.



The handbook proposes a series of best practices, among them:

Adopt diversity as an umbrella strategy

Inclusive policies and programs for people with disabilities can be anchored in an organization's diversity strategies. This enables broader opportunities for decent work in accessible, inclusive, and respectful environments, contributing to a more inclusive organizational culture. It's important that such programs be aligned with an organization's values.

Seek executive support

It's crucial to ensure the commitment and support of senior management. In order for diversity programs to be sustainable, companies may choose to focus on transforming mental models first, then plan how to integrate people with disabilities.

Expand inclusion strategies to other areas

Inclusive efforts and initiatives must go beyond Human Resources. All division managers should be motivated to add people with disabilities into their teams.

Educate and train

Educating and training collaborators is key to changing preconceptions and generating greater support for inclusiveness. Companies can organize workshops, e-learning courses, and talks for people with disabilities to share their experiences.

Propose inclusion goals

By implementing annual inclusion goals, companies can be motivated to continue their efforts to incorporate people with disabilities.

Envision an inclusive selection process

In order to ensure equal opportunity, companies must confirm that their processes of recruitment and selection are accessible to people with many types of disabilities. To this end, application forms and other documents must be formatted in an accessible manner. Even psychological evaluations may have to be modified: drawing tests, for instance, may need to be replaced with an alternative for candidates with movement disabilities.

Carry out reasonable adjustments

Potential adjustments include: moving desks around so people with hearing impairment can read their colleagues' lips; implementing screen reader software for people with visual loss; stipulating rest times for those who need it; offering sign language interpreters for deaf employees; and assigning tutors for people with cognitive disabilities.

Make information and communication accessible

Organizations can convey news and information in accessible formats that account for their employees' disabilities. For example, they can provide documents that: are easy to read and understand; are written in braille or large fonts for people with visual loss; are made up of pictograms and images that can be described by a screen reader; include subtitles or closed captions for institutional videos.

Vuela Colibrí are developing many of the above solutions. They have joined with the Kallpa Educational Association to adapt gastronomical spaces and create menus in braille and pictograms. One of their projects involved Gianfranco Caffé, an Italian coffee shop in the capital of Peru. Today, this establishment offers menus for people with visual and cognitive disabilities, giving these customers greater autonomy and independence. However, this project is about more than just an "inclusive menu." The coffee shop's staff was also trained to properly serve people with disabilities and stimulate their autonomy as customers. What was accomplished at Gianfranco Caffé can be replicated in any public space, even a mall or commercial center.

Recently, I ran into Rodolfo in the parking lot of a supermarket. He can read lips in many different languages, but since we had our face masks on, we couldn't communicate very well. COVID-19 has isolated him further, as it has done to many other people with disabilities.

It's crucial for organizations to develop their empathy and for leaders to create diverse and inclusive environments. Teams must be open to communication and they should try to make life easier for everyone, so that our eventual return to the workplace can be more inclusive. Every action is helpful: trimming our beards so that people with hearing loss can read lips; having ramps for wheelchair access; or, in times of remote work, prioritizing chat over video calls in consideration of people with hearing loss or speech impediments. The health crisis, the economic crisis, and climate change are forcing leaders to reconsider their role and purpose, as they show their teams the way toward more empathetic and inclusive organizations. Leaders must first enact change within their

inner circle, where even the smallest action can generate an impact. From there, the next step is a holistic approach to bring about a real cultural transformation.

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By Luis Fernando Angulo, Partner of OLIVIA



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