

POLICY AGENDA

An inaugural initiative to increase representation
and opportunity for people with disabilities



Despite the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act more than three decades ago and one in four American adults having a disability, individuals with disabilities today still face discrimination in the workplace, deal with inaccurate assumptions about their abilities from employers, are underrepresented in Corporate America, and have higher rates of poverty than individuals without disabilities.¹

With this inaugural policy agenda, Disability:IN seeks to increase representation and opportunity for individuals with disabilities in business through the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in environmental, social, and governance (ESG) criteria, increasing access for Disability Owned Business Enterprises (DOBE) in supplier diversity, supporting individuals with disabilities who are self-employed, and encouraging self-identification in the workplace. Disability:IN looks forward to working with policymakers and business leaders to ensure the full inclusion and participation of individuals with disabilities.

ESG Criteria

Disability inclusion in ESG criteria must be a priority for investors and companies. ESG criteria are a set of standards for a company's operations that socially conscious investors use to screen potential investments.

Increasingly, investors and executives are demanding information on disability inclusion efforts to make informed decisions. Recently, a group of investors, led by New York State Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli and Oregon State Treasurer Tobias Read, with over \$2.8 trillion in assets under management – including Bank of America, TD Bank, Voya Financial, the California State Teachers' Retirement System, and the New York State Common Retirement Fund – signed a joint letter calling on the companies they invest in to take steps to create an inclusive workplace for people with disabilities.²

Disability inclusion in ESG criteria is key to increasing the long-term value of companies and returns to shareholders as well as reducing the inequality faced by individuals with disabilities in the workforce. According to "Getting to Equal: The Disability Inclusion Advantage," a report published by Accenture, Disability:IN and the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD), companies that embrace best practices for employing and supporting persons with disabilities achieved 28% higher revenue, double the net income, and 30% higher economic profit margins.³

¹ "Disability Impacts All of Us," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

² "Global Investor Group Representing \$2.8 Trillion Appeals to Companies to be Inclusive," Disability:IN.

³ Accenture, [Getting to Equal: The Disability Inclusion Advantage](#)

Yet, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the labor force participation rate of working-age (16–64) people with disabilities was 36.7% in December 2021, while the labor force participation rate for working-age (16–64) people without disabilities was 76.6%.

Disability:IN urges policymakers to include disability status in any disclosure requirements on human capital and board diversity.

Supplier Diversity and Self-Employment

Disability:IN is the leading third-party certifier of disability-owned business enterprises (DOBEs), or for-profit businesses that are at least 51% owned, managed and controlled by a person with a disability. Disability:IN is committed to working with companies to integrate disability inclusion in their supplier diversity chains. Through its leading Supplier Diversity program, Disability:IN certifies and links over 400 DOBEs to organizations seeking to diversify their supply chains. DOBEs are estimated to have a total U.S. economic impact of over \$32.4 billion and employ people with disabilities at 10x the rate of their non-DOBE peers.⁴

Additionally, DOBEs are often self-employed, a key pathway to economic opportunity for individuals with disabilities. Indeed, Bureau of Labor Statistics data reveals individuals with disabilities are nearly twice as likely to be self-employed as persons without a disability.⁵ Yet programs designed to level the playing field for disadvantaged communities often lack government-wide goals for individuals with disabilities, do not include training in business ownership, or lack the staff capacity and expertise to support self-employment as a placement strategy for individuals with disabilities.

Disability:IN calls on companies to **ensure the inclusion of DOBEs in their supplier diversity programs**, where they can. Companies can work with Disability:IN to identify DOBE-certified suppliers to match their procurement needs.

Lawmakers should ensure a set percentage of procurement contracts are allotted to DOBEs. Government procurement presents an opportunity to support DOBEs and entrepreneurship. It is worth noting that the federal government is the largest purchaser of goods and services in the world but does not have set-asides for procurement and contracting for DOBEs like it does other historically disadvantaged groups such as women and minority business owners.

⁴ “Supplier Diversity,” Disability:IN.

⁵ “Table 4. Employed persons by disability status, industry, class of worker, and sex, 2020 annual averages,” Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Additionally, policymakers should ensure that programs support self-employment as a viable option for individuals with disabilities. For example, Maryland's WorkABILITY Loan Program helps Maryland residents with disabilities qualify for low-interest loans to buy equipment to be able to telework or start small businesses.⁶ And Alaska, Maryland, and Washington have developed criteria to target individuals for whom entrepreneurship and self-employment training may be a good fit.⁷

Finally, lawmakers should provide education, training, and resources to facilitate entrepreneurship among individuals with disabilities. Programs designed to increase access to capital for historically disadvantaged groups like women and minorities could be expanded to include DOBEs. Policymakers could also adopt innovative approaches like low-interest loan and accessibility programs specifically tailored towards individuals with disabilities in the workplace.

Self-Identification

While the choice to self-identify as an individual with a disability in the workplace is entirely voluntary, employers are increasingly endeavoring to foster an environment that promotes self-identification in an effort to increase hiring and retention of individuals with disabilities, create and sustain a diverse and inclusive workplace, and achieve compliance with affirmative action regulations.

“ Encouraging self-identification by people with disabilities is key to increasing accessibility in the workplace, both physically and virtually. ”

When individuals with disabilities do not self-identify, employers may be unable to provide the accommodations necessary for them to perform their jobs, impacting both economic opportunity for the employee and the bottom line of the business.

⁶ [“Work Matters,”](#) Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

⁷ [“Work Matters: A Framework for States on Workforce Development for People with Disabilities,”](#) The Council of State Governments and National Conference of State Legislatures, December 2016.

Employers should strive to create a workplace culture in which employees and applicants are comfortable self-identifying by adopting strategies to encourage self-identification like including disability in their diversity statement, tailoring their recruitment efforts to better appeal to applicants with disabilities, creating accessible workplaces, conducting voluntary surveys for employees to disclose a disability, and offering disability diversity training to staff.⁸

Employers should also collect and publicly report self-identification data on individuals with disabilities in their workforces. Making disability data publicly available would give employees, customers, investors, and other stakeholders a clearer picture of the progress being made in the workplace on disability inclusion and shed light on areas that can be improved.

Conclusion

Individuals with disabilities make significant contributions to the American economy, with a total after-tax disposable income of about \$490 billion.⁹ As the Covid-19 economic recovery begins to take shape, people with disabilities should not be left behind. Disability:IN looks forward to working with policymakers and business leaders to ensure the full inclusion and participation of individuals with disabilities.

⁸ ["Encouraging Self-Identification,"](#) Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion.

⁹ Michelle Yin, et al., "A Hidden Market: The Purchasing Power of Working Age Adults With Disabilities," April 2018, at 7, cited in Solving "Then What?": Empowering Investors to Achieve Competitive, Integrated Employment for Persons with Disabilities, The Harkin Institute for Public Policy & Citizen Engagement (Jan. 2021), at 12.

INTRODUCTION

The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) more than three decades ago marked a historic achievement toward equality for individuals with disabilities. The landmark legislation prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including employment.

Yet despite one in four American adults having a disability, individuals with disabilities today still face discrimination in the workplace, deal with inaccurate assumptions about their abilities from employers, are underrepresented in Corporate America, and have higher rates of poverty than individuals without disabilities.¹ Unlocking opportunity in the workplace for people with disabilities requires proactive policies to eliminate barriers and promote opportunity.

Disability:IN is the leading nonprofit driving disability inclusion and equality in business worldwide. Through its network of more than 400 corporations, Disability:IN serves as the voice for people with disabilities in the business community by promoting disability inclusion, advising corporations on and sharing proven strategies for the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the workforce, and expanding opportunities for people with disabilities by helping companies invigorate their disability initiatives.

This inaugural edition of Disability:IN's policy agenda is for policymakers and business leaders to understand employment issues facing working-age people with disabilities so they can make informed decisions that will empower people with disabilities in the workplace. It is centered around three themes:

- **Shaping the corporate operating environment**
- **Advancing equitable access and opportunity**
- **Enabling participation with a focus on environmental, social, and governance (ESG) criteria, supplier diversity, self-identification, and self-employment issues affecting individuals with disabilities in the business community**

It is imperative to the prosperity of individuals with disabilities that they have a voice in Corporate America, and this policy agenda serves as a tool to that end.

¹"[Disability Impacts All of Us](#)," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Individuals with disabilities make significant contributions to the American economy, with a total after-tax disposable income of about \$490 billion.² As the Covid-19 economic recovery begins to take shape, people with disabilities should not be left behind. Disability:IN looks forward to working with policymakers and business leaders to ensure the full inclusion and participation of individuals with disabilities.

ESG CRITERIA

Disability inclusion in ESG criteria must be a priority for investors and companies. ESG criteria are a set of standards for a company's operations that socially conscious investors use to screen potential investments.

Recent research has revealed significant economic benefits when individuals with disabilities are embraced in the workplace. According to “Getting to Equal: The Disability Inclusion Advantage,” a report published by Accenture, Disability:IN and the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD), **companies that embrace best practices for employing and supporting persons with disabilities achieved 28% higher revenue, double the net income, and 30% higher economic profit margins.**³ Moreover, companies that improved their inclusion of persons with disabilities over time were four times more likely than others **to have total shareholder returns** that outperformed those of their peer group.

Increasingly, investors and executives are demanding information on disability inclusion efforts to make informed decisions. Recently, a group of investors, led by New York State Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli and Oregon State Treasurer Tobias Read, with over \$2.8 trillion in assets under management – including Bank of America, TD Bank, Voya Financial, the California State Teachers' Retirement System, and the New York State Common Retirement Fund – signed a joint letter calling on the companies they invest in to take steps to create an inclusive workplace for people with disabilities.⁴

² Michelle Yin, et al., “A Hidden Market: The Purchasing Power of Working Age Adults With Disabilities,” April 2018, at 7, cited in Solving “Then What?": Empowering Investors to Achieve Competitive, Integrated Employment for Persons with Disabilities, The Harkin Institute for Public Policy & Citizen Engagement (Jan. 2021), at 12.

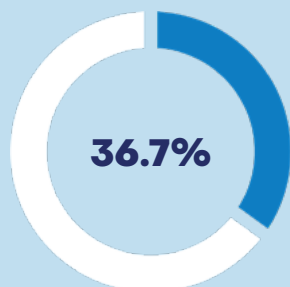
³ Accenture, [Getting to Equal: The Disability Inclusion Advantage](#)

⁴ [“Global Investor Group Representing \\$2.8 Trillion Appeals to Companies to be Inclusive,”](#) Disability:IN.

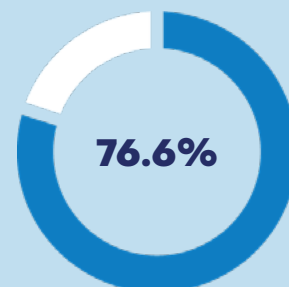
Top CEOs have also signed Disability:IN's CEO Letter on Disability Inclusion urging fellow Fortune 1000 executives to join them in advancing equality and inclusion and to participate in the Disability Equality Index (DEI).⁵

Disability inclusion in ESG criteria is key to increasing the long-term value of companies and returns to shareholders as well as reducing the inequality faced by individuals with disabilities in the workforce. A report by the Center for Talent Innovation found that 75% of employees with disabilities in the United States have ideas that would drive value for their companies – compared with 61% of employees without disabilities.⁶ Yet, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the labor force participation rate of working-age (16–64) people with disabilities was 36.7% in December 2021, while the labor force participation rate for working-age (16–64) people without disabilities was 76.6%.

Labor Force Participation for People with Disabilities



Labor Force Participation for People without Disabilities



Call to Action

Disability:IN urges policymakers to include disability status in any disclosure requirements on human capital and board diversity. To that end, in April 2021, Disability:IN and AAPD sent a comment letter to the Securities and Exchange Commission urging the inclusion of people with disabilities in NASDAQ's proposed board diversity rules.⁷ Disability:IN and AAPD also sent a letter to SEC Chair Gary Gensler in December 2021 urging the Commission to require companies to collect and disclose certain diversity information including disability status.⁸

⁵ "CEOs are 'IN' for the Disability Equality Index," Disability:IN.

⁶ "Disabilities and Inclusion," Coqual.

⁷ "AAPD & Disability:IN Comment Letter to SEC," Disability:IN, April 6, 2021.

⁸ "AAPD & Disability:IN Letter to Chair Gensler," Disability:IN, December 3, 2021.

SUPPLIER DIVERSITY AND SELF-EMPLOYMENT

Disability:IN is the leading third-party certifier of disability-owned business enterprises (DOBEs) and is committed to working with companies to integrate disability inclusion in their supplier diversity chains. Through its leading Supplier Diversity program, Disability:IN certifies and links over 400 DOBEs to organizations seeking to diversify their supply chains. DOBEs are for-profit businesses that are at least 51% owned, managed and controlled by a person with a disability and are estimated to have a total U.S. economic impact over \$1 billion and employ people with disabilities at 6 to 7 times the rate of their non-DOBE peers.⁹

Disability inclusion in supplier diversity programs is essential for corporations to **maximize return on procurement investments and increase economic opportunity for individuals with disabilities.** A study by the consulting firm Hackett Group of 50 companies found that “leading procurement organizations had slightly higher adoption rates of supplier diversity than the typical company, yet generated **133% greater returns in the cost of procurement than the average performer**, driving an additional \$3.6 million to their company’s bottom line.”¹⁰

For example, working with a DOBE, pharmaceutical company Merck’s Universal Design initiative ensures that all Merck employees can comfortably and safely access their workplace.¹¹ Consulting firm Accenture’s global supplier inclusion and sustainability practice includes language in agreements to confirm Tier I suppliers will commit to working with disability-owned suppliers and/or suppliers that employ persons with disabilities.¹² And Fidelity’s Procurement Analytics team created a self-serve online portal to help sourcing managers find disability-owned suppliers who may meet the needs of their upcoming sourcing events.¹³

⁹ “[Supplier Diversity](#),” Disability:IN.

¹⁰ The Hackett Group. “Supplier Diversity Pays Off,” *Purchasing*, 135, no. 12, (09/07/2006): 27

¹¹ “[Universal Design at Merck](#),” Disability:IN, August 1, 2021.

¹² “[Accenture’s Supplier Diversity & Inclusion Program Integrated Tier 1 Support Language Driving Commitments to Disability-Owned Business Enterprises](#),” Disability:IN, August 1, 2021.

¹³ “[Fidelity Investment’s Self-Serve Online Portal for Sourcing Managers Champions Disability:IN Certified Vendors](#),” Disability:IN, August 1, 2021.

Additionally, DOBEs are often self-employed, a key pathway to economic opportunity for individuals with disabilities. Yet programs designed to level the playing field for disadvantaged communities often lack government-wide goals for individuals with disabilities, do not include training in business ownership, or lack the staff capacity and expertise to support self-employment as a placement strategy for individuals with disabilities.

Bureau of Labor Statistics data reveals **individuals with disabilities are nearly twice as likely to be self-employed** as persons without a disability.¹⁴ Self-employment appeals to individuals with disabilities for a variety of reasons, including **necessity as a result of higher unemployment, flexibility in work hours, and better accommodations at home.**¹⁵

Call to Action

Companies should ensure the inclusion of disability-owned business enterprises (DOBEs) in their supplier diversity programs, where they can. Companies can work with Disability:IN to identify DOBE-certified suppliers to match their procurement needs.

Lawmakers should ensure a set percentage of procurement contracts are allotted to DOBEs. Government procurement presents an opportunity to support DOBEs and entrepreneurship.

For example, in Illinois, the set-aside program sets a goal of 20% of the total amount of state contracts for all Business Enterprise Program eligible vendors, including 2% for DOBEs.¹⁶

It is worth noting that the federal government is the largest purchaser of goods and services in the world but does not have set-asides for procurement and contracting for DOBEs like it does other historically disadvantaged groups such as women and minority business owners.

¹⁴ ["Table 4. Employed persons by disability status, industry, class of worker, and sex, 2020 annual averages,"](#) Bureau of Labor Statistics.

¹⁵ Kitching, John. (2014). Entrepreneurship and self-employment by people with disabilities.

¹⁶ ["Work Matters: A Framework for States on Workforce Development for People with Disabilities,"](#) The Council of State Governments and National Conference of State Legislatures, December 2016.

“ The federal government alone is the largest purchaser of goods and services in the world but does not have set-asides for procurement and contracting for DOBEs. ”

Additionally, policymakers should ensure that programs support self-employment as a viable option for individuals with disabilities. For example, Maryland’s WorkABILITY Loan Program helps Maryland residents with disabilities qualify for low-interest loans to buy equipment to be able to telework or start small businesses.¹⁷ And Alaska, Maryland and Washington have developed criteria to target individuals for whom entrepreneurship and self-employment training may be a good fit.¹⁸

Lastly, lawmakers should provide education, training, and resources to facilitate entrepreneurship among individuals with disabilities. Programs designed to increase access to capital for historically disadvantaged groups like women and minorities could be expanded to include DOBEs.

Policymakers could adopt innovative approaches like low-interest loan and accessibility programs specifically tailored towards individuals with disabilities in the workplace. For example, disability-owned businesses certified as an Iowa Targeted Small Business are eligible for microloans of up to \$50,000 to start or expand a business.¹⁹

¹⁷ [“Work Matters,”](#) Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

¹⁸ [“Work Matters: A Framework for States on Workforce Development for People with Disabilities,”](#) The Council of State Governments and National Conference of State Legislatures, December 2016.

¹⁹ [“Targeted Small Business Loans,”](#) Iowa Economic Development Authority.

SELF-IDENTIFICATION

Employers are generally allowed to ask applicants and employees to voluntarily self-identify as disabled if the employer is taking affirmative actions because of a federal, state, or local law or if “the employer is voluntarily using the information to benefit individuals with disabilities.”²⁰ While the choice to self-identify is entirely voluntary, employers are increasingly endeavoring to foster an environment that promotes self-identification in an effort to increase hiring and retention of individuals with disabilities, create and sustain a diverse and inclusive workplace, and achieve compliance with affirmative action regulations.

One little known fact is that encouraging self-identification by people with disabilities is key to increasing accessibility in the workplace, both physically and virtually. When individuals with disabilities do not self-identify, employers may be unable to provide the accommodations necessary for them to perform their jobs, impacting both economic opportunity for the employee and the bottom line of the business.

Call to Action

For employers to measure their progress towards these objectives, they should strive to create a workplace culture in which employees and applicants are comfortable self-identifying, including when a disability may not be visible. To that end, employers should adopt strategies to encourage self-identification like including disability in their diversity statement, tailoring their recruitment efforts to better appeal to applicants with disabilities, creating accessible workplaces, conducting voluntary surveys for employees to disclose a disability, and offering disability diversity training to staff.²¹

Research has shown that many **individuals with disabilities are reluctant to self-identify**. For example, a study by researchers at Cornell University found the top reasons individuals did not disclose a disability include **the risk of being fired or not hired, the employer focusing on the disability, the risk of losing health care coverage, fear of limited opportunities, and an unsupportive supervisor**.²²

²⁰ [U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Enforcement Guidance on Preemployment Disability-Related Questions and Medical Examinations under the ADA, EEOC](#)

²¹ [“Encouraging Self-Identification,” Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion.](#)

Equally important, employers should collect and publicly report self-identification data on individuals with disabilities in their workforces. While some recognizable brands like Accenture, AT&T, Google, Intel, Microsoft, and Northrop Grumman publish data on individuals with disabilities in their workforce annually, many employers collect but do not report this data.

“ Making disability data publicly available would give employees, customers, investors and other stakeholders a clearer picture of the progress being made in the workplace on disability inclusion and shed light on areas that can be improved. ”

Moreover, the well-documented corporate and shareholder benefits of disability inclusion, increasing shareholder demand for corporate accountability and reporting on ESG criteria, and the rise of ESG-focused investment products has demonstrated that this information is material to investors and necessary for them to make informed investment choices.

For these reasons, Disability:IN believes the SEC has the broad authority to require public companies to collect and disclose certain diversity information including disability status.

²² Schrader, Sarah & Malzer, Valerie & Erickson, William & Bruyere, Susanne. (2011). Emerging Employment Issues for People with Disabilities.

CONCLUSION

Despite the passage of the ADA more than three decades ago, individuals with disabilities still face economic exclusion and discrimination. Explicit policies to eliminate barriers and promote opportunity in the workplace are key to unlocking opportunity in the workplace for people with disabilities.

With this inaugural policy agenda, Disability:IN seeks to increase representation and opportunity for individuals with disabilities in business through encouraging self-identification in the workplace, increasing access for DOBEs in supplier diversity, supporting individuals with disabilities who are self-employed, and the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in ESG criteria. Disability:IN looks forward to working with policymakers and business leaders to ensure the full inclusion and participation of individuals with disabilities.



About Disability:IN

Disability:IN is the leading nonprofit driving disability inclusion and equality in business worldwide. Our network of more than 400 corporations expands opportunities for people with disabilities across industries. Our organization and 25 local affiliates nationwide raise a collective voice of positive change for people with disabilities in business.

We do this by:

- Promoting disability inclusion through heightening awareness;
- Advising corporations on and sharing proven strategies for including people with disabilities in the workplace, supply chain, and marketplace; and
- Expanding opportunities for people with disabilities by helping companies invigorate their disability initiatives, explore best practices, incorporate culture changes, and realize positive business outcomes.



Learn more at DisabilityIN.org