People with Disabilities: The World’s Largest Minority

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“We are all disabled…on some of us it shows.”¹ That statement from James F. X. Payne, telecommunications executive and chair of Gallaudet University’s Board of Associates, speaks to the profound impact disability is having on the people and nations of the world.

At some point in life, almost everyone experiences a temporary or long-term mental or physical impairment. A broken leg, a bout of depression, or a back injury may provide insight into the challenges of living without full functionality. A few days on a pair of crutches in a modern city might help you understand why some describe modern cityscapes as “An Architecture of Apartheid.”²

The number of people with disabilities is swelling. The 2011 World Report on Disability indicates that, “More than one billion people in the world live with some form of disability, of whom nearly 200 million experience considerable difficulties in functioning. In the years ahead, disability will be an even greater concern because its prevalence is on the rise.”³ The growing risk of disability is due, in part, to the ageing of the populations of many nations and the global increase in chronic health conditions from cancer to mental health disorders.

Affecting every aspect of society, the issue has become a global priority summoning the resources of the United Nations’ World Health Organization (WHO), the World Bank, and the world’s nations, organizations, and businesses. People with disabilities, activists, and organizations are driving a paradigm shift that is creating a new model of disability that focuses on society’s responsibilities to people with disabilities.

This chapter discusses this paradigm shift, the evolving approaches to disability and their benefits and global impacts, and the roles governments and global organizations, advanced communications technologies, and global commerce are playing in its implementation.

A Long Time Coming

The global perspective on what it means to have a disability has taken many centuries to evolve. According to Jonathan J. Kaufman, founder of strategy and consulting firm DisabilityWorks, Inc., this paradigm shift is a momentous advance, because it overcomes a “lingering pathology” that has long isolated people with disabilities from their communities.⁴

Throughout history, the “normal” has been associated with good, and the “abnormal” with the bad. To the public, disability was “abnormal,” and societies felt justified in treating people with disabilities as “different,” “defective,” and “inferior.” They were “outsiders” and, as suggested by the word “invalid,” not valid.
University of Iowa Associate Professor of History of Disability Baynton C. Douglas has observed that people from western cultures “routinely associated nonwhite races with disabled people, depicting both as evolutionary laggards or throwbacks.” Douglas refers to the physician who first identified Down syndrome in 1866 as Mongolism, because he understood it as a biological reversion by Caucasians to the Mongol racial type. That label prevailed well into the 1950s. The international eugenics movement and the systematic elimination of the people with disabilities by Nazi Germany demonstrated how terribly far societies could take these prejudices.

The Role of Attitudes in Shaping Disability Policies

Global cultures have put much of this bigotry behind, but many individuals and societies still view people with disabilities as inferior. An anecdote from the former USSR reveals the opinion that people with disabilities are a disgrace to national reputations: “During the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow, a Western journalist inquired whether the Soviet Union would participate in the first Paralympic games…The reply from a Soviet representative was swift, firm, and puzzling: ‘There are no invalids in the USSR!’”

In February 16, 2011 testimony before a U.S. Senate subcommittee, Yvonne Jones, director of the strategic issues for General Accounting Offices, identified “attitude” as “the most significant barrier keeping people with disabilities from the workplace…. Attitudinal barriers can include bias against and low expectations for people with disabilities—a focus on disabilities rather than abilities.”

Many Westerners consider people with disabilities as childlike, less intelligent, and dependent. A recent study found that Americans still have reservations about people with serious mental health problems. A majority of the public continues to express an unwillingness to work closely (62 percent) or socialize (52 percent) with a person with schizophrenia. This lack of progress surprised the researchers because of the significant increase in the percentage of people who attribute mental illness to neurobiological causes.

Religion plays a role in certain Asian cultures that view disabilities as punishment for misconduct in a past life, and, in some cases, the source of a family’s disgrace. In rural India, intellectually disabled males are “the butt of social ridicule,” and placed in the category of not marriageable, “feeble-mindedness” [is a] deviance associated with hot temper, erratic behavior and impotence and people manifesting such characteristics are described as mad or paagal.”

Islam has a very different view of disability, but it creates its own challenges because its “perception that disability is…[a] test in front of God and that one should be thankful under any circumstances, limits the prospects of a rights-based attitude, of feeling as having the right to have rights.” The World Bank reports that “social stigma and discrimination against persons with disabilities is a common occurrence in [the Middle East and North Africa], not only in the physical and cultural environment surrounding persons with disabilities, but even within their own families. Thus, social exclusion limits the opportunities open to persons with disability to participate as full and productive members of the society.”
In Turkey, many people with mobility impairments live as virtual “home prisoners” because of inaccessibility. Turkish sign language did not become an official sign language until 2005, suggesting a cultural indifference to the disability community.13

A study of depictions of HIV/AIDS in the Israeli press found that the media often portrayed the illness as a disease “of the other” and a “foreign illness” mainly afflicting immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia. Some journalists described people with HIV/AIDS metaphorically as deviant or nonhuman in their conduct or appearance.14

This prejudice has long encumbered global efforts to allow people with disabilities to become full participants in their cultures. Margaret Wangui Murugami, lecturer in special needs education at Kenyatta University, explains, “Society often does not take into account the ways in which impairment is part of humanity. Instead, it views the effects of impairment as obstacles…Society desires that a person with a disability fit into societal structures, rather than structures fitting into the person’s with disability needs.”15 Murugami believes that society must accept that “a person with disability has the capability of constructing a self-identity not constituted in impairment but rather independent of it, and of accepting impairment as a reality that he or she lives with without losing a sense of self.”16 Personhood emanates from the interaction with society, and the goal of the new model of disability “shifts from fixing individuals to eliminating socially constructed barriers (meaning everything from prejudice to physical access barriers).”17

How do we, as diversity professionals, bridge these barriers to ensure that all members of our organizations feel welcome, respected, and part of the team? Deborah Dagit, vice president and chief diversity officer of Merck & Co, Inc., observed that even highly regarded diversity specialists have admitted their own uneasiness when working with people with disabilities. “It is difficult to create a sense of belonging when employees without disability feel emotionally challenged to be in the presence of a person with an impairment and not stare, back off, or be unable to make eye contact.”18

Titan Industries, a manufacturer of timepieces in India, employed a very systematic and sensitive process to overcome India’s traditional cultural disdain of people with disabilities and recruit and integrate them into its workforce. Titan succeeded by:

- Providing counseling sessions with families during the transition
- Creating barrier-free workspaces, including provision of handrails to support persons with loco-motor disabilities
- Encouraging all workers to share a common room
- Supporting work-group camaraderie (everyone responsible for fabricating watch straps uses sign language
- Creating programs to build technical competencies and computer literacy
- Ensuring human resource policies are all non-discriminatory, including promotion and effective grievance procedures
- Working with NGOs to create programs on disability awareness and personal development for people with disabilities

People with disabilities comprise 4 percent of Titan’s workforce (29 with physical disabilities, 84 with hearing/speech impairments, and 4 who are visually impaired).
company found that workers with disabilities tend to be more loyal and job-focused than other employees.¹⁹

**The Evolution of the Disability Model**

If disability is part of humanity and not an isolated abnormality, then society should manage it holistically and with the goal of making people with disabilities full members of their societies. This principle overturned convention and had far-reaching implications for people with disabilities and the national and local governments, international organizations, and administrative programs responsible for serving their needs.²⁰

Until the 1980s, the “medical model” was the state-of-the-art approach to disability and its management. The model “locates the disability within the person.”²¹ By focusing specifically on the impairment rather than the whole person, this model asserts that only medical professionals are qualified to manage disability, have sole decision-making authority, and expect the patient to follow orders.²² This approach is inconsistent with the facts that people with disabilities have social, economic, and cultural needs and that they have the knowledge and experience to make informed choices about their health and their lives.

Consequently, people with disabilities, their advocates, and researchers became determined to replace the current model with one that stressed “the interaction between the person with the disability and his or her environment.”²³ This societal, rights-based approach would be “based on the conviction that most problems associated with disability could be addressed best through self-advocacy,” and the removal of diverse barriers that restricted self-determination, quality of life, and community participation.²⁴

Scholars have incorporated these beliefs into a new model, which carries various names, such as the cultural, social, or human rights model. (This chapter uses the term “social model” going forward.) In general, the social model sees disability as a social construct in which “disability is not the attribute of the individual; instead, it is created by the social environment and requires social change.”²⁵ Within this model, society has a responsibility to address barriers that prevent the participation of persons with disabilities, shifting the focus from fixing individuals to eliminating socially constructed barriers.

**Three Powerful Forces**

The paradigm shift is helping fuel the transformation of the world’s attitudes about disability. The disability community is demonstrating its strength and driving change. It is allying with three powerful forces to produce a better future for people with disabilities:

1. The United Nations, WHO, the World Bank, and the world’s nations, organizations, and businesses are promoting legislative, programmatic, and social reforms to transform global concepts of disability.
2. Advanced communications technologies are enabling the distribution of information to distant locations, providing breakthrough assistive devices and systems;
3. The disability community’s economic power and enhanced cultural experiences are offering the growth opportunities to local, national, and global businesses.
Governmental Reform

During the 1960s and 1970s, people with disabilities and their organizations began seeking consensus on overarching issues common to a range of disability categories. These efforts were particularly effective in the United States where advocates succeeded in convincing the federal government to implement Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and adopt the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 and its 2008 amendments. The U.S. emphasis on antidiscrimination legislation helped advance the social-cultural goals by employing environmental accessibility regulations to enhance the standard of living and employment opportunities for people with disabilities.26

Many nations are addressing disability issues using more collective approaches. Norway, for example, adopted redistributive policies in the Discrimination and Accessibility Act of 2008 and the Working Environment Act of 2005. (Redistributive services use government funds to deliver resources to different groups of the population to narrow socio-economic inequities among these groups.) Using funds from the national budget, the Norwegian National Insurance Scheme distributes resources and services primarily through public assistive technology centers or employers.27

The United Nations has taken on an even bigger challenge. On December 13, 2006, the UN General Assembly adopted The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) to ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity. The convention requires state parties “to develop, promulgate, and monitor the implementation of minimum standards and guidelines for the accessibility of facilities and services open or provided to the public.” It also obliges state parties to “ensure that private entities that offer facilities and services which are open or provided to the public take into account all aspects of accessibility for persons with disabilities.”28

With its 149 signatories, the CRPD represents an extraordinary advance for the disability community, because it signified global recognition that disability is an issue of human rights and development. The CRPD affirms that persons with disabilities experience worse socioeconomic outcomes and poverty than persons without them, and it officially recognized the acceptance of the new paradigm.

Astute executives of multinational corporations and their diversity professionals are collaborating with the UN and other governmental entities. The Bangkok Post applauded AirAsia for its participation in an UN-sponsored conference to promote cooperation between governments, businesses, and disability organizations. The airline “outpaced its rivals earlier this month by becoming the only travel-industry company to be represented at a regional conference on facilitating accessibility for people with disabilities. Although all airlines facilitate travel by [people with disabilities], AirAsia has been faster at capitalizing on the marketing and corporate social responsibility benefits of this service as an intrinsic part of its ‘now everyone can fly’ marketing slogan.”29
Advanced Technologies

According to New York Times op-ed columnist Thomas L. Friedman, “globalization and the information technology revolution have gone to a whole new level. Thanks to cloud computing, robotics, 3G wireless connectivity, Skype, Facebook, Google, LinkedIn, Twitter, the iPad, and cheap Internet-enabled smartphones, the world has gone from connected to hyper-connected.” The parade of technical wonders continues to astound, but what is becoming even more compelling about the digital revolution is its “super-empowering” [of] individuals, enabling them to challenge hierarchies and traditional authority figures—from business to science to government.

Friedman’s observations on “super-empowering” could serve as a clarion call to the disability community, renewing optimism and urging its advocates to greater effort. The democratizing influence of global communications is particularly relevant to people with disabilities. The Internet provides individuals with the power to become global agents of social change.

Advanced technology also helps persons with disabilities overcome discrimination. Government regulations cannot prevent all acts of bias against people with particular cultural, social, or physical characteristics in interpersonal encounters, for example, with service provider or store merchant. E-commerce providers do not have those opportunities, because they know only as much as the customer is willing to share. Internet anonymity also enables individuals to interact without preconception.

However, the power of advanced communications technologies raises another challenge to the disability community: ensuring access. According to past research, the ratio in the United States of all Americans online compared to ones with disabilities is 4 to 1. We are accustomed to seeing the digital divide as separating the rich and the poor. The most problematic dimension of the digital inequality is the capabilities constraint. Many websites that are accessible to fully abled people may be inaccessible to many people in the disability community. Website designers should approach accessibility from the earliest stages, and work with each component of the disability community to understand and address its specific requirements. Collaboration with the hearing community, for example, could help them incorporate the styles and needs of both sign language users and those who communicate orally.

Given its complexity, this task may seem daunting, but the prospect of a fully accessible Internet is eminently achievable and driven by social, economic, and commercial forces. An article in the Journal of Internet Law explains that policies, like those promulgated in the ADA and CRPD, support accessibility but “other values favor an accessible Internet. The ideals of universal design, maximizing market efficiency and common sense, suggest that an accessible Internet is in our best interest.”

The Economic Power of the Disability Community and its Impact on Global Businesses

Businesses worldwide have already learned that accessibility is in their economic best interest. As a market segment of one billion people with multiple needs, the disability
community certainly has the right to expect quality services and goods meeting its requirements. People with disabilities in the United States, for example, spend $796 billion a year on products and services.34

There will also be an abundance of new products and services to create and deliver. Don Hubbell, Microsoft's technical evangelist for the Accessibility Business Unit, envisions an exciting future, “I am excited to see that eventually more accessibility devices will be integrated to work with mobile technology.”35 So small that they can be fashioned into an earring, these devices “will not only be able to manipulate our environment by turning lights on or off…but they will also inform us of where we are and provide critical information about our environment.”36 These technologies “will put everyone in control and allow them to interact and manipulate their environment, regardless of ability, through the method of their choice. The next generation of technology will be life changing for everyone, but especially for people with disabilities. When an employee who is blind can easily navigate through a new office building with no assistance other than the computer he always carries with him as a lapel pin, we’ll know the future has arrived.”37

The more distant future will be even more remarkable, because the pace of technological change will enable extraordinary advances unimaginable today. According to futurist and pioneer in assistive technologies Ray Kurzweil, “the 21st century will see about a thousand times greater technological change” than occurred in the 20th century, which most feel was extraordinary by any measure.38

**Proceed with Caution**

The opportunities are enormous, but the risks are great. Competing for a share of this market of one billion people carries all of the challenges of doing business in a foreign country plus the unique demands of the disability community. Multinationals need to understand cultural, attitudinal, legal, religious, and ethical differences of the countries in which they do business and how they relate to the nation’s disability community. As one executive remarked, “If someone is doing business in the Far East but does not understand how their values are different, they’re operating on a cricket field by football rules.”39

As diversity executives and thought leaders, we can guide our companies to the right uniforms and enable them to play by the rules. Here are some thoughts about how to make the best choices:

- Market products and services that satisfy the desire of people with disabilities to have the same products used by everyone, such as the iPhone with all its built in accessibility features, to avoid costly, specialized products;
- People with disabilities should be treated as consumers first and as possessing an impairment only when conditions warrant. Overt, insensitive attempts to accommodate impairment engender feelings of exclusion;40
- Corporation leadership and diversity executives should be prepared to “call out” efforts that might conflict with national cultures.
- Encourage executives to suspend judgment when first working with people with disabilities and to see their unique characteristics as potential competitive advantages.
Let us conclude this chapter with an example of a company that employs cultural knowledge and awareness of the disability community's attributes to ensure success for the company and its employees. Danish entrepreneur Thorkil Sonne's autistic son taught him about the unique strengths of his “impairment.” As an executive in the software testing industry, Sonne knew that his boy's remarkable memory and eye for detail were qualities critical in software testing. Consequently, he opened his own firm and recruited from the autistic community. Thirty-seven of Sonne's 51 employees are autistic and the firm generates $2 million in revenue.

Sonne based his success not just on hiring people with disabilities, but by creating the right working environment for them. The design of the firm's headquarters reflects their spatial needs. Hypersensitive to noise, individuals with autism can be uncomfortable in open-concept offices spaces with no doors or walls. His company's management policies and style recognize that these employees do not work well in teams; however, he does not expect them to excel socially or interact with others. When communicating expectations, his managers are very precise and direct, because people with autism often have difficulty understanding non-verbal communications, such as gestures, facial expressions, or tone of voice. Company employees also refrain from using sarcasm or irony, which autistic individuals tend to not understand.

Sonne's example, and others like it, serve to powerfully prove that people with disabilities can contribute significantly—even providing the crucial competitive edge—to any workplace, and, like any other workers, represent a valuable asset to employers.

Endnotes

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