

We Need to Elevate the Conversation about Inclusion

A champion for those with disabilities is on a crusade to promote a new way of thinking.

By Lloyd Lewis

Inclusion should be on the mind of every nonprofit leader, manager, and hiring professional in the country. As the CEO of one of Colorado's largest nonprofits and the father of a young man with Down syndrome, it's most definitely on *my* mind.

DEI – diversity, equity, and inclusion – shouldn't be a foreign concept to those of us in the nonprofit sector. But sadly, it sometimes is.

It's not that we don't have diversity and inclusion programs, it's that something significant is missing from many of them. Where we – as leaders and as a society – fall short is that how we view inclusion – the “I” of the equation – isn't inclusive enough. We make sure our hiring practices aren't biased when it comes to race, gender, and sexual orientation – but what about people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD)? Too often we forget the need to include them when considering job applicants.

It's time to open our minds to how productive people with such disabilities can be – and to the invaluable contributions they can make. When you consider that there are approximately 6.5 million people in the U.S. who have an intellectual or developmental disability, it's shocking that they experience an 80% unemployment rate. In a world where employers are struggling to fill jobs, this is more important than ever.

There are several nonprofit organizations, like the Rees-Jones Foundation's Best Buddies Jobs Program and the DISH Foundation, that are doing great things to employ people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The Global Down Syndrome Foundation, Arc of the United States, RespectAbility, Easterseals – all these nonprofits are helping to provide opportunities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. But more needs to be done, and we in the nonprofit world are perfectly suited to lead the change.

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Myth versus Reality

The biggest hurdle we face is breaking down the barrier of misconceptions surrounding what it means to hire people with disabilities. Many believe that employing someone with intellectual or developmental disabilities is disruptive and time-consuming. Many worry that making the necessary accommodations to meet the needs of an employee who may have autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or Down syndrome is expensive and “too hard.”

The reality is quite different. For example, Arc Thrift Stores (arcthrift.com) employ over 400 people with disabilities in every department. They are cashiers, they work in donations, they stock the aisles, they interact with customers, they work at the corporate office. Some of these employees have Down syndrome, some have autism, some are in wheelchairs. Some are high functioning; some are nonverbal. But because of the way the store hires – for *fit* rather than job description – none of these disabilities is a problem. There's always a job that needs to be done, always someone able and willing to do it.

Of course, the store makes accommodations for their employees' disabilities, gives them special training, and mentors them. But, frankly, don't we make accommodations for typical employees? Don't we provide training and mentoring programs for them? Don't we sometimes need to deal with disruption? It's no different when managing someone with a disability.

The Benefits – Inclusivity in Action

Hiring people with disabilities is a smart strategy. The fact is that the benefits far outweigh the fears. Research from Accenture (accenture.com) supports this: Organizations employing people with intellectual and developmental disabilities have seen 28% higher revenue and are growing profits 4.1 times greater than their peers.

What You Can Do

It begins with a shift in the way we define disability and the way we think about what someone with a disability can do.

Look at the jobs that need to be done in your organization. You'll find that many jobs can be taken on – and done with remarkable skill – by someone with a disability.

Hire for *fit*, not job description. In other words, find people who will fit into the organization's culture rather than

“Have a conversation, not an interview.”

focusing on particular skills when you're assessing job applicants.

Have a conversation, not an interview, with job seekers. It's in these discussions that you'll truly get to know people and understand their capabilities.

Review your diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies to ensure that they include people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Network with local organizations that find jobs for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in your area.

Be mindful and disability-friendly in your organization's culture.

Educate yourself and your team on disabilities; you'll find that there's no one kind of disability.

Work every day to debunk the myths and misconceptions surrounding employing people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

And remember that there are many national and local resources available to you for assistance. There's the ARC, the American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, the Global Down Syndrome Foundation, and many others. They're all just a simple Google search away.



Lloyd Lewis is CEO of the Arc Thrift Stores of Colorado (arcthrift.com), one of Colorado's largest nonprofits, social enterprises, employers of persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), recyclers, and relief organizations. Under Lewis' tenure, Arc Thrift has funded over \$250 million to nonprofit causes and charities since 2005. Lewis has a 19-year-old son with Down syndrome.



Let's Shift the Conversation: Taking Inclusivity to the Next Level

In a webinar presented by the Society for Nonprofits (snpo.org/webinars), Lloyd Lewis outlines what nonprofit organizations need to know about creating a truly inclusive culture and provides tangible takeaways to help you create a more inclusive hiring program. A recording of this presentation is available at no cost for Society members.

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It's the Right Thing to Do, It Has Practical Benefits – & It's the Law

It's important to note that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was amended in 2008 to include people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, making it illegal to discriminate against them in hiring and other workplace policies. Thus, inclusion goes beyond championing those in need and carrying the flag of acceptance and tolerance. It's the law.

You'll find a plethora of insights on hiring, accommodating, and working with people with a range of differences – while avoiding lawsuits for discrimination or unfair practices – in the following articles, available free of charge at NonprofitWorld.org.

How to Write Effective Anti-Bias Policies (Vol. 30, No. 4)

Creating an Inclusive Workforce (Vol. 24, No. 4)

Overcome Unconscious Bias in the Hiring Process (Vol. 39, No. 3)

What Followers Want from Leaders: Capitalizing on Diversity (Vol. 25, No. 5)

Fighting Harassment & Improving Inclusion (Vol. 36, No. 2)

How to Accommodate Common Disabilities in the Workplace (Vol. 31, No. 3)

Is Your Organization Culturally Competent? (Vol. 26, No. 6)

Find Your Aces: Turn Your Handicaps into Opportunities (Vol. 35, No. 3)

Diversity and Inclusion – Why Now? (Vol. 29, No. 1)

The Failure of Diversity Training (Vol. 18, No. 3)

How to Avoid Retaliation Claims (Vol. 21, No. 6)

Reimagining Your Hiring Practices: A Self-Assessment (Vol. 36, No. 3)

The Most Likely Lawsuits – and How to Protect Yourself (Vol. 19, No. 1)