

Lead with Inclusion

A manager's guide on how to invest in, grow, and retain staff with disabilities.

Choose meaning over minimum

In Aotearoa New Zealand, 1 in 6 people identify as disabled, but only 44.7% of this population is employed [Stats NZ]. For organisations, it's a huge, often untapped, pool of skilled talent.

By embracing a truly inclusive approach, organisations can do more than just meet minimum legal standards. This is an opportunity to enhance problem-solving, create new opportunities for innovation, and build stronger teams.

Meaningful disability inclusion is felt across the whole organisation. It means looking beyond the hiring phase to investing in disabled staff from the moment they join, and throughout their career journey with you.

This guide contains practical advice on how to create an environment where disabled staff are empowered to thrive and succeed. It is split into three chapters:

- 1. A business case for inclusion
- 2. Developing and retaining staff
- 3. Addressing unconscious bias

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Chapter 1: A business case for inclusion

This chapter provides evidence for investing in disabled talent.

Drawing on key facts and figures, we present the financial, innovative, and market benefits of embracing disability inclusion. By examining the cost of exclusion and proven dividends of inclusion, the chapter provides the evidence for investing in disabled talent.

1.1 Challenging common misconceptions

Misconceptions are one of the greatest barriers to inclusion. By addressing common myths, we can begin to address the hesitation and anxiety that some feel about hiring disabled staff.



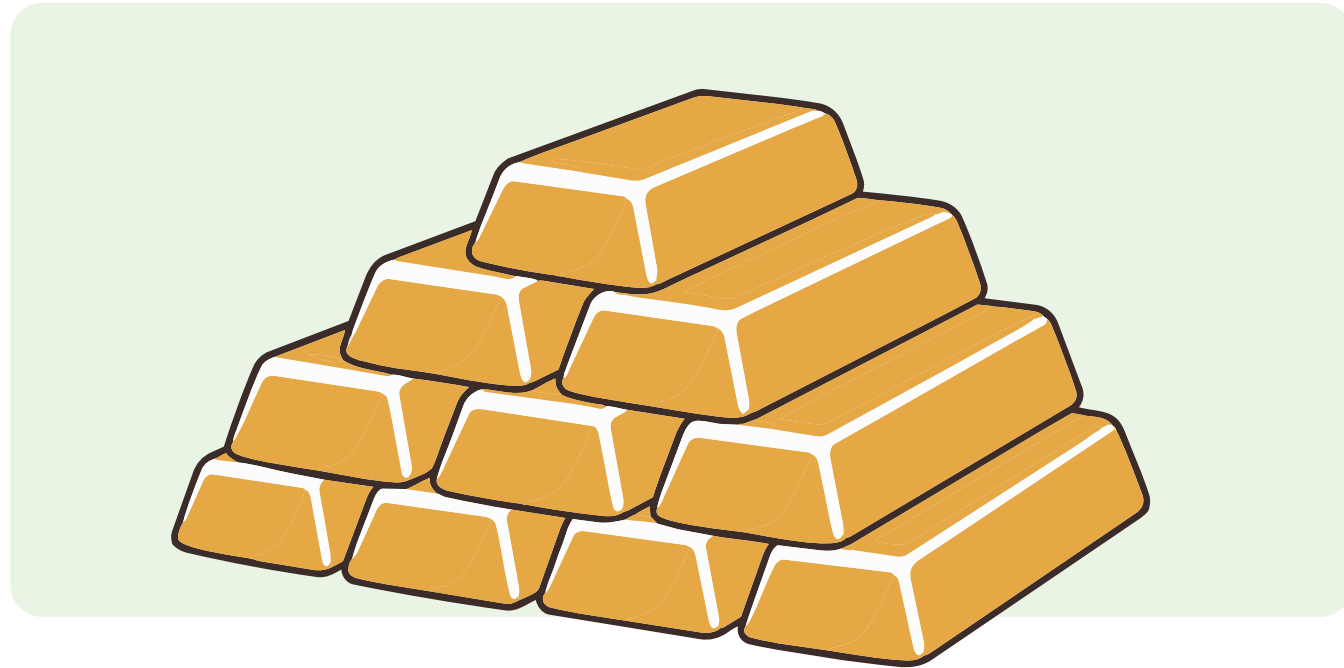
Misconception:

"There's a cost to inclusion."

Reality:

Many organisations believe that hiring disabled people is expensive or comes with unexpected costs. In reality, it's an economic opportunity, and one that's starting to be realised.

Research by Accenture has revealed that companies actively employing people with disabilities see up to a 28% increase in revenue, a 100% increase in net income, and a 72% increase in employee productivity.

**Misconception:**

“Accommodations are expensive.”

Reality:

Disabled staff often require reasonable accommodations. Often, these adjustments can be made quickly and at a reasonable price, or at no cost at all. For example, access to software, adjustment to flexible working policies, or efforts to increase cultural competence among staff.

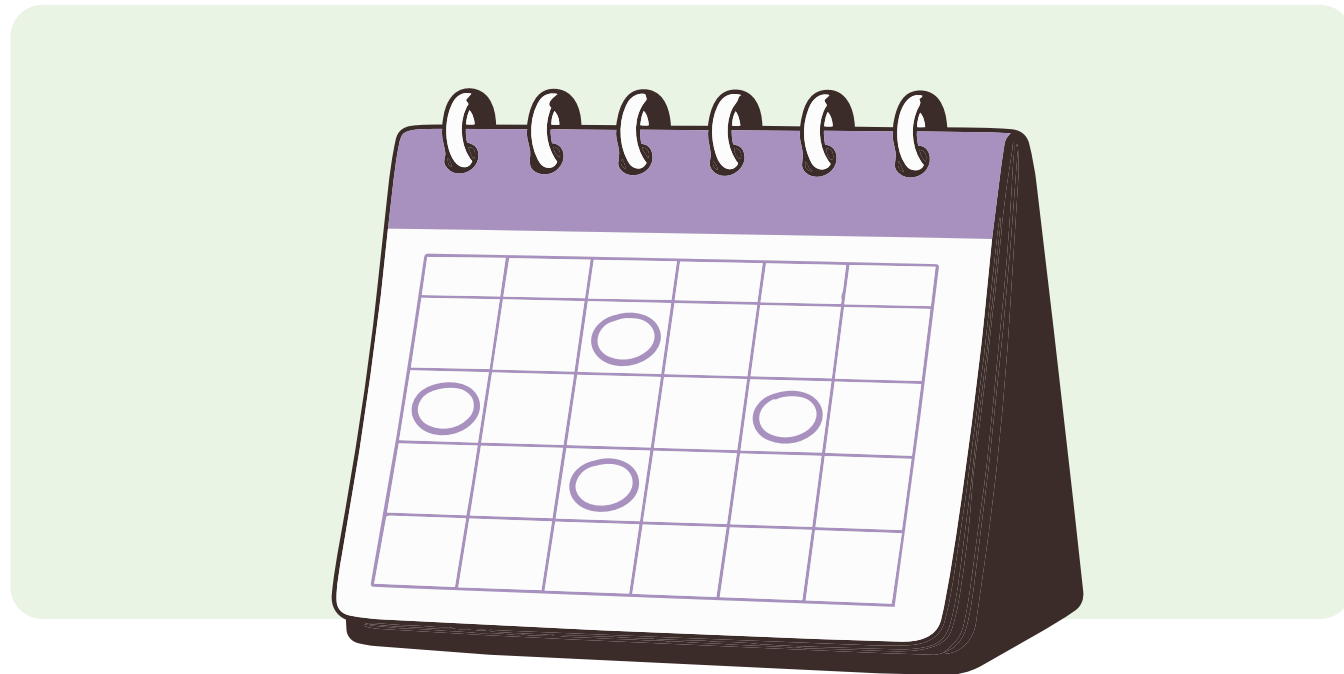
The cost of not accommodating talent leads to lost productivity, high turnover, and recruitment costs, far outweighing the cost of the adjustment itself.

**Misconception:**

“Hiring disabled people will increase workplace safety risks.”

Reality:

When a manager and employee work together to assess needs, safety is prioritised and maintained. Disabled people have the same legal right to a safe workplace as any staff, and accommodations are made to enhance safety and usability for everyone.

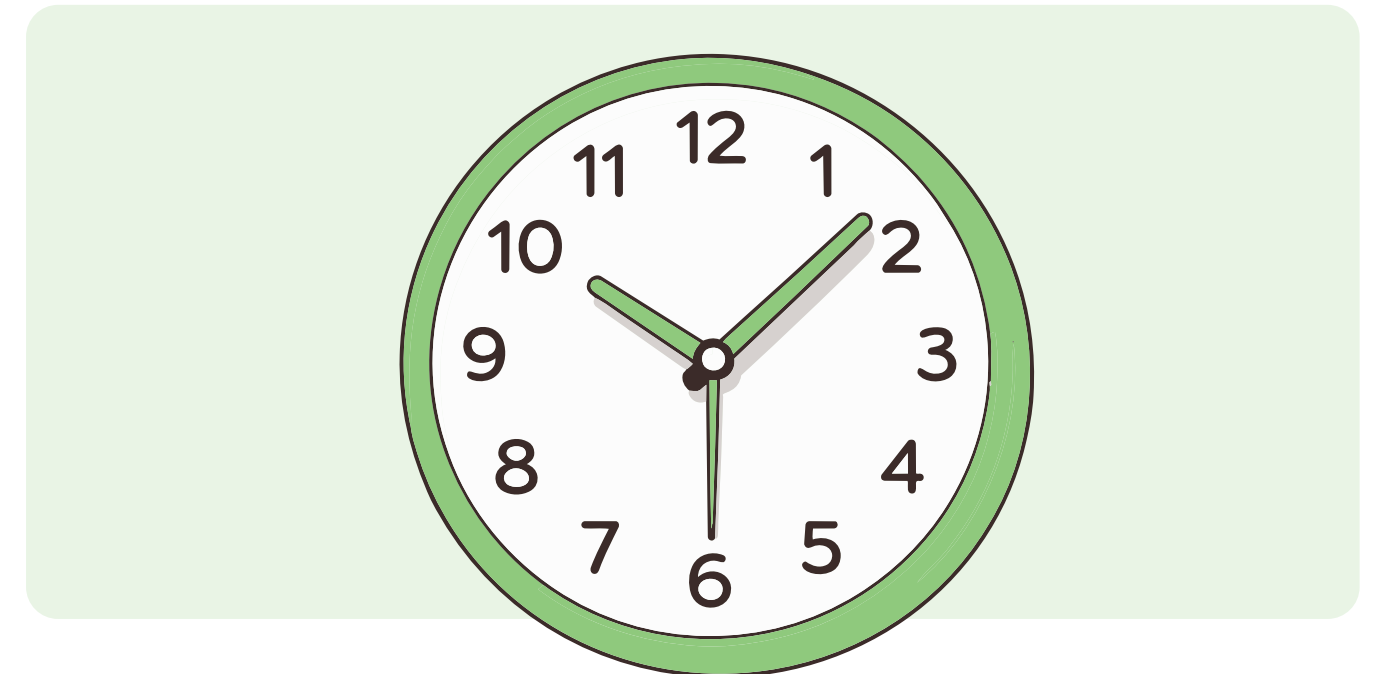
**Misconception:**

“Disabled employees will use more leave and be off sick more often than my non-disabled employees.”

Reality:

In reality, disabled employees often have equal or sometimes better attendance records than their non-disabled colleagues. A study in Australia found that disabled employees were 15% less absent from work compared to their non-disabled colleagues.

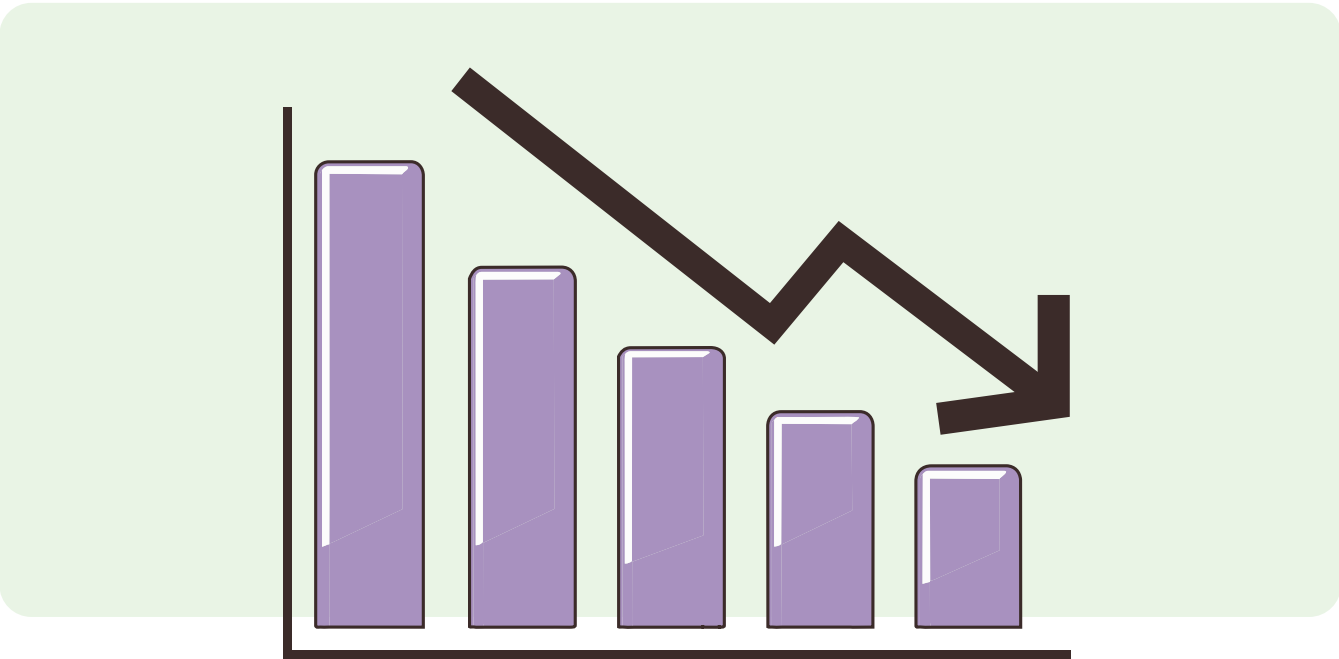
In supportive environments, disabled employees often show high levels of commitment and loyalty. That means flexibility and effective accommodations are not only a retention strategy, but an investment that leads to a dedicated and high-performing workforce.

**Misconception:**

“The process of finding the right support and funding is too complex and time-consuming.”

Reality:

There are many supports available in Aotearoa New Zealand to help employers make necessary adjustments. Agencies such as the Ministry of Social Development or Workbridge guide employers through the process of funding and developing accommodations and inclusive workplaces for their disabled employees. To learn more, [click here](#).



Misconception:

“Disabled employees will be less productive than my non-disabled employees.”

Reality:

Productivity is directly linked to effective accommodation and support, not disability status. When accommodations are in place, disabled employees perform at the same level or higher than their non-disabled colleagues. They bring unique strengths, such as superior problem-solving skills and resilience, which directly benefit overall team output.

1.2 Identify economic benefit

Disability and neurodiversity bring unique experiences and skills that drive business outcomes, individual and team performance. Different perspectives offer new avenues for innovation, problem-solving, and attention to fine detail, unlocking business advantage.

The evidence

There’s a growing body of evidence that disability inclusion enhances economic benefits and returns:

- Deloitte Australia suggested that reducing the labour participation gap by one-third could result in a cumulative \$43 billion increase in Australia’s GDP over a decade (Deloitte Access Economics).
- The World Bank estimates an average of \$9 USD in economic gain for every dollar invested in assistive technology (Investing in Assistive Technology).
- An [Accenture](#) global survey found that companies that invested in disability inclusion across the workforce and supply chains reported significant gains over a four-year period – **28% higher revenue, doubled net income, 30% increase in profit margins** ([Getting to Equal: The Disability Inclusion Advantage](#)).

\$43B

9:1

28%

The actions to take

Provide interview questions in advance:

Help people prepare and reduce nervousness, while still testing the skills needed for the job. Instead of relying heavily on traditional behavioural questions, use work samples or practical skill tests. This will help you spot great analytical skills and attention to detail that might otherwise be missed.

Identify specific policy gaps:

Review standards like the Disability Equality Index (DEI) to surface any missing procedures. It will give you a clear roadmap of where to focus your efforts, so you can better remove the barriers blocking employee performance.

Use tools that provide automatic live captions for all meetings:

(e.g., Teams, Zoom, Otter). This will ensure everyone can follow the discussion, improving focus and minimising confusion.

See difference as strength:

Actively place disabled and neurodivergent employees on teams tackling tough business problems. Their unique viewpoint will help to see flaws from new perspectives and quickly generate entirely new solutions.

Resource: Comic Strips

Access visual resources to support team communication, meetings, culture, interview processes and more.

[Click here to explore resources.](#)



1.3 Create customer and community value

A diverse workforce offers a significant market advantage. It ensures that products, services, and customer relations are intrinsically accessible, innovative, and reflective of the entire consumer base. When something is available to everyone, its relevance is maximised.

Nothing About Us Without Us

Drive advantage during product conception using the following principles from the concept of Nothing About Us Without Us:

- **Design for extremes:** When diverse employees are involved in the design process, they naturally highlight barriers and needs that non-disabled employees might overlook. This leads to “design for the extremes,” where features created to accommodate a specific disability often become superior features for all users.
 - *Example:* Subtitles (closed captions) were designed for the d/Deaf but are now essential for watching videos in noisy environments or silent public spaces. Similarly, voice controls (like Siri or Alexa) were initially developed for people with motor impairments but are now a mass-market convenience.
- **Appeal to a broader market:** Incorporating accessibility principles early on helps to ensure products are usable by the \$13-trillion disability market (including family and friends). It also avoids costly retrofitting, creating a larger potential consumer base right from launch.

Improve customer experience by ensuring diversity in customer-facing roles:

- **Demonstrate authentic understanding:** Employees who are disabled are uniquely positioned to understand the needs, frustrations, and preferred communication styles of customers with disabilities. This leads to more effective, empathetic, and rapid problem-solving.
- **Build brand reputation and trust:** When a company is visibly inclusive both in its marketing and its staffing, it builds goodwill and trust with the disability community. Consumers are more likely to support a brand they perceive as socially responsible and genuinely committed to inclusion.

While accessibility is a market advantage, failure to adhere to standards is a liability:

- **Drive proactive compliance:** A diverse team acts as an internal quality control mechanism, catching accessibility flaws (e.g., in website coding, physical store layout, or product packaging) before they result in legal action or alienate customers.
- **Future-proof your organisation:** Disability laws are constantly evolving. An inclusive team helps the company stay ahead of regulatory changes, turning potential mandates into market advantages.

Chapter 2: Developing and retaining disabled talent

This chapter provides actionable guidance on essential management practices, including reasonable accommodations, managing return-to-work processes, and ensuring equitable career pathways. Here, we focus on authentic, respectful, and cost-effective support.

2.1 Defining reasonable accommodations

What constitutes a reasonable accommodation?

A “reasonable accommodation” (often called “workplace support” in New Zealand) is any necessary and appropriate modification or adjustment to the work environment, role, or recruitment process that enables a disabled person to perform their job effectively and participate equally in the workplace. Employers should expect to make practical, often low-cost adjustments.

The focus is on effectiveness. An accommodation must successfully remove the specific barrier the employee faces, allowing them to work safely and productively.

Legal context matters. Under the New Zealand Human Rights Act 1993, employers have a legal duty to provide these accommodations unless doing so would cause “undue hardship.”

What is considered unreasonable?

An accommodation is typically considered unreasonable if it imposes an “undue hardship” on the employer. This is a high threshold that considers excessive cost, health and safety risk, and operational disruption.

Excessive cost is defined as something that is prohibitively high relative to the size and resources of the organisation (e.g., a small local café vs. a large corporate firm).

Health and Safety Risk refers to an adjustment that creates a genuine safety risk to the employee or others that cannot be mitigated.

Finally, **operational disruption** refers to a change that would fundamentally alter the nature of the business or prevent the core duties of the job from being fulfilled.

Accommodations Checklist

This covers the most frequent types of support discussed in disability inclusion contexts:

- ☐ **Flexible working arrangements**
 - Adjusting start and finish times (e.g., to align with medication needs, energy levels, or accessible transport schedules).
 - Allowing a compressed work week or part-time hours.
- ☐ **Remote work / location flexibility**
 - Allowing the employee to work from home (WFH) for some or all of the week to manage fatigue, sensory overload, or mobility barriers.
- ☐ **Assistive technology & software**
 - Providing screen-reading software, text-to-speech tools, or text overlays e.g., OpenDyslexic font.
 - Ensuring internal systems and documents are digitally accessible.
- ☐ **Physical workspace modifications**
 - Physical premises are accessible to people with a range of disabilities
 - Installing a standing desk, ergonomic chair, or specialised lighting.
 - Providing noise-cancelling headphones or designating a quiet workspace to reduce sensory distraction.

- ☐ **Communication adjustments**
 - Providing instructions in multiple formats (e.g., following up verbal instructions with a written email or vice versa, using imagery/ pictures/graphics instead of words).
 - Booking NZSL (New Zealand Sign Language) interpreters for meetings or allowing a support person to attend key discussions.
- ☐ **Recruitment and interview support**
 - Providing interview questions in advance allows for processing time.
 - Allocating extra time for completion of skills tests or assessments.
 - Asking questions that emphasise how the person can do the role and not what they cannot
- ☐ **Modifying the way a job is done**
 - Changing tasks
 - Allocating or swapping non-essential aspects of the job to another employee so the disabled employee can focus on their core strengths and duties.
- ☐ **Additional breaks and pacing**
 - Allowing for frequent, short breaks to manage pain, fatigue, or administer medication, rather than one long lunch break.

Resource: The Accommodations Planner

Getting workplace support right is a team effort. The Accommodations Planner is an online tool designed to help managers and kaimahi (employees) get on the same page. It gives you a clear place to document exactly what adjustments have been agreed on, so everything is sorted in writing, and there is no confusion later on.

Things change over time. To support this, the planner helps you check in regularly to make sure the arrangements are still doing the job. By reviewing and updating the plan together, you can ensure the support stays practical and helpful without disrupting the flow of work. It is all about keeping the conversation open and making sure the solution actually works for everyone.

Tips for using the Accommodations Planner

1.	Get familiar with the tool: Before you meet, have a quick look through the Accommodations Planner yourself. Understanding the layout helps you guide the conversation without getting stuck on the paperwork.
2.	Have the kōrero (chat): Sit down with your team member to discuss what barriers they are facing. Listen to their ideas first – they often know best what will help them get the job done.
3.	Fill it in together: Don't write the plan in isolation. Complete the planner with the employee to ensure you both agree on the details. Be specific about what the adjustment looks like in practice.
4.	Check for practicality: Ask the hard question: "Is this sustainable?" Ensure the accommodation is effective for the employee but non-disruptive to the wider team or workflow. If it feels clunky, tweak it now.
5.	Don't file and forget. Set a review date (e.g., in 4 weeks) to check back in. Put it in the calendar immediately so you can see if the adjustment needs fine-tuning later on.

[Click here to explore more.](#)

2.2 Return to work processes

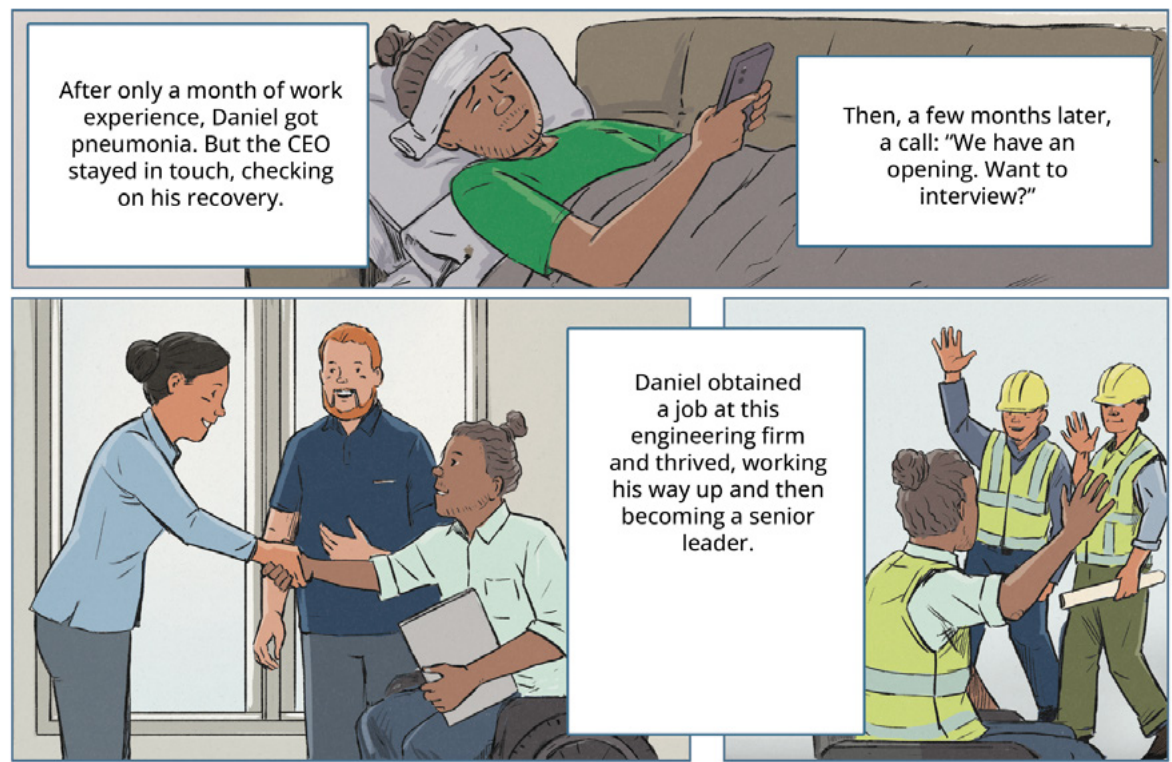
Employment retention by supporting and accommodating employees' needs due to illness, disability or injury is more cost-effective than recruitment.

To do this well, it is vital to structure return-to-work processes and programmes for employees following injury or illness. The objective is to reduce physical and psychological exhaustion, as well as the workload of both the individual and their team.

Clarity and transparency are key. When collaborating on the process or programme, consider the cost of employee absence and replacement, including the loss of their expertise, disruptions to the team dynamic, temporary replacements before a permanent one, and more.

ACC has made support and services available for this process.

[Learn more here.](#)



Practical tips

- **Stay in touch:** Silence creates anxiety, so begin communication before the employee returns. Agree on a communication schedule during their absence (e.g., a fortnightly email or call) to keep them connected to the team without putting pressure on them.
- **Hold a “Welcome Back” meeting:** Hold a pre-return discussion to review the return-to-work plan in a neutral environment. Use this time to listen to their concerns and set expectations, rather than on their first morning back.
- **Avoid making assumptions about what an employee can or cannot do:** A formal assessment ensures decisions are evidence-based.
- **Use medical guidance** Information from certificates, such as the NZ Medical Certificate for Work Capacity or ACC reports, will help you understand functional limitations.
- **Ask the employee directly:** Use clarifying questions such as “What barriers do you see to performing your core duties?” and “What adjustments would remove those barriers?”
- **Identify adjustments/accommodations early:** This could range from ergonomic equipment (standing desks) to modified hours or temporarily reassigning physical tasks.
- **Know that recovery is rarely linear:** A rigid plan often fails because it cannot adapt to the employee's changing health.
- **Use tools available:** The Accommodations Planner can help you record agreed adjustments. Use the six-monthly review function (or more frequent milestones for acute recovery) to revisit the plan.
- **Iterate:** If an employee is fatiguing early, the plan must be flexible enough to immediately dial back hours. Conversely, if recovery is faster than expected, duties can be accelerated.

2.3 Career pathways and progressions

Disabled employees often face the “sticky floor” phenomenon – getting hired into entry-level roles but finding themselves overlooked for promotion due to unconscious bias or a lack of accessible development opportunities.

To build a genuinely inclusive culture, employers must move beyond a focus on hiring diverse talent to actively nurturing and advancing it. This means creating clear pathways and interventions that actively support advancement, demonstrating that inclusion does not mean remaining stagnant in the workforce.

Recognise what is real

Employees who see a clear future within your organisation are more engaged, loyal, and productive. Yet it's common to place limits on disabled talent based on misconceptions rather than real-world experiences. For example, wheelchair users have successfully obtained qualifications to operate heavy machinery, demonstrating that physical impairments do not dictate professional capability.

When development opportunities are accessible, disabled talent can excel in complex, safety-sensitive, and high-skill environments. The absence of visible pathways risks losing valuable institutional knowledge and talent to competitors willing to invest in growth.



Practical tips

Adopt a structured and proactive approach to conversations on progression:

- **Audit learning systems.** Ensure learning systems, training materials, and workshops are fully accessible, i.e. do your training videos have captions? Is your leadership seminar held in a wheelchair-accessible venue?
- **Create an open conversation.** Ask directly, “What skills do you want to develop next?” and “Are there barriers in our current training structure that I can help remove?”
- **Establish a mentorship programme** where senior leaders champion disabled talent. A sponsor can advocate for the employee in rooms where they aren't present, which is crucial for upward mobility.
- **Recognise that career progression doesn't always look linear.** It might involve lateral moves to gain breadth of experience, secondments, or job-crafting to align a role with an individual's unique strengths.

Chapter 3: Addressing unconscious bias

This chapter addresses the social and attitudinal barriers to inclusion. Here, we focus on identifying and dismantling barriers in hiring, communication and culture that will create a truly inclusive workplace culture for all to thrive.

3.1 Recruitment

Unconscious bias happens when the brain makes an automatic and quick judgment towards a person without realising that it is grounded in stereotyping. These biases often create systemic barriers towards access for disabled people. This happens in policies and practices, as well as in obstacles such as biased job descriptions or candidate screening processes, leading to further exclusion and unfair disadvantages.

Identifying bias during hiring and onboarding

Practice reflective questioning to help identify potential biases.

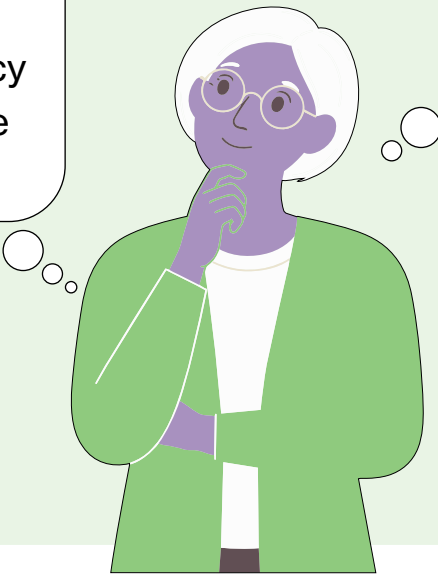
Scenario: The trap of fitting in.

Reflective question

Am I focusing too much on the communication and personality style of this employee? Am I clear on their expertise, competency and skills to do and get the work done?

Strategy to overcome bias

Define the values and skill sets needed for the role, not personality traits. When reviewing candidates, assess and set a criteria based on the values of the organisation, behaviours and skills for the role, such as work ethic.



Scenario: The trap of limited assumptions.

Reflective question

Am I making limited assumptions about this candidate's potential to complete the job? How has their disclosure of their disability impacted my perception of them?



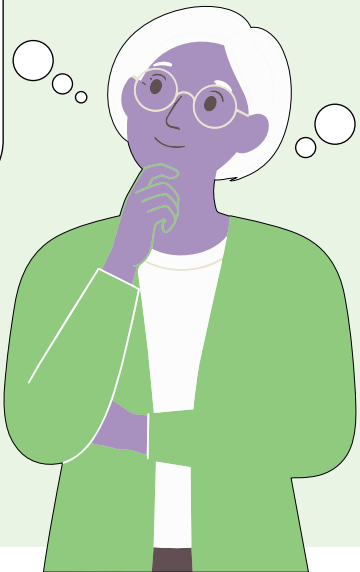
Strategy to overcome bias

Provide the candidate the opportunity and a safe space to disclose their disability and what accommodations they may need to do the interview and the job. We are all experts of our own mind and body, so **focus on a person's ability to perform core job functions.**

Scenario: The trap of pity.

Reflective question

Am I hyper-fixated on this person's disability? Am I creating unfair positive value and pity on a candidate for "overcoming challenges"? Could I refocus and assess their technical qualifications for this role?



Strategy to overcome bias

Develop a **standard criterion and scoring matrix for all interviews** to guide you, and focus purely on the performance of candidates to complete the job.

Scenario: The trap of fearing the unknown.

Reflective question

Am I fearing an unknown future because of a person's disability? Is this influencing my assessment of their credentials and current qualifications?

Strategy to overcome bias

Assess all candidates on their demonstrated track record – how they managed a similar workload and met expectations of what is required for the role.



Scenario: The trap of communication bias.

Reflective question

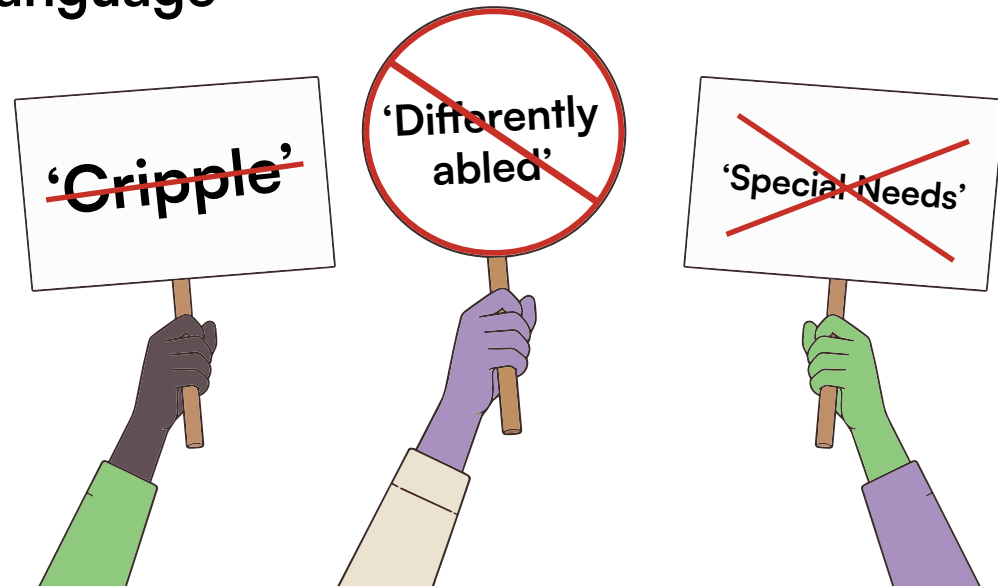
Am I confusing the style of communicating (such as avoiding eye contact or repetition) with their competency?

Strategy to overcome bias

Focus on the content of candidate answers, not on the delivery of them.



3.2 Language



When engaging with disabled people, it's important to use respectful language. Disability language is a personal choice that people have the right to express and identify with.

When it comes to the identity of a disabled person, there are generally two preferred languages:

Identity-first language (Disabled person)

vs

Person-first language (Person with a disability)

Note: Unless someone has expressed their preferred language, we recommend using identity-first as a default, except when interacting with a person with a learning disability, who prefers person-first to recognise their personhood first and foremost, as this has been historically stripped away from them.

In addition to knowing what language to use, it's important to know what not to use. Avoid using these terms unless it is the preference of the disabled person you are working with or talking to.

“Special needs”

Accessibility / disability needs are not special; they are simply “needs.” The term “special needs” is considered offensive by many disabled people and is discouraged, but we also recognise and acknowledge that some parents use / prefer this term.

“Differently abled”

This is often used to avoid the term “disabled.” It is meant to minimise the presence of disability for the comfort of non-disabled people. There may be some disabled people who prefer this language, but the consensus amongst the community is that this is not an appropriate term to use to identify a disabled person.

“Cripple”

This is an old, offensive term that has strong negative and traumatic connotations. It should not be used unless explicitly stated by the disabled person. While some people in the community have reclaimed the word in recent years, it is still considered an offensive term by many.

Ultimately, disability language and identity are very personal and nuanced. There is no right or correct answer, but instead an ongoing journey and conversation that we continue to learn from.

For some, this means choosing whether or not they identify with having a disability. The important factor here is choice, and respecting the individual's preference.

Communication Tips

- Acknowledge the disabled person's presence and treat them with the respect we all deserve.
- Know that many disabled people prefer not to talk about their specific diagnosis unless it is explicitly relevant to the conversation. This is influenced by the fact that, historically, non-disabled people have referred to a person's disability as a burden when it is not.
- Avoid identifying a person by their specific disability or medical diagnosis, or stating that someone suffers from an impairment. Instead, try saying "John has Spina Bifida" or "Jane lives with Down Syndrome".
- Avoid saying that a disabled person is wheelchair-bound. Instead, choose phrasing such as "John uses a wheelchair" or "Jane is a wheelchair user."
- Do not assume that a carer or family member should speak on the disabled person's behalf. If you are communicating with a disabled person accompanied by a carer or family member, speak directly to the disabled person where possible.
- Be patient and remember to respect disabled people and their ability to communicate their needs with you. Some people may use a communication device or an alternative way to communicate. Other times, you may need to speak with carers or family members.

How to handle awkward or unexpected situations



Scenario One

An employee with a chronic health condition (invisible disability) calls in sick for the third Monday in a row.

Don't

Demand details and discourage employees from putting their health and well-being first. For example, "What's the issue? This is becoming a recurring problem, and I need to know you'll be back soon."

Do

Acknowledge an individual's absence professionally in a kind, respectful manner. Applying sick leave and health policies across the board, regardless of health or disability status, provides consistency.

For example, "Thanks for letting me know. I hope you feel better soon. Our policies show you still have sick leave available if you wish to use that. Until then, I will have [insert team member's name] handle your calls until you are back. We can bring you up to speed and discuss a more flexible schedule when you are back."



Scenario Two

An employee recently disclosed their disability to their manager. The following week, the employee missed a couple of crucial work deadlines.

Don't

Assume and announce that a work performance issue was due to a person's disability.

For example, "Why did you agree to the deadline if your dyslexia [condition] makes it difficult for you to manage?"

Do

Address and discuss the work-related issue in a constructive and supportive conversation.

For example, "The deadline for the report was last Thursday, and it impacted the team when the deadline was missed. Was there anything about the process or reporting that we could support you with the next time we need you to develop the report?"



Scenario Three

An employee who uses a wheelchair has the skills and qualifications to attend a work conference. Still, the manager decides to send a less qualified, non-disabled employee instead.

Don't

Assume a person's disability limits them from work opportunities. For example, "The travel might be too difficult for them. I'll send Sam to the conference instead."

Do

Offer opportunities to qualified employees and allow them the chance to decide what supports or accommodations they might need for the specific opportunity. For example, "I think you are the best person to attend the conference in Rotorua. Would you like to go? If so, let's find some time to discuss how we might best support you and what accommodations you might need to attend the conference."

3.3 Culture

There’s a benefit in leadership and disability confidence training

Research shows that leaders, managers, and employers who participate in leadership and disability confidence training report increased understanding and a commitment to developing a more inclusive workplace culture and upskilling in DE&I (Diversity, Equity & Inclusion)¹. When learnings and skills from leadership and disability confidence programmes are implemented, employees feel respected, confident, valued, able to participate fully, safe to open up, and able to retain roles.

Identify barriers beyond physical spaces

To create a truly inclusive workplace, address barriers and challenges beyond physical barriers and spaces. Addressing barriers to inclusion, such as communication gaps or cultural differences, enables people to thrive, and this increases workforce productivity.

A study from Deloitte² shows that when leaders and employers implement inclusivity in their behaviour and actions in the workplace, it can lead to increased employee performance, decision-making quality, connection and collaboration. The key is creating and enhancing a culture of inclusion, diversity and belonging³.

1 https://employersforchange.ie/userfiles/files/EFC_TrainingToolkit_web.pdf
2 <https://www.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/talent/six-signature-traits-of-inclusive-leadership.html>
3 <https://peopleelement.com/blog/overview-of-diversity-and-inclusion-in-the-workplace/#:-:text=F%20ully%20embracing%20and%20creating%20a%20n,equal%20oppo%20rtunities%20to%20participate%20and%20contribute>

Resource: Additional links

Use these links to access external resources and organisations that offer specialised disability inclusion and confidence training and support:

- [Ministry of Social Development: Toolkit for Employing Disabled People](#)
- [New Zealand Disability Employers Network](#)
- [Employment New Zealand: Employment for Disabled People](#)
- [Ministry of Social Development: Regional Employment Support Services Organisations](#)