Approximately 15% of the world’s population – one in seven people – have a disability. Nowadays, rather than being seen as welfare recipients and objects of charity, these people are widely understood to be citizens with rights. Including people with disabilities in the labour market is part of the paradigm shift on disability that has taken place since the advent of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006.

People with disabilities can perform almost any job and in a conducive environment most can be productive. Excluding people with disabilities from the labour market has cost implications for national economies (up to 7% of GDP in some countries), whereas providing access to employment breaks the vicious circle of disability and poverty.

It is therefore high time to bring an end to employment discrimination against people with disabilities and to the situation where these people’s unemployment levels are nearly double that of the rest of the population.
Several types of actors need to be mobilised to ensure the success of inclusive approaches to employment:

- **People with disabilities** play a key role in their integration into the world of work; their inclusion is determined according to their skills and wishes. Despite being long overlooked, the participation of people with disabilities is critical to the success of inclusion interventions.

- When **business leaders** are involved in the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace, this becomes a key driver of the momentum required for the process. Indeed, the impact of this kind of involvement is borne out by all the best practice studies in this area. Depending on the size of the company, this involvement can be achieved by adopting commitments that are fulfilled in accordance with the roadmap developed to this end, or by management implementing specific actions.

- The **trade union organisations** in the company can also spearhead actions aimed at promoting universal accessibility. Depending on the regulations in the country, they may also play a role in representing employees in management bodies on issues related to diversity and disability. Setting up bridges between the world of disability and the ordinary world is one of the challenges involved in promoting the employment of people with disabilities in the ordinary working environment.

- The **company’s staff** are involved in all matters pertaining to accepting disability and respecting individuals and the diversity of colleagues. A number of best practice cases reveal the benefits of running peer support and job coaching schemes and putting in place disability focal points. The impact these measures have on changing wider perceptions of disability is broadly recognised and documented.

- **Employment and training specialists** will support the various stakeholders by providing technical advice and assistance and by disseminating best practices. In some contexts, roles have been created for staff specialised in the employment of people with disabilities, which involve providing employment services that complement those offered in the mainstream environment.

- Finally, **public authorities**, whether centralised, decentralised or devolved (i.e. regardless of the system of public governance), will be able to foster private initiatives, to develop regulatory conditions that promote action on inclusive employment, and to regulate practices in cases where deficiencies are identified. Collecting statistics on gender is also crucial when monitoring the implementation of policies and practices.

A joint and coordinated mobilisation of these various stakeholders is one of the guarantees of successful inclusive action in the labour market.

People with disabilities are not a homogeneous group for which a one-size-fits-all solution can be developed. They are a diverse group of people. Disability is too often still perceived as a characteristic of the person him or herself and the stereotype of being wheelchair user is deep-seated in most societies. Nevertheless, there has been a huge change in perceptions and attitudes over the past 20 years. Disability is now defined as the result of a person’s interaction with their environment. In other words, disability is no longer seen as a characteristic exclusive to a person with a disability, regardless of the environment he or she lives in. Without disregarding the importance of the disability, it is important to address the person’s environment, which plays a crucial role in alleviating or exacerbating the difficulties they encounter.

Disability is becoming more widespread as the population ages and chronic conditions increase around the world. The World Health Organization estimates that approximately 15% of the global population has some form of disability. 80% of disabilities are invisible and the stereotype of persons with disabilities necessarily being wheelchair users must be emphatically rejected. Most people with disabilities who work are employed in a normal work setting.
Nowadays, an inclusive employer is one who realises that supporting the employment of people with disabilities is a positive step towards supporting all their employees. So, by changing practices and attitudes around disability, society as a whole will benefit from an environment that is accessible to all.

Disability is a human rights issue and adopting a ‘disability’ approach in companies is becoming a key element of diversity policies. At the macro level, the societal goals have been identified:

- Integrating people with disabilities means seizing the opportunity to place an organisation’s human resources back at the heart of its activity.
- Allowing people with disabilities to work is a win–win strategy to fight exclusion and boost these people’s incomes, while enhancing the pool of skilled people and improving countries’ long-term economic situations.
- Structural reforms, which combine employment aid, compensation provision and mutual obligations, are bearing fruit in various European countries.

In both the public and private sectors, employers are achieving their performance and development goals by changing their hiring practices and developing new in-house expertise. However, many challenges remain:

- Even today, the average employment rate of people with disabilities in OECD countries is almost half that of people without disabilities.
- Policies directed at people with disabilities are still too focused on providing social benefits for a diverse target group.
- Stereotyping – the way able-bodied people depict people with disabilities – is one of the main obstacles to hiring a person with a disability. This way of seeing, which prejudges others before engaging in dialogue, must be dismantled, in particular by including people with disabilities from an early age in nurseries, then in schools and training institutes.

This requires the development and implementation of an intersectoral policy on disability.

Disability as a concept has been understood in a number of ways, with perceptions changing significantly in recent decades. The social model of disability emerged during the 1970s from the critique of the then prevailing medical and charitable interpretations of disability. This ‘social model’ proposes a radically different interpretation by classifying disability as a subject of law and by stating that people with disabilities are not disadvantaged because of their individual characteristics but because of limitations imposed by external and/or environmental barriers or obstacles.

So, without denying its importance, the disability becomes a consequence of the way society is organised. Accordingly, disability becomes an issue of discrimination and social exclusion. This model implicitly acknowledges that disability is a part of life and requires different responses and priorities. While recognising the need to take medical aspects into account, it focuses on removing the barriers that prevent the full participation of people with disabilities and that prevent them from fully determining and controlling their own lives. This approach underpinned the drafting of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which came into force in 2008 following its ratification by more than 20 states (by April 2018, the Convention had been ratified by 177 states).
Substantial progress has been made on the inclusion of people with disabilities in the labour market, with a social approach to disability prevailing around the world. This paradigm shift has highlighted the importance of a number of concepts on which the development of **concrete practices of inclusion through employment** is now based:

- **Respect for disability as intrinsic to human diversity**
  This involves accepting others in a spirit of mutual understanding that transcends apparent differences. In the case of disability, respect for difference is about accepting people with disabilities for who they are, instead of pitying them or viewing them as a problem to be solved. In employment, this translates into non-discrimination and equal opportunities policies.

- **The principle of non-discrimination**
  In the employment field, this principle concerns business leaders’ responsibility, under the law, to adopt recruitment and career management practices that focus exclusively on the candidate’s worker’s skills and experience. Being prevented from carrying out certain actions because of one’s disability (e.g. because of lack of accessibility) is considered to be discrimination and, depending on the country and the decision of the court, can carry severe penalties.

- **The pursuit of equal opportunities**
  This principle is based on several international law instruments as well as numerous national regulations. Closely linked to nondiscrimination, this principle does not always mean that exactly the same opportunities are offered to all, because treating everyone the same could give rise to inequalities. Equal opportunities therefore considers the fact that people are different and consists in ensuring that, despite these differences, everyone has the same opportunities to exercise their rights.

- **Access to work**
  is an inherent part of equal rights. Applying this principle to the world of work may involve implementing positive actions, such as:
  - ensuring that all candidates with disabilities who qualify for a position will be interviewed;
  - promoting the hiring of a person with a disability who has the same skills as another candidate;
  - adopting quotas that require companies to ensure a certain percentage of their workforce comprises people with disabilities, with failure to meet the quota punishable by a fine.

- **Universal accessibility**
  This should be understood as the removal of obstacles or barriers that prevent people with disabilities from effectively exercising their human rights. It is about enabling people with disabilities to be independent and to participate fully in all aspects of their lives. In the area of access to employment, this translates in many countries as the right to reasonable accommodation – i.e. technical and/or organisational adjustments that are acceptable to all stakeholders to redress the imbalance that disability causes individuals. The International Labour Organization (ILO) applies this principle very broadly – i.e. to people and situations other than those concerning workers with disabilities. Accessibility is often mentioned as a best practice for inclusion and is referenced in Article 27 on Work and employment of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. However, it is worth pointing out that approximately 85% of workers with disabilities do not require physical adjustments to perform their work. People’s beliefs to the contrary shed light on how stereotypes still shape public perceptions.

- **Gender parity**: the issue of **gender equality** in labour market access has, over the years, become an increasingly critical factor in employment. Gender gaps in the labour market require urgent attention. Worldwide gender statistics on employment and participation rates show that women with disabilities are less likely to be employed than their male counterparts.

- **The principle of the participation** of people with disabilities in decisions that affect them, either directly or through representative bodies.
Full and effective participation and inclusion go hand in hand. They mean that society, in both the public and private spheres, is organised in such a way that everyone can participate fully. Participation is not merely a consultation; it implies that people genuinely take part in activities and decision-making processes and that they can express their views, exert influence and challenge any refusal to let them participate.

In the employment arena, this is particularly significant with respect to the opportunities given to the person with a disability to express her or his wishes regarding a work placement in an open (ordinary) environment or a protected environment (primarily in a social care environment – i.e. sheltered workshops or work centres depending on the country). Bridging these environments is essential for professional mobility and personal development.

A number of levers must be activated when undertaking an inclusive employment approach. Adopting a global approach that enables the activation of several of its levers will contribute to its success.

With regard to human resources, ‘managing individuality’ in the company can be achieved through the implementation of measures that enable all staff members to fulfil their roles in conditions that are appropriate to their specific needs. This applies to disability as well as to other situations (e.g. a pregnant employee who will need to adjust her work schedule or an aging employee who will have to shift to less-demanding tasks at a different workstation to avoid health problems).

By distinguishing more clearly between the difficulties relating to the person and those caused by the work environment (or around/in the workplace), it is then easier to assess needs regarding the posting, additional training or specific measures for the person with a disability or the company that will hire them. This is how the social approach to disability is implemented in practice.

Promoting the employment of people with disabilities is an opportunity for the company to reaffirm its openness to diversity and its commitment to human values and the spirit of solidarity. These are all issues that have broad-based support, can boost employee involvement and enhance the employer brand.

The regulations in certain countries enable the state to provide financial support to companies that employ people deemed to be vulnerable in some way, which includes those with a disability. The company can also work to ensure that all of its means of communication encourage recruitment: digital accessibility is a veritable springboard for inclusion.

When embarking on an inclusion process in a company of any size, no time is more propitious than another to get started. Building on the success factors described below, this process can only result in improving life in the company and enhancing performance.

**Success Factors**

**Taking action in the work environment** is a key success factor and a prerequisite for an inclusive labour market. At present, workers with disabilities are often held back more by their limited skills than by a severe disability. It is therefore necessary to train people with disabilities and thus improve their skills. In cases where basic training is absent or, depending on the context, is poor, on-site training should be encouraged. A number of good practices highlight the benefits of focusing on the placement first and then on the development of skills in situ through the provision of appropriate and personalised support.
Deconstructing persistent and hackneyed depictions of disability and tackling ignorance around the subject is a key area requiring action, both by society, through incisive government policy and the company’s own specific actions. At the company level, positive action might, for example, involve developing an awareness-raising and communication plan on disability at work that includes distributing explanatory brochures and videos in the company that champion internal good practices, or creating a dedicated intranet with a Q&A page.

By taking action on how disability is represented, the company is also working to create a shared conceptual framework of disability among those engaged in the fight for inclusion. Developing a common language and a common conceptual framing of disability within the company helps to reduce barriers to inclusion in employment. Good practices to this regard identified in a number of countries include taking part in trade fairs, professional societies and external events in the same occupational sector.

It is also clear that one of the challenges for a successful inclusion policy is to identify and reduce barriers to the employability of people with disabilities by: (i) complying with the employer’s obligation to reasonably accommodate workers with disabilities, which may involve adjustments to work schedules or the physical adaptation of workstations, and (ii) identifying work practices that need to be changed (e.g. in recruitment, moving towards hiring based on the applicant’s skills rather than their formal qualifications).

Having dedicated systems for inclusion in the company ensures greater efficiency when implementing specific measures for inclusion. Depending on the size of the company, and building on corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies, this could be a team dedicated to disability issues and/or could be diversity/disability focal points (i.e. people trained and assigned part-time or full-time to support vulnerable people as part of their role in the company).