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THE ACTUAL CAPABILITY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

FROM ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT DISABILITY
TO EVIDENCE OF SKILLS

A CAPABILITY-FIRST POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR
RECRUITMENT, PERFORMANCE, PROGRESSION
AND WORKFORCE STRATEGY



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Disability inclusion is often discussed in terms of representation: how many people with disabilities an organization employs, recruits or promotes. That matters. But it leaves a more basic question unanswered: are organisations actually seeing, testing and developing the capability of the people in front of them?

This paper argues for a capability-first approach. A disability is a functional circumstance, not a standardized skills profile. Two people with the same disability can have very different education, experience, technical skills, communication styles, problem-solving ability and leadership potential. People with different disabilities can, meanwhile, have very similar professional capabilities.

The practical implication is simple. Start with the work. Define what the role genuinely requires. Then assess the individual against those requirements using evidence. If a barrier appears, identify whether it comes from the person, the workplace, the technology, the process, the training or the communication method. Remove or reduce barriers where appropriate. Only then make a judgement about performance.

THE STRATEGIC POLICY SHIFT

01 PERSON



02 CAPABILITY



03 ROLE



04 BARRIERS



05 ENABLEMENT



06 PERFORMANCE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY — CONTINUED

This is not an argument for lowering standards. It is an argument for making standards more accurate. It replaces assumptions with evidence and conventional methods with legitimate outcomes.

CONVENTIONAL LENS

What disability does this person have?

Can the person perform the conventional method?

Is disability the explanation for the gap?

Inclusion as a separate programme.

Representation as the principal measure.

CAPABILITY-FIRST LENS

What can this individual demonstrate?

Can the person achieve the legitimate outcome?

Is the gap related to capability, training, experience, technology, accessibility or communication?

- EST. 2 Inclusion built into mainstream workforce systems.

Capability, enablement, performance and progression measured alongside representation.

THE STRATEGIC PROBLEM: WHEN A CATEGORY BECOMES A CAPABILITY PROXY

A disability label can quietly become a shortcut for judgement. Once that happens, an organisation may start assessing the category rather than the individual.

The problem is not limited to negative stereotypes. Positive stereotypes can be just as misleading: assuming that disabled employees are automatically more resilient, that autistic employees are always exceptionally detail-oriented, or that blind employees necessarily have superior hearing. These statements may be intended as compliments, but they are still assumptions.

The better question is always: what evidence do we have about this person's capability?
A strength should be treated as a strength because the individual demonstrates it—not because a label suggests it.



DISABILITY, FUNCTION AND PROFESSIONAL CAPABILITY

Disability can affect how a person performs a particular activity. That functional reality matters. What it does not do, by itself, is tell an employer how capable that person is of performing the job.

FUNCTIONAL AREA	POSSIBLE WORKPLACE CONSIDERATION	WHAT SHOULD STILL BE ASSESSED
Mobility	Movement, standing, lifting or physical access	Whether essential role outcomes can be achieved
Vision	Reading, navigation or visual information	Analysis, judgement, accuracy and decision-making
Hearing	Meetings, verbal communication or auditory alerts	Understanding, contribution and professional communication
Speech	Conventional verbal communication	Ability to communicate required information effectively
Dexterity	Typing, fine-motor tasks or equipment use	Ability to achieve the required work outcome
Cognitive processing	Processing speed, memory or information management	Quality of reasoning, learning and problem-solving
Concentration	Sustained attention or environmental distraction	Ability to perform required tasks under appropriate conditions
Energy/stamina	Duration or intensity of activity	Whether work design can support the essential requirement
Sensory processing	Noise, light or other environmental stimuli	Ability to perform when unnecessary barriers are addressed

The distinction is important. Difficulty with handwriting does not mean difficulty with analytical thinking. Difficulty hearing in a conventional meeting does not mean difficulty understanding a complex business issue. Limited physical mobility does not, by itself, determine leadership capability.

In other words, the method may change while the outcome stays the same.

THE CAPABILITY GAP MODEL

A practical policy model can be built around six questions. The order matters: assess capability before turning a barrier into a conclusion about capability and consider enablement before judging performance.

STAGE	POLICY QUESTION	DECISION OUTPUT
Role requirements	What does the job genuinely require?	Essential outcomes and requirements
Individual capability	What can the person actually demonstrate?	Evidence of knowledge, skills and behaviours
Functional barriers	Does disability affect how particular tasks are performed?	Specific functional considerations
Workplace barriers	Are systems, technology, environments or processes creating additional barriers?	Organisational barriers
Enablement	What adjustment, technology, training or workflow change could reduce those barriers?	Enablement plan
Performance	After appropriate barriers are addressed, is the individual meeting legitimate requirements?	Performance/development decision

This sequence helps avoid two opposite mistakes: assuming disability means incapability, and assuming inclusion means genuine capability gaps should never be addressed. Neither approach produces sound workforce management.

A SKILLS-FIRST ASSESSMENT ARCHITECTURE

A mature assessment should look at the person's actual professional capability. At minimum, it should consider:

KNOWLEDGE

What does the individual know?

Professional expertise, theoretical understanding, and domain-specific information.

TECHNICAL SKILL

What technical tasks can they perform?

Application of methods, use of professional tools, and execution of specialized tasks.

COGNITIVE CAPABILITY

How do they reason and learn?

Quality of analysis, problem-solving speed, memory, and information management.

BEHAVIOURAL CAPABILITY

How do they collaborate?

Communication, teamwork, exercising responsibility, and meeting professional expectations.

ADAPTABILITY

How effectively do they adapt and learn?

Ability to navigate new systems, processes, and changing workplace environments.

FUNCTIONAL REQUIREMENTS

What enables this capability?

Identifying the specific tools, conditions, or adjustments required for peak performance.

This gives managers a much more useful basis for employment decisions than using a disability category as a proxy for capability.

CAPABILITY IS NOT THE SAME AS METHOD

One of the most important principles in this framework is that the conventional way of doing a task is not necessarily the task itself.

Take a data-analysis role. The organization may need someone who can understand data, apply analytical methods, identify patterns and anomalies, produce accurate analysis, communicate conclusions and use the required systems. Those outcomes matter. The precise way the person interacts with a spreadsheet may not.

That distinction becomes especially important when technology, communication methods or workplace design are involved. A different method is not automatically a different capability.



THE INDIVIDUAL CAPABILITY MATRIX

The following matrix turns the principle into a practical management tool. It can be used in recruitment, performance reviews, development, workplace support and progression.

CAPABILITY	ROLE REQUIREMENT	INDIVIDUAL EVIDENCE	BARRIER	ENABLEMENT	OUTCOME
Technical expertise	High	Demonstrated	None	None	MEETS
Communication	High	Strong	Meeting environment	Accessible meeting support	MEETS
Physical mobility	Low	Not role-critical	Office layout	Accessible workspace	MEETS
Analytical ability	High	Demonstrated	None	None	MEETS
Teamwork	High	Strong	Communication format	Adjusted communication	MEETS
Leadership	Medium/High	Developing	None	Coaching and mentoring	DEVELOPING

FROM EMPLOYMENT DECISION TO WORKFORCE DECISION

A capability-first approach should not stop when someone is hired. If the principle is sound, it should operate across the employee lifecycle.

RECRUITMENT

Define essential requirements and assess relevant competencies rather than assumptions associated with disability.

LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT

Provide equivalent access to development, leadership and career opportunities with appropriate support.

TECHNOLOGY

Make sure systems allow employees to demonstrate their actual capabilities.

PERFORMANCE

Assess legitimate outcomes while separating disability-related barriers from genuine performance issues.

PROMOTION & SUCCESSION

Assess capability, performance and potential; do not allow disability to become an informal ceiling.

JOB DESIGN

Where appropriate, examine alternative methods without compromising essential outcomes.

MANAGEMENT

Equip managers to distinguish capability gaps from workplace barriers.

THE POLICY TEST: WHAT EXACTLY IS THE GAP?

When someone appears not to meet a requirement, the decision-maker should diagnose the gap before acting on it.

POSSIBLE GAP	PRIMARY POLICY RESPONSE
Skills gap	Development, training or an appropriate employment decision
Training gap	Training and structured development
Experience gap	Experience-building opportunity or development plan
Technology barrier	Assistive or accessible technology
Accessibility barrier	Remove or reduce the environmental or process barrier
Communication barrier	Effective alternative communication method or support
Reasonable adjustment issue	Assess and implement appropriate adjustment
Genuine essential-function limitation	Assess against the legitimate requirement without lowering the requirement merely because disability is present

These categories should not be collapsed into one. A training gap calls for development. An accessibility barrier calls for accessibility. A technology barrier calls for appropriate technology. And where an essential function genuinely cannot be performed, the legitimate requirement remains relevant.

The point is not to guarantee the same outcome in every case. The point is to make ensure that the organisation correctly identifies the problem it is addressing..

MEASUREMENT: FROM REPRESENTATION TO CAPABILITY

ACCESS

TALENT ACQUISITION

Recruitment accessibility and selection outcomes assessed against capability criteria.

EFFICIENCY

ENABLEMENT TIME

Speed and resolution effectiveness of identified workplace barriers.

GROWTH

INTERNAL MOBILITY

Promotion rates and internal career progression for disabled employees.

STABILITY

RETENTION

Turnover rates compared across capability cohorts and enablement status.

QUALITY

MANAGER CAPABILITY

Managers' confidence in distinguishing capability gaps from functional barriers.

IMPACT

PERFORMANCE

Performance ratings following barrier removal and appropriate enablement.

SYSTEM

INFRASTRUCTURE

Accessibility audit scores for core enterprise and communication technology.

SUMMARY

STRATEGIC ROI

Total workforce contribution unlocked through capability-first policy.

IMPLEMENTATION AND STRATEGIC MATURITY

PRIORITIES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- 0-90 DAYS Foundations**
Review policy language; define essential role requirements; identify assumption-based decision points.
- 3-6 MONTHS Operations**
Build assessment tools; establish the enablement process; train recruiters, HR and managers.
- 6-12 MONTHS Integration**
Review technology barriers; integrate the capability matrix into mainstream talent processes.
- 12-24 MONTHS Optimisation**
Track mobility and performance indicators; refine policy using evidence-based implementation data.

STRATEGIC MATURITY TEST

1. Do we know the genuine requirements of our roles?

Essential outcomes are distinguished from conventional methods.

2. Do we assess individuals on evidence?

Processes test relevant capability rather than disability assumptions.

3. Can we identify barriers separately from capability gaps?

Managers diagnose the source of a gap before making decisions.

4. Can we enable people to demonstrate capability?

There is a clear and accountable enablement/adjustment process.

5. Do we know whether the system is working?

The organisation tracks mobility and performance—not representation alone.

CONCLUSION: BETTER-INFORMED EXPECTATIONS

The next stage of disability inclusion is not about creating a separate kind of employee. It is about getting better at understanding human capability.

The policy sequence should be clear:

THE PERSON → THE CAPABILITY → THE ROLE → THE BARRIERS → THE ENABLEMENT → THE PERFORMANCE

Not:

THE DISABILITY → THE ASSUMPTION → THE LIMITATION

A capability-first approach does not ask organisations to lower legitimate expectations. It does not ask them to create special expectations either. It asks them to create better-informed expectations. That is the real policy opportunity: move disability inclusion beyond benevolence and into the discipline of sound workforce strategy. Assess capability through evidence. Identify barriers explicitly. Manage enablement deliberately. And make performance and opportunity decisions based on what people can actually demonstrate.

[1] World Health Organization (WHO). International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF). WHO. The ICF provides a biopsychosocial framework in which functioning and disability occur in context and includes environmental factors.

[2] International Labour Organization (ILO). Promoting diversity and inclusion through workplace adjustments: A practical guide. ILO, 2016. Provides practical guidance on reasonable accommodation across the employment cycle and on enabling workers to use their skills and talents effectively.

[3] International Labour Organization (ILO). Disability and work / Pathways to disability inclusion in the world of work. ILO. Provides guidance on accessibility, reasonable accommodation, inclusive employment systems and the removal of assumptions about the work persons with disabilities can perform.

[4] United Nations. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 27: Work and employment. Establishes equal rights in employment, career advancement, vocational training and reasonable accommodation.

[5] OECD. Disability, Work and Inclusion: Mainstreaming in All Policies and Practices. OECD Publishing, 2022. Provides comparative evidence on employment, skills, barriers and the case for mainstreaming disability inclusion across labour-market policies and practices.

[6] OECD. Disability, Work and Inclusion — Assessment and recommendations. OECD Publishing, 2022. Emphasizes mainstreaming disability inclusion in ordinary systems and strengthening employment-oriented policy approaches.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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