

Companies Need to Do More for Employees and Customers with Disabilities

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In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) opened a new world for millions of people with disabilities by requiring businesses to make their physical locations accessible. Forward thinking business leaders are making sure their digital spaces are also accessible and are embracing the universal design that will help them tap into new consumer markets. But [too many businesses](#)—including pizza chain [Domino's](#)—have made their websites (often unintentionally) inaccessible. Earlier this month, the Supreme Court signaled that all companies must do better, that physical accessibility and digital accessibility are two sides of the same coin.

While some see this development as a costly burden to be resisted, we see an opportunity to embrace innovation and new talent. In 2017, we led a study, "[Disabilities and Inclusion](#)," at the Center for Talent Innovation, which uncovered enormous innovative potential in hiring and empowering employees who themselves have disabilities because they excel in designing products for consumers with disabilities.

How did we get here? The case began when Guillermo Robles, a man with visual impairment, unsuccessfully attempted to order a pizza using Domino's online system. Robles, used a popular screen-reader software that turns digital content into spoken words, but Domino's had not built its website to be compatible with screen-readers. In *Robles vs. Domino's Pizza*, he argued that the pizza chain had violated his rights under the ADA. Earlier this year, a federal court agreed,

explaining in a [unanimous ruling](#) that the ADA applied to Domino's websites and apps. Rather than accept the decision and update its website, the company petitioned the Supreme Court, which declined the case and let the lower court ruling stand. Now companies face a mandate to build ADA-compliant websites or risk litigation.

Here's the irony: by losing the court argument, Domino's may actually win. Professionals with disabilities are a larger and more valuable population than many business leaders realize. In our study, we found that 30% of white-collar employees meet the federal government's definition of having a disability. Companies reap rewards when they signal that they are a [rare organization offering a culture](#) that supports this talent cohort. They know that ADA compliance is just a tiny step in the direction of all the gains to be made from fully including both consumers—and employees—with disabilities.

So how do you capture the innovation that comes from including your consumers—and employees—with disabilities in your business? There are three ways.

1. Recognize the innovative potential of employees with disabilities.

What so many companies don't get is that people with disabilities tend to be very innovative because they face—and solve—problems each day. In fact, employees and HR professionals we interviewed noted that in addition to their hard skills, employees with disabilities frequently bring qualities such as agility, persistence, drive, strategic planning, and creativity. According to our nationally-representative survey of thousands of professionals, 75% of employees with disabilities (compared with 61% of employees without disabilities) have ideas that would drive value for their company. Nearly half of these ideas would serve the disability market.

2. Create inclusive environments that empower professionals with disabilities.

Don't just hire people with disabilities to check a box. Listen to them, empower, and prize them. [Nearly half](#) (48%) of employees with disabilities who have ideas that would drive value for their companies fail to win endorsement for those ideas. Additionally, more than one-third said they have encountered discrimination or negative bias at their companies. More than half (57%) feel stalled in their careers. This needs to change.

Make accommodations available, transparent, and easy to access. [Provide disclosure and accommodations training](#) to staff. Employees who disclose their disabilities to most people they interact with at work are more than twice as likely to feel regularly happy or content at work than employees with disabilities who have not disclosed to anyone (65% versus 27%). Ask leaders with disabilities to serve as role models and tell their stories.

Above all, create a culture of inclusive leadership. Forty-one percent of employees with disabilities who do not have inclusive team leaders experience discrimination or bias. That number drops to 26%, when there is inclusive leadership.

If possible, hire a top leader who focuses on disability inclusion. Since [Microsoft did this](#), the company has moved ahead by leaps and bounds.

3. Expand the definition of innovation.

Ironically, Domino's was known as a great innovator because it excelled in speed-driven online pizza delivery. But without an accessible website or mobile app, it excluded a sizable portion of the market: According to the CDC, [3.4 million Americans](#) aged 40 and up are blind or visually impaired. Other estimates of "vision problems" are as high as 21 million. What other disabilities markets did Domino's miss?

When companies innovate for the “edge case,” they often wind up creating products and services that later go mainstream. Think of closed captioning, originally developed by the U.S. government for people who are deaf, and the OXO Good Grips kitchen equipment company, begun for those with arthritis. These innovations are now widely embraced by many.

Companies are well advised to adopt [universal design principles](#). This means designing for everyone, regardless of age, gender, or disability. It is the essence of innovation. With employees with disabilities on their teams, companies can better adopt such principles.

Leaders who are concerned that Robles v. Domino’s Pizza may cause a costly website overhaul are probably *already* missing out on huge opportunities. Re-considering inclusion of all consumers will help them abide by the law and access valuable employees, new consumer markets, and ultimately, profitable innovations.



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