

Embracing difference – physical disability; ‘the last taboo’?

By Paul Havranek

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Following an article I wrote on my personal experience of disability in the workplace, Egon Zehnder recently hosted a dinner at its London offices to talk about physical disability at the board table. We were joined by the chairs of nine FTSE 100 companies and four FTSE 250 companies as well as six chairs from other institutions, including Egon Zehnder. Together with our two guests, Sara Weller and Steve Ingham, both of whom operate at the highest level of the corporate world while living with physical disability, we had representation of the boards of 36 companies across the FTSE 350, privately owned and government institutions/bodies. Of the 24 attendees, we had five individuals who work productively with physical disability (four of whom acquired their disability during their lives, in later life). This impressive attendance signals a growing level of commitment to physical disability inclusion among some of the world's most notable boards.

The overriding observation of the evening was the enthusiasm from some of the most senior representatives of business in the UK, and worldwide, to improve their knowledge about this lesser discussed diversity dimension. Indeed, there was recognition that physical disability is often overlooked when it comes to diversity discussions and most boards are still at early stages of maturity on the topic. Participants also highlighted the importance of having role models of physical disability at senior levels of business, whether in the board room or elsewhere. Also, it was concluded that there is a positive economic business case for companies to embrace physical disability diversity, over and above the wider societal benefits to the individual and community.

After hearing the personal stories of our two guests, Sara and Steve, both of whom have been affected with significant physical disability later in their lives, we had an insightful and productive discussion around the table on this element of diversity in the corporate environment. We have summarised some of the points discussed below:

Physical disability is not widely spoken about in the business environment

Surprisingly, some individuals are still reluctant to talk openly about their own disability in the business environment (*as I can personally acknowledge, having found it difficult to talk openly about my disability for some time after my accident*). We discussed why this might be the case concluding that a contributing element could be part of a wider societal inertia from previous generations when, to talk about physical disability, was to admit weakness or to cause potential embarrassment. Additionally, in a society where disability has been less present in the media more generally (without popular role models or advocates), and in business specifically, individuals early in their career do not associate business success with physical disability.

It is of note that those individuals who do not acquire disability, but rather are born with it, are likely to have a very different perspective on what constitutes “normal.” It was noted that individuals who acquire a disability early in their career have additional hardship when financial resources and personal identity are less well developed compared with those impacted later in their careers.

Another reason for the lack of discussion on physical disability within the corporate environment is that both the individual with disability and their colleague may feel uncomfortable bringing it up. The former is nervous that it will disadvantage them, and the latter is uncertain how to initiate the discussion without causing offence – thus a vicious circle often results. To break this cycle, participants discussed the following:

- Whether the first step in the disability inclusion journey would be for boards to identify and measure disability within organisations and thus adopt a quota system, which has proven successful in advancing other elements of diversity? Boards have found this approach easy to understand and action. However, a strong view prevailed that it was not appropriate as disability is hard to define (“hidden” or not obvious) and there is a strong impediment to self-disclosure. A concern was that this might encourage individuals to falsely identify with disability in order to meet corporate targets, for presentational purposes. It was felt more appropriate to ensure that **engagement surveys**, which are commonly adopted by organisations, accurately identify disabled colleagues and follow-up with them to ensure that their voice has been heard and their requirements looked after appropriately and fairly.
- Organisations should **react quickly** to requests for **reasonable adjustments** to the office workplace/protocol enabling colleagues with disability to work efficiently and with appropriate conditions from when they first join the company or from the point when they acquire disability. It was noted that delays in satisfying such requests can result in a reluctance to disclose personal disability. There are currently no disclosure systems required to identify how organisations are performing in this regard.
- Companies could do more to raise awareness through **social media and communication** of disability, for instance including photographs of real people with disabilities in annual reports or on the company website. It was noted that, unlike other dimensions of diversity, there have been a lack of role models and popular advocates of physical disability in the public eye. Showcasing disabled role models in a company would also signal to disabled people applying for jobs there that disability inclusion actually reflects the true values of the organisation.
- **Proactively encouraging** disabled applicants in the recruitment process is critical. One chair shared that they guaranteed interviews to disabled applicants and that, if a company is not advanced in relation to disability inclusion, it is important that the board be upfront about it and explain the measures being taken to change this situation. Additionally, the **recruitment process** needs to be proactively diverse (in

terms of advertisements, role specifications, etc.) in order to encourage a reluctant/discouraged cohort to come forward. This may well include redefining “what good looks like” when considering candidates.

- Quite often, disability is the last in a long line of diversity conversations within boards’ **busy agendas** and boards simply run out of time before discussing the topic. There is also an issue that boards need to make practical decisions and actions rather than just noting that it is a topic to discuss in due course – namely, the need for **proactivity rather than reactivity** in relation to physical disability inclusion.
- Participants observed that an older generation had it drummed into them when young never to embarrass people. As a result, it may be harder for them to bring up the topic of disability in fear of saying the “wrong thing”. Making it **natural** to talk about physical disability and familiarising people with the correct language to use will be important steps in making disability a central focus for boards to fully advance inclusion.
- Disability covers a **breadth of conditions**. While our event focused on physical disability, which has languished in the corporate diversity agenda, participants mentioned that neuro diversity and mental health are other aspects of disability to consider – although these categories have probably had greater visibility and advocacy than physical disability in recent times. Nevertheless, attendees expressed hope that there will be a “ripple effect in the corporate environment” once physical disability is embraced, expanding the conversation to other forms of disability, including these categories. Interestingly, the airport sector has already started to include these other dimensions of disability in their agendas, which is creating a more sophisticated and complete picture.

The economic case in business for physical disability diversity

As our attendees who are disabled shared, the goal of elevating this discussion is not to elicit pity or sympathy from the audience, nor voice the generic benefit of having diverse views around the board table which is already well recognised. Rather, it is to emphasise that hiring talent with physical disabilities makes good business sense in the context of a competitive talent market globally. Specifically, they shared the following viewpoints:

- It is widely reported that about 20 percent of the UK population is disabled (approximately the same proportion globally), with 80 percent of disability being acquired during an individual’s lifetime, normally between the ages 18 to 64. The physically disabled therefore represent a **huge proportion of working age talent** which is generally ignored.
- Often, too much is made of what is not possible to achieve when somebody is disabled with only the first part of the word being acknowledged. Instead, when

thinking of disability, the focus should be on the “**ability**” component. Indeed, for disabled individuals to survive and recover, they must rely on tenacity, determination, resilience and creativity (often with a sense of humour too!), which are all attributes that Chairs and CEOs value most within their current teams and new recruits. Disabled people are therefore likely to bring many of these attributes and thus represent an attractive talent pool.

- In a competitive talent market, younger generations place huge importance on a **culture** that is sophisticated, authentic, open and modern, with this being a determining factor in whether they are attracted to or stay with a company. Organisations have advanced on gender and ethnic diversity across the company including in the boardroom. Now it is time to expand what diversity means and embrace physical disability. Establishing a culture of DE&I is a lengthy process, taking several years if not decades. During the discussion, attendees noted that linking this dimension to senior executives and board members’ compensation has been proven to help accelerate the pace of cultural evolution towards greater inclusivity.

Further reflections – and proactive actions

- During our gathering, all attendees committed to discussing the issue of physical disability with their boards.
- The need to embrace physical disability as a positive, fundamental component of diversity was recognised.
- There is a cultural difference between countries on this topic.
- Companies should recognise and facilitate employees who have become disabled while working there, but also acknowledge that there is a large population and thus talent pool outside of their organisations.
- Physical disability perhaps represents the “last taboo” within companies, with disabled individuals reluctant to disclose their situation. This is present at all levels of seniority, including non-executive directors.
- We are merely at the start of the journey – nevertheless, to quote one chair, “*probing questions need to be asked.*”
- Data needs to be sensitively collected through engagement surveys.
- Informed representatives or ambassadors need to get the facts/experiences around physical disability direct to boards, rather than boards thinking about the topic in isolation, “from scratch.”
- In general, there needs to be better awareness of the language around disability and how to present disability as a positive element of the workforce.
- Physical disability is one element of diversity and there are other neglected dimensions more broadly, for example socio-economic and age dimensions too.

Conclusion

- Physical disability is not widely spoken about in the corporate environment.
- The compelling economic/business case for organisations to have this discussion (approximately 20 percent of the population is disabled and 80 percent of disability is acquired during individuals' lives).
- There is a requirement for physical disability **role models** in visible business environments, especially given the lack of popular media advocates.
- A recognition that physical disability is an element of diversity that has slipped down the diversity agenda in boardrooms.
- The enthusiasm with which senior leaders of business are keen to learn more about this element of diversity.
- An acknowledgement to shift perceptions away from the negative connotations of the word "disability" to the inherent positive abilities that such individuals can give to an organisation.
- A target quota system for companies is less appropriate for disability. Better would be a more sophisticated approach to engagement surveys to allow the real voice of physically disabled individuals to be heard and provide a culture in which self-declaration of disability will increase and a more open environment prevail.
- Reasonable adjustment requests for the workplace (either from the point when the individual first joins the company as a disabled person or when disability is acquired during employment) should be efficiently and quickly provided (there is currently no system of disclosure on this dimension).

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Paul was impacted by physical disability in 2011. He returned to work in 2012 and continues to work at EZ as a Partner of the firm.

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