



INCLUSIVE HIRING PRACTICES *THAT WORK*

AN EMPLOYER TOOLKIT BY COLUMBIA ABILITY ALLIANCE

Building an inclusive workplace isn't just the right thing to do, it's also a smart business strategy. Companies of all sizes, from small businesses to Fortune 500 firms, are discovering that hiring people with disabilities *leads to tangible benefits*. Inclusive hiring can boost employee morale, drive creativity, and strengthen your brand's reputation. When employees see that their workplace values diversity and inclusion, it fosters loyalty and higher engagement. Moreover, diverse teams bring together different perspectives that can spark innovation and improve decision-making.

This toolkit will help you understand effective inclusive hiring practices and how to implement them. We'll address common misconceptions, provide practical tips for each stage of the hiring process, and more. *Columbia Ability Alliance (CAA) is here as a partner to support your inclusive hiring journey every step of the way.*

MYTH VS. REALITY: HIRING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Let's start by clearing up a few common misconceptions about employees with disabilities. It's normal for employers to have questions or uncertainties. Below, we debunk some myths with facts and real-world data:

MYTH:

Few people with disabilities have the skills or qualifications we need.

Reality: There is a large, qualified talent pool of people with disabilities. In fact, people with disabilities are joining the workforce in growing numbers as barriers are reduced. The U.S. saw the employment rate of working-age people with disabilities **rise to about 21% in 2022** (up from 19% in 2021). Many have educational backgrounds and skill sets that match today's jobs. Employers who have tapped into this talent pool often report that these hires perform well and contribute valuable perspectives.

MYTH:

Accommodating an employee with a disability will be expensive.

Reality: Workplace accommodations are usually very affordable or cost nothing at all. According to the [Job Accommodation Network](#), more than half of all accommodations cost employers \$0. For those with a cost, the typical one-time expense is around \$300, which is minimal compared to the cost of recruiting and training a new employee. In many cases, simple adjustments like flexible scheduling or ergonomic equipment are all that's needed. Additionally, public resources such as vocational rehabilitation services and tax credits can offset accommodation costs.

The bottom line: *cost is not a barrier for most employers.*



MYTH:

Employees with disabilities won't perform as well as other workers.

Reality: Workers with disabilities have proven they can perform on par with their peers. Studies show no significant differences in overall job performance between employees with disabilities and those without. In some cases, employees with disabilities bring unique problem-solving skills and creativity developed from navigating a world not built with them in mind, assets that can improve business processes. Employers also often find that these employees have comparable or even better attendance records.

By dispelling these myths, we see that hiring people with disabilities is a beneficial proposition.

Next, let's look at how to make your hiring process more inclusive in practice.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR INCLUSIVE HIRING

Creating an inclusive hiring process doesn't require a complete overhaul of your HR. It's often about making sensible adjustments and being mindful of accessibility and bias. Here are some practical steps and tips for each stage of recruiting and onboarding:



TIP: Make the Application Process Accessible

Ensure that your online application system is accessible to people who use assistive technology (*such as screen readers*). Offer alternative ways to apply (*like email or phone*) for those who may have difficulty with standard forms. Indicate on job postings that accommodations are available throughout the hiring process. For example, provide contact info for applicants to request any accommodations for interviews.

TIP: Foster an Inclusive Workplace Culture

Inclusive hiring works best in the context of an overall inclusive culture. Encourage leadership to champion diversity and model inclusive behavior. Offer regular training or resources on diversity, equity, and inclusion (*DEI*), including disability awareness. Review your workplace policies to ensure they support flexibility (*which benefits everyone, not just those with disabilities*). Create an environment where employees feel safe to disclose a disability and request assistance if needed. By normalizing accommodations and celebrating differences, you create a culture where all employees can thrive and contribute their best.

TIP: Write Inclusive Job Descriptions

Start by ensuring your job postings welcome all candidates. Use clear, straightforward language and focus on the **essential functions** of the job. Avoid unnecessarily restrictive requirements (*for example, if a college degree isn't truly required, don't list it as a must-have*). Consider adding a statement that your company is an equal-opportunity employer and encourages candidates of all abilities to apply. This signals that you value diversity and can help people with disabilities feel more comfortable applying.

TIP: Rethink How You Evaluate Candidates

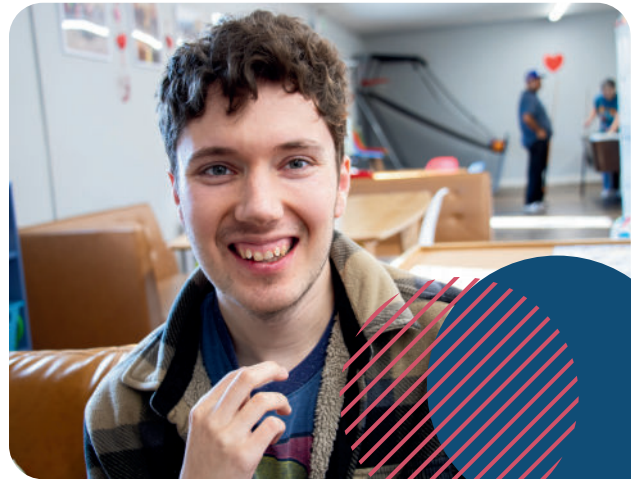
To create a more inclusive hiring process, consider rethinking how candidates are assessed, not just how they apply. Consider alternatives to traditional interviews, such as written responses, video submissions, or portfolio reviews. You might also explore job previews, work simulations, or trial tasks that reflect actual job responsibilities. These methods can uncover strengths that may not come through in a standard verbal interview, particularly for candidates with disabilities.

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR INCLUSIVE HIRING

Diversity and inclusion aren't just buzzwords, they have a real impact on business success. Numerous studies have quantified the benefits of employing people with disabilities and fostering an inclusive workplace. Here are some data-driven reasons why investing in disability inclusion makes good business sense:

Better Financial Performance:

Companies that lead in disability inclusion financially outperform their peers. A landmark study by Accenture found that firms championing disability employment **achieved 28% higher revenue and double the net income** on average compared to other companies. These inclusive companies also enjoyed 30% higher profit margins. **The message is clear:** inclusion drives innovation and growth, which translates into better financial results.



Reliable, Committed Employees:

Inclusive hiring can improve your workforce stability. Employers report that employees with disabilities often have exceptional dedication. For example, one study noted a **85% retention rate** after one year for employees with disabilities, **indicating lower turnover**. Higher retention means reduced costs related to recruiting and training new staff. Additionally, teams that include people with disabilities can be more efficient, a Walgreens distribution center that employs a significant number of people with disabilities was 20% more efficient than its other centers. The focus and loyalty of employees who are given an opportunity can elevate team performance.

Innovation and Problem-Solving:

Inclusive workplaces are **1.7 times more likely to be innovation leaders** in their industry. *Why?* Because diverse teams are better at problem-solving, they bring a variety of viewpoints to brainstorming and challenges. When employees feel included, they are more likely to share ideas and drive improvements. Additionally, a diverse team can make decisions faster and more effectively by leveraging multiple perspectives.

Positive Company Image & Talent Attraction:

Companies known for inclusion have a stronger employer brand. Not only will consumers view your company more favorably, but potential employees will too. A reputation for diversity can help attract top talent across all groups. Remember that **67% of job seekers consider diversity an important factor** when choosing jobs, showing leadership in disability inclusion can set you apart in recruiting. Furthermore, inclusive practices tend to boost overall employee morale and engagement, as team members take pride in working for an employer that values all people. This positive culture can increase productivity and make your company a place where people want to stay.

HOW COLUMBIA ABILITY ALLIANCE HELPS EMPLOYERS

You don't have to embark on inclusive hiring alone. Columbia Ability Alliance (CAA) offers services to make hiring and retaining employees with disabilities easier for employers. When you partner with us through our Supported Employment program, here's how we support your success:

Talent Matching

We work with a pool of job seekers with disabilities who have a wide range of skills. Our employment specialists take the time to understand your job openings and business needs. We then **match you with qualified candidates** who are well-suited for the role and your company culture. Essentially, we provide an extra recruiting resource, at no cost to your business, to find reliable talent that you might not otherwise encounter.



Job Coaching & Training

One of CAA's biggest supports for employers is our job coaching service. After you hire a candidate through our program, a CAA Employment Specialist will come on-site to help train the new employee directly in their role. The coach works alongside your new hire to teach job tasks, ensure they understand workplace expectations, and help them integrate with your team. This hands-on training period means less strain on your staff and managers. The coach gradually fades out as the employee becomes proficient. And importantly, this service is provided at no charge to you, it's funded through our program.



Ongoing Support & Retention

CAA remains a partner for the long term. After the initial training period, we continue to be available for support check-ins. If an issue arises months down the line, say the employee's job duties change or they encounter a new challenge, our staff can step back in to provide additional coaching or problem-solving. We also regularly touch base with both you and the employee to ensure things are going well. This ongoing support means any small problems can be addressed early, helping maintain a successful employment relationship.

No-Cost, No Hassle Collaboration

All of CAA's supported employment services (candidate sourcing, coaching, etc.) are typically funded through state programs, so employers do not pay for these supports. Essentially, you get the benefit of an experienced support team working alongside you when you hire one of our clients. We aim to make the process as smooth as possible, our staff will handle much of the heavy lifting in terms of paperwork or training so that you can focus on running your business. Hiring inclusively becomes hassle-free with CAA as a partner.

We share the same goal: to ensure that the hire is a win-win for both the company and the employee.

GETTING STARTED: YOUR INCLUSIVE HIRING ROADMAP

Ready to take action? This checklist will guide you through the first steps of building or enhancing an inclusive hiring program at your organization:



Assess Your Needs and Goals

Audit your current workforce and identify opportunities where a more inclusive approach could help. Gaining clarity on why you want to hire more inclusively (be it to fill talent gaps, improve diversity, etc.) will inform your approach.



Review and Revise Job Materials

Look at your job descriptions, website, and application forms through an inclusive lens. Update any language, add statements about being an equal opportunity employer, and make sure your online application is accessible, or provide an alternative contact method for applications.



Partner with Columbia Ability Alliance

Connect with CAA to let us know you're interested in hiring through our Employment Services program. Our staff will consult with you to understand your workforce needs and can start identifying candidates who might be a fit.



Interview & Hire Inclusively

When you begin interviewing candidates with disabilities, apply the tips from this toolkit. Focus on abilities and potential, and involve the CAA job coach or employment specialist if you'd like support during the hiring process. Once you find the right candidate, proceed with your usual hiring steps, we'll assist in prepping for their start date.



Onboard and Engage

Implement the onboarding best practices, ensure accommodations are ready, introduce the new hire to the team, and utilize the job coach's help for training.



Reflect and Continue

After your first inclusive hire is in place, take time to evaluate what went well and what you learned. Gather feedback from the new employee, their supervisor, and the team. Use these insights to refine your process for future hires.

By following these steps, you'll build momentum toward a more diverse and inclusive workforce. Each hire is a learning experience, and CAA is here to assist and celebrate with you as you progress.

TAX INCENTIVES FOR INCLUSIVE HIRING

Employers who hire people with disabilities can take advantage of tax incentives that make inclusive hiring financially beneficial. Several federal and Washington State programs offer tax credits or deductions to offset costs such as wages, training, and accommodations.

FEDERAL TAX CREDITS AND DEDUCTIONS

Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC)

Who qualifies: Employers who hire individuals from certain target groups that face barriers to employment, including people with disabilities (*such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients or vocational rehabilitation referrals*).

Benefit: A federal income tax credit for each eligible new hire, ranging from about \$2,400 up to \$9,600 depending on the employee's category (*for example, \$2,400 for an SSI recipient, with higher credits for veterans with service-connected disabilities*).

Where to learn more/apply: Certification is required through the state workforce agency within 28 days of the hire. In Washington, the Employment Security Department (ESD) processes WOTC applications, employers submit IRS Form 8850 to ESD for certification. See the U.S. Department of Labor's WOTC page for guidance on target groups and how to apply, or visit ESD's WOTC portal for Washington-specific instructions.

Disabled Access Credit (IRS Code Section 44)

Who qualifies: Small businesses that earned \$1 million or less or had 30 or fewer full-time employees in the previous year.

Benefit: A non-refundable tax credit equal to 50% of eligible expenditures for improving accessibility, up to a maximum of \$5,000 credit per year. This credit helps cover the cost of accommodations such as removing barriers, providing sign language interpreters, producing Braille materials, or purchasing adaptive equipment.

Where to learn more/apply: Claim this credit by filing IRS Form 8826 (Disabled Access Credit) with your tax return. For details on eligible expenses and how to claim the credit, refer to IRS guidance on the Disabled Access Credit.

Architectural/Transportation Barrier Removal Deduction (IRS Code Section 190)

Who qualifies: Businesses of any size that incur expenses to remove physical barriers in facilities or vehicles to make them accessible to people with disabilities (*and the elderly*).

Benefit: A federal tax deduction of up to \$15,000 per year for qualified ADA-related barrier removal costs. Eligible expenses include improving building entrances, restrooms, parking, and other structural modifications to enhance accessibility. This deduction can be taken in addition to the Disabled Access Credit in the same year, as long as each applies to different portions of the expenses.

Where to learn more/apply: Businesses claim this deduction by itemizing the expense as a separate line item on their income tax return (no special form required). See IRS publications on Architectural Barrier Removal for guidelines on qualifying expenses and claiming the deduction.

EXAMPLE – OFFSETTING HIRING COSTS WITH CREDITS

A small business hires a part-time employee with a disability through Columbia Ability Alliance. The business invests **\$1,200** in simple accommodations, such as modifying a workstation and providing flexible scheduling. The employee works 20 hours per week.

Here's how tax incentives can help:

- Because the individual was referred through a vocational rehabilitation program, the employer qualifies for the **Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC)**. For part-time hires, this credit is pro-rated based on wages earned. In this case, the employer may receive around **\$1,200 in WOTC benefits** over the first year, depending on the employee's total hours and wages.
- The company also qualifies for the **Disabled Access Credit**, which reimburses 50% of the \$1,200 accommodation cost, an additional **\$600 in tax credits**.

Total benefit: approximately \$1,800 in tax credits.

In this scenario, the employer's actual out-of-pocket cost is effectively \$0, and they gain a reliable employee, ongoing support from Columbia Ability Alliance, and the opportunity to build a more inclusive workplace. It's a great example of how inclusive hiring makes sense both ethically and economically, even for part-time positions.

CONTACT US

If you're ready to partner with **Columbia Ability Alliance** or simply want to learn more, we encourage you to reach out. Our team is excited to collaborate with employers on inclusive hiring initiatives. Contact us at **509-582-4142** and ask for the Employment Services Divisional Manager. We can provide personalized guidance, connect you with capable job candidates, and answer any questions you have.

Together, let's create workplaces where everyone has the opportunity to contribute and succeed.

