asae foresightWORKS

Toward a Spectrum of Abilities

SUMMARY: Changing attitudes and technological interventions are shifting the nature of disability and blurring its boundaries. Gaining ground is the concept that disability and ability are not a binary but instead a spectrum, with every individual's physical, behavioral, and cognitive traits falling on multiple points along that spectrum. These changes will increase the number of workers who would once have been characterized as "disabled," while also broadening that category. Organizations will need to navigate a complex and evolving terrain of expectations and rules.

Forecasts

- Medical and technological interventions to ameliorate disabilities will proliferate, providing new ways to repair or work around physical and mental conditions. These will include robotic prostheses, sensory enhancements, and artificial intelligence (AI) coaches, among other innovations.
- Interventions will spark debates over what should be "fixed" and how, with issues growing more intense as pharmacological, neurological, and genetic approaches advance.
- Legal challenges will contest the formal boundaries that define disability. For instance, a U.S. district court has found that Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protections can be extended to gender dysphoria—a conflict between a person's biological sex and gender identification—creating a legal precedent for litigating gender discrimination under disability discrimination laws.
- U.S. cities and states will enact new disability discrimination protections that extend protections to new groups. These new legal protections will be broader than existing federal standards.

Key Uncertainties

Shifts in the definitional boundaries of what is considered a disability

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Degree of organizational support for disability-friendly working environments

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Employer willingness to hire workers with neurodevelopmental and emotional disabilities

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Extent of public acceptance of "ableism"—discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities—as a form of social discrimination

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Regulatory commitment to enforcing anti-discrimination laws

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Supporting Trends

- **Data tools for improving diversity and inclusion.** Human resources practices are being measured and monitored for embedded bias using new data-analytics tools.
- **Diversity policy in the corner office.** Diversity and inclusion are increasingly being seen as CEO-level strategic priorities.
- **D&I and the bottom line.** A growing body of research indicates that organizations that prioritize diversity and inclusion may perform significantly better financially.
- **Neurodiversity.** The neurodiversity paradigm destigmatizes autism, treating it and other cognitive conditions as an expression of the wide variety of human behavioral traits.
- **Cognitive diversity.** Cognitive diversity is gaining acceptance as an important new dimension of diversity and inclusion that has the potential to improve team performance.
- **New interfaces for accessibility.** New digital interfaces are employing voice, gesture, and brain-computer interfaces to enable inclusion for people with physical disabilities.
- **VR for people with disabilities.** People with restricted mobility or other faculties are beginning to use virtual reality (VR) to broaden their career options.

Related Drivers of Change

- Diversity and Inclusion
- Aging World
- Personalized Artificial Intelligence
- Ethical Edge of Innovation
- Work Redefined

Notable Data Points

DISABILITY PREVALENCE RATES

The disability prevalence rate **in the United States rose from 11.9% in 2010 to 12.8% in 2016.**

Source: 2017 Annual Report on People with Disabilities in America

A NEED TO SUPPORT NEURODIVERSITY

According to the CDC, **the autism rate in the United States is 1 in 42 among boys and 1 in 189 among girls.**

Source: "Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage," Harvard Business Review, May/June 2017

PUSHBACK AROUND EMOTIONAL-SUPPORT ANIMALS

Airlines are revising their polices in response to the **increase in support animals aboard U.S. planes: up 40% from 2016 to 2017.**

Source: "American Airlines tightens leash on emotional support animals," USA Today, May 14, 2018

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Strategic Insights

- Neurodiversity frames neurodevelopmental "disorders" not as problems but as natural variations in brain function and human behavior. Although neurodiversity initially addressed autism-spectrum disorders, it can be expanded to encompass learning, language, and anxiety disorders. Pursuing neurodiversity can be part of inclusion of formerly stigmatized workers.
- Workforce aging will bring notable increases in workers with physical and neurological challenges. Accommodating workers with temporary or ongoing disabilities will ensure that organizations retain access to skilled and experienced personnel.
- Technological innovation has the potential to expand the range of potential accommodations to a variety of physical and neurological conditions. Organizations should also explore how these interventions could potentially benefit all workers by bolstering productivity, mental health, etc.
- There will be inevitable tensions between inclusion efforts and the operational realities of efficiency, cost, and practicality. Defining boundaries and policies will be a challenging and ongoing task

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Timing

- **Stage:** Gradual growth
- **Speed:** Medium, propelled by demographic, cultural, and technological change

Potential Alternative Futures

- **Universal design:** The growing prevalence of disability in the world influences workplaces to embrace universal design principles.
- **Skeptical backlash:** Abuse of disability accommodations by the non-disabled leads to greater scrutiny of disability claims.
- **Overcoming ableism:** Society treats discrimination based on ability as it does discrimination for race, sex, and sexual orientation.
- **Jurisdictional divergence:** Federal law, state, and local inclusionary efforts diverge widely.

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Take Action

- **Become better prepared to champion inclusivity.** Few associations prioritize including individuals with differing abilities in either staffing or volunteering. HR and volunteer management directors may need training. Staff, boards, and committees will need to understand how their attitudes and behaviors foster welcoming cultures.
- **Seek expertise from other organizations.** Organizations with expertise in the latest research and proven practices in an area of concern can help. Identity groups can help you understand the lived experiences of their constituents. Universities may also be a local resource.
- **Transfer what your meetings team knows into everyday practice.** Your meeting professionals are your frontline experts in making your association's meetings and events accessible to all members. Consider how you might extend this responsiveness into everyday operations.
- **Anticipate assistive technologies.** Websites, databases, and other member interfaces need to be responsive to differing needs and assistive technologies. Plan to incorporate new capabilities in system updates and redesigns.
- **Set expectations in requests for proposals.** Ask your vendors and service providers to explain how they will enable your association to meet differing needs. Make responsive solutions a requirement in getting your business.
- **Know what local laws require.** While federal laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act set important national standards, local governments may have broader and more specific provisions governing workplaces and public accommodations.

Keyword Search

To continue researching this change driver, use these search terms:
disability discrimination, disability accommodation, assistive technology, physical impairment, mobility impairment, neurodiversity, inclusion, disability inclusion, ableism, accessibility design, universal design, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) hearing, sight, augmentative communication, alternative communication

Who Will Be Affected

Associations and nonprofits with a mission addressing a societal challenge, such as healthcare, education, human rights, or public services, will be expected to model inclusive practices. Individuals may be inspired by their personal experiences with family and friends to press their associations to champion changes. Any association failing to act in inclusive ways could face intense criticism. As younger generations experience greater integration of individuals with a spectrum of abilities in their schools, they will project these expectations into their future associations.

About ASAE ForesightWorks

ASAE ForesightWorks is a deliberate, evidence-based research program and emerging line of products to provide association professionals with a continual stream of intelligence about the changes facing the association industry, including:

- regularly updated action briefs;
- tools for applying insights from the research in your association;
- guidance in performing environmental scans; and
- opportunities to engage with peers around the research.

Ultimately, the program's mission is to empower association leaders to create a culture of foresight.

Check **asaecenter.org/ForesightWorks** and follow **@ASAEfdn** on Twitter for updates on new findings and events.

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