

embracing

all abilities

employment experiences of  
people with disabilities &  
the way forward in India

randstad  
insights

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# study approach & respondents

The study focused on understanding the inclusion of People with Disabilities (PwD) in Indian workplaces through studying the experiences and attitudes of employers, employees, allies and policy-makers.

An analysis of workplace policies and provisions also helped understand the status quo at the workplace.

The qualitative study used guided in-depth interviews in order to gather insights into the lived experiences of people with disabilities, while the quantitative study used a structured questionnaire administered online.

Keeping in mind the sensitivity involved in providing safe expression, details such as the respondents' names and places of employment were only shared after obtaining consent.

## qualitative study



30 people with physical and/or invisible disabilities

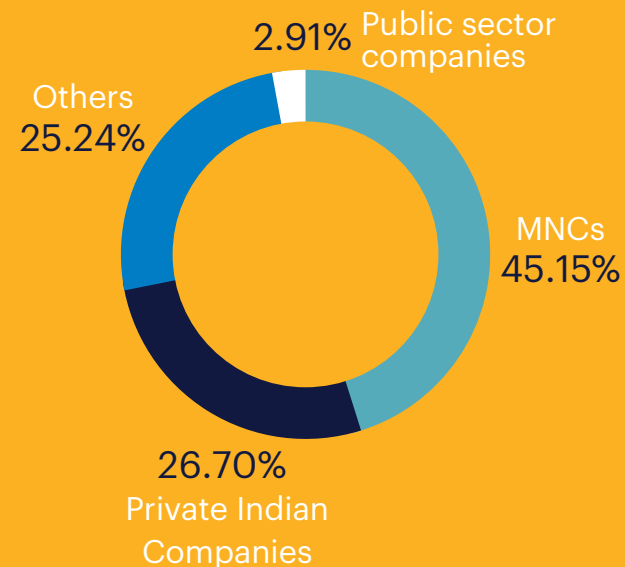
10 HR/D&I Leaders

10 Non-Profits & Other Allies

## quantitative survey



206 business leaders across levels and sectors



# study focus areas



## Organizational mindset to readily include PwD

The current state of organizations to embrace PwDs through reasonable accommodations and intangible practices: What measures are implemented by various employers, given their stated intention to become inclusive?



## The involvement of PwD at work

Understanding if employers and peers make the PwD feel equal at work. A deep dive into the prominence their skills get over their disability. Are they an integral part of the decision-making processes?



## Role of D&I and HR leaders in driving inclusion

Understanding how managers perceive inclusion at work. Do they consciously make the workplace disability-friendly? How are they helping organizations construct a workplace with minimal bias?



## Best practices to adopt in future

A look at some salient practices that can help build inclusive workspaces. How can PwDs, employers, and external advocacy groups collaborate to drive inclusion at each step of the professional journey?



## section 1

# how people with disability experience the workplace

- Major challenges faced by people with disability
- How discrimination manifests in the workplace
- What makes people with disability feel included?
- Visible & Invisible disabilities

# major challenges faced by people with disability



## mindset related

- Preconceived notions about employability and capabilities
- Ignorance of colleagues on what inclusive behavior means
- Others' discomfort in interacting with people with disabilities
- Emotional labor and burden of educating others about PwD

"...whether visible invisible, both would require some kind of change in the mindset,"

Seema Bangia  
Vice President & Chief People Officer at Mahindra\*



## policy related

- Not consulted on policies, leading to gaps
- Done on case-to-case basis, leading to onus of asking on the individual & a sense of 'othering'
- Difficulty in availing benefits entitled to when not communicated well
- Some groups not included in policy-making (chronic health/neurodivergent)

"...just by having the policies it is not sufficient, they should ensure that all these policies are met."

Mahesh Narasimhan  
Consultant, Ernst & Young. Visually impaired



## skill related

- Some lack education or skills needed for many roles in organizations today
- Receive insufficient training/customized onboarding to succeed at work
- Matched to opportunities that are not aligned to skills or interests

"With respect to employment secured by PwDs through reservation or special hiring arrangements by private organizations, are the job descriptions mapped to their disabilities?"

Dr. Abinaya S.M  
Member of the Ethics Committee,  
Advocate-Corporate Affairs, National Institute for Empowerment of Persons with Multiple Disabilities, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Govt of India

# how discrimination manifests at the workplace

## pre-employment

### educational

- Lack of accessible learning leads to skill gaps
- Support organizations impart basic training less relevant to emerging jobs

"... the lack of support that you get for people who are disabled. So that's why I just decided to choose the least problematic field of studies."

Ankit Bhasin  
HR, Social Media.  
Visually impaired

## at employment

### hiring & onboarding

- Considered only for junior/back-end roles
- Low empathy and poor understanding of onboarding needs e.g. time taken to understand the functioning of a software

"There are high level chances I might not get the opportunities which I deserve."

Manager, MNC. Muscle deformity

## post employment

### infrastructure

- Lack of assistive devices (e.g. screen readers, captions)
- Poor physical infrastructure (e.g. ramps, seating, common areas access, washrooms)
- Inadequate medical benefits especially for less understood conditions

"It takes extra effort, extra infrastructure. You need to invest into these kinds of things."

Akankshya Abismruta  
Writer. Chronic health condition

### behavior

- Exclusion from informal interactions
- Colleagues' focus on their inadequacies
- Intrusive questions
- Not considered for growth opportunities

"You talk about mental illness and then people just start thinking of you as a mad person who doesn't need to be heard."

Bhanu Priya  
independent researcher.  
Psychosocial disability and chronic pain

# what makes people with disability feel included?

## 🕒 Beyond bias, to explicit interest & allyship

Showing support and speaking up for them where needed, being invested in their lives and growth, including them in informal interactions

"Some ask if I am capable of taking class, but others stand up and say I am perfectly capable."

Teacher, Government School. Visually impaired

## 🕒 Collaborative & transparent culture

Where the managers/team believes they can succeed, and the metrics for success as well as resources available are well communicated

"Instead of it being a word of mouth policy, it's nice to see it when they've actually set it up in papers so that it can be enforced."

Andy Morgan, Freelance Illustrator (previously employed in Social Media & Marketing). Dyslexic

## 🕒 Provision of training & support

Where they receive the necessary onboarding & training (for e.g. on software) to do well, in a way that is accessible to them

"...the chief operating officer was very candid. He said that you take your time, and any resource any help you want, straightaway walk up to me."

Mahesh Narasimhan, Consultant, Ernst & Young, Visually impaired

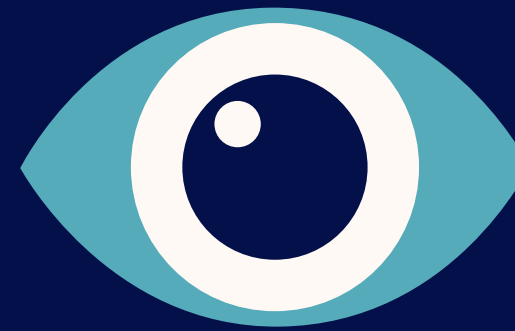
## 🕒 Being included in policy-making

When the organization has mechanisms for two-way communication so that people with disability can provide feedback, Includes them in policy making and decision making, especially when it directly impacts the individual

"In our Q and A sessions, people ask, how can we help and all that? So, yes, I was a part of that, being on the side where I am answering questions somewhat made me feel that I think this is the right thing to do."

Sobhan Acharya, HR Executive, Wipro. Visually impaired

# how are visible/invisible disabilities different?



## Visible Disabilities

### Challenges

- Mobility issues
- Sensory deficits
- Orthopedic limitations

### Needs

- Physical accessibility for ramps, washrooms, and seating arrangements
- Assistive methods of communication
- Accessible modes of conveyance
- Comprehensive health insurance that covers disabilities like spinal cord injuries, multiple disabilities, chronic health conditions
- Flexible work arrangements to cater to medical needs

"If I were to go to the cafeteria, that would be a place which would have great footfall, it might be a situation that chairs might be not in place. So there I require assistance, visual support."

Mahesh Narasimhan, Consultant, Ernst & Young. Visually impaired

## Invisible Disabilities

- Inability to articulate
- Slow pace of learning
- Inability to use unfamiliar tools or software
- Inability to work continuously

- Inclusion through assistive technology, language flexibility
- Flexibility in training methodology to suit different styles of learning
- Training and upskilling for client-facing roles
- Health benefits with provisions for neurodivergence or have learning disabilities
- Flexible work arrangements to cater to need for physical or mental rest

"They have never tried to check in or had a conversation with me about it. Nor has there ever been a safe space where I could go and have a conversation..."

Shauna James, News editor. Neurodivergent



A man with short brown hair and glasses is sitting on a dark blue couch. He is wearing a light blue button-down shirt and is looking at a smartphone in his hands. The background is a bright, out-of-focus indoor setting with a window. The overall color palette is dominated by blues and oranges.

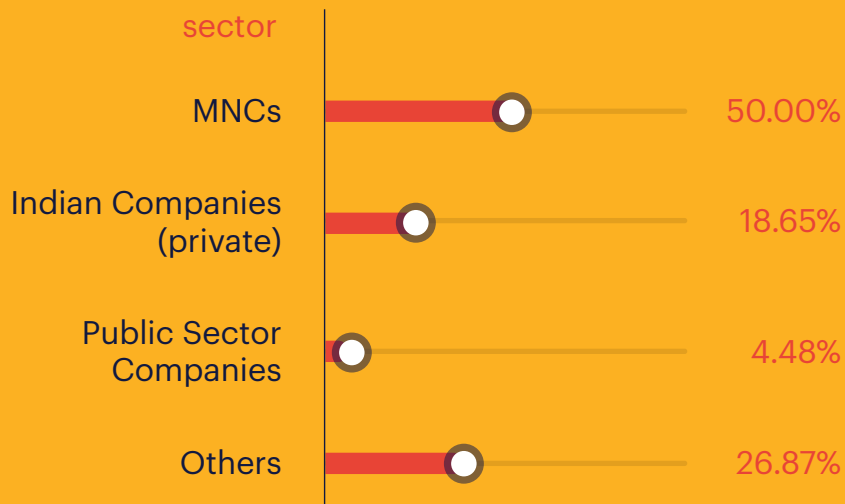
## section 2

# employer engagement with PwD in India

- The Big Picture on where employers stand
- Employer engagement with PwD: Maturity Levels
- Key factors driving approach to PwD inclusion
- Current employer focus
- What hampers faster organization inclusion of PwD?
- Role of leadership in driving PwD inclusion

# employer engagement with PwD: the big picture

Presence of specific policies or processes for including people with disabilities (by sector)



At a broad level, 65% of respondents say that their organizations have policies to include people with disabilities, indicating that PwD are on the radar of organizations.

Of this 65%, the biggest chunk come from MNCs (50%) indicating that their organizations are more likely to have policies in place. The figures are lower for other sectors.

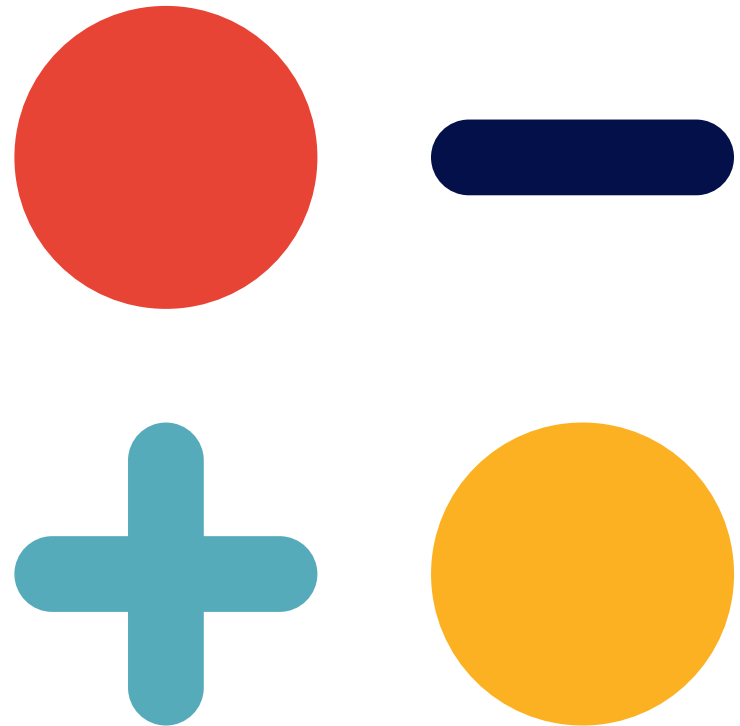
The big picture, however, is not dependent on the intentions alone. An assessment of the effectiveness of and accountability for the policies can tell us more.



# beyond intention: accountability & effectiveness

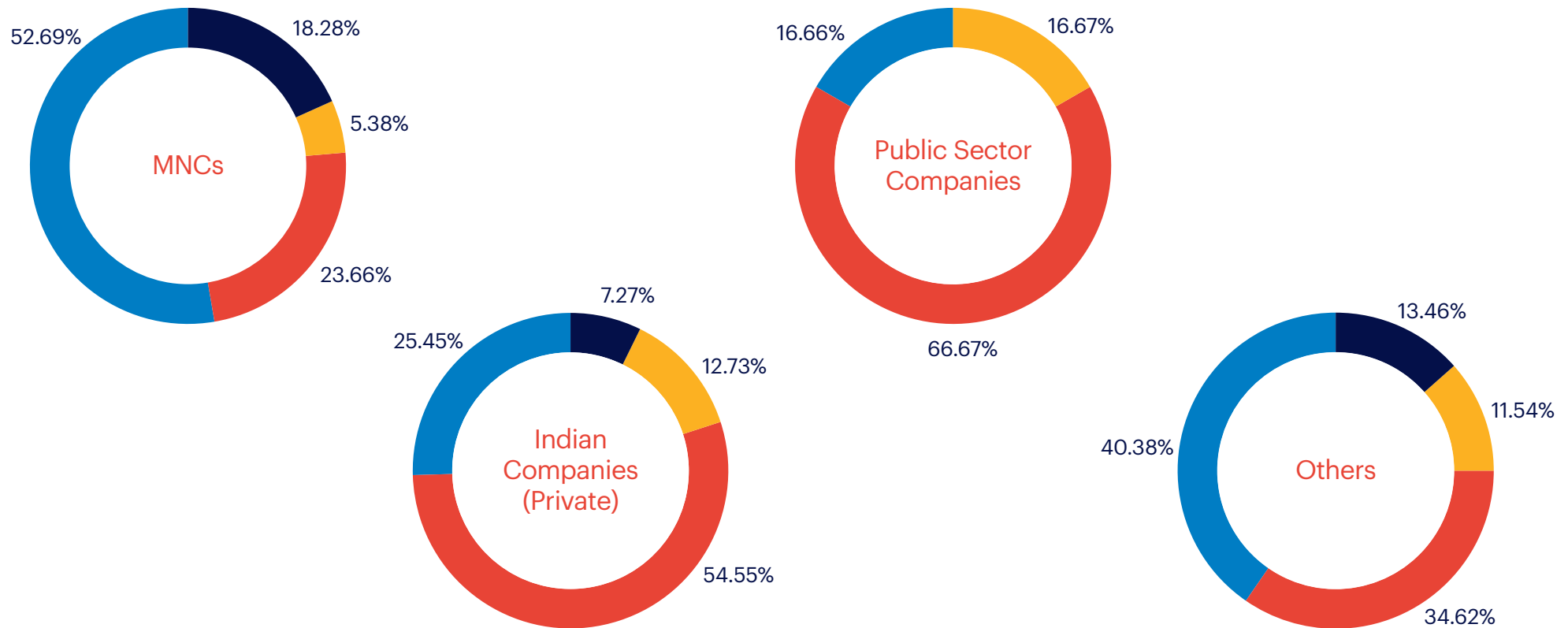
Relatively speaking, a larger proportion of MNCs have accountability and effectiveness measures in place, with more than 50% of MNC respondents saying that their business leaders' goals are aligned with inclusion, and that fair policies exist and are also well implemented.

Indian companies however are yet to attach accountability metrics to policy-oriented action or focus on effectiveness, with much lower percentages even on self-assessment in these areas. This is backed up by what HR leaders have to say, in the qualitative discussions that were part of this study.



# beyond intention: accountability & effectiveness

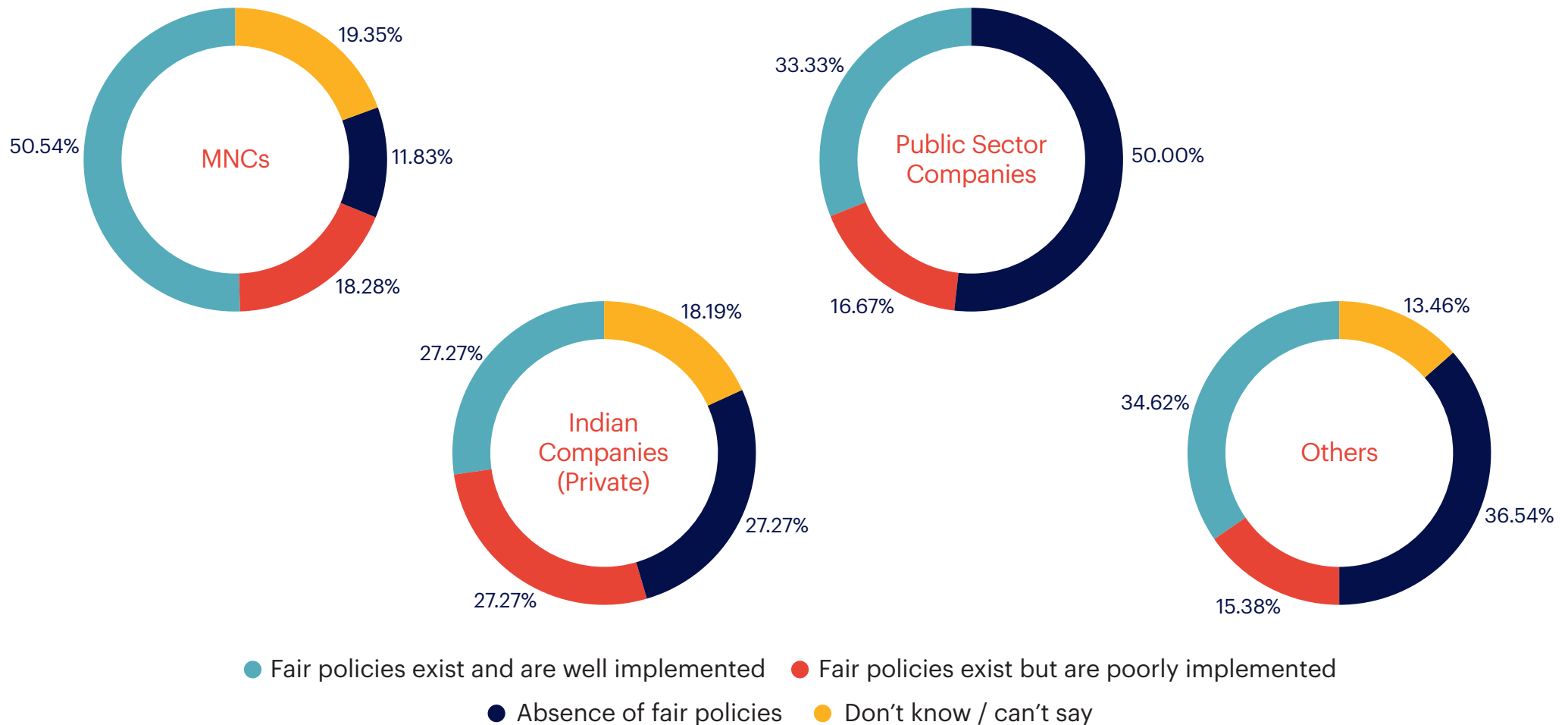
## accountability



- Business leaders' goals are aligned with inclusion
- Inclusion is present but not mandated in the goals
- Absence of alignment between goals and inclusions
- Don't know / can't say

# beyond intention: accountability & effectiveness

## effectiveness



# employer engagement with PwD: maturity levels

In line with the quantitative data, it is evident that inclusion of PwD is at a nascent stage in most organizations. Organizations fall into 3 maturity levels when it comes to PwD inclusion, with the 'norm' being intention and basic action, and holistic inclusion being an exception.

## NORM

## EXCEPTION

### intention

- Intention to hire/some CSR focus
- Sensitization of HR & Leadership (may have to overcome resistance)
- Basic infrastructure e.g. ramps, washrooms
- Mostly focused on mobility related disabilities
- Allocation of some roles for hiring PwD

"...a lot of our business people may not be interested – they may say why make so much effort, we already support them - we do CSR, under CSR we support in various initiatives. But why do we need them here?"

### enablement

- Clear budgets for hiring PwD
- Hiring & aligning PwD across roles
- Sensitization of more employees/managers
- More focus on digital inclusion
- Begin considering invisible disabilities
- Clarity on grievance mechanisms

"...it is still in infancy so I don't think that we have resource groups and representation of other groups yet when it comes to policy making."

### holistic inclusion

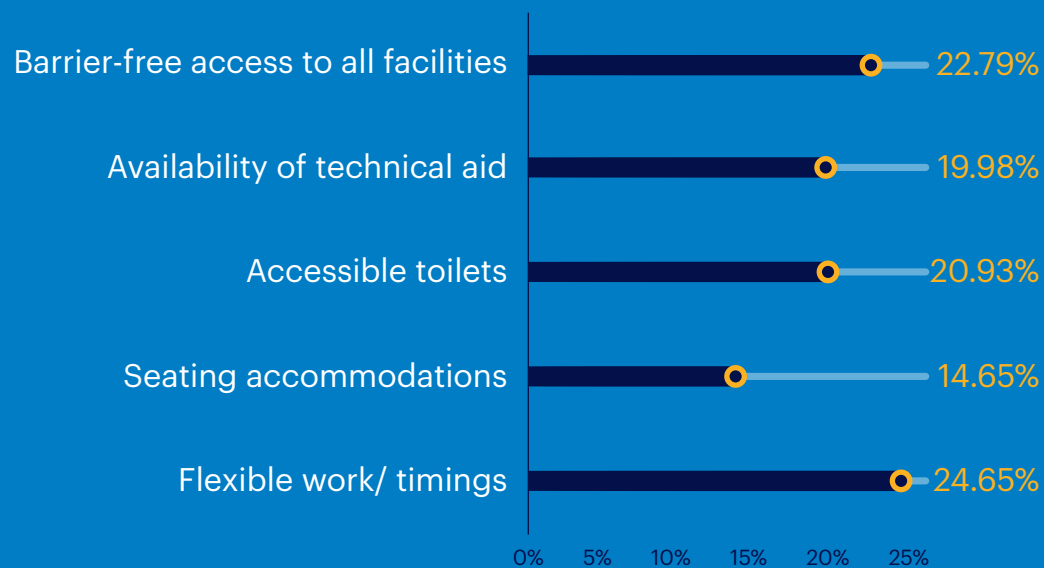
- Beyond hiring, to onboarding & growth
- ERGs/Affinity groups
- Annual audits to track outcomes
- Benefits for people with different disabilities + mental health support
- Working with insurers to make policies more inclusive
- Structured training & resources available for employees to use as needed
- Hiring of a wider range of people, including those with invisible disabilities

"...when we say programs, it's basically hiring to retention, the entire gamut of programs and how our D&I goals are integrated with each stage of the people process, the employee lifecycle in the organization."

\*Names of HR people redacted here given the sensitivity in discussing organization specific maturity levels of policy adoption

# what are the ways in which employers provide accommodations for including people with disabilities?

## availability of workplace accommodations for people with disabilities



While respondents pointed at the presence of stated policies for inclusion in their workplace, the data on accommodations shows holistic inclusion is yet to become the norm.

24.65% of respondents identified flexible work timings as available, which also points to the impact of the pandemic in enabling such change.

However, necessities such as accessible toilets and technological accommodations were present in less than 25% of the spaces.

Any kind of accommodation was entirely absent in their workplaces, as per 17% of the respondents!

Even though intentions exist, the roll-out of policies is incomplete, with many gaps that need to be filled.

# key factors driving approach to PwD inclusion



spurred by  
global mandates

At the risk of some generalization, it is evident that global commitments on DE&I are driving MNC employers faster to invest in resources to support inclusion of PwD. This does not mean that no Indian employers are passionate about inclusion - only the larger trend is driven by MNCs. Government mandates are not yet a critical factor in India (for private sector), but do impact academia & government hiring.

"To advance our commitment to Disability Inclusion, both visible and invisible Thoughtworks signed The Valuable 500 - a global business collective made up of 500 CEOs and their companies, innovating and working together for disability inclusion."

Tina Vinod, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion - Strategy and Consulting at ThoughtWorks



impacted by  
nature of work

Blue collar work, especially factory/ outdoors is seen as less available for PwD and requiring more investment prior to employment. Here, the pandemic is seen as a positive enabler, with work from home (WFH) being more acceptable in many roles and allowing for more location-agnostic hiring.



leadership driven

Top leadership's involvement and desire (or lack of it) for a wider inclusion of PwD is seen as a critical factor driving the approach, including investments in infrastructure.

"...in principle, in the management team meetings and the leadership team meetings, it is talked, but I don't see any proof points of it being implemented yet, when it comes to the space being aligned."

Senior HR leader in a Digital Transformation focused organization



# where is the current employer focus?



## physical disability centric

Physical disability, and especially mobility/motor related is the first area of focus for most employers followed by visual/auditory.

Chronic health conditions & Neuro-divergence related initiatives are rare.



## beneficiary focus

PwD are still seen as an 'other', i.e. a beneficiary group to be sympathetically considered.

Even in companies with stronger inclusion policies, representation of PwD at leadership levels or in policy-making is still low.

Some companies are trying to bridge this gap by partnering with external organizations who can bring in the needed perspectives.



## limited outcome focus

While many employers have begun mapping key outcome metrics on gender diversity, the same is not the case for PwD.

Only hiring numbers may be tracked in some cases, with growth/retention tracking absent.

# what hampers faster organizational inclusion of PwD?

## mindset

From stereotypes about what PwD are capable of, or discomfort around them, to active resistance from managers who feel that hiring PwDs will need more investment of their time and resources

"I think barriers is more around the mindset, and education and awareness of managers about the inclusion at the workplace is extremely, extremely important."

HR Leader in a Digital Transformation organization

## lack of business case

PwDs form a very small number of employees, and hence organizations do not see a business case in investing in accessibility for more use cases that they may not have yet - creating a vicious cycle that leads to people with some disabilities not being employed

"We have to make the environment for them first and then do the calling...When I say environment, in our parlance it is more physical environment. Offices and infrastructure needs to be ready first."

HR Leader in Retail organization

## talent shortage

Many PwD have not been able to access the education or updated their tech skills needed by employers - a function of larger access to education issues in India. Who will invest in closing this skill gap is a question

## liability fear

Some employers fear that they are not equipped with the resources PwD need to function, and are afraid of liabilities or PR issues that may arise in such cases - hence they proceed cautiously

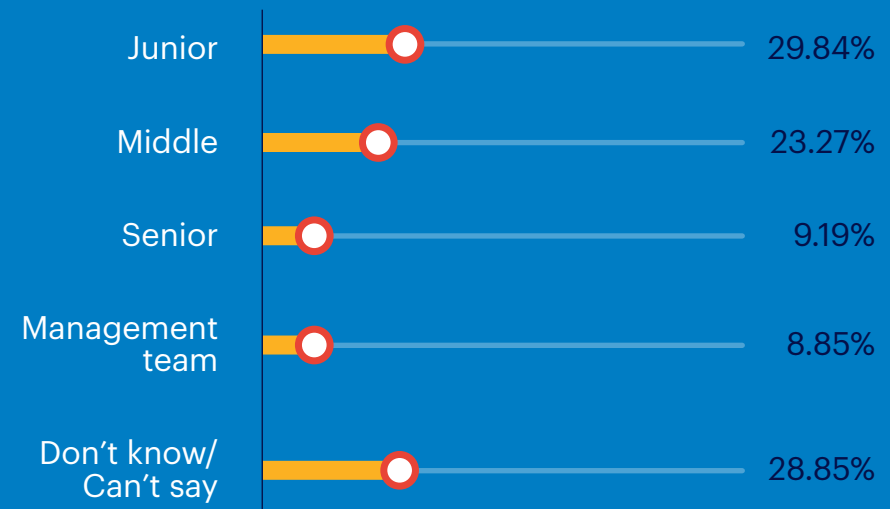
# at what levels are people with disabilities hired?

As a result of the prevailing biases against people with disabilities, as well as preconceptions about what they can and cannot do, their skill development is hindered and judged.

The presence of an unconscious bias, the lack of business case perceived by many, as well as the talent shortage due to underinvestment in their education, restricts the professional growth of PwD.

As revealed by the quantitative survey, a majority of people with disabilities are employed at the junior levels. Their presence in the organizational structure of the company decreases as we move towards middle and senior management roles in the hierarchy.

## at what levels are people with disabilities hired in the workspace?



# role of leadership in driving PwD inclusion

HR leaders strongly believe that top leaders' awareness and desire to include PwD is an important predictor of the organizational success in enabling such inclusion. One challenge here is that since PwD are rarely part of organizational leadership teams, their lived experiences do not become part of leaders' own learning journeys. Nonetheless, the role of leadership must be emphasized, and their impact in this area comes through one of three ways.

## through awareness

leaders' own awareness of both the barriers facing PwD, the need to include them at every level, and the business case for doing so, is seen as a strong indicator of organizational success in this space.

"Leadership has to be invested, they have to have the commitment, they have to have the budget for this to be a successful initiative."

D&I lead at a consulting company.

## through policies

Leaders aware of and deeply invested in inclusion help set policies that are inclusive of the widest possible range of people, adaptable and responsive to emerging needs, by creating two-way communication channels.

"Both diversity and inclusion can be ingrained in everything, whether it is your policies, processes, your areas, the work everywhere."

HR Manager at a consulting firm

## through example

Leaders who demonstrate inclusion through their own behavior highlight the organization's seriousness and act as visible exponents of the desired organizational culture.

"Whenever I've told my manager I'm facing this problem, he has replied saying, "Ok you take your time, but only you must complete this work." He's always had a lot of trust in me, this has motivated me to work."

Arvind Yadav, Creative Producer, Idea.  
Cerebral Palsy affected

# how employers are using external resources to move ahead

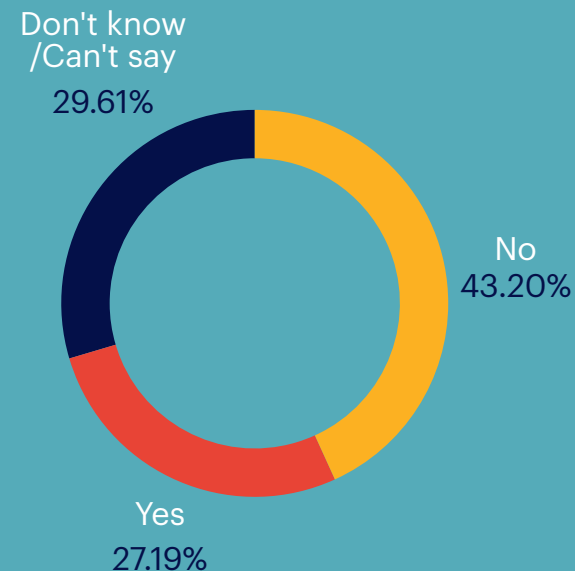
According to the quantitative survey, 27.2% of business leaders say that their organizations are collaborating with external groups to improve their inclusion of PwD. This is a positive trend that more organizations can consider.

Currently, the primary roles in which organizations are considering external partners include:

- Helping them formulate transparent workplace policies and plan reasonable accommodations to maximize the inclusion and contribution of PwDs at work
- Act as external counsellors or grievance officers who make PwDs feel safer at work
- Design empathetic sensitization/awareness programs for 'able-bodied' individuals to help them change their mindset for the better.
- Conduct accessibility audits (still rare)

A crucial role performed by non-government organizations is to upskill PwD to make them eligible for the job market. This is an area that demands much stronger involvement from employers, to improve employability, as well as design stronger training & onboarding policies internally.

do organizations collaborate with external groups for support?



"The government is making policies, but NGOs are trying to implement them on the ground. They are pushing the corporate and other authorities to follow the policies."

Anurag Kashyap, Advocacy Manager in a disability organization. Locomotor Disability.

# training & sensitization

"People can be extremely insensitive."

- Shauna James, News editor. Neurodivergent.

A strong bias against PwD in the workspace is common - they are stereotyped as "incapable", "dependents", and "liabilities". Often, colleagues avoid talking to them because they don't know how to interact with a PwD. Hence, Sensitization & Training is critical.

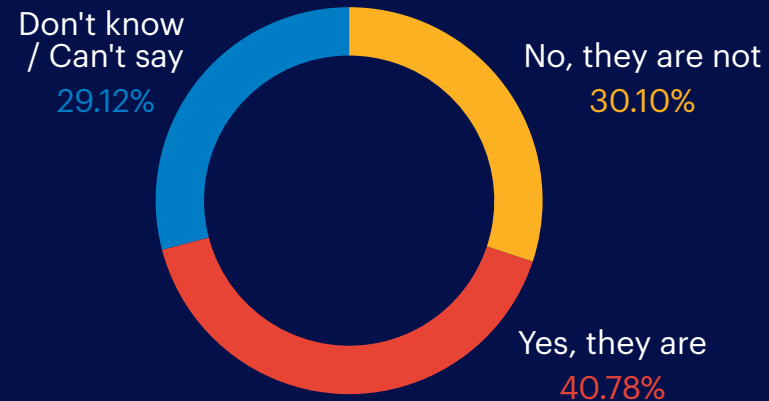
Currently, many organizations have training programs designed around inclusive behavior. However, conversations with HR Leaders reveal that there is not yet much emphasis on PwD as part of such training, though the quantitative data is more positive in this regard. In some organizations, such training does exist, mainly for leaders or HR managers themselves.

One positive example is from a leader who has previously worked with Accenture and cites the example of standardized training programs that are available for all employees to use, besides one-time training.

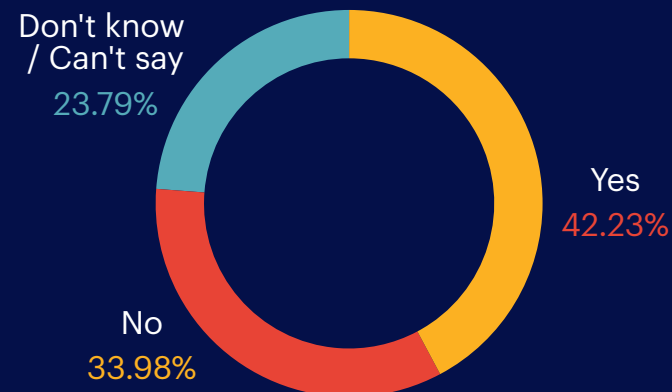
"... these mechanisms are already in place where, say somebody who is a manager and is looking at employing a person with a disability, they can actually go and get themselves trained before the person comes on board, so they are ready to assimilate the person."

HR Leader from IT Services

are managers responsible for hiring PwD-provided recruitment training?



do sensitization programs include training on working with PwD?



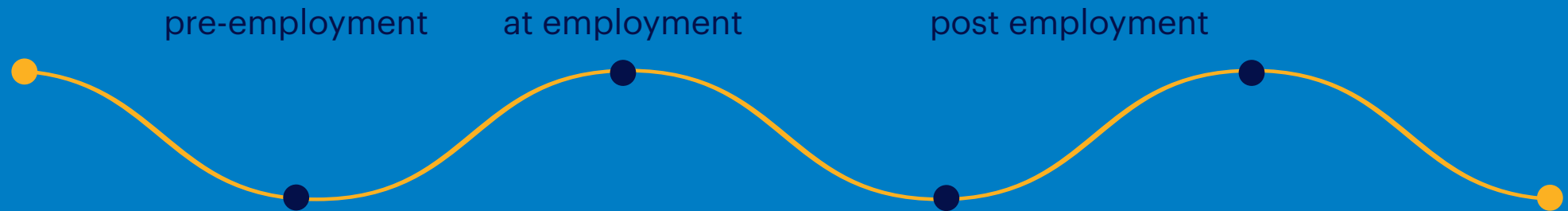


## section 3

# best practices for future Inclusion of PwD

- Best practices across the employee lifecycle
- Some examples to take us forward
- Best practices for leaders to consider

# best practices to include PWD at workplaces



## across lifecycle

- Include People with Disabilities, whether from inside or outside the organization, as Policy Advisors
- Conduct annual audits that assess the impact of policies, as against targeted outcomes

## educational

- Working with support organizations to build stronger employability for specific groups within PwD
- Educate training organizations on the skill sets needed by industry

## hiring & onboarding

- Framework of making jobs inclusive for the widest number of people, rather than ear-marking specific roles only for PwD
- Skill-based hiring, but with value also for potential (given training)
- Incentivize employees to hire through referrals
- Adequate time for onboarding/ramping up

## infrastructure

- Adequate planning to meet as many needs as possible, reducing case by case approach
- Flexible work models
- Widen benefits to include people with invisible disabilities & mental healthcare
- Enable involvement of family members where needed, especially for those who are neurodivergent

## behavior

- Helping all employees educate & sensitize themselves & avoid burdening PwD\*
- Encouraging a buddy/mentor system to familiarize the PwD with the workspace
- Encourage more informal interaction & story sharing in safe spaces

\*This Harvard Business University guide to inclusive meetings is among the useful tools available today for your employees to educate themselves ([https://edib.harvard.edu/files/dib/files/inclusive\\_meeting\\_guide\\_final\\_1.pdf?m=1617641674](https://edib.harvard.edu/files/dib/files/inclusive_meeting_guide_final_1.pdf?m=1617641674))



# some examples to take us forward

## **harness disability as a strength to drive further inclusion**

In North Carolina, visually-impaired people have been hired at a workforce development program to train them as digital accessibility testers.

Mirakle Couriers, a Mumbai-based for-profit company trains and employs only hearing and speech impaired persons in its messenger services.

Carlsberg Brewery has hired people with disabilities to inspect the refillable drink bottles. The role required the individuals to sit in one place and perform a repetitive job with precision and attention to detail.

## **drop preconceived notions about what people with disabilities can or cannot do**

Organizations like Lemon Tree Hotels hire individuals with down syndrome, hearing speech disabilities even in client-facing roles.

## **create spaces for people to learn**

Some of the HR leaders interviewed for this study cited the example of affinity groups internally, that allow people to share interesting resources they come across and ask questions, and also invite employees with lived experience, for e.g. as parents of a child with a disability, to talk about their own experiences and participate in such spaces, since people listen to them and they bring in a lot of credibility.

## **provide additional resources and mentoring for equal opportunities**

Accenture India has a Growth Track program where people with disabilities are included in mentoring programs with senior leaders to help resolve any challenges or barriers people with disabilities may encounter



# best practices for leaders to consider

## building awareness

- Initiate and participate in awareness programs: explore arenas such as terminologies, technologies, and services that help include people with visible and invisible disabilities.
- Empathetically study the workplace challenges of PwD employees: encourage open communication and feedback sessions with them to find realistic solutions.

## creating policies

- Collaborate with advocates to explore reasonable accommodation and policy planning, which can help make the workplace a safe space.
- Communicate seriousness of intent by combining policies with resources, redressal mechanisms as well as clear communication of policies at all organizational levels.

## leading by example

- Include people with physical and invisible disabilities in the leadership and D&I teams to ensure representation while making major workplace decisions.
- Clear focus on outcomes (with appropriate tailoring for different groups) to enable individuals with disabilities to also grow as per their skills and ambitions.

## about Randstad

Randstad is the world's largest HR services provider and is driven to become the world's most valued 'working life partner', supporting as many people as possible in realizing their true potential throughout their working life. We provide companies with the high quality, diverse, and agile workforces they need while helping people get rewarding jobs and stay relevant in the ever-changing world of work. In 2021, we helped more than two million people find a job that is right for them, advised 235,000 clients on their HR needs, from talent acquisition to total workforce management, and delivered training to over 450,000 people. We use data and technology to provide the right advice at the right moment at scale, while our consultants across almost 5,000 locations in 38 markets give talent and clients personal, dedicated human attention. It is this combination of Tech and Touch that makes our offer unique.

Randstad was founded in 1960 and is headquartered in Diemen, the Netherlands. In 2021, Randstad had on average 39,530 corporate employees and generated revenue of € 24.6 billion. Randstad N.V. is listed on the NYSE Euronext.

For more information, see [www.randstad.com](http://www.randstad.com).

## about Randstad India

Randstad India offers the broadest HR services portfolio ranging from Staffing, Search & Selection to Recruitment Process Outsourcing (RPO). The organization has a vast network of offices across the country to be within the reach of clients, candidates and flexi workers. The company, previously called Ma Foi is a leader in the HR services industry in India for more than 25 years and became part of Randstad through its global acquisition of Vedior in 2008. The Randstad Group is the global leader in the HR services industry, active in 38 countries across the globe. Randstad India continues to focus on developing customized and innovative HR services, leveraging on its unique strengths of geographical presence and end-to-end capability across all HR service functions.

For more information, see [www.randstad.in](http://www.randstad.in)

## about Randstad Risesmart

Randstad RiseSmart is a leading specialist in work-life coaching and career transition solutions and an operating company of Randstad N.V. Our purpose is to enable organizations to unleash possibilities throughout their working lives for their biggest asset, their people. We understand that a business thrives when its people do. Our coaching-centric approach is designed to support individuals throughout all stages of their employment, and to support businesses in onboarding, developing, mobilizing, engaging, retaining, and transitioning employees to have the best possible work-life experience in alignment with business needs. We do this through our industry-leading combination of 'tech and touch' resources such as expert coaching, field expertise, industry insights, curated content, specialist platforms, and personalized action plans.

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