

# UNDERSTANDING INCLUSIVITY CHALLENGES FOR PERSONS WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITY IN WORK PLACES AND EXPLORE POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS FOR SAME SUB-THEME: MANAGEMENT OF CULTURE AND CHANGE IN A LEARNING ORGANISATION (EMBRACING DIVERSITY)

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**Abstract** A learning organisation of today is the one that goes through a continuous learning process and adapts rapidly in a frequently changing environment. Such an organisation promotes a culture of learning, incremental innovation, adaptability and critical thinking in their employees. There is today, a lot of emphasis on on-the-job training where employees are allowed to make mistakes and continuously improve from previous mistakes. They want rapid adapters and team players. There is a greater emphasis on team building and team work where mutual appreciation and a “we” culture is promoted. A learning organisation today wants to be known for its inclusivity measures.

There is greater adaptability in creating a culture of inclusivity. There is a lot of emphasis on embracing diversity. While different culture faces different inclusivity challenges on diversity based on gender, age, disability, sexual orientation and the likes, this paper would focus on persons with disability, with emphasis on physical disability.

**Keywords:** Adaptability, Embracing Diversity, Inclusivity, Physical Disability

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## 1. SPECIFICATION OF THE BROAD FIELD OF STUDY

Why should one study employment inclusivity on persons with disability?

Approximately 10 percent of the globe’s population, i.e. a humongous 650 million people, live with a disability. They are considered to be the world’s largest minority (<http://www.un.org>), However their representation in work force is significantly low.

Below are some statistics from United Nations Enable and initiatives by United Nations for persons with disability (<http://www.un.org>).

Around 386 million of the world’s working people have some or the other kind of disability, reports a study by the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Unemployment among the persons with disabilities is as high as 80 percent in some countries. Often a major group of employers assume that persons with disabilities are not suitable to work in conventional jobs.

Persons with disability contribute a substantial 5 to 6 percent of total India’s population. However, their employment needs are largely unmet, reports India’s National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (<http://www.ncpedp.org>). This is in spite of “People with Disabilities” Act, slated to reserve at least 3 percent of government jobs for persons with disability (<http://www.ncpedp.org>).

Of approximately 70 million of persons with disability in our country, only about one Lakh has succeeded in obtaining employment opportunities for themselves with industry.

Per company, the numbers are so low, that there is high potential for ignoring the needs of this segment of work force.

In such a situation it is extremely important to understand the current work landscape or environment of person with disability.

Are we really embracing diversity? This is a glaring question with respect to the above situation.

When one studies diversity, physical disability is one of the core areas of challenge with implications that can change an organisation for better.

It is a direct measure of inclusivity initiatives that an organisation claims to take.

ILO (International Labour Organization) at one hand is fighting for decent work opportunities for persons with disability.

On the other hand a few companies are striving to promote an inclusive environment to benefit one and all. Some of these names include IBM, Carrefour, Accor, Nokia, M & S, E & Y and Cisco (<http://www.ilo.org>).

This is to add to the fact that work place inclusivity based on physical ability occupies a core position in the four layer model of diversity (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2009).

A team of diversity experts headed by Lee Gardenswartz and Anita Rowe (1994) identified the four layers of diversity as organisational dimensions, external dimensions, internal dimensions and personality at its core.

Physical ability, being a core internal dimension of workplace diversity, is very important to study the challenges and implication of embracing diversity with respect to persons with disability as employees with potential to make a difference to the organisation at various levels.

This study hopes to understand inclusivity challenges at a more personal and individual level.

## 2. STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The research problem includes understanding inclusivity challenges for persons with physical disability in work places and exploring possible solutions for same.

Inclusivity could be in the form of interaction with structural (canteen, building facilities, transport to work to name a few) as well as emotional environment ( interaction with team members, boss, other teams and the likes).

In the purview of this research, persons with only physical disability (visual, hearing, olfactory, impairment of limbs and the likes) are considered.

## 3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objective of the research is to understand the work universe of persons with physical disability. We will enumerate and deep dive into inclusivity challenges faced by persons with disability. We will also understand current initiatives by HR/Corporations to embrace diversity in this aspect and promote inclusive environment around work places.

## 4. DEFINING THE SCOPE AND SAMPLING ASSUMPTIONS

We will focus on urban population of SEC A and B segments. SEC refers to socio-economic classification based on certain parameters, re-modelled by the Media Research Users Council (MRUC) and the Market Research Society of India (MRSI). It considers two variables: education of chief earner and number of “consumer durables” (from a predefined list) - owned by the family. The list has 11 items, ranging from ‘electricity connection’ and ‘agricultural land’ to cars and air conditioners. There are 12 grades in the SEC system, from A1 to E3; we will restrict our sample to A & B to maintain homogeneity in analysis and interpretation.

We will also try to maintain cultural and language diversity as much as possible. Place of research will not be a constraint, availability of the right people in the stakeholders will be the key. Web or social media was also explored as a viable methodology to connect with stakeholders.

## 5. THE RATIONALE FOR AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research has aimed to answer the following questions on this topic: What constitutes the work universe of a person with physical disability? Who are the key influencers in their work environment? Are there any structural barriers/ challenges involved in their life? Are they any emotional challenges with co-workers, other teams and bosses? What is the qualitative extent and variation among key agents of influence in their work? What are companies across globe doing to address this issue? Where can HR play a role in this?

**Stakeholders which will be a part of this study and can be benefited from this study:** Persons with physical disability, NGOs, human resource professionals and corporations, policy makers and psychologists to name a few.

## 6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A mixed bag approach of secondary reading in addition to qualitative research methods to address multiple stakeholders has been deployed in this research.

Secondary reading and research involved an understanding of current work environment of persons with physical disability, challenges that they face, improvement cues or leads, companies, NGOs and other stakeholders that are working on same.

**Participatory Photo Interviews:** Observing and discussing their life through pictures taken by persons with disability themselves/ assisted through someone, understanding their take on general aspect of life, food they eat, their likes/ dislikes, their friends, their family, on career aspirations- things that they like/dislike at work, people in their work lives, things that they are proud of/ not so proud of.

**Interviews:** Interviewing stake holders like persons with disability, psychologists, NGOs / social activists, human resource professionals and aspirants for understanding issues and apprehensions that plague the inclusivity challenges of today with persons having physical disability

## 7. USABILITY OF SUCH A STUDY

There will be a precise understanding of work universe of a person with disability. We can tap Influence areas of each of these elements in work productivity. Stakeholders can actually identify change agents through which effective measures can be used as remedies for inclusivity challenges. One can improve effectiveness of inclusivity measures in areas with high influence.

## 8. THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

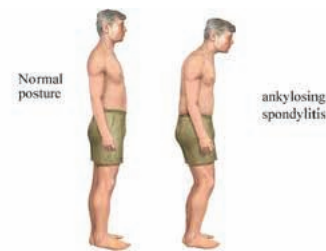
In line with the abstract, the research has focused on following stakeholders for primary research interviews (a qualitative representation- see figure 1).

The primary and secondary research report has been highlighted as small cases, followed by learning and outcome or possible solutions illustrated by the author.

The sectors were selected randomly depending on availability and willingness of stakeholders. Thus, sectors like BFSI, IT, FMCG, Education and Media & Entertainment were covered.

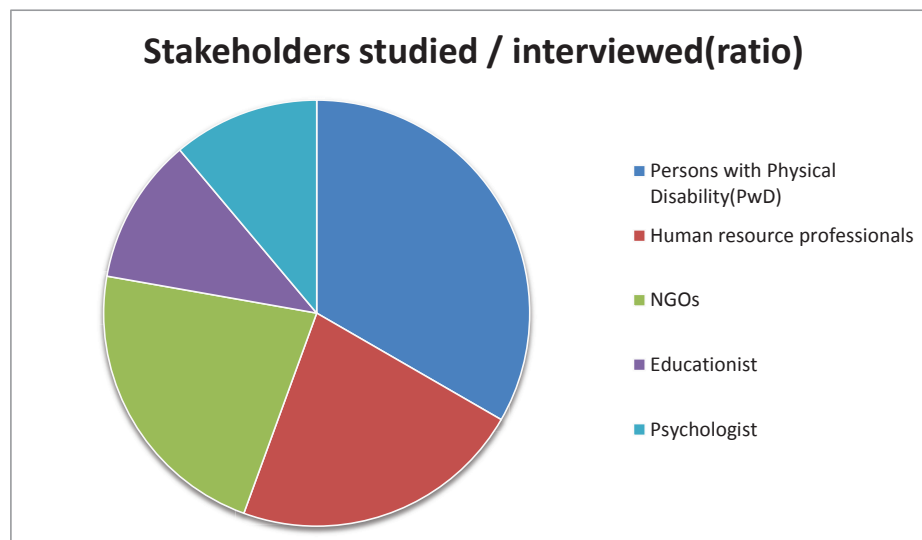
In order to protect the identity of research subjects, names and locations have been changed.

**Caselet 1: "I have to turn my back on inconsequential advice and loose talks"**



Rajeev is living with a condition called ankylosing spondylitis since the age of twenty one. This condition is categorized by chronic back pain and stiffness that sets in adolescence or early adulthood. Over time, back movement progressively becomes limited as the bones of the spine fuse together (<http://www.netguruonline.com>).

Figure 1: Chart Showing Proportion of Different Stakeholders



Rajeev cannot look down to his shoes and cannot sit down on the ground or cross his legs. His disability is certified 70 percent by the Government of India.

Rajeev has a history of belonging to a family that has faced socio-economic scarcity and has come up the hard way. Rajeev, though, has married off his siblings through his earnings and settled the economic crisis in the family.

He is now forty seven and a responsible finance and accounts manager in a leading media firm in Delhi. Being in the finance department he is into liaising with a varied amount of teams across the organisation.

Rajeev loves his work place and dealing with numbers. He feels very responsible that he is a crucial link to the entire financing of his firm. He has a cordial relationship with most of the team that he works with.

The organisation has structurally made it exceptionally convenient for him to work and support his performance. He has been given pick up drop facility and facility to position in a convenient chair at work. In severe winters, where his back becomes stiff and travelling is virtually impossible, even work from home facility is provided. The structural facilities provided to him are very satisfying and leads him to give his best to the organisation.

Rajeev, however, does have one glaring problem. The minute his office colleagues (right from peers to even subordinate) get to know about his disability, which is not very obvious, they start to get personal with advice.

Rajeev is “encouraged” (or rather pushed) to go and visit top spinal surgeons, physiotherapists and even prominent religious practitioners to alleviate his problems. He is advised to take up a religious *mannat* or vow or donate possessions and money to ‘cure’ his condition.

When Rajeev explains to them that it is a lifelong condition, he is often pleaded or chided to not lose hope.

To top it all, he is on and off advised on how to lead a happy ‘single’ life without him even asking for it.

Rajeev aches to be treated as normal and not ‘special’ or ‘different’. He has told off people who keep advising him on his condition. But the bitter feeling of losing out on good team mates remains. He feels that it has affected his work to a large extent in building cross functional relationship with teams, which is the mainstay of his work.

Rajeev feels it is a breach of his personal space. He had left his previous organisation for the purpose of growth and a better income. With the current organisation having excellent inclusive facilities in terms of infrastructure and management, he does not want to let go of it. However, this constant reference to his condition makes him think of other alternatives like business and other job opportunities.

### Learning:

If the case of Rajeev is studied using Herzberg’s two factor theory’s lens, Rajeev has a high sense of job satisfaction. This is due to following aspects that are provided by the job: achievement of economic stability, recognition through his work, the work itself, responsibility of a very crucial role, advancement and growth over the years in the organisation.

However, the dissatisfaction of peer relationship and other team members is leading to disconnect at a psychological level. The fact that this situation is instigated by his permanent physical condition adds to the frustration.

The organisation has given complete support in terms of infrastructural needs of the person with disability in order to sustain and improve his work condition and consequently performance. However, teams and team mates are not sensitized or oriented enough to have a fruitful work interaction which will help to build a positive work relationship.

The teams may have a well-meaning objective towards the PwD team mate. However, they may find it difficult to interact and speak in a way that is normal with this team mate. This is a genuine problem with the peer group and even superiors. However, the bigger picture is that this is affecting the psychological stability of the PwD. It is also creating an awkward situation among peers when they are told off by the ‘victim’.

The work universe of a PwD is not just his immediate team mate but everyone he interacts in the organisation right from the lowest rung of the ladder to the top.

A solution which is acceptable to all stakeholders involved in this case should be put forth which will help build a ‘normal’ thriving environment in the work set-up.

### Caselet 2: “I love the HR policies for a PwD like me, but pray, spare me the pity”

Arindham suffered from a polio attack in his childhood and has been walking with a limp ever since. He doesn’t need to use crutches or a cane. However, he has a prominent visible gait when he walks about.

Arindham is currently working in an organisation that is a prominent name in the banking and financial services sector. He likes the fact that the organisation has given him a job on the basis of his skills which has nothing to do with his disability.

He enjoys the HR policies of the organisation where a PwD can park anywhere, sit anywhere with a laptop. He also has been given a place that is most accessible to the other areas like canteen, washroom, and exit. His organisation has a policy where in case of any infrastructural debacle; people like him will be the first ones to be evacuated. He has been

educated about all these facilities and PwD specific policies at the time of joining itself. He believes these are valuable support factors for his condition and welcomes it.

However, he is finding it difficult to handle the pity from his peer group and team members. He has noticed that people at work invariably stare at him from a distance. They often try to sympathise by pointing out to his disability. Over a period of time when they get to know him, they openly state their sympathy.

The sympathetic attitude towards his condition has gone to the level where it affects his motivation. If there is a difficult challenge at work and he wants to attempt the same, his well-wishers unknowingly and unintentionally tell him that he might not be able to attempt the same. The work that is assigned to him has nothing to do with his disability. His manager is very well aware that he is capable of the job and hence has entrusted with him. In fact, he has the same target as his peers in the team and believes that it is fair to have such a policy.

In a situation, where there are people who put down his capabilities unknowingly, Arindham feels that this really stops him from giving the best. It is not just in this organisation. He might face the same kind of a situation in every other organisation.

He feels the only way is to work more shifts or push himself the hardest even more than required to make sure others are proved wrong about his capabilities.

### Learning:

Similar to the previous case the organisation has a very advanced and a superior sense of structural mobility for accessibility. Just like Arindham's organisation, a lot of other organisations have very rightly focused on providing basic structural support to a PwD with a physical emphasis.

Organisations like EMC 2, Accenture, IBM, Vodafone, Deutsche Bank, Thomson Reuters and many top players in their respective sectors (FMCG, BPOs) employ and create structural support for maximum accessibility.

EnAble India, a non-profit organisation helps bridge the gap between employers and employees who are PwD to bring out the best interest for the business objective.

Few examples of structural solutions provided by EnAble India include the following (<http://enable-india.org>):

**Banking and Manufacturing Sector:** Persons with visual impairment use their heightened tactile sense to put the items and fold the box or envelopes following a standardised process. Braille, *bindi* stickers or some coloured tactile marking for the low vision employee is used to differentiate between boxes or containers for further processes

**IT Sector:** Vision magnifying software for partially blind, Braille software products are used to help read data on screen better

**Service Sector:** Hearing and speech impaired customer service attendants are employed in retail arena of organisations like Shell and KFC. They undergo training to use physical aids like written signboards or use a helper who put across their point to the customer.

As a general work place structural solution, few companies use the following methods used to train the PwD:

Few of the solutions include audio note taking (for visual, partially hearing and speech impaired), writing important meeting discussions on the board (for hearing impaired), and compulsory minutes of meeting to be sent on mail for hearing impaired.

However, all these solutions are focused only on the PwD; there is very little involvement of other team members. Involvement of team members is essential to build a culture of an inclusive environment.

For Arindham, to work more shifts or hours than required is not a solution to prove it to his peers. Neither is it a healthy work culture, nor does it foster any goodwill among the team for one another. The crux of the situation lies in the sensitization of other teams.

The sensitization of employees to the needs of a PwD is not established as a priority exercise. The teams need to understand that these exercises will only help in overall performance of the team.

This is an exercise that can only be led by a business manager or a leader and not just a human resource professional. A human resource professional can only provide the basic training through an expert or by themselves if they are equipped. But the emphasis for such a need, the torch bearer for such an activity, the prime lead for such an initiative who can create the maximum impact is the top management and immediate reporting managers.

In the current scenario, the sensitization of employees to the needs of a PwD is not established as a priority exercise. The teams need to understand that these exercises will only help in overall performance of the team.

### Caselet 3: "Do not use my disability to distract my performance at work"

Vijay is a wheelchair user since childhood. He has fought through his disability to walk without support and has come up through the hard way. He is now a well-known auditor in the field of hospitality and manages a team of account managers and executives.

As an auditor, one has to find misnomers and incongruities to correct the same across departments. There has to be a

mental stability to be focused towards work and correcting any inappropriateness at the right time to avoid long term consequences that are detrimental to an organisation's growth.

However his team mates are not able to share his vision. They use his disability to try to distract him from work.

They openly express pity and focus more on him as a person with disability rather than looking into his professional work allocation, which is what their primary work activity should be!

He has tried to bring to his team mates' notice that he doesn't require external support or sympathy and the team should focus on completing the job. In such cases the team is resorting to activities that are even more detrimental to his health condition.

They try to shirk deadlines, do not co-operate with him. He now has to spend long hours at work to make sure his deadlines are met, even though the team mates shirk work. This is affecting his health as he should not be staying up at work so late. Just to not co-operate for work and finish tasks assigned, few team mates have even resorted to isolating Vijay.

This situation is really affecting Vijay. He feels that he has not been an effective leader for one and his disability is coming in the way to build a mutually satisfying work relationship with his sub-ordinates.

He really feels depressed that even after achieving so much, he is not able to sustain a happy work life. Nor is he able to provide himself a good work life balance.

### Learning:

Vijay is in a very difficult situation. The environment that he is working with is definitely not very positive either for him or his team as a whole. The overall objective of a job or work goal will not be complete in this situation.

Any discrimination on the grounds of a disability will rob the objective of an organisation of equal opportunity and inclusivity. This situation, if continued, will lead to significant discrimination of the employee with disability amongst his peers and subordinates which is against the code of any positive organisation. [6]

The higher authorities do not seem to know what the situation is. These authorities in his work place need to step in front to lead the much needed change in his department.

The situation demands a very strong disability management system in the organisation. [6]

Only if the organisation as a culture gets involved in creating a discrimination free environment, an inclusive culture will be born.

Caselet 4: "I will go that extra mile to prove that I am normal, just like you"



Archana is a fiery 27 year old woman from a top Business School in the country. She is passionate about marketing. She is currently working as a marketing professional in a leading public sector bank placed through her Business School. Archana has a cleft palate right from birth (A file photo of the condition is shown in Figure 3) (<http://en.wikipedia.org>).

Due to same, she has a speech defect from birth. In order to have a reasonable conversation with others, she has to undergo quite some surgeries at definitive intervals. So far, she has undergone 16 surgeries. One has to listen very carefully in order to have a productive conversation with Archana.

Being in a job where one's bread and butter is all about communication, Archana is doing a commendable job of handling over 600 individuals for target achievements across the country. She is also directly working with a senior leader in the department. She is a classic example of overcoming barriers through a great support system from family and educational stakeholders.

Her disability has so far not affected her job. Archana says that she has been very assertive about her expectations and believes in maintaining only professional work relationships. She has made sure that people at work do not speak about her disability or let it come in the way of work.

Archana has gone that extra mile to make sure her work speaks for herself and has put in more works than many of her team members at work.

As a representative from public sector bank, she does feel that persons with disability have to undergo discrimination in terms of differential treatment at work with respect to a public sector: namely, talking behind one's back on how they have a seat reserved whether they are really disabled or no. She also points out that people try to deliberately or unintentionally isolate the PwD by going for tasks that the person cannot take part in. For example: Singing (PwD may have a speech problem), group adventure which involves

climbing, hiking which may not be possible for everyone in the team to try, especially a PwD.

She feels that as an organisation, probably this is the culture that exists. This is something that she despises but believes she has to live with it.

#### Learning:

Archana has moved heaven and earth and undergone various physical and mental hardships to reach her place in the society.

At each level, when her disability proposed a challenge, she has bravely risen up to it. Her circumstances have made her tough, assertive and given rise to a no-nonsense personality. She has also had a very strong family support in achieving her dream

However, not everyone is like her who would be egged on by just internal motivation and family support. In many cases parents are not aware of how to support their differently-abled children and as PwD adults their purview remains narrow in terms of options and opportunities for them. Most of them just like a lot of us need external motivation in terms of people, opportunity, context and environment.

Another strong learning is that disability management system needs to be mobilised differently for different sectors.

### 8.1. Key Insights and Possible Solutions that Arise from Research Findings

#### 8.1.1. Structural Inclusivity is Almost in Place

Structurally, at a broad level, a lot of companies have put in lasting efforts in creating an inclusive environment. Few companies in the IT sector and service sectors have gone few steps ahead to even create structural convenience at the work station of the employee. For instance: magnification software for the visually impaired, height adjustment chairs and wheel chairs for person affected with the locomotor disability, assistive signboards for customer service attendants at the petrol station or retail cash counters

**Figure 4: Inclusion in Lasersoft and Core Logic**

**Inclusion in Lasersoft:** Lasersoft provided free accommodation very close to the company for needy PwDs, so that they can avoid commuting in the city. They also provide bus transport facilities for PwDs to come to office and go back. They have permitted one severely disabled PwD to work from home.

**Inclusion in Core Logic:** As part of learning and development activities, Core Logic conducts soft skills training for its employees. The trainer realized that teaching hearing impaired is different from teaching others mostly because of their limited English knowledge skills. Initially the trainer went looking for sign language books to make the instructions easy. Later on they came up with an idea of using pictures to explain things.

Having a structure in place for inclusive environment is a commendable step in creating a culture of rapid adaptation and learning (<http://enable-india.org>).

However, emotionally supportive environment and inclusive measures for same is still a much needed practice that needs to be followed:

From the caselets analysed, it is clear that persons with physical disability are at various levels in the organisation be it leaders, managers or teammates. They are small in numbers but will definitely have a significant impact in how a learning organisation progresses towards inclusivity.

Office of disability employment policy, U.S.A urges the world to look at PwD as a viable work resource. Perhaps more than any other group of people, they believe, individuals with disabilities have a greater ability to adapt to various situations and scenarios. This gives a fresh outlook to a range of viewpoints that a business would like to discuss, a fresh set of ideas for problem solving. Hiring people with disabilities can positively impact a business's bottom line. The PwD segment can help in increasing retention and reducing turnover (<http://www.dol.gov>).

**Figure 5: Training Session in Thomson Reuters**

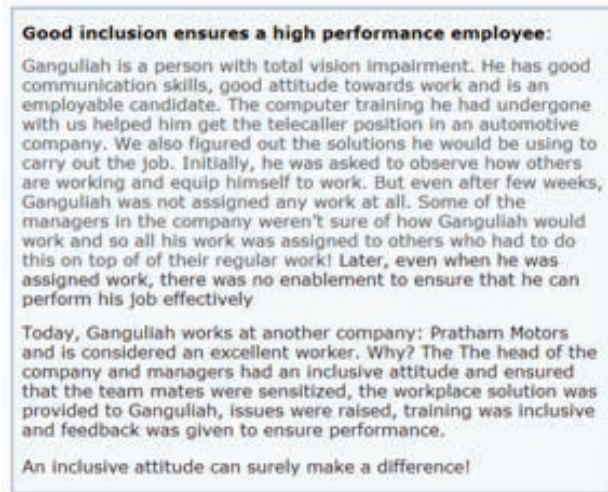


In order to help retention of PwD, the inclusive measures that need to be taken should involve the team mates whether PwD or the general workforce. These measures need not be just employee engagement activities but also the way in which the specific team work. This is a file photo of a training session in Thomson Reuters (Figure 5). The file photo is sourced from EnAble India, an organisation committed to improving the lives of physically disabled PwD (<http://enable-india.org>).

### 8.1.2. Feedback Mechanism Can be Used as a Strong Inclusion Method

Illustrated here is a case file that provides a strong example of how high performance can be ensured through inclusion in everyday work behaviour.

Figure 6: Case File



This case brings in a very important aspect of not just providing fair job assignment but also how constructive feedback goes a long way in improving performance. In this regard, one has to also enable a supervisor to provide in a feedback that is also constructive and not demeaning to the PwD, just like any other employee.

An interview with a team member of a person with hearing impairment illustrates an incident below:

Figure 6: Inclusion in Café Coffee Day



The supervisor had a hearing impaired assistant who was trained in MS Office, specifically data entry. Over a period of time supervisor noticed that the PwD gave excuses of not hearing properly for mistakes in updating excel sheets. The process of updating in excel sheet does not involve any contact or dialogue with another human being and the supervisor felt really agitated that one cannot give an excuse of being disabled when the skill required is altogether a different arena. She gave this feedback to the individual and saw a marked improvement in the way he approached the work. However, she really felt the need for a constructive feedback mechanism in approaching a PwD for feedback. Somewhere, the sympathy factors or the notion that a PwD is different from a non PwD really affects the working at some level.

It is important to sensitize team members and leaders to consciously look at the skills of the PwD and continue a normal work relationship. This should involve equal conduct in terms of constructive criticism or praise. They have to be trained to not bring in a sympathetic factor when working with a PwD. It is a very difficult behaviour to bring into place. More so in an Indian society, the whole outlook towards this community is of pity and sympathy.

### 8.1.3. Disability Management as A System is an Effective Method for Emotional Inclusion

Different aspects of interaction can be managed only by a strong disability management system in the organisation. A senior leader in the human resources department of a well-known FMCG conglomerate says that a strong system can arise only when all the variables of an organisation are covered for inclusion. This includes: the job involved, team outings, and team meetings, apart from the basic structural and infrastructural accessibilities. This is a file photo of inclusion environment in Cafe Coffee Day (Figure 6) where the trainers themselves are hearing impaired (<http://enable-india.org>). Another example is of an employee working with 24x7. He being visually impaired was still blindfolded in a game. The employee felt one among the rest and had a strong sense of belongingness.

### 8.1.4. More Than Anything Else, An Inclusive Attitude is The First Step to all the Above Activities

One has to value the person for what they can bring to the table. One cannot negate another person because of their disability. The PwD has acquired skills required by the organisation; hence it is not going to be a wasted effort or a charitable activity to employ them

It is very important to understand how the person will work and accordingly enable them. One should consciously defy from the temptation to over protect or 'talk on behalf of' PwD.

Feel free to assign responsibility and hold them accountable for their performance. It is their right and a fair thing to do by an organisation. This will develop a base for an environment of equality.

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