

Economic Equity Is Both a Philanthropic and DEI Issue

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By tapping the talents of disabled persons, older adults, and those with criminal records, employers can help close income and wealth gaps and address the labor shortage.



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More than 61 million Americans have some type of disability, including difficulty with hearing, vision, cognition, ambulation, self-care, or independent living, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Despite laws intended to prevent discrimination against people with disabilities in the workplace, these individuals are more likely to be unemployed, underemployed, and underpaid.

A 2022 AARP survey found that 41% of workers age 40 and older have faced age discrimination in the previous three years. That may be one reason why older workers surveyed said they value job stability and good pay even more than flexibility.

Although there is a tendency to assume that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives serve primarily Black and brown people, the reality is that it includes many more populations. And everyone can benefit when we uplift multiple populations to help create pathways to economic opportunity.

When we leverage philanthropy to widen the aperture through which we traditionally view DEI, we can begin thinking about economic equity beyond a Black/brown/white paradigm. It is then easier to understand how initiatives that increase access to knowledge and resources can benefit us or someone we know.

Job reskilling

Preparing and reskilling people for jobs helps mitigate economic inequity, closes income and wealth gaps, and provides a sense of purpose and self-value. Employers need to better understand how to recruit, hire, and promote a workforce that is often forgotten despite more than eight million U.S. job openings. Expanding the scope of who they are willing to hire and promote can help. Otherwise, they will miss out on addressing the country's labor shortage.

This is the idea behind WorkingNation's Breaking Barriers, an Emmy Award-winning series created with an Ares Charitable Foundation grant. The series shines a light on talent that employers frequently fail to tap, examining how—and why—employers should leverage the skills and competencies of disabled persons, older adults, and justice-impacted individuals—populations often not elevated in economic mobility conversations.

6 ways to remove job barriers

I want to share six ways employers can help remove barriers for adults with disabilities and nurture older workers, lessons learned from the first two episodes in the series.

Leverage technology

Assistive technologies like speech recognition, text-to-speech, and computer vision better enable workforce inclusion and remove many barriers to employment. However, offering accommodations is not enough. Employers also need to make it easy for workers to access these technologies, especially because many people have invisible disabilities.

Companies should consider giving all employees access to assistive technologies rather than requiring them to request specific accommodations. Too often, people with disabilities are hesitant to ask for an accommodation because of concerns that they won't be treated as equals. In addition, the responsibility for making sure the technology is working properly and up-to-date should fall on leadership and IT, not the worker.

Provide training

Don't overlook adults with disabilities when upskilling and reskilling workers. The employment landscape is rapidly changing, and workers who aren't reskilled or upskilled risk getting left behind, creating yet another barrier to employment. People with disabilities often excel at learning to use emerging technologies and can be trained for new roles that use artificial intelligence.

Evaluate company policies

People with disabilities are an asset to companies because they are both innovative and resilient. However, employers need to make the first move and assess the barriers within their companies, e.g., policies, infrastructure, and accommodations that may be hindering them from hiring people with disabilities. In addition, employers should involve people with disabilities in the hiring process.

Dispel stereotypes

There are subtle ways employers indicate they won't hire older people. They may say the candidate lacks the needed skills, seems stuck in their ways, or is unwilling to learn new technologies. Employers can help promote an age-inclusive workforce through intentional efforts, including recognizing age as a dimension of diversity and including it in their DEI programming.

Focus on experience

Don't overlook the power of multigenerational teams that encourage each generation to bring its own experiences, insights, and skills into dialogue and consideration. Companies with multigenerational teams are 288% more likely to exceed financial targets, according to a 2022 Gartner study. A diversity of skills and experiences contributes to a more well-rounded organization, capable of making better decisions and solving complex problems.

Offer training

Provide continuing education and skill-building opportunities for older workers. Don't assume that older workers aren't interested or are incapable of learning new skills. Traditionally, employers are least likely to train their youngest and oldest workers, according to AARP. Yet, employers are the most important educators because most people spend the majority of their life in the workforce. As such, employers should take a central role in nurturing, supporting, and training older workers.

Support justice-impacted individuals

I look forward to sharing the learnings from the third episode in the Breaking Barriers series, scheduled to air in early 2025, exploring ways that employers can hire and support individuals affected by the justice system, who are looking to enter the workforce.

Employers have a critical role to play in helping to accelerate economic equity and equality for overlooked members of society, including older adults, people with disabilities, and justice-impacted individuals. By evaluating company policies and practices, employers can help build a pipeline of talent that is often overlooked, and help address the country's workforce shortage by including more diverse groups in it.