

Why disability learnerships have the potential to empower youth

By [Roland Innes](#)

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A struggling economy and job market in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic has left the youth despondent that they'll find employment after school or university. Learners with disabilities have an even tougher time finding employment.



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Although many companies do offer disability learnerships, most fail to utilise these opportunities to their full potential - using them instead to boost their BEE scorecard without considering the personal impacts that such learnerships can have on individuals with disabilities.

For business leaders, this tick-box, short-sighted approach needs to shift to facilitate greater inclusion for the workforce.

Learnerships are the perfect platform for the youth to gain valuable workplace experience while earning a living wage and opening the door to further skills development possibilities.

Programmes specifically designed to include the disabled workforce could be the path to unlocking even greater business value.



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1. Perception shift required

Disability learnerships are intended to provide an environment in which individuals with disabilities can develop skills they never dreamed they could have, making a meaningful contribution both to society and to the company that they're working with.

This requires learnership programmes to be designed in a manner that appreciates the potential of learners with disabilities while taking into account that their needs are different to the rest of the workforce. This sends the message to everyone else in the organisation that everyone should have an equal opportunity to develop their talents and progress in their chosen career.

For this, it's important to acknowledge that a change in mindset is required. Companies with disability learnerships might spout the usual CSI messaging about good intentions and developing segments of the workforce that have been traditionally overlooked, however, most are doing it for the scorecard value without following the learnership through to its intended conclusion.

This is because organisations are not taking an integrated approach to the development of their disability learnerships and recognising the important role that these programmes can play. Here, organisations need to examine what skills they need and how they can potentially empower learners with disabilities to develop these skills instead of simply executing on the easiest way to earn scorecard points.



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2. Challenging but rewarding

To properly facilitate a learner with disabilities, it is necessary to look at their holistic development. This means focusing on the whole person, their disability and how they manage that disability - both at home and in the workplace. Without an understanding of how they manage their disability at home, they're going to struggle to get to work, making it unlikely that they will finish the training.

As such, a specific disability support process is useful in order to look holistically at that individual and how to grow and develop their skills while addressing the challenges they face in the workplace. This involves looking at the individual's home circumstance and medical records and finding a way to support that while looking at what other skills will help to grow that person.

In short, it's about helping the individual build confidence within themselves and their newly-found abilities. Without that confidence, they'll struggle to deliver in the workplace. This means focusing on developing communication abilities and

other life skills, such as how they present themselves at work, how they manage their money, how to interact with other people - all of the developmental aspects that aren't usually covered in standard learnership programs.

By pulling these together into a big picture program that looks at the entire individual, suddenly that person has a much better chance of succeeding.



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3. Focusing on empowerment

This disability-oriented methodology is concerned with empowering learners. By making the programme learner-driven, they take responsibility for their development and for the way they manage themselves.

This includes being strict and consistent with office fundamentals such as being on time for work, keeping up with deadlines and constantly working towards progress. This also includes asking for and getting support when it's needed - either from a go-to person or from an extended circle of support for a person with disabilities. This takes consistency and finding a balance between giving support without creating dependency.

For businesses that want to make the most of their learnership opportunities or those that would like to get started from scratch, getting it right isn't something that they have to do alone. Engaging early on with a training provider who understands the disability framework will take the guesswork out of the process, especially when it comes to recruitment.

In this respect, it's essential to find a match between the organisational culture and the person with a disability, and specifically the skillset relating to what the employer requires. The individuals recruited must have the interest and potential to succeed in their specific skill requirements. Without this match, recruitment is flawed.



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4. Making inclusion part of the culture

It is also necessary to conduct organisation-wide sensitivity training and awareness. This will facilitate empathetic inclusion within the workplace, sending a message to all in the company that inclusion is the secret ingredient to making a business work.

When set up holistically and for the correct reasons, disability learnerships can create real value in the creation of a more engaged culture in which people with disabilities can develop their skills.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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