Inclusion Is Not a One-Off Project, but an Ongoing Process

How companies can remove barriers while also benefiting economically

Inclusion does not happen overnight. It is an ongoing process that can make companies more efficient and competitive. This is the view of Iryna Fedorovych, an equality and non-discrimination advisor at the Ukrainian Social Action Center. Her experience also provides practical guidance for employers seeking to make their recruitment and management practices more future-oriented.

For Fedorovych, one thing is clear: equality and non-discrimination are not voluntary goodwill measures. They are part of the legal and economic framework within which companies operate and should therefore be integrated into everyday business processes.

Inclusion takes time and requires systematic change

The shift towards inclusive personnel policies can be initiated systematically, but it takes time. Experience from Ukraine shows that it can take years for companies to move beyond talking about inclusion and begin implementing concrete measures, participating in public initiatives and reviewing their HR processes.

Important drivers of change include peer effects, international requirements and investor expectations. When companies achieve visible successes within an industry, or when global guidelines from corporate headquarters are passed on to local teams, pressure for change increases – as does the willingness to try new approaches. EU regulations and ESG reporting reinforce this trend by requiring companies to take human rights into account in their supply chains and internal processes.

Symbolic measures are not enough

Despite good intentions, many measures fail because of overly rigid approaches. A common problem is symbolic action: a quota, a policy or an annual awareness-raising event is quickly considered “done”, without any real change to everyday processes.

Rigid quotas combined with financial penalties can also lead companies to prefer paying fines rather than adapting their internal structures. Incentives instead of penalties can provide additional motivation, but financial measures alone are not enough. Companies also need public support, for example through funding programmes, training or internship schemes.

Stereotypes limit the pool of potential employees

Another major barrier is the persistence of stereotypes and narrow perceptions of disability and ability to work. Employers often first think of visible physical disabilities, such as people who use wheelchairs. Yet people with disabilities are a highly diverse group, including many people with invisible disabilities and chronic health conditions.

Such perceptions can quickly lead to assumptions such as “they will be less productive” or “they will require additional effort”. As a result, applicants may be excluded from the outset.

Similar assumptions exist regarding women of childbearing age and employees with caregiving responsibilities. These expectations unnecessarily reduce the pool of potential candidates – particularly at a time when skilled workers are already in short supply.

Change starts with recruitment

Practical change can begin with everyday recruitment processes. Job advertisements should focus on genuine requirements and be worded in ways that do not unnecessarily exclude people.

Phrases such as “highly flexible, fast and versatile”, for example, may discourage applicants who need reliable but flexible working hours – including single parents and people with caregiving responsibilities.

A more effective approach is to bring together HR staff, managers responsible for specific areas and team members to review each step of the process, from advertising and selection to hiring:

- Which criteria are genuinely relevant?
- Which requirements are simply based on habit?
- Which procedures could be changed?

This simple exercise often reveals how many implicit filters unnecessarily restrict access to employment.

The three-column analysis: from identifying barriers to an action plan

Fedorovych recommends a practical three-column analysis as a concrete tool.

1. What do we already have?
Companies list existing policies, team structures, reporting channels and existing diversity, for example.

2. What can be implemented in the short term?
This column includes measures that can be implemented within 20, 30 or 90 days – such as adapting a code of conduct, revising job advertisements or appointing responsible persons and defining indicators.

3. What needs to be clarified or supported externally?
This can include accessibility assessments, external advice, cooperation with employment agencies or applications for funding.

The analysis results in a concrete action plan with milestones, responsibilities and realistic objectives. In this way, the general commitment to inclusion becomes a practical process.

Trust and safety are essential

Employees need a trusting environment in order to speak openly about adjustments they may require. Data protection, clear anti-discrimination policies, reliable reporting channels and visible commitment from management are important prerequisites for people to feel able to disclose their needs.

When these conditions are absent, employees may hide their needs. This can affect performance and increase staff turnover. By contrast, openness can pay off: providing appropriate working conditions and retaining employees over the long term can reduce recruitment and onboarding costs.

Inclusion does not have to be expensive

Fedorovych also challenges two widespread myths: that inclusion is a one-off measure and that it is primarily expensive.

Both assumptions are misleading. Inclusion is an ongoing process of adaptation and learning. Many measures – such as awareness-raising, changing the wording of job advertisements or making practical workplace adjustments – require relatively little investment and can have an immediate impact.

Major structural or construction-related changes are just one of many options and are often not the first measure that needs to be taken.

Inclusion as an economic advantage

Companies that take discrimination seriously can benefit in several ways: they expand their pool of potential candidates, fill vacancies more quickly, reduce staff turnover and at the same time meet legal and investor-related requirements.

The key lies in systematically reviewing existing processes, being willing to question established habits and developing realistic short- and medium-term action plans.

Inclusion requires work – but it is work that pays off: economically, legally and humanly.