The So What from BCG

What You Don’t Know About a Quarter of Your Workforce

Brad Loftus, Managing Director and Senior Partner; Hillary Wool, Partner

GEORGIE FROST: What percentage of your workforce would you guess are living with a disability? Most companies report 4% to 7%, but it's likely that they're wrong. New research from BCG shows that a quarter of workers around the world identify as having a disability or medical condition that limits a major life activity. The consequences of this underreporting could have dire repercussions for the individual, but also your business.

I'm Georgie Frost and this is The So What from BCG.

HILLARY WOOL: Eighty percent of disabilities are acquired at working age, between 18 and 65, and we need to really think about this holistically.

BRAD LOFTUS: In most of our industrial societies, we have an aging population. Disability increases with age. So many, many people as they go from 20 in their career to 65 or 70 or 75 now are going to end up acquiring disabilities.

GEORGIE FROST: Today I'm talking to Brad Loftus, senior partner at BCG and leader in BCG's global retail practice and Hillary Wool partner in BCG's Health Care and Public Sector practice, co-founders of AccessAbility@BCG.

HILLARY WOOL: We surveyed 28,000 employees around the world across 16 countries, and as you mentioned, we found that 25% self-identified as having a disability or a health condition that limits an aspect of their day-to-day life. And they consistently, across the board in every single country, feel lower levels of inclusion and are having worse workplace experiences. But we found that these gaps can also be closed and with the right strategies and interventions in place, we see that people with disabilities actually have just as great of an experience at work as their non-disabled peers.

GEORGIE FROST: Brad, why such a disparity between what companies think is the case? So 4% to 7% to almost a quarter. That's a huge difference.

BRAD LOFTUS: Yeah, I think there are a number of reasons. One, disability as a part of diversity is surprisingly late in most people's consciousness. Folks thought about either race or ethnicity or gender, later sexual orientation, but in many markets around the world, disability wasn't quite at the forefront and the thought was, well, disabled people shouldn't be working, maybe some of the underlying piece.

I think the second piece on the underreporting is there hasn't been a lot of reason that companies have given individuals to self-disclose, and they may have actually given negative incentives to disclose because there's a fear and I think a legitimate fear that I'm going to be discriminated against. I'm going to be viewed as less capable even if my disability has nothing really to do with the core functions of my job.

And we have found that many people end up trying to hide their disabilities, in which case they don't get relatively easy help they would need. They don't end up doing as good of a job as they could. In my case, I had a spinal cord injury 30 some years ago. I've been between crutches and a wheelchair, so there was no option other than disclosing...I disclosed the moment I walked, or rolled, into a room.

But if you tell your employer you have an anxiety disorder and you want to make some minor changes to the work environment, that may make it easier for you. Does someone say, "Well, individual X can't handle the job, we're going to take away the toughest assignments from that individual that would lead to career advancement." Because they don't really understand the condition. So then the individual ends up not disclosing and trying to self-solve. It leads to a more negative experience for the

individual and more negative business outcomes for the employer.

GEORGIE FROST: You mentioned there that you weren't born with a disability. That's the reality, isn't it? We've got an aging population. This is something that could hit you at any stage in your life.

BRAD LOFTUS: I think very different from a lot of other diversity groups. Most of us don't change our gender. Most of us don't change our race. I was–you're perfectly able-bodied as far as I could tell up through when I was 17 and I broke my neck and then I was paralyzed from the neck down, ended up getting some of the function back, but somewhere in between for the rest of my life.

If you think about societies and most of our industrial societies, we have an aging population. Disability increases with age. So unless you're going to have people, candidly, die early on the job, many, many people as they go from 20 in their career to 65, or 70, or 75 now are going to end up acquiring disabilities.

We are not going to be able to ignore it. When what is probably 25% of the working population becomes 30% and 35% and 40%. I mean, at the extreme, how is society going to function if we don't have enough people working to support the functions of society, and we effectively cast out those that could be productive?

HILLARY WOOL: Eighty percent of disabilities are acquired at working age, between 18 and 65. And so for me, I acquired my disability about a year into my time at BCG. I was around 30, the healthiest I'd ever been in my life and in the wake of a really bad unlucky infection, just acquired a really serious set of musculoskeletal conditions unexpectedly. But again, zooming out, employees are our people at the end of the day and we need to really think about this holistically as we think about the arc of people's careers, and their lives, and how we can make work with all of the things that just are part of the human experience, disability being one of them.

GEORGIE FROST: This is a hard question to ask because obviously, as you say, this is down to individuals, down to companies, but do we have a working environment, a business environment that almost makes people feel that if they do ask for any sort of provisions, and it doesn't have to be disability, I mean it could be if you've got caring commitments as well, that actually you are viewed as less capable?

HILLARY WOOL: Yeah, I think ableism just discrimination against people with disabilities or the belief that people with disabilities are less-than, is so pervasive just in the air we breathe. Especially within the corporate world, especially within high-powered industries.

And so there's a lot of work that needs to be done up to the leadership level to really break that apart day-to-day and have the impact on employees that is needed for them to feel comfortable bringing themselves to work. And I think there's also the psychological safety element as well. The notion that just like people from other marginalized backgrounds often feel like they need to cover at work, people with disabilities absolutely feel this as well.

And so psychologically and emotionally, if you feel like you're bringing that baggage to work every day, there's a part of your identity just like gender, or being a parent, or having hobbies that you can't quite either disclose at all or really feel comfortable talking about without it being stigmatized. That has a massive, massive impact on the day-to-day experience of an employee.

BRAD LOFTUS: I generally am optimistic about people and that they're trying to do the right thing. And it's not that the world's out there to get disabled people. I also think people are really busy. You end up thinking in very simplistic ways on your day-to-day activities. So you can go to the root of the word disabled. Well, they're not able. They are dis-abled and there's some truth to it and I'll speak to myself and my own experience. I used to be an athlete. I used to be 210 pounds. I could lift lots of things.

I am "dis-abled" to be a mover. I am "dis-abled" to be a construction worker. I am still, I like to think, very intellectually capable. I did not hurt any of my mental faculties and I'm very able to do analysis. I'm very able to do the type of work we do that is extremely valuable to our clients. But people I think use with a broad brush and say,

"Well, they have a disability, they're unable to do anything.

So I don't think people go through that nuance to say disabled isn't all abilities and it isn't broad brush, and it doesn't apply to every job. So for the job in question, this person may be the most able person on the planet despite their disability in another realm. I don't think any of that nuance hits busy people's heads and they're just like, oh, binary, able/disabled.

HILLARY WOOL: And I think just to build on that and thinking back to some of the findings in our research, we found that reasonable accommodations or workplace adjustments that enable someone to do the essential functions of their role are absolutely critical for both feelings of inclusion and workplace success.

It's that piece around to do the essential functions of the role. And so for me, I, like Brad, use crutches and a wheelchair, particularly when I'm traveling and running around outside of the house. For example, travel is an inherent part of our job as consultants, but it doesn't necessarily need to be done like walking on your feet and carrying a big suitcase. The essential component of our job is the analysis, is serving clients and people with disabilities in our role just for example, might do some of it in a different way, but still providing that core value, ultimately. And again, I think that's part of the nuance that people just aren't aware of.

GEORGIE FROST: If you aren't hearing from the right people what needs they have and what accommodations they need, you will never even think about it. It's sort of the unknown unknowns, as it were. If I was a company and I was looking at your research thinking, a vast swathe of my disabled employees were not telling me, I would be really concerned about that because how on earth can you learn to accommodate them if they're not even telling you they have an issue?

BRAD LOFTUS: I think it's a very good point, Georgie, because I'm head of a global disability employee group. I don't know every disability. I barely understand my own. Not any doctor in the world understands every disability. So how is your average manager going to understand any of it, and think ahead of time?

Versus creating an environment where someone feels safe to say, "I have this need that will help me work better and make my life easier. Can we change X or Y about the environment?" But in many cases, and I think what we're seeing in our research is the majority of people who have a disability are not disclosing because they don't feel safe doing that. And I think that is a loss for the individual. I think it's a loss for the employer and a loss for society in general.

GEORGIE FROST: Agreed. We've spoken about what it can do for the individual, but just spell it out for me. What can it do for a business? How does it impact the bottom line?

BRAD LOFTUS: Well, I think it's in a few dimensions. I mean, one, let's start with the employee you have. They have some needs that they don't feel comfortable bringing up. They soldier on through their work tasks, but they're not as efficient as they may be. It may be causing added health issues. So you get them less productivity, increase sick time and maybe increase turnover at some point when they say it's just not worth it, I'm out.

And then on the recruiting side, you have to replace that person so you have all the recruiting costs and hiring costs of another person. If you have a reputation that you're not open, then you're not going to attract any folks that have a disability or any folks that may be allies of those who have disabilities.

So you end up becoming a less desirable place to work. So then you have to offset by more recruiting, paying people more so you get less productivity of the people that you have, higher turnover costs, higher recruiting costs, and all of that plays through is the direct impact to the bottom line that I see. Hillary, did I miss anything there?

HILLARY WOOL: I think all of that is absolutely right. I also think that from the perspective of what value is a company bringing to the market to its customers from a product standpoint? There's something powerful that getting the disability piece right, getting accessibility right, getting inclusion right in general, brings to the culture and the way of thinking that permeates an entire organization.

For example, many tools and technologies that today benefit everyone were originally started for people with disabilities. You think curb cuts after veterans came home following World War II. Closed captions today. According to Netflix, the majority of Gen Z-ers watch their shows on Netflix with captions on. And the innovation that comes from including people with disabilities and doing design work through that authentic lens can absolutely have an impact on the outputs of a company, products, and services.

A lot of people think about accommodating people with disabilities from a compliance lens. I work in the government space and I hear the words 508 Compliance, much more than I hear the word accessibility or digital accessibility. But when we take this lens that is inclusion first, accessibility first, that really I think opens up strategically a company to really being at the forefront of design and better serving customers and users of all backgrounds.

GEORGIE FROST: Brad, you mentioned the benefit to society. I do just want to ask why you think that when we have movements for so many other areas, why not so much for disability? Why does it seem when we have targets for so many other areas in big companies, why not disability?

BRAD LOFTUS: If you think about it, I mean, it's spot on. I was talking to a CEO one of my clients and he was talking about his board and he said, people have asked, "Where's my African-American board member?" This is a US CEO. "How many women do you have? How many people have Latino background do you have?" He said, "No one has ever asked me if I had a disabled person on my board or on my executive team." Just not on the radar.

And this is someone who is more progressive in that dimension. But I think maybe back to the earlier comments, it's almost a view of, well, no, these disabled people are disabled across the board and we should take care of them and be nice to them, but we'll put them off on the side and they don't need to be productive members of society. Versus, no, these people have a lot to give on a lot of dimensions, and you're overlooking a massive source of talent.

And I think the belief is, oh, it's 2% or 3%. And not to say that you would want to throw 2% or 3% to the side, but if the real number is 25%, and particularly in a world today where a lot of it is a knowledge economy, there's a war for talent. Your competitive advantage is much more about the talent you can bring and motivate versus do you have a large factory or not?

Because those things become obsolete, need to be updated by talent once again. So in a war for talent, we are effectively marginalizing, or at the extreme, leaving 25% on the sidelines. And then if you think about the cost to society, would you rather have them be productive, high earning, and paying taxes or on the other extreme, on government benefits?

GEORGIE FROST: How can businesses then be more inclusive, create a better environment, create a better people strategy to be more inclusive of disabled people? What does it look like?

HILLARY WOOL: There is so much that we know now about what works and a lot of these things, they help people with disabilities, but they're beneficial for everyone. Do you have diversity leadership roles like a chief diversity officer? Do you have employee resource groups? Do you have benefits and supports in place like flexible working models that again, really benefit everyone? And so I want to say first and foremost, this is not zero-sum, right?

A lot of these strategies, they're shown to benefit employees of all identities. And so the first big piece, what I mentioned, employee-centric policies and programs, we also see that employees have a massively better workplace experience and are also more likely to want to stay at their company, at their organization if they have a manager who they believe to be committed to inclusion.

And so investing in your managers and developing a culture in which people, leaders at all level feel comfortable and empowered to talk about inclusion, to talk about their own identities, whether that's disability or otherwise, because that just creates an environment in which everyone feels like they can show up and talk about what's important to them.

That's the first big bucket. And then, as Brad touched on before, mentoring, mentoring matters for all employees and it particularly is absolutely critical for disabled employees whether or not those mentors are disabled or have other marginalized identities. Just having any mentor we found really moves the needle.

GEORGIE FROST: Brad, any quick wins?

BRAD LOFTUS: On the quick wins front, I think if I look at some of what we put in place at BCG, one of the first places was having the accessibility group and having somewhere where people could talk. Then from there, I think there was a bit of getting it part of the conversation, at least having it be on people's minds.

I, in particular leveraged learnings from our LGBTQ or Pride diversity group because people's sexuality isn't readily apparent when they walk in the room, and there was a lot of fear of would people be willing to disclose their sexuality? Why should they disclose it? That was rampant, that people were hiding it for years. Or you could say, for millennia, how did that come about? How do we make it safe to talk about it or to disclose?

Those were the first pieces. Then we had by law, in many of the countries, there is a reasonable accommodation process and we had one, but was it well set up? Was it publicized? Was it easy? None of those were true in the initial days, and then our next step was how do we make that better? I'm not saying it's perfect, but we tried to streamline that as much as possible.

The other thing that we set up was the mentoring program. We had lots of mentoring programs at BCG. We just didn't have one focused on this, so none of those had any material cost for the firm. I can remember when we had our first disability conference, it was really interesting to see the experience of the people who had come and that this was the literally first place in their career that they'd ever been able to openly talk about this. Some of these people were three years out of university. Some of these people were 30 years out of school.

HILLARY WOOL: I think in many organizations, especially large organizations, even if you don't have a formal employee resource group yet, what leaders can do is remove the barriers to allowing those people to organize and drive community, and it doesn't even necessarily require a leader with a disability to sponsor it. And in some organizations, the executive sponsor is maybe someone who has a disabled family member or who is just passionate about ensuring equity and inclusion for everyone.

But having that leadership buy-in and destigmatization like that sends a message that this is OK, that we want people to be open about their experiences, and we want people with disabilities to succeed and feel just as part of the organization as anyone else.

GEORGIE FROST: Fantastic. Hillary, Brad, thank you so much for your time and to you for listening. If you want to check out the research that Hillary and Brad were referring to, there's a link in the show notes of this podcast episode. We'd love to know your thoughts though. To get in contact, leave us message at thesowhat@bcg.com. And if you liked this podcast, why not hit subscribe and leave a rating wherever you found us? It helps other people find us too.