

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION<sup>Review</sup>

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***Centering Disability Supplement***  
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**Advancing an Inclusive Workplace**  
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# Advancing an Inclusive Workplace

*Empowering people with disabilities at work advances social inclusion and is good for business. Digital accessibility is essential to efforts at Microsoft to create opportunities for disabled talent.*

BY JENNY LAY-FLURRIE

More than one billion people around the world live with a disability. At some point, most of us will likely experience a temporary, situational, or permanent disability. Employment and education rates are lower for people with disabilities and poverty rates are higher. This disparity has caused a “disability divide,” a social inclusion gap that has persisted for the more than three decades since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

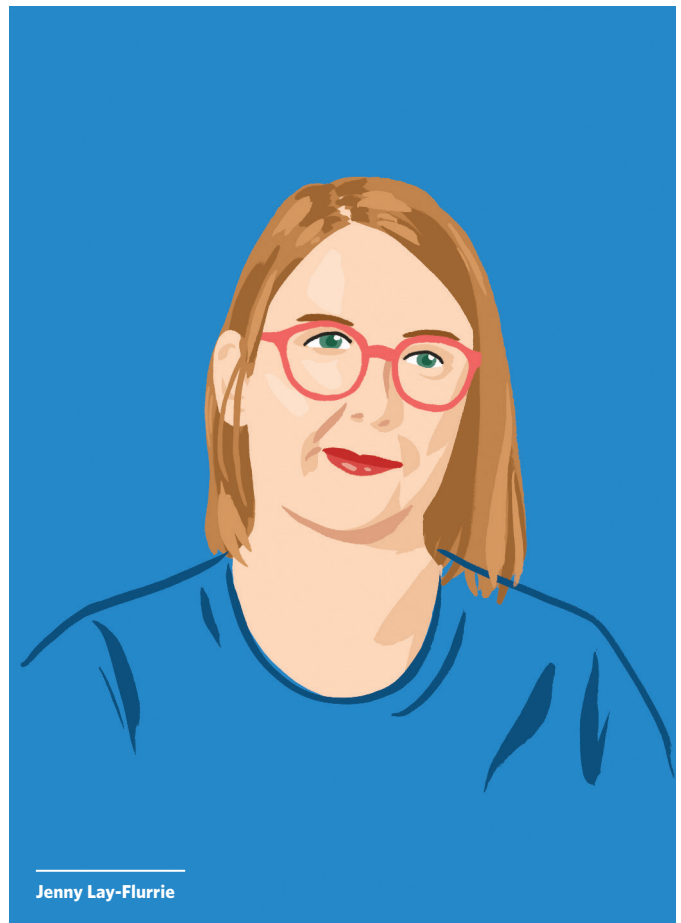
From our nearly 30 years of work on accessibility at Microsoft, we have learned that people with disabilities represent one of the world’s largest untapped talent pools. Studies show that companies that hire, support, and promote talent with disabilities financially outperform their peers, and at Microsoft, we have benefited from a long list of technologies ideated and created by our employees with disabilities. And yet this talent pool too often confronts closed doors. We all need to act with bolder ambition to open doors and empower disabled talent.

We are committed to creating opportunities for people with disabilities by driving the development of more “accessible by design” technology across our industry and the economy, using this technology to open doors for more people with disabilities, and intensifying our focus on building a workforce that better represents the disability community. It’s the right thing to do and it’s good for our business.

Microsoft has a clear goal to reduce the unemployment rate for people with disabilities and work with industry partners, nonprofits, the public sector, and the disability community to address barriers to hiring people with disabilities. To achieve these aims, we are taking several actions. First, we are growing the locations and scope of our inclusive hiring programs. Our Supported Employment Program is expanding from 1 to 12 countries, and our Neurodiversity Hiring Program, now covering Asia and Europe, will include a more robust definition of neurodiversity that covers ADD/ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia, and learning disabilities. Beyond Microsoft, the Autism Employer Hiring Coalition, a program that has enlisted Dell, EY, JPMorgan Chase, and other companies with support from Inclusively, is expanding to better enable companies to consider autistic job seekers.

We have learned that understanding digital accessibility is essential to advancing inclusion. Since accessible digital technology can play a critical role in eliminating barriers to communication, interaction, and information, we are focused on growing our work with workforce development organizations and empowering them with digital tools and trainings that focus on digital accessibility. This effort includes a

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pilot program with the UK Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to train 26,000 work coaches on modern accessibility tools to assist job seekers with disabilities. Such partnerships are at the core of our strategy to scale this effort in the future.

Microsoft’s work in accessibility is informed by feedback from our employees. Our Disability Employee Resource Group now includes more than 22 disability communities and regional and divisional chapters. In October 2020, we shared a first look at our disability representation, in which 6.1 percent of employees in the United States identify as a person with a disability. Our ambition is to fully represent the population of people with disabilities across the globe, and we take that goal seriously.

I am proud to be counted as one of those employees with disabilities at Microsoft. My disability is a strength, and arriving at this realization was the most significant turning point for me, both personally and in the workplace. My story is one of many. I encourage you to check out our accessibility stories page to hear from some amazing employees who belong to our community.

Our focus on disability inclusion is a major reason why digital accessibility is now part of Microsoft’s engineering DNA. Innovations such as Seeing AI and the Xbox Adaptive Controller sprouted from disabled talent using their expertise to drive innovation. We look forward to continuing this journey, opening doors to talent, and reducing the disability divide. As our accessibility team always reminds us, when it comes to disability inclusion, “nothing about us, without us.” It’s a motto that we take to heart daily as we work to create a more inclusive future. ♦