

Beyond Access: An Organizational Maturity Model for Disability Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

This resource complements our peer-reviewed [publication](#) on the inclusion of disabled people in organizations and offers a practical framework for organizational leaders. It situates disability inclusion within the broader landscape of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work, introduces a six-phase maturity model, and provides guidance for applying the model to real-world organizational contexts. The resource also introduces the term *transformative middle ground*, referring to DEI work that focuses on organizational systems, processes, and tools, enabling enduring inclusive change while minimizing the resistance that can accompany deeper mental model and paradigm-shifting work. Designed to be accessible to organizations seeking to move from compliance toward meaningful inclusion, this resource invites leaders to center dignity, agency, and belonging as measures of success.

This resource complements and elaborates on the ideas presented in our peer-reviewed [publication](#)² on the inclusion of disabled people in organizations and presents an organizational maturity model for leaders.³ It includes three sections:

- **Context.** A brief overview of how disability fits into diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practice.
- **Conceptual Framing.** The intellectual foundations and phases of the model.
- **Application.** High-level guidance for applying the model.

Taken together, these sections aim to provide leaders with a pathway: where to start, how to build capacity over time, and how to assess progress in the inclusion of disabled people.

There are many organizations, including those that are disability-led, that can support this work, including:

¹ First authorship is shared.

² If you do not have an institutional affiliation that provides access to the full scholarly publication, please contact Anna Cechony at hello@wovenexperience.com for a copy of the full paper for private use.

³ This resource uses identity-first language for disability (e.g., disabled person instead of person with a disability). Although individuals can and do choose the language that feels best for them, as a whole, identity-first language centers on a [positive disability identity](#) and [disability pride](#).

- [Adventures of Community](#)
- [Create Knowledge](#)
- [Imprint Legal Group](#)
- [The Inclusion Practice](#)
- [ThriveOn Talent Consulting](#)

We encourage you to reach out to these organizations directly for support in implementing any of the elements of our model or for assistance with any other work you are planning or undertaking to support the inclusion of disabled people.

CONTEXT

We frame our model within the broader context of DEI practice, emphasizing two key points.

First, the most effective locus of this work is on the systems, processes, and tools that shape daily organizational life, situated between individual efforts that may seem piecemeal or superficial and broad paradigm-shifting efforts that may exceed organizational readiness. By targeting this middle ground, leaders can build momentum without provoking resistance that often arises from context-insensitive and strategically mismatched DEI changes.

We refer to this area of work as the **transformative middle ground** of DEI efforts, which has the potential to create sustainable and enduring change while remaining attentive and responsive to organizational goals and operational sustainability.⁴

Second, we encourage organizations to treat disability as an identity category, and not exclusively as a legal or medical designation. Doing so does not essentialize disabled experiences but ensures that disability is neither erased nor treated as peripheral in broader DEI efforts.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMING

The model (see Figure 1 below) includes six phases, from Pre-Structural Inclusion to Symbolic Inclusion, each representing a deeper level of inclusion for disabled people. The intellectual foundations of this model draw on ideas of social and economic exclusion from development economics literature and emphasize the importance of personhood, which is often denied to disabled people due to beliefs that they cannot be held accountable in the same way as nondisabled people. It also incorporates scholarly concepts of inclusion in formal organizational settings. Together, these areas underscore the importance of striving for work that exceeds minimum legal requirements.

We highlight two related points about our use of the terms structural and symbolic in our model. First, we see *structural* work as essential to all DEI efforts, especially those centered on disability inclusion. While structure is often used to describe DEI initiatives that focus on organizational design, systems, and processes, we also use the term here to refer to the built environment—the features of infrastructure that impact the accessibility of physical and digital spaces.

⁴ This framing draws on two foundational systems models of organizational change: [Burke & Litwin \(1992\)](#) and [Nadler & Tushman \(1980\)](#). The former focuses on the relationships between organizational components in the context of its internal strategy and external environment. The latter emphasizes congruence between many of the same elements for organizations to improve performance. See [Brown & Coukos \(2025\)](#) for a discussion of the importance of designing and DEI work with organizational identity and the external environment in mind.

Second, we use *symbolic* to emphasize the levels of inclusion beyond the basic elements of structural and social inclusion, the latter of which helps establish supportive and inclusive relationships in organizations. Symbolic inclusion involves deep work on mental models and identifying and addressing underlying, hidden values and norms that impede the inclusion of disabled people. This use of symbolic should not be confused with its more common application to describe DEI efforts that are seen as performative.

In most cases, what supports the inclusion of disabled people across different types of organizations tends to align more with the left side of the model. As organizations move from

left to right along the model, toward social and symbolic levels, they shift from compliance-driven efforts to co-creation and leadership by disabled people. Each phase builds on the previous one, encouraging organizations to ask deeper questions: not just “Are we legally compliant?” but “How do we design spaces where disabled people belong, lead, and create?”

PHASES OF THE MODEL

With this context in place, we introduce our six-phase model, which ranges from Pre-Structural Inclusion to Symbolic Inclusion. This progression reflects increasingly sophisti-

Figure 1. Organizational Maturity Model for the Inclusion of Disabled People

	Pre-Structural Inclusion	Structural Inclusion	Pre Social Inclusion	Social Inclusion	Pre Symbolic Inclusion	Symbolic Inclusion
Why work toward this level of inclusion?	Legal compliance with the ADA.	Disabled people can experience organizational structures as fundamentally inaccessible, regardless of ADA compliance.	Disabled people share that the experience of accessibility is socially isolating.	Solution creation processes do not robustly include disabled organizational members.	Attention to deep-seated, intersectional inclusion issues.	Treatment of disabled people as central to the success of the organization.
What does this level of inclusion entail?	Maintaining the status quo and only making adjustments that are legally required.	Retrofitting existing structures for access and designing future structures around access.	Ensuring that organizational structures are both accessible and inviting.	Disabled people are involved in designing systems that are accessible and ensure personhood and access to resources.	Rooting out ableism and ableist thinking at all levels of organizational structure, policy, and systems.	Creating new structures, policies, and systems with liberatory access at the forefront.
Overall guiding growth question	Are there disabled people here? If not, why not?	How do we create structures that allow disabled people to be present?	How do we create spaces that invite disabled people to be present?	How do we ensure agency and personhood for disabled people?	What might be possible outside of our current systems?	How do disabled people lead and create liberatory access for other disabled people?

For a full-page version of this table, see the end of this document.

cated and participatory approaches to disability inclusion.

Many organizations, especially those that have never explicitly and strategically considered disability inclusion into their DEI efforts, are in the **Pre-Structural Inclusion** phase. Although one in four American adults has a disability, many organizations only view disability through the lens of the ADA as a law. The **Structural Inclusion** phase is marked by recognizing that disabled people are part of the organization and wanting to include them, often through the retrofitting of existing systems, structures, and the built environment. This can involve adding ramps, image descriptions, or other accommodations that allow disabled people to be there.

Pre-Social Inclusion goes a step further by asking how we actively invite disabled people into spaces, rather than just allowing them. In this phase, organizations realize that a lack of inclusion can lead to social isolation, such as when accessible entrances are tucked at the back of a building or when events do not follow COVID-19 safety measures.

If organizations work through the first three phases—Pre-Structural Inclusion, Structural Inclusion, and Pre-Social Inclusion—they will see a demonstrable impact over time in terms of disabled people’s ability to access physical and digital spaces and, at times, feel invited and welcomed to participate in organizational activities. These phases are relatively achievable with shifts in systems, processes, and tools.

However, the next three phases—Social Inclusion, Pre-Symbolic Inclusion, and Symbolic Inclusion—demand shifts in paradigms and mental models, moving beyond the transformative middle ground that can

enable meaningful change with minimal resistance.

In the fourth phase, **Social Inclusion**, the focus shifts to the agency of disabled people in shaping their personhood within the organization. This phase encourages organizations to consider how they can create opportunities for disabled people to take meaningful leadership roles, empowering them to express end-user needs and develop accessible tools. **Pre-Symbolic Inclusion** emphasizes the importance of including disabled voices and perspectives, especially in formal leadership and influence roles that affect organizational structure, policies, and systems.

In the final phase, **Symbolic Inclusion**, organizations must ask, “How do disabled people lead and create liberatory access for all disabled people?” In line with the commonly used phrase “nothing about us, without us, is for us,” disability scholars and activists have similarly stated that although many nondisabled people will need to be involved in the work to include disabled people, these efforts must be led by disabled people.

To do this effectively, it is important to understand that ableism is connected to other forms of systemic inequality, including racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. Here, organizations and their leaders must commit to learning how their organizations might sustain these inequalities.

APPLICATION

The exclusion of disabled people results from a series of choices made at individual, organizational, and societal levels that define what is considered normal for navigating the world. Often, these are not choices that individuals are consciously aware of making. By critically

questioning what you decide to include or exclude in your organization, it becomes easier to build inclusive environments that recognize disability and multiple intersecting identities.

For organizations seeking to apply the model presented here, there are two key practical points. First, maturity is not a straight path. Organizations may progress or regress within the model for various reasons, some within their control and others outside it. The model acts as a guide for leaders and organizations to focus on desired states while being honest about their current position and past developments. Any strategic change effort that does not acknowledge its current and previous conditions is already compromised.

Second, no two organizations are alike. Larger institutions with more resources may find it easier to establish the structural supports

described in the early phases of the model. Movement toward more tailored, context-specific practices on the right will depend not only on internal will but also on external factors like industry norms and regulatory environments. What matters most is that progress is pursued with honesty, consistency, and meaningful engagement with the communities this work aims to serve, focusing on dignity, agency, and belonging as its measures of success.

Ultimately, naming disability as part of identity encourages organizations to actively engage with disabled people—to ask, listen, and respond to what is needed for meaningful support in specific situations.

Brown, A., & Cechony, A. (2025). *Beyond Access: An Organizational Maturity Model for Disability Inclusion*. AB Performance Advisory-Woven Experience.

Figure 1. Organizational Maturity Model for the Inclusion of Disabled People (full page version of Figure 1 from page 3)

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