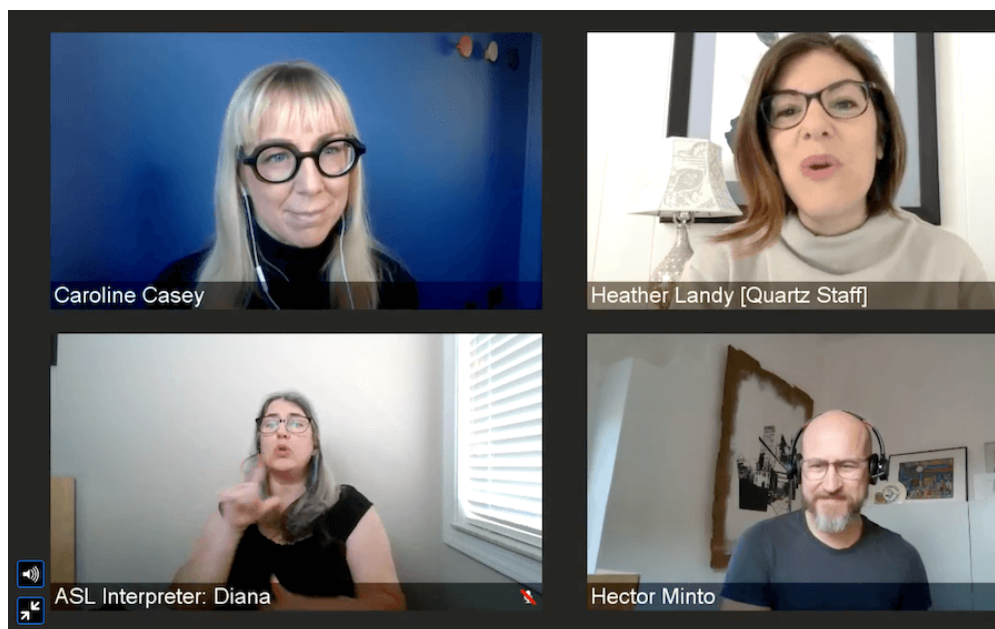


What's Often Missing From the Diversity and Inclusion Conversation

Author: Casey Gale



Inclusivity activist Caroline Casey and Microsoft technology evangelist for accessibility inclusion in the workplace with the help of an ASL interpreter

As employers seek to understand and remedy racial and gender bias within their industries, they have focused on inclusivity and diversity initiatives. But even with more open discussions about inequality and the need for change in the workplace, some marginalized communities are still being left out of the conversation. According to December 2020 research by The Valuable 500 (<https://www.thevaluable500.com/>), a global CEO community launched at the World Economic Forum's Annual Summit in Davos in 2019 with the goal of revolutionizing disability inclusion in the workplace, only three percent of articles (<https://www.thevaluable500.com/only-3-of-articles-discussing-diversity-reference-disability/>) discussing diversity published in 2019 and 2020 referenced disability.

In a recent Quartz at Work webinar, "How to Promote Disability Inclusion at Your Workplace (https://qz.com/work/1975002/how-to-promote-disability-inclusion-at-your-workplace/?utm_source=email&utm_medium=membership-promotion&utm_content=e8a3295d-72f5-11eb-b3f1-e295655a8910&utm_campaign=wfh-event-inclusion)," the Valuable 500's founder and inclusivity activist Caroline Casey, as well as Hector Minto, senior technology evangelist for accessibility at Microsoft and a member of the Valuable 500, spoke with

Quartz at Work Executive Editor Heather Landy about the first steps organizations can take to better include people with disabilities. Casey said that it starts with creating a "culture of support and permission" to ask questions.

"The most important part is we've got to create spaces for people to ask the question, 'What are we doing about this?'" Casey said. "I think it's important to understand that you're not expected to know it all. You will not get canceled out by asking questions with the intention to change. I think it is [about] reaching out to people with different lived experiences who can help," she said, noting that between 11 and 15 percent of many organizations are made up of people with disabilities — and those disabilities could be unknown to business leaders, as 80 percent of disability is invisible.

Minto, who has been with Microsoft for nearly five years and has specialized in assistive technology, alternative communication, and special educational needs for two decades, added that creating resource groups and time for conversations around the importance of disability inclusion can yield powerful results for organizations and their partners on both a large and small scale.

"Microsoft is not just a technology provider," Minto said. "We have an entire technology industry spun up around us to go and deliver technology all around the world. Some of the most exciting work I do is with our partners because they see this leadership from [Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella and Jenny Lay-Flurrie, chief accessibility officer] on disability inclusion and accessibility as a deliverable, they see themselves as an industry that can actually help us create an inclusive society... They've gone away and learned about digital accessibility, the technique, the deliverable, the responsibility, the opportunity, but then they'll come back and say to me, 'I've got five dyslexic people in my organization and I never knew.'"

Many employees don't speak up about their disability, Minto noted, because of past bad experiences "coming out" in the workplace or for fear that it will make them less attractive as workers because of the perceived extra expenses that come with making accommodations — a feeling that Casey, who has a lifelong visual impairment, understands well.

"In the last 24 hours, we were ordering new tech for the Valuable 500 team, and I needed a particular set of accommodations," Casey said. "This is my company. I set it up. And I looked at our CEO and I found myself squirming in my seat on the Zoom saying, 'Do you mind if?' And of course she didn't, but I could feel my heart squishing and I was shaking, emotional. This is my company!" she emphasized.

To remove the stigma that comes with asking for accommodations, Minto suggested larger companies can centralize accommodation costs, as Microsoft has, so that individual managers are not aware of how certain accommodations are impacting their department budgets. Leaders of smaller companies, he said, should educate themselves on the true cost of assistive technology, noting that while some technology is still pricey, many people would be "amazed at how low-cost disability tech is actually becoming now," he said. Alternately, companies can widen their work policies to allow employees who use assistive technology to bring their own devices to the office.

"I think what is really interesting is this is head and heart stuff. This is not about cost," Casey said. "And that's why it keeps coming back to cultures — culture, culture, culture."

Creating a culture in which people with disabilities feel they can openly disclose their disability and ask for accommodations can lead to business breakthroughs that might not have otherwise been discovered without the help of those with lived experience with disability, Minto said. He gave the example of the creation of Microsoft Teams, which was designed to feature captions that can privately be turned on for anyone who is deaf, hard of hearing, or needs extra language support.

"That might seem like a tiny thing," he said. "But that only happened because a deaf individual was leading that project, saying 'Hang on, you shouldn't have to ask for that button to be pressed for everybody,'" Hector recalled. "I think people expect Microsoft to be doing this stuff. We design tech, we design personal devices in many ways, right? It's not until we have the confidence to turn around, though, to our health boards, to our schools, to our colleges, to our banks, to our retailers, and start putting the same demands on disability inclusion in those industries that we'll see an inclusive society."

There's a lot of work to do, Casey said. In the two years since The Valuable 500 launched with the intention of obtaining 500 commitments from companies and leaders to put disability inclusion on their leadership agenda, the organization — which counts companies like Airbnb, Virgin, Hilton, and Bespoke Hotels among its few confirmed members in the travel and hospitality sectors, according to its website — has secured 435 commitments to date.

Until businesses truly acknowledge the power that they have to drive inclusion in society, Casey said, "I don't think we're going to see the change."



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