



Recognition Gap Audit & Toolkit

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Recognition Gap Audit & Toolkit

A practical tool to help employers find out where talent-development practices may be excluding disabled and neurodivergent employees

Relay Resources | Disability Inclusion & Belonging

Use this toolkit to find recognition gaps, clarify advancement criteria, and design more accessible talent systems.

Purpose

The Recognition Gap Audit & Toolkit helps employers examine how talent is identified, developed, and advanced inside the workplace.

It starts from a simple premise: disabled and neurodivergent employees belong in every role and at every level, and they are already capable of leading. When the people being recognized, developed, and promoted do not reflect that, the cause is almost always in the system, not in the people. This toolkit helps you find out where.

Use This Tool to Ask

- Who is recognized here, and who is not?
- Who actually gets development opportunities?
- Whose way of working is treated as a performance problem?
- Who designs the systems that decide all of this?

How to Use This Toolkit

Each statement below describes something you have either witnessed in your organization or have not. Rate how true each one is for you, from 1 to 5.

Rate only what you have witnessed or know firsthand. If you are not sure, rate it lower. Not knowing is useful information in itself: it means the evidence leaders need is not reaching them.

At the end of each section, add your ratings for a subtotal, then divide by six for the section average. The section averages are what you will use in the Scoring Guide.

Each section's reflection questions are split by score: one set if your average is high, another if it is low. Between 3 and 3.9? Use both: the low questions for the statements you rated under 3, the high questions for the rest.

1

Not true yet

2

Rarely true

3

Sometimes true

4

Mostly true

5

Consistently true

Section 1: Clear Criteria for Talent and Advancement

#	Audit Statement	Rating (1-5)	Notes / Evidence
1.1	I personally know openly disabled people at all levels of our organization.		
1.2	Everyone I know in our organization got a written explanation of what it takes to get promoted, long before they were considered for it.		
1.3	I have worked with successful leaders here whose work styles, arrangements, or communication differ from the norm.		
1.4	I have observed many people with different work or communication styles promoted from non-leadership roles.		
1.5	All of the documentation about what it takes to get promoted that I'm aware of, for any role, describes what the role produces, not how, when, or where the work is done.		
1.6	My organization has a documented, outcome-based definition of leadership potential, and I have witnessed it used in promotion decisions.		

Subtotal: ____ / 30

Section average: ____ (subtotal ÷ 6)

If your average is high (4 or above)

The written and unwritten ideas of a leader here are probably reaching people and working for people who work differently. Check your Notes column first: if the evidence was thin, the score may be confidence rather than observation.

- Do the openly disabled people at every level represent many kinds of disability, including non-apparent, chronic, psychiatric, and cognitive, or mostly one?
- Would people in every part of the organization describe what it takes to get promoted the same way you do?
- How could the way you define leadership potential be shared with partners, peers, or your industry?

If your average is low (below 3)

Either the criteria for advancement carry barriers, or you are not close enough to how advancement works here to know. Both deserve attention.

- (1.1) If you could not name openly disabled people at every level: are they not there, not disclosing, or there and you have not noticed?
- (1.2, 1.5, 1.6) If the criteria for promotion are not written, or did not reach everyone: how do people here find out what it takes?
- (1.3, 1.4) If the leaders and recent promotions you can think of all work in similar ways and share similar characteristics: how is that expectation being communicated, and is it documented anywhere?
- (1.5) Think about the roles you are most familiar with. In what it takes to get promoted from them, which lines are about hours, location, or pace rather than results? Could those results be produced another way?

Actions to Take

1. Rewrite what it takes to get promoted, for every role, as what the role produces, with disabled employees in that role helping to write it.
2. Share it with every employee as part of their role, not only with people already being considered for advancement.
3. Remove any requirement about how, when, or where work is done unless it is a documented requirement of that work.
4. Check your last year of promotions against the written criteria and note where other factors decided the outcome.
5. Define leadership potential in writing as job-related outcomes, and use that definition, not impressions, in every promotion decision.

Section 2: Access to Development Opportunities

#	Audit Statement	Rating (1-5)	Notes / Evidence
2.1	Every stretch assignment I'm aware of was announced to all eligible employees through more than one channel, with its selection criteria and enough notice to apply.		
2.2	Everyone I know here has a documented growth plan that they helped create.		
2.3	I personally know openly disabled employees who have accessed our organization's mentorship, training, and leadership opportunities.		
2.4	Every development program I'm aware of here was accessible to disabled employees, with no one needing a change or accommodation the organization wasn't prepared to offer.		
2.5	I am aware of my organization's own reporting on who is offered growth opportunities and promotions, including disability and other demographics, and it is accessible to leaders across the organization.		
2.6	I can name several openly disabled employees who have helped design or run our development opportunities.		

Subtotal: ____ / 30

Section average: ____ (subtotal ÷ 6)

If your average is high (4 or above)

Opportunity here probably reaches people by design rather than through relationships. Check your Notes column first: if the evidence was thin, the score may be confidence rather than observation.

- Do the disabled employees using mentorship, training, and leadership programs reflect your whole workforce, or the same few people each time?
- Do the opportunities that reach everyone include the most visible ones, such as high-profile projects and succession lists, or mainly training?
- What would it take to offer the way you announce and design opportunities to the organizations you work with?

If your average is low (below 3)

Either opportunity here travels through relationships and self-promotion, or you are not close enough to how it is distributed to know. Both deserve attention.

- (2.1) If stretch assignments were not announced broadly with their criteria: how did the people who got them find out, and who decided?
- (2.2) If not everyone has a growth plan they helped create: who does, and what do they have in common?
- (2.3, 2.4) If you could not name openly disabled employees who have used mentorship, training, or leadership programs: are they not applying, not being chosen, or not able to take part as the programs are built?
- (2.5) If no report exists on who gets growth opportunities and promotions, or you have never encountered one: who would know, and how would a pattern be found?
- (2.6) If disabled employees have not helped design or run these opportunities: who has, and when were disabled employees asked?

Actions to Take

1. Announce every stretch assignment and development opportunity through more than one channel, with its criteria and enough notice to apply.
2. Co-create a documented growth plan with every employee, and revisit it outside of annual reviews.
3. Make the accommodations each development program will provide a documented part of the program before it launches.
4. Report to leaders, at least yearly, on who is offered growth opportunities and promotions, including disability and other demographics.
5. Bring disabled employees into designing and running development opportunities, with decision-making roles.

Section 3: Communication and Workplace Norms

#	Audit Statement	Rating (1-5)	Notes / Evidence
3.1	I have observed people here who communicate differently receive full credit as strong communicators.		
3.2	All of the feedback I have witnessed within my organization has been about outcomes, agreed deadlines, or communication the work actually required, not about someone's pace or style beyond those.		
3.3	I have observed ideas shared through other channels, such as asynchronous or escalated feedback, recognized and put into practice here.		
3.4	Everyone I know here can do their job without first working around harassment, exclusion, or tools and norms that don't work for them.		
3.5	My organization has documented norms for meetings, invites, and social gatherings (agendas ahead, when cameras are required), and I've observed them followed at every level.		
3.6	I can name several openly disabled employees who helped set our communication and meeting norms.		

Subtotal: ____ / 30

Section average: ____ (subtotal ÷ 6)

If your average is high (4 or above)

People here can probably contribute in the way they work best, without extra work to get around barriers first. Check your Notes column first: if the evidence was thin, the score may be confidence rather than observation.

- Are people who communicate differently credited at every level, including in senior and customer-facing roles, or mostly in a few teams?
- Which norms and tools do people still quietly work around, and who carries that extra work?
- How could your documented meeting and gathering norms be adopted by partners, vendors, or the clients you meet with?

If your average is low (below 3)

Either the norms here reward one way of communicating and leave barriers in place, or you are not close enough to day-to-day work to know. Both deserve attention.

- (3.1, 3.3) If the people credited as strong communicators all communicate the same way: what happens to ideas that arrive in writing, after the meeting, or through someone else?
- (3.2) If feedback you have witnessed was about pace or style: was it tied to a deadline or something the work needed, or to how most people here work?
- (3.4) If people you know work around harassment, exclusion, or tools that don't fit them: how much of their energy goes there before the work begins, and who knows about it?
- (3.5, 3.6) If meeting and gathering norms are not documented, or not followed at every level: who set the current norms, and were disabled employees among them?

Actions to Take

1. Document norms for meetings, invites, and social gatherings, including agendas ahead of time and when cameras are and are not required, and apply them at every level.
2. Create and publicize more than one channel for contributing ideas, including asynchronous and escalated routes, and credit contributions equally whatever the channel.
3. Tie every piece of performance feedback to an outcome, an agreed deadline, or a communication the work actually required.
4. Treat every reported barrier, including harassment and tools that do not work, as the organization's to remove, not the individual's to work around.
5. Train managers on disability, neurodiversity, and communication differences.

Section 4: Performance Management and PIPs

#	Audit Statement	Rating (1-5)	Notes / Evidence
4.1	My organization has a system in place for reviewing performance concerns for access or systemic barriers before taking corrective action with the individual.		
4.2	I am aware of the training and accountability in my organization that ensure people leaders consider whether unclear expectations, inaccessible processes, or lack of accommodations are negatively impacting an individual's performance.		
4.3	My organization has defined models for providing specific, behavior-based feedback that are regularly trained on, and I have witnessed their use across the organization.		
4.4	The performance plans I'm aware of here regularly result in the person succeeding in their role, not leaving the organization.		
4.5	I am aware of my organization's own reporting on who is placed on performance plans or disciplined, including disability and other demographics, and it is accessible to leaders across the organization.		
4.6	Everyone I know who received a corrective action here already had that expectation documented before it came up.		

Subtotal: ____ / 30

Section average: ____ (subtotal ÷ 6)

If your average is high (4 or above)

Performance management here is probably built to help people succeed, with the organization owning its part. Check your Notes column first: if the evidence was thin, the score may be confidence rather than observation.

- Does the barrier review happen for everyone, including people who have never disclosed a disability, and for every kind of concern?
- Which managers would find it hardest to describe the barrier review or the feedback model, and what would help them?
- How could what you have learned about supporting people through performance concerns be shared beyond HR, for example with frontline supervisors or peer organizations?

If your average is low (below 3)

Either performance concerns here go to the individual before anyone checks the system, or you are not close enough to how corrective action happens to know. Both deserve attention.

- (4.1, 4.6) If corrective action begins before tools, instructions, and expectations are checked: what is checked, by whom, and when did the person first learn the expectation?
- (4.2, 4.3) If managers are not trained on barriers to performance or on a feedback model: where do they learn how to handle a concern, and who holds them to it?
- (4.4) If performance plans here mostly end with the person leaving: what do the plans commit the organization to change, and when do they begin?
- (4.5) If no report exists on who is placed on performance plans or disciplined, or you have never encountered one: who would know whether disabled employees are placed on them more often?

Actions to Take

1. Put a documented review for access and systemic barriers in front of every corrective action, applied to everyone, whether or not they have disclosed a disability.
2. Train people leaders on unclear expectations, inaccessible processes, and lack of accommodations as causes of performance concerns, and hold them accountable for considering them.
3. Adopt one model for specific, behavior-based feedback, train on it regularly, and use it at every level.
4. Include the organization's and the manager's commitments in every performance plan, alongside the employee's, with timelines and success measures.
5. Report to leaders on who is placed on performance plans or disciplined, including disability and other demographics, and act on what the pattern shows.

Section 5: Disabled Employee Leadership and Design

#	Audit Statement	Rating (1-5)	Notes / Evidence
5.1	I have witnessed openly disabled employees involved from the start of designing a promotion, review, or development process here, and again each time it changed.		
5.2	I can name several openly disabled employees who have had decision-making authority, not only an advisory role, over our communication norms or performance expectations.		
5.3	I personally know people who reported a barrier here, and the only thing that changed for them afterward was the barrier.		
5.4	I have witnessed our leaders report back to disabled employees what changed because of their feedback.		
5.5	My organization has a documented practice of paying or formally recognizing disabled employees for their input on its systems, and I have witnessed it applied.		
5.6	The individuals I have witnessed shaping our systems reflect our whole workforce, across race, gender, and type of disability, including disabilities that aren't apparent.		

Subtotal: ____ / 30

Section average: ____ (subtotal ÷ 6)

If your average is high (4 or above)

Disabled employees here probably hold real influence over the systems that affect them, from the start and as those systems change. Check your Notes column first: if the evidence was thin, the score may be confidence rather than observation.

- Do the disabled employees shaping your systems reflect your whole workforce across race, gender, and kind of disability, or a few familiar people?
- Which systems or decisions are still designed without disabled employees, and why those?
- How could the way you involve and pay disabled employees for design work become a standard you share with others?

If your average is low (below 3)

Either disabled employees here are consulted late or not at all, or you are not close enough to how systems get designed to know. Both deserve attention.

- (5.1, 5.2) If disabled employees were not involved from the start, or had no decision-making authority: at what moment were they brought in, and who decided that?
- (5.3) If reporting a barrier changed something for the person other than the barrier: what changed, and who would report one now?
- (5.4, 5.5) If disabled employees were not paid or recognized for their input, or never learned what came of it: what did the organization do with what they gave?
- (5.6) If the people shaping your systems reflect only part of the workforce: who is missing, and which decisions are being made without them?

Actions to Take

1. Involve disabled employees from the start of designing any talent, advancement, or performance process, and again each time it changes.
2. Give disabled employees decision-making authority, not only advisory roles, over the norms and expectations that affect everyone.
3. Pay or formally recognize disabled employees for their input on your systems, and document that practice.
4. Make reporting a barrier safe in practice: the only thing that should change afterward is the barrier.
5. Report back to disabled employees what changed because of their feedback, in formats everyone can access.
6. Check that the people shaping your systems reflect your whole workforce, across race, gender, and type of disability, including disabilities that are not apparent.

Scoring Guide

Record each section average below, then add the five averages together for your overall score (out of 25).

Section	Section average
Section 1	
Section 2	
Section 3	
Section 4	
Section 5	
Overall Score (sum of the five averages)	/25

Section	Section average	Section average
20-25	Strong Foundation	Your organization likely has several accessible and equitable talent practices in place. Keep auditing outcomes, not just intentions, and check that the pattern holds across teams, managers, and roles.
15-19.9	Progressing, But Inconsistent	Some practices are working, but they may depend too much on individual managers. Focus on consistency, documentation, and accountability.
10-14.9	Recognition Gaps Likely Exist	Your organization is probably missing disabled and neurodivergent talent. Prioritize clear criteria, manager training, accessible communication practices, and review of performance management patterns.
Below 10	High Risk of Exclusion	Your current systems may be reinforcing ableism through unclear expectations, informal networks, inaccessible communication norms, or inconsistent performance management.

Wherever your overall score lands, your lowest section average is where to start.

If you rated many statements a 1 because you did not know, that is a finding too: the information leaders need to recognize talent fairly is not reaching them.

Quick Audit: Warning Signs of a Recognition Gap

- You cannot name openly disabled people above a certain level.
- The same employees always get stretch assignments, and others learn about them afterward.
- “Executive presence,” “fit,” or “not ready” is used without a defined work outcome behind it.
- Employees have to network informally to find out what it takes to get promoted.
- Meetings are the main place where ideas are credited.
- A style of communication is praised in a leader and counted against someone in a non-leadership role.
- Corrective action begins before anyone checks the tools, instructions, or environment.
- No report exists, or no leader has encountered one, on who is promoted, developed, or disciplined, by disability and other demographics.
- Disabled employees are consulted after decisions are made, or are not paid when they are consulted.

30-Day Action Plan

Week 1: Choose an Area

Use your lowest section average to pick one role, team, or process to focus on.

Week 2: Clarify Expectations Together

With the people in that role, including disabled employees, clarify what the work actually requires and name the key gaps in access.

Week 3: Design for the Gaps

Design a development opportunity that removes those gaps, announced through more than one channel with its criteria and enough notice.

Week 4: Debrief and Keep Going

With the same people, review what worked and what didn't, and build a plan to keep improving it.

Closing Commitment

Recognizing talent more fairly requires clear criteria, accessible systems, manager accountability, and disabled employees helping shape the decisions that affect them.

When organizations examine how talent is seen, developed, and rewarded, they create stronger workplaces for everyone.

That is how we move closer to a world where Disabled People Belong. Everywhere.