

Do Mandatory Disability Inclusion Trainings Work?

Leadership Council-Exclusive Resource



Disability remains misunderstood and stigmatized in the workplace, contributing to challenges that can impact productivity and effectiveness. The National Organization on Disability recommends requiring disability awareness training in the workplace. Effective educational initiatives can remove barriers for employees with disabilities, fostering a more collaborative, creative, and innovative culture for all employees.

While recent concerns have emerged about the effectiveness of mandatory programs, particularly in the current DEI-focused cultural and political climate, this resource refines the approach to disability inclusion education, offering strategies to ensure lasting, meaningful impact for both employees and the company.

Challenges with (Mandatory) Trainings

Many challenges with mandatory sessions stem not from the requirement itself, but from overlooked, controllable factors. Understanding these challenges is key to preventing them.

Quality Takes a Hit

Mandatory training can become a “checkbox” task, leading to rushed, low-quality content that lacks real value. This is often reflected in the way these programs are marketed, with non-mandatory programs receiving more attention, while mandatory ones get little to no promotion, reducing interest and thus engagement.

Low Engagement and Accountability

Mandatory training can feel like a time-wasting chore, leaving employees frustrated that they’re spending time on something they don’t find valuable. Without motivation to engage, they may put in minimal effort, resulting in a lack of genuine participation and missed learning opportunities.

Learner Burden

Mandatory training often places the responsibility on employees to absorb and apply the material on their own, without adequate support or guidance. This is compounded by a lack of personalization, making it harder for employees to connect the content to their daily responsibilities.

Frustration and Resentment

Mandatory training can trigger feelings of resentment, particularly in today's polarized cultural and political climate, increasing resistance or disengagement toward the very demographic the program aims to support.

Lack of Ongoing Commitment

Mandatory training can feel like a one-time checkbox exercise, with little follow-up or continued support. Without ongoing engagement, it may seem performative rather than fostering real, lasting change.

Despite these challenges, mandatory disability awareness training can be highly effective with proper planning. By addressing these issues, organizations can ensure the training is both engaging and impactful.



Components of a Successful Training

Use the following steps as a guide to create a learning experience that employees find engaging and informative:

1 Preparation: Set the Stage for Engagement

Use the following steps as a guide to create a learning experience that employees find engaging and informative.

Consider Conflicting Priorities:

Schedule live sessions and completion deadlines during quieter periods and work with managers to prioritize the training. If possible, break the training content into digestible modules. This ensures employees can fully engage without distractions or stress from other responsibilities.

Promote Buy-In:

Approach the marketing as you would for a non-mandatory program. Use compelling messaging that emphasizes relevance and impact to encourage participation.

Provide Quality Content:

Invest in engaging, high-quality content that captures attention. The material should be interactive, practical, and directly applicable to employees' roles.

2 Clarity and Flexibility

Define Clear Objectives:

Be clear about what you want to achieve. Whether it's increasing awareness, improving specific processes, or building new skills, set measurable goals.

Offer Flexible Delivery Options:

Provide a range of formats (e.g., eLearning, live workshops, self-paced modules) and content styles (e.g., auditory, visual, experiential) to accommodate various schedules and learning preferences.

Leverage Microlearning:

For longer sessions, consider breaking the content into small, digestible modules. This keeps learning manageable and reinforces key concepts without overwhelming employees.

3 Engagement and Reflection

Incorporate Reflection:

Build in time for employees to reflect on the content and how it applies to their roles. Consider group discussions or self-reflection activities.

Make It Interactive:

Keep learners engaged by including quizzes, real-world scenarios, or other activities that directly relate to their daily tasks.

Create Incentives for Participation:

Offer meaningful incentives, such as rewards or recognition, to motivate participation. Foster active involvement by creating opportunities for feedback and facilitating group discussions.

4 Actionable Follow-Up and Continuous Reinforcement

Post-Training Resources:

Provide a simple, easily accessible follow-up guide for employees to review after the session, ensuring they can continue applying what they've learned.

"Nudges" to Reinforce Learning:

After the training, send small reminders and opportunities for employees to reinforce and apply new knowledge.

5 Be Strategic with DEI Language

Reframe It as an Opportunity:

Reframe DEI trainings as an opportunity to build a culture of belonging, aligning them with professional development to enhance skills, leadership, and cross-functional growth.

Choose Language with Care:

Use language focused on inclusion and belonging to create an environment where people feel encouraged to engage and safe to offer creative ideas.

Broaden Your Focus:

Review your inclusion strategy to ensure you're reaching out to often-overlooked groups. This includes not only people with disabilities but also individuals without college degrees and first-generation students. By broadening your approach, you'll create a more inclusive environment and ensure equitable access for all.

6 Avoid Performative Engagement

Encourage Continuous Dialogue:

Ensure disability inclusion is woven into the fabric of daily conversations, beyond just the annual training. This can include hosting guest speakers, integrating inclusion topics into other discussions, and incorporating accessibility into project planning and implementation.

What Should Always Be Mandatory?

Annual disability awareness training for all employees is a best practice, with additional, role-specific education for positions such as managers and HR personnel. Making these programs mandatory ensures that all employees receive crucial disability awareness, provided that the content is engaging, relevant, and well-executed. That said, if the mandatory factor is holding you back, offering optional training is still encouraged.

Education on legal compliance should always be mandatory for employees who need to understand their obligations under the ADA and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. This includes HR, Talent Acquisition, leadership, and people managers.

We recommend that this session be at least 30 minutes annually, ensuring that employees are fully informed and equipped to uphold legal requirements.

Measuring Success

Whether you choose mandatory or optional training, tracking the effectiveness of your initiatives through qualitative and quantitative methods is key.

Completion Rate:

Track the percentage of employees who complete the training. Even for mandatory sessions, it's common for the completion rate to fall short of 100%.

Immediate Feedback:

Use surveys to gather feedback on satisfaction, clarity, and relevance.

Behavioral Change:

Track indicators of progress, such as the number of accommodations requested, feedback from employees about inclusivity, or changes in team dynamics.

If you find that mandatory learning programs have low completion rates or poor feedback, consider the messaging and then testing optional training sessions as an alternative.

Take Advantage of Your Membership!

As a Leadership Council member, you're entitled to one disability awareness training, fully organized by us, and one speaking engagement with a speaker provided by our team. Reach out to your Disability Inclusion Specialist to get those sessions scheduled.



NATIONAL ORGANIZATION ON
DISABILITY