

Original Article

# Unequal Representation of Differently-Abled People in Economic Activity: Socioeconomic Implications for a Modern India

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Received: 03 February 2023

Revised: 07 March 2023

Accepted: 21 March 2023

Published: 31 March 2023

**Abstract** - The paper explores the poor representation of differently-abled people in the Indian workforce and economy. It peers into the challenges they face during education and employment by looking at various primary and secondary resources. Additionally, it also analyses the impact of exclusion from society on their lives and society as a whole using a sociocultural management lens. The paper, most importantly, looks at the exclusion of differently-abled individuals and its large-scale macroeconomic impacts on India through empirical evidence analysis. The issue's consequences can be better understood and valued by extensively estimating the economic impact of exclusion. Finally, the report also suggests potential solutions that could lead to positive change for the differently-abled community and the Indian economy.

**Keywords** - Disability Studies, Exclusion, GDP, Employment.

## 1. Introduction

Throughout the different stages of their lives, differently-abled people face several challenges and barriers that result in a greater likelihood of being pushed closer to poverty. This results in a higher chance of further disabilities or no possible solutions to aid them, leading to increased poverty levels and dependence on the government or other people. This creates the endless loop that countless people in India are trapped in. These issues are further worsened by discrimination against them and social exclusion, which they often undergo.

They encounter such challenges in every aspect of their lives, including but not limited to early childhood life, education, employment, day-to-day interactions, and much more. This paper aims to explore these challenges effectively and present a series of solutions to tackle them.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This paper will explore empirical and secondary data to understand the necessary issue. It also uses statistical data to calculate numerical data to support the research question necessitating change. Through further analysis of reports, the paper suggests crucial changes that will be important in a developing country like India to ensure equity.

## 3. Educational Challenges Faced by Differently-Abled People

The divide created against the differently-abled runs deep to the roots of discrimination in India and has a key correlation to India's caste system. Even though ancient India practised integration and inclusion, those beliefs have since changed. Hundreds of years ago, when the Indian education system was modelled after the student going and staying with the teacher in the Gurukul system, differently-abled and their classmates stayed together and supported each other. Contrarily, those values have since changed to the point that their impact can be seen in the employment of these individuals. According to the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People in a 2009 baseline report, "We found that many companies are openly rejecting disabled people on the grounds of disability/medical reasons. Many of them openly say that they do not want to hire people with severe and mental disabilities." (NCPEDP 21)

This leads to several issues for differently-abled people, the most important of which is poverty. As stated previously, discrimination against the differently-abled is also closely tied to the caste system. Dalits are considered to belong to the lowest of the four classes in the Indian caste system, and disability is present in much higher quantities in the Dalits, as seen at around 2.4%. (Mehrotra 302) This results from the economic setbacks that those in the lower caste face. They have limited social capital and poor access to education.



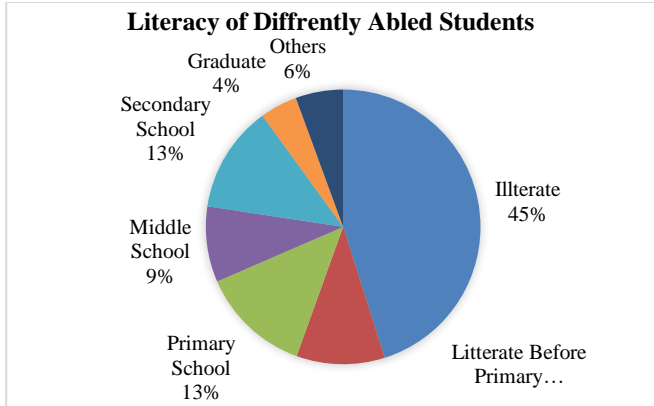


Fig. 1

A very similar scenario can be seen with a majority of the differently-abled people in India. The differently-abled face setbacks from the youngest of ages possible. In a country where the national literacy rate is around 74%, the literacy rate of the differently-abled is only 55%. Furthermore, only around 17% of all differently-abled people have completed secondary school education. (Census 2011)

These numbers are alarming and a serious cause for concern regarding the lack of education for the differently-abled. Schools throughout India use different strategies for their education, and the ones that are most effective and widely used are Special Schools. These schools follow a similar curriculum pattern to those for other children of the age group with slight adjustments that allow the teachers to cater the education specifically to the students by accounting for issues that may arise due to the challenges they face. Other strategies and options include integrated schools as a result of limited resources, especially in rural areas, and inclusive schools.

The situation further worsens at higher-level education. Out of the limited number of children that do enrol at a younger age in school, a majority, if not all, drop out by the time they reach grade 12. Figure 2 gives a thorough representation of the same. (District Information System for Education) It can be observed that the highest number of differently-abled students can be seen in grade 4, after which an eventual and continuous decline can be observed as the grade level increases. This highlights a major issue with the education system for the differently-abled. This could be because of the content being taught in schools for the differently-abled.

Differently-abled students are taught the standard curriculum in the subjects; however, a key aspect of their education is missed. They are not taught how to be independent and live self-sustainable life. This is likely to be far more valuable than any content-oriented knowledge. Additionally, training in skills they would need to work in corporate jobs will likely help them while seeking employment.

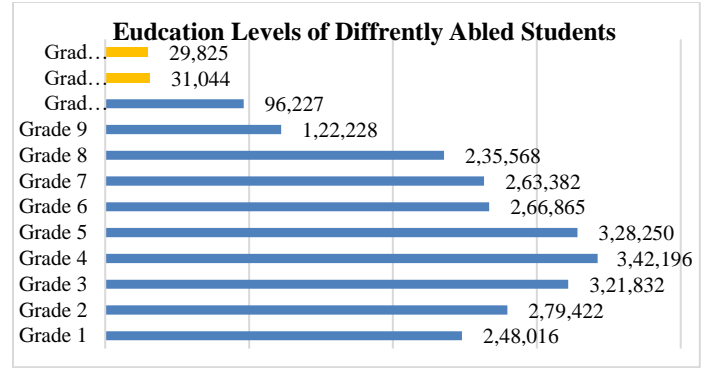


Fig. 2

A shift in the style of education from a content-based style to one revolving around the importance of learning essential life skills will be extremely effective. It could also increase the likelihood of more students completing secondary education as they receive more tangible and required assistance through education to achieve independence.

#### 4. Employment-Related Challenges Faced by Differently-Abled People

A major challenge that differently-abled people face is that when they work in paid private sector jobs, they have to complete the same amount of work as any other employee but often receive salaries less than those of their counterparts. This is a consequence of them being considered 'less efficient' in comparison, which is a major example of discrimination against them in the workplace. (Singh 71) The employment rate of the differently-abled in India is around 44%, while in developed OECD countries, that percentage rises to around 75%. (Chhapparwal 41) Differently-abled people face a wide variety of challenges in the workplace. Some major ideas can be drawn from a study conducted by Professor Selvi Narayanan. Even though the study focused on Malaysia, the results can also be applied to the Indian context. The first major challenge observed in the paper was that employers often failed to understand the needs of differently-abled employees. They were often insensitive to them, and hence the working conditions were unsuitable. A major issue was providing appropriate parking spaces and washrooms. These are basic requirements for working but were not ensured for the differently-abled employees.

Another issue revolved around miscommunication between them and non-disabled employees, as well as a misunderstanding about task assignments. This led to employees being de-moralised as they felt their contributions were not valued in the company. This created an extremely unsatisfactory work environment, further contributing to the several challenges differently-abled people face. Out of the 40 differently-abled respondents for the study, all 100% agreed that they felt a social distance from other co-workers.

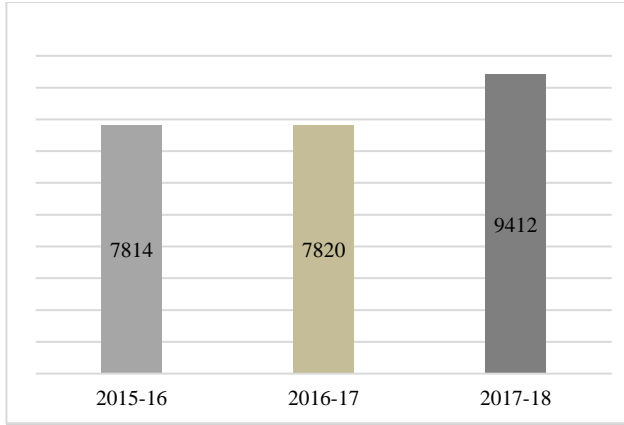


Fig. 3 Percentage of Workforce

The co-workers started to form lower expectations for tasks and an overall negative attitude towards their differently-abled colleagues. This further fueled workplace discrimination.

A major issue that many of the respondents faced was an issue with power and position. Any non-differently-abled managers or supervisors could often be seen commanding differently-abled people into doing tasks that were not a part of their duties and not their role in the organisation. They could never say no to their superiors, hence further increasing the divide and negative attitudes.

As shown in Figure 2.1, differently-abled people make up an extremely small proportion of the workforce. The numbers have not changed much over the span of three years. The data is based on a total of 52 companies in India and stands as an estimated representation of numbers nationally (Business Standard). The challenges, as explained above, further contribute to the slow and limited growth of that percentage value. Hence, these are some of the major challenges faced by the differently-abled when seeking employment and working life.

## 5. Stigma surrounding the Efficiency of Differently-Abled Employees

A common stigma that is used against the employment of differently-abled employees is questioning their efficiency and contributions to the organisation. A large number of differently-abled people are capable of equivalent performance to their counterparts if given appropriate resources and a functioning support system when required. A term commonly used to refer to the differently-abled is 'disabled'. However, it paints a rather poor picture of showcasing how individuals may be unable to do certain tasks. This creates a negative connotation in the minds of many people. Many of which are responsible for denying employment opportunities to the differently-abled.

It is rather a statement of a disabled environment created that prevents the differently-abled from reaching success on an uneven playing field. Hence, the argument of questioning their efficiency and ability is not a valid argument to deny them employment or growth in the field.

A potential solution moving forward would be the creation of a 'Disability - Job Fit' that could create matches where the disabilities of an individual do not hinder them from carrying out an employment role. This could be crucial to address any challenges they face while simultaneously addressing questions about their efficiency. A clear example could be that an individual with speech and listening impairments might not be able to carry out consumer interaction roles effectively. However, they might be able to perform roles in relation to movements such as shelving and back-end retail tasks. Hence, this could be the crucial change in thinking needed to tackle the issue at hand effectively.

## 6. Macroeconomic Impact on the Indian GDP

The exclusion of the differently-abled is a major issue due to discrimination. However, at the same time, it also negatively impacts companies and the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In fact, this negative impact was quantified in a study by the International Labour Organization (ILO) that focused on low to middle-income countries in Asia and Africa. The study stated that the cost of exclusion of differently-abled individuals led to losses of as many as 3-7% of the GDP. (Buckup 51) This means that major portions of potential profit are being neglected due to discriminatory behaviour and employment policies.

This trend is visible when looking at countries as big as China and shows how the current scenario is not profitable for either party involved. The economic sector loses valuable money, while differently-abled people are marginalised—neighbours of India, such as Bangladesh, face losses of as many as US\$891 Million. India having an even bigger GDP and larger population means the losses will likely be even greater. However, the study does not provide data for India.

Additionally, there are no other published studies that state the exact losses that India faces as a result of unemployment and discrimination against differently-abled people. In order to bridge this gap, an extension of the study by Sebastian Buckup will be performed. Using the same methods and applying them to data in the Indian context.

In order to begin with the calculations, the conceptual framework will need to be set. The main formula that will be used to calculate economic losses is the following. Here, (L) stands for economic losses, (P) a given individual's average productivity, ( $\gamma_i$ ) is the productivity adjustment factor for a particular disability level, and ( $n_1$ ) for the quantity of working-age differently-abled people.

$$L = \sum_{i=1}^k P n_i \gamma_i \text{ and } \gamma_i = (\beta_i^o - \beta_i) e_i + \beta_i^o (u_i - u) + \beta_i^o (d_i - d)$$

The adjustment factor is made up of the following three parts-

- Differently-abled people who are employed
- Differently-abled people who cannot find employment
- Differently-abled people who left the workforce

First, the productivity of an average person in the country can be calculated by dividing the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by the number of people employed. Taking India's GDP of \$2.36 Trillion at the end of 2021 (Business Standard) and the estimated number of people employed as around 500 Million (World Bank), we receive the average productivity as 4,720.

Next, finding employment rates for the entire population and the differently-abled population is crucial. The employment rate in the nation is around 42.3% (Trading Economics). However, when seen for just differently-abled individuals, this value drops down to around 36.34% (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation 37). Table 1 represents this data concisely.

**Table 1. Employment rates of the total population and differently-abled people**

	Total Population		Differently - Abled People	
	Million	Percent	Million	Percent
<b>Employed</b>	589.4	42.3	9.74	36.38
<b>Unemployed</b>	803.9	57.7	17.05	63.62

Next, to account for productivity rates, differently-abled people will be categorised into three major categories accounting for the severity level: mild, moderate, and severe. Then the formula below will be used to calculate their employment rates at different severity levels, which will be crucial to calculating economic losses.

$$e_i = e + \varepsilon_i \text{ and } \varepsilon = \frac{e_k - e}{k}$$

The equation above stands such that the employment rate with severity level (i) is equal to the sum of the national employment rate added to a variable ( $\varepsilon$ ) and again multiplied by (i). The difference between the employment rate at a severity level (k) and the national employment rate divided by (k) is equivalent to the variable. This helps us receive employment rates at different severity levels. The results of the same calculations can be seen in Table 2 below.

The data above uses estimates that around 17% of the differently-abled population of India has mild conditions, 35% have moderate, and 16% have severe conditions. (World Health Organization) Finally, these values can be used to calculate the productivity adjustment factor ( $\gamma_i$ ) as required by the first formula.

Hence, we can then calculate the overall economic losses to the GDP due to the exclusion of differently-abled people. Table 3 provides all the results and categorises them by reasons that limit the productivity of differently-abled individuals.

Hence, it can be understood that the total loss to the Indian National GDP is around \$ 45.0 billion annually. This is around 1.29% of the GDP. It may seem like a small factor; however, it represents the earnings of hundreds of millions around India.

**Table 2. Employment status of working for age population by severity levels**

	Total Population	Disability Levels of Differently-Abled People		
		Mild	Moderate	Severe
<b>Employed</b>	42.3	34.8	25.4	12.5
<b>Unemployed</b>	57.7	65.2	74.6	87.5
<b>Percentage of Population</b>	-	17	35	16

**Table 3. Economic losses in regard to differently-abled issues, organised by level of severity (millions USD)**

	Disability Levels of Differently-Abled People		
	Mild	Moderate	Severe
<b>No. of People In Disability Level Group (Millions)(ni)</b>	4.42	9.1	4.16
<b>Productivity Adjustment Factor (<math>\gamma_i</math>)</b>	0.24	0.31	0.26
<b>Part I (Inhospitable Environments)</b>	0.18	0.10	0.09
<b>Part II (Excessive Unemployment)</b>	0.04	0.18	0.15
<b>Part III (Excessive Inactivity)</b>	0.02	0.03	0.02
<b>P x ni x <math>\gamma_i</math> (Millions of USD)</b>	13,322	17,208	14,433
<b>Total Economic Loss (Millions of USD)</b>	\$44,963		

It is crucial to understand that these losses are major and can be easily avoided through simple means, as later highlighted in the paper.

## 7. Consequences of Hiring Differently-Abled People

When looking at the situation from an employer's perspective, there are several consequences of hiring a differently-abled employee. Here, the positive and negative impacts of those actions will be analysed from an employer's perspective. A major reason companies might hire differently-abled employees is to fulfil their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which aims to fulfil philanthropic goals and give back to the community. However, a major issue is companies simply trying to build a positive social image and meet government requirements.

Contrarily, the aim should be to integrate differently-abled people into their workforce as a consequence of their individual strengths. Hence, a system revolving around CSR necessity or quota requirements set by the government can create an environment where differently-abled employees do not feel their work is valued equally and that they are just there as a part of a social project. This would be highly demotivating and lead to unpassionate employees who do not want to work within the company's environment. The ideal solution for this issue is to look at the practical advantages and disadvantages for the companies from the perspective of hiring differently-abled employees for the goal of creating an inclusive team and not for fulfilling philanthropic goals (CSR).

According to a study by the Bloorview Research Institute, the first major advantage is one supported by factual data. (Lindsay et al.) By taking a sample of several organisations that hire differently-abled workers, they found several positive impacts on the companies. The first of which was an increase in turnover and retention of employees when compared to their counterparts. When looking at a situation of janitors with cognitive impairments, they found a much higher retention rate of around 24% more for the differently-abled janitors.

Furthermore, the hospitality sector observes higher job tenure for those with disabilities. Again, lower turnover rates could also be seen. This together equated to a higher level of cost-effectiveness per employee. Another positive consequence is a higher level of reliability and more employee punctuality. The study showed a decrease of around 1.4 days of absence by the differently-abled employees. Hence, consistent attendance and fewer sick leaves can be observed, while a higher level of reliability in their presence can be understood. So, this is a major advantage.

Looking further into the situation, another advantage is a higher level of loyalty from the employees. A much lower turnover rate means differently-abled employees are less likely to switch jobs. This would result in lesser training costs as would be needed for newer employees. Hence, a higher level of loyalty is another key benefit. A positive impact on the customers would also be profitable, as the study suggested that differently-abled employees would not only result in a more diverse customer base but also more customer satisfaction and loyalty.

A more diverse customer base allows for further growth in different communities. Hence, spreading the business further. A higher level of customer loyalty can be ensured through a better human bond created and positive interactions with the customer.

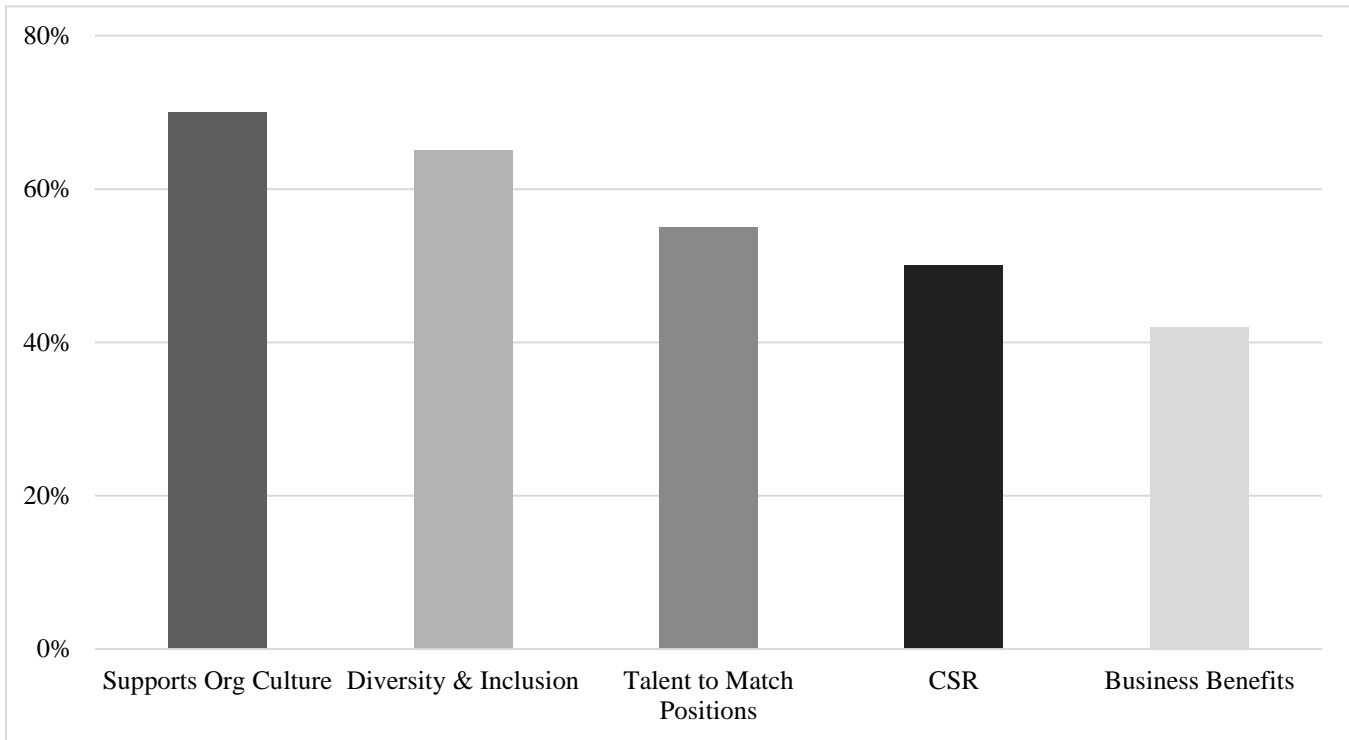
A higher level of productivity and improved work ethic could also be seen as differently-abled workers could face further challenges in finding newer employment opportunities. Hence, making them likely to be more productive in their work from the opportunities they have gotten.

Finally, a major positive impact is a more diverse workplace. This results in a wide variety of ideas and perspectives being shared in group discussions.

This will diversify the approach taken by the corporation to projects, ensuring not only a positive but also an inclusive work environment. This all leads to positive development within the company. All these positive impacts improve the profitability and cost-effectiveness of the company, leading to positive growth.

Furthermore, Figure 4 showcases reasons organisations see as practical determining factors for hiring differently-abled employees. The reasons support the advantages as identified through the analysis of the study. As can be seen, two major reasons are differently-abled employees supporting the organisations working culture or improving diversity within the company. This also improves inclusion and works at removing the exclusive culture that hampers teamwork and collaboration. (Davis).

Contrarily, there could be potentially negative consequences too. Since the paper aims to provide an unbiased view of the situation, this area is also being explored. As explained previously, workplace discrimination is a major issue and can often make the work environment extremely negative for differently-abled employees. This would also be negative for the company, as there would be little to no collaboration within diverse teams. This would lead to inefficient work and an unhappy work environment for their employees. This would consequently make them more likely to change jobs and leave the company.



**Fig. 4 Reasons Why Businesses Hire Differently Abled**

Hence, if such a situation is not appropriately dealt with, it could have severe negative impacts. Another potential negative impact would be creating appropriate systems and infrastructure for allowing differently-abled employees to thrive. This would result in further expenditure for the company. However, it can be noted that this loss is likely to be offset by the higher profitability and loyalty of differently-abled workers on average. Nevertheless, this would be a negative for some companies where building infrastructure to sustain differently-abled workers would result in complete system overhauls and would not be feasible. These are the major negative impacts of hiring differently-abled employees.

## 8. Conclusion and Recommendations for the Future

Throughout the paper, several different scenarios have been looked at, and the following is the best course of action that can be taken in order to improve the situation for differently-abled people.

It can also be understood that differently-abled people in India have faced a myriad of challenges that have contributed to their marginalisation. These are observed throughout their education and work lives. This has had a direct consequence on the Indian Gross Domestic Product, as shown above. Hence it is crucial for these conditions to be changed immediately.

As stated, the most crucial step moving forward would be implementing strategies targeting the 'Disability - Job Fit' as it could ensure the appropriate pairing of individuals with necessary employment roles. This will be done while simultaneously ensuring that no individuals are placed in situations where they are at a disadvantage compared to other individuals.

The first solution is to incentivise education for students better. This could be through better employment opportunities as a result of its completion or, more importantly, a change in the style of education. The curriculum needs to focus more on teaching students skills needed to be self-dependent alongside the information-based content. This is something that many differently-abled people struggle with later in life, and teaching these skills at a younger age would expedite the process. Additionally, if the curriculum adapts to teaching them skills needed specifically for employment opportunities, the results would be even more effective regarding higher employment opportunities. These could be skills in business, computers, or even the retail sector based on the student's preferences and limitations. This would allow them to grow as individuals and stand as some of the best options a company would look to employ. Hence, a more positive impact could be observed through a change in the education style.

The next few steps would have to be taken to improve employment opportunities and working conditions for the differently-abled. The first step would be to improve the



work environment to make it appropriate for differently-abled employees. This could involve better systems for parking and movement or even better offices, washrooms, etc. These would be some examples of the required changes that would ensure that differently-abled employees can work comfortably in the company and be as efficient as possible. This might result in costs for the company; however, as stated previously, a better work environment and efficiency of the employees would likely offset it in the long term.

The next step towards improvement would be to implement a corporation-wide approach to changing the mindset of employees. This was a major issue, as spotted from the data above; changing the mindset of those not differently-abled would be effective. It would allow for a change in ideologies and the development of a more inclusive environment.

Furthermore, the company could take further steps to improve teamwork between the differently-abled and their counterparts. Collaboration would be crucial for effective results. It would also allow for better development of relationships with co-workers, ensuring happy employees. This would make them more likely to continue working with the company and do more effective work.

Therefore, these changes could be crucial and impactful in determining the position of differently-abled employees in the Indian workforce in the coming years. They are a marginalised portion of the economy with incredible untapped potential and are being missed. Hence their training and employment would be the best humanitarian approach to inclusivity and an effective way to improve the workforce through diversity and the creation of the best possible work environments.

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