



Disability Today Podcast Series

Purple Washing



Disability inclusion in business: Is it just purple washing?

Introduction

This discussion paper accompanies episode 2 of our Disability Today podcast series, 'Disability inclusion in business: Is it just purple washing?'

What is purple washing? Is your organisation doing it? What is purple hushing and does it matter? How can you avoid both?

Example

“Global Inc. is a global business employing thousands of people and reaching millions with its products and services. On 3 December, which is International Day of People with Disabilities (IDPD), Global Inc. decides to light up their offices in London, Paris, Chicago, Sydney, Bangalore and Sao Paulo in the colour purple. It also turns its logo purple for the day on social media posts. This is because the colour purple is associated with disability.

Global Inc. faces accusations of “purple washing”.



What is purple washing?

Purple washing is claiming to be supportive of disabled people or doing something good for people with disabilities without evidence of any inclusive practices.

It can also be a way to deflect attention from poor practice by showcasing one inclusive initiative or making a statement of commitment. Or it can be a form of “virtue signalling” where an organisation makes statements that show that it supports inclusion unlike, perhaps, its competitors.

The term “washing” was first used in this context in the 1980s by environmentalist Jay Westerveld who coined the term “Greenwashing”. This was in reference to a hotel policy about reusing towels to “save the environment,” but in reality, targeted customers’ environmental sensibilities to reduce laundry costs.

How to tell if an organisation is “purple washing”

A key indicator that something might be “washing” is that if the initiative being marketed and promoted has nothing to do with the organisation’s core business but is pure marketing such as turning a logo purple on 3 December (International Day of Persons with Disabilities) on social media.

A truly inclusive business has robust year-round policies and procedures around inclusion, the impact of which can be measured and evaluated.

Conversely, businesses that are really trying to implement inclusive business practices often do not want to talk about what they are doing. Why is this?



Purple hushing – the opposite of purple washing?

Purple hushing is a term sometimes used about organisations who are reluctant to talk about their disability inclusion activities even when the work is extremely good. This can even extend to not advertising access information on websites or promoting the accessibility features of products and services.

Example

“Really Trying Ltd” has successfully increased the number of disabled people it employs across the business and worldwide which helps it to provide an inclusive service to its customers. It is in the process of access-auditing their buildings region by region with a plan to make them all fully accessible and inclusive for people with a variety of disabilities in three years’ time. It is working with disabled peoples’ organisations in all the countries where it operates to ensure that it meets its commitments.

“Marcus, who has sight loss, has been a Really Trying Ltd customer for many years. He was astonished recently to learn that Really Trying Ltd has a dedicated helpline for its disabled customers which can be accessed by telephone, email, online chat and that he can log his communication preferences so that he can get information in a format he can access. He has never found any information about this helpline on Really Trying Ltd’s website.”



One reason for “purple hushing” in large organisations is that it is difficult for the business to know and control everything that is happening everywhere. There is always a risk that a disabled person will have a poor experience in a particular location or with an individual line manager or customer adviser. Even if such poor practice is dealt with the moment it is known about, one individual’s story might negatively affect the reputation of an organisation that is trying to be inclusive.

Why does purple hushing matter?

One obvious reason is because disabled customers and employees, both existing and potential new ones, do not know about accessibility and inclusion initiatives. They might not know that they can request changes or adjustments to the way in which they work or access the businesses’ services.

Sharing good practice is also a way to help others learn and grow. Demonstrating inclusive practices can encourage competitors and others in different fields to do the same and thereby help make business, and the world, a better place.



More diverse organisations perform better

Disability-inclusive organisations achieve **28 per cent** higher revenue on average.

Source: Getting To Equal: The Disability Inclusion Advantage (Accenture, 2023).



Disability-inclusive organisations are **25 per cent** more likely to outperform on productivity compared to their industry peers.

Source: The Disability Inclusion Imperative (Disability:In and AAPD, 2023).



More than **3 out of 4** job seekers prefer companies that have a diverse workforce.

Source: What Job Seekers Really Think About Your Diversity and Inclusion Stats (Glassdoor, 2021).





Organisations that want to leverage diversity to be more successful need to hire diverse and talented individuals. As the population in many developed countries ages, there will be increasing competition for younger workers who are often more concerned about diversity and inclusion.

Being the change you want to see?

This leads to a challenging question that some disabled people face: Is it better to work within a business to create change and inclusivity from the inside, or should they highlight poor practice from the outside and boycott organisations that are not doing enough?

Example

“Jamie, who has a disability, has been offered a job by Global Inc. in its new Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Department. The application and interview processes were not very accessible or inclusive but when they pointed this out to Global Inc. it said that was exactly why they needed Jamie. This impressed Jamie and they are inclined to accept the job offer.

Jamie’s partner Mo is horrified by this decision. Mo lists all the poor practices of Global Inc. worldwide that they have read about – not least the purple washing of lighting up Global Inc. buildings in purple last year even though it was revealed to have no known disabled employees working at Global Inc. Headquarters.

Jamie doesn’t know whether to take the job or not.”



How to avoid purple washing and purple hushing

Businesses that want to be more inclusive and accessible to disabled people, and be able to demonstrate it, must:

- Start with action not promotion. Organisations need to audit their policies and practices to discover and remove barriers to disabled people.
- Employ disabled people in all areas of the business and make workplace adjustments that enable disabled people to work to their full potential.
- Talk about what they are doing once they have started to implement robust inclusion policies and practices, even if they have more to learn and do.
- Be transparent and authentic. As Diane Lightfoot, CEO of Business Disability Forum says, “Don’t let perfection become the enemy of good”. No business or organisation will ever be perfect but that not a reason to do nothing, or to be silent about the positive inclusion actions it is taking. That’s the substance behind the purple logos and light ups.



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About Business Disability Forum

Business Disability Forum is the leading business membership organisation in disability inclusion. We are trusted partners working with business, Government and disabled people to improve the life experiences of disabled employees and consumers, by removing barriers to inclusion.

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