



# Disability in the Workplace in China: Current Realities and Ways Forward

Roundtable Summary Report  
(for Situation Assessment, see [here](#))

## Meeting Context

According to official statistics, there are an estimated 85 million persons living with a disability in China. Due to stigma, discrimination, and a lack of successful government strategies, they are economically and socially marginalized, with limited access to education, training programs, and work opportunities. The quota system currently in place is not effective in enabling labor market participation for persons with disabilities in China. In 2015, a mere 0.3 percent of China’s total urban employment consisted of persons with a disability—a far cry from the mandated 1.5 percent. Further analysis and subsequent discussions with employers suggest that the quota system rarely encourages real employment opportunities. Instead, employers tend to view hiring persons with disabilities as part of regulatory compliance or charitable programs rather than as an element of their talent acquisition strategies.

To [move the disability discussion from compliance to competitive advantage](#), The Conference Board China Center collaborated with the K. Lisa Yang and Hock E. Tan Institute on Employment and Disability (YTI) at Cornell University’s ILR School to convene a groundbreaking roundtable on September 19, 2018 in Beijing. The event was part of a broader research collaboration between The

This report is based on a workshop jointly conducted with the  
K. Lisa Yang and Hock E. Tan Institute on Employment and Disability (YTI)  
at Cornell University’s ILR School



Cornell University  
ILR School

Conference Board China Center and YTI to increase understanding of workforce inclusion of persons with disabilities in China, and to identify practical ways forward for employers (see more on the research partnership on [page 8](#)).

A dozen large multinational companies and NGOs gathered in person to share current approaches and challenges to hiring persons with a disability in China, including recruitment practices, accessibility and accommodation in the workplace and training and skills development. Participants also shared experiences with partnerships, on-the-job training, and retention programs. Senior managers attending included leaders from human resources, operations, corporate communications and government relations. Key learnings from the workshop's expert presentations and group discussions are summarized below.

### Key Takeaways

China has adopted a 'carrot and stick' approach to disability in the workplace – incentivizing companies to employ people with disabilities and fining those who don't. The simplistic national employment quota fails to address the complexities MNCs face in recruiting, training and retaining employees with disabilities. Although companies invariably cite challenges in finding employees with disabilities, some are beginning to debate the financial wisdom of continuing to ignore this under-represented talent pool and are increasing their hiring and engagement efforts of persons with disabilities; effective strategies companies are currently utilizing include:

- **Developing leadership commitment and articulating disability inclusion as a business strategy.** Companies reporting commitment of the C-suite made significantly more progress rolling out programs for employees with disabilities.
- **Activating multiple recruitment channels.** Companies tend to utilize the following channels: personal referrals and employee networks, hiring specialized recruiters, and partnering with universities. Companies find that internships provide low risk experiences both for company supervisors and for individuals with disabilities.
- **Gaining the support of profit-driven BU leaders is critical.** To reduce fear of a potential budget burden of taking on employees with disabilities, companies are experimenting with temporary internal funding solutions which subsidize initial cases while BUs find ways to effectively utilize employees with disabilities.
- **Ensuring managers understand their roles and accountabilities around workplace disability inclusion.** Managers are key to the quality of workplace experiences of people with disabilities, and thus require specialized training. As well, reducing fear of interacting with colleagues with disabilities by providing etiquette and workplace accommodation training at all levels is also crucial to foster an inclusive workplace culture.
- **Measuring for success.** Identifying existing and needed metrics/analytics to measure workplace disability inclusion across all parts of the employment process and use them to regularly measure progress and identify improvement opportunities.

## Presentations and Q&A Takeaways

Three presentations were presented by **Anke Schrader**, Senior Researcher, The Conference Board, China Center for Economics and Business; **Susanne M. Bruyère, Ph.D.**, Professor of Disability Studies, Director, K. Lisa Yang and Hock E. Tan, Institute on Employment and Disability, ILR School, Cornell University; and **Haibin Zhou**, Founder and CEO, Easy Inclusion. (Please [contact us](#) for presentation materials).

Key points were as follows:

- **Official estimates of the numbers of disabled citizens are low.** In most countries, disability covers a broad spectrum of long-term physical, mental, intellectual and sensory impairments, but in China the definition is strictly medical, covering “loss or abnormality of a certain organ or function”<sup>1</sup> only. Thus, many citizens with disabilities are left out of Chinese government statistics, potentially as much as half of the actual disabled population.
- **China looks good on paper ...** As a signatory of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) since 2008, China has signed on to implementing a comprehensive set of laws protecting the interests of persons with disabilities and has committed to eradicate discrimination against people with disabilities.  
**... but in reality, the key legislation governing disability in the workplace amounts to a simplistic national quota.** Under the quota scheme, companies employing over thirty employees are obligated to hire 1.5 percent (in Beijing, 1.7 percent) of their workforce from the pool of persons with disabilities or pay a penalty to the Disabled Employment Security Fund (DESF). The fine is based on the number of employees in the company and the average wage paid at the company.
- **Despite the quota, employment outcomes for Chinese people with disabilities are bleak.** Two-thirds of workers with disabilities are currently employed in agriculture, and urban dwellers with disabilities suffer from high unemployment. Wage income for urban households with a person with a disability are three times lower than the average.
- **Global best practice exists and can be leveraged for China.** From hiring practices, career development/retention strategies, to accommodation policies, there is research on global best practice that can be utilized without too much modification in the China context. For example, research shows that several affirmative hiring initiatives significantly increase the likelihood of successfully hiring persons with disabilities. These include targeted internships (5.7 times increased likelihood of hiring, strong senior management commitment (4.8 times), and explicit organizational hiring goals (4.1 times).<sup>2</sup> Numerous examples were shared during the meeting of companies in China successfully applying similar best practice in China, despite local challenges.

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<sup>1</sup> Chinese law defines a person with disabilities as “a person who suffers from the loss or abnormality of a certain organ or function, psychologically, physiologically or in human structure, and has lost all or in part the ability to normally carry out certain activities.” (Law of the PRC on the Protection of Disabled Persons (1990).

<sup>2</sup> Erickson, W. A., von Schrader, S., Bruyère, S. M., VanLooy, S. A., & Matteson, D. S. (2014). Disability -inclusive employer practices and hiring of individuals with disabilities. *Rehabilitation Research, Policy, and Education*, 28(4), 309–328.

## Learnings from Group Discussion

### MNCs struggling to comply with the national quota face a dizzying array of challenges

A confluence of circumstances unique to the China market make it difficult for companies to show progress in employing people with disabilities:

- **Finding skilled, certified candidates is hard.** China lacks significant training and development programs for people with disabilities, resulting in a low number of qualified candidates. Most lack college diplomas and basic English language skills. In fact, the share of people with college degrees in China overall is eight times higher than for disability certificate holders (for more analysis on access to education and training, see our more in-depth report [“Disability in the Workplace in China: Situation Assessment”](#)). Only candidates officially certified as having a disability can be counted toward company quotas, further narrowing the pool of applicable candidates.
- **Most companies still see the fine as a fee.** Only one of twelve companies participating in the roundtable discussion has met the 1.5 percent quota; all others pay the fine to some extent. With a small pool of qualified candidates and thus little incentive to invest in facilities accommodating people with a disability, companies have little chance of meeting the quota. Most don't think twice about paying the fine. Funds generated from the quota are supposed to go to the Chinese Disabled People's Federation (CDPF), but actual usage is said to be opaque, which seems to further perpetuate corporate indifference and a sense that one must simply “go through the motions” when it comes to employing persons with a disability. (See our report [“Disability in the Workplace in China: Situation Assessment”](#) for more details on the CDPF).
- **Certain recruitment agencies are perverting the quota system.** Agencies are said to be assisting some companies to fill quotas with employees who sign “fake” labor contracts which allow them to stay at home instead of showing up for work. Some companies are said to take this illicit tactic a step further: regularly terminating contracts with employees with disabilities each year to legally avoid entering long term, binding employment relationships.
- **Individuals with disabilities are discouraged from working due to current working environments.** Because of the challenges involved in finding continuous longer-term employment, many candidates have become dispirited; others face inadequate facilities and fear being socially marginalized. Because of this, several companies even report that candidates often prefer to collect a salary while staying out of the workplace, presumably too discouraged to take up the challenges of on-premises employment.

### Companies are utilizing an array of recruitment channels

Identifying skilled employees is particularly challenging, as most candidates only have access to segregated, inferior education programs. Many lack college education, and their English language and social skills are often perceived as inadequate for succeeding in an MNC work environment.

Companies cited the following recruitment strategies as successful in recruiting persons with disabilities:

- Collaborate with the CDPF, utilizing their databases, local networks, and job fairs.
- Ask colleagues for referrals of family and friends with disabilities.
- Hire specialized recruiters experienced in legitimately placing employees with a disability.
- Ask existing employees with disabilities to promote job opportunities in their communities.
- Partner with universities, particularly special education colleges; participate in college-organized hiring fairs such as the annual hiring fair of the Tianjin University Special Education College.
- Tap the International Labor Organization (ILO), which through its Global Business & Disability Network (GBDN) offers a database of people with a disability to businesses and related support services.
- Set up internship programs, which offer a low financial and organizational entry barrier for identifying candidates for full employment. In many provinces, substantial subsidy programs are in place to offset costs associated with hiring disabled interns.

### [Recruitment and retention challenges require attention to nuance](#)

As companies strive to increase numbers of successful placements of employees with a disability, a nuanced approach to onboarding, employee integration and internal communications is required.

- **Employees prefer not to be singled out.** Companies which launched internal communications campaigns to trumpet their support of employees with disabilities found that these employees generally preferred not to stand out. One company learned to focus on work performance efficiency as a broad umbrella under which to highlight success with disability support services.
- **Reducing fear of candidates with disabilities is key.** One company made a job offer to a woman missing a limb, but the candidate was afraid of potential discrimination and declined the offer. Another company found that smoothly onboarding and integrating employees with disabilities required outreach to the employee's family and friends.
- **Workplace assessments help companies identify improvement opportunities.** Some companies conduct surveys across all types of employees to reduce sensitivity of any diversity group being singled out. Resulting data is critical in formulating effective programs to support employees with disabilities, but companies are under pressure to keep private employee information confidential
- **Perceptions and resulting sub-group dynamics need to be carefully managed.** Members report that many colleagues have the impression that employees with disabilities are only in their post because of the company's interests in reducing fines or meeting charitable goals. They are skeptical that a colleague with a disability can provide value to the bottom line. These colleagues often avoid employees with disabilities, leaving them feeling excluded. As a result, employees with disabilities are prone to 'stick together', forming a company subculture in work

and social situations that further exacerbates their marginalization and creates an additional barrier to full workplace inclusion.

### Social Stigma and Segregation

Stigma and prejudice against any form of disability remain prevalent in modern China, although the situation has clearly improved, especially in major urban centers and among the educated population. However, most Chinese continue to view disability as a problem to be “fixed” or pitied, rather than focusing on reducing and ultimately removing disabling barriers in social and physical environments, as advocated by the United Nations and disability rights organizations. While the old terminology used to describe persons with a disability—“canfeiren” (残废人, where “can” means “injured” or “damaged”, and fei means “useless”)—has now largely been replaced with the less derogatory “canjiren” (残疾人, “ji” meaning “disease” or “illness”), the term remains rooted in the medical model. The term “canzhangren” (残障人, “zhang” meaning “obstruction” or “barrier”), promoted by many disability rights organizations, is still rarely used in official government statements, legislative text, or by the CDPF.

(See our report “[Disability in the Workplace in China: Situation Assessment](#)” for more).

### Successful strategies: Start at the top and get creative

The mindset of inclusion is gaining in MNCs—especially among executive management—but many MNCs are still challenged to formulate strategies suitable for China.

- **Commitment of top leadership is key.** Companies reporting commitment of the C-suite made significantly more progress rolling out programs for employees with disabilities. Leading member companies had appointed diversity leaders with responsibility for people with disabilities, LGBT, minorities, religious employees and other groups. Others have diversity committees consisting of concerned employees.
- **Identifying suitable roles for disabled employees is different for each sector and requires outside-the-box thinking of how to utilize unique skill sets.** One hotel group focuses on employing people with autism as room cleaning staff. A catering company relies on people with disabilities in food preparation. A cosmetics company trains the hearing impaired as makeup artists. IT companies are beginning to take notes from Silicon Valley startups who are beginning to employ candidates with autism in certain technology roles to harness their unique cognitive abilities.
- **Companies need to work closely with business unit leaders to “make the numbers work”.** Successful companies invested time and resources to carefully align disability targets with business unit (BU) budgets. One company shared that HR was tasked to hire ten employees with disabilities, while the BUs which were asked to fill those headcounts were concerned about missing their profit targets. Another member said that a special fund to cover headcount costs was created to relieve host departments of financial burden. Another company bears the levy for hundreds of disabled employees across the company with no clear financial return and does

so simply because it's the "right thing to do". Many companies aim to initially provide "free" headcount to BUs with an eye toward subsidizing and then normalizing the financing as candidates and host BUs gain experience in this new labor market outreach.

- **Managers require specialized training.** Hiring managers are key to the quality of workplace experiences of people with disabilities. Manager perceptions (and unconscious bias) of organizational motivation for disability inclusion (true inclusion interests rather than legal compliance) positively impacts the workplace climate for these employees. Disability disclosure most often occurs with the manager or co-workers, rather than with HR; education and training around disability disclosure is vital to foster an inclusive workplace culture.
- **Move the conversation along without setting unrealistic goals.** While many aspire for disability to become a strategic HR rather than a compliance or charity issue, most MNCs aren't quite there yet. Setting realistic, oftentimes incremental goals is therefore crucial. For example, creating employment opportunities by piggybacking on existing disability-focused CSR programs, and thus not only using resources already invested in, but also focusing on issues leadership and employees are already familiar with and may already have hands-on experience through volunteering programs, can be one effective way of moving the needle in the right direction.

### Key Strategies for MNCs

- Develop top leadership commitment, and articulate disability inclusion as a business strategy.
- Identify initial positions where people with disabilities can reasonably succeed and expand throughout the organization and position ladders over time.
- Engage individuals with disabilities and their family members both within your business organization and in the broader community to design your strategy.
- Assign responsibility – put someone in charge of attracting, engaging, advancing and fully including employees with disabilities.
- Activate multiple recruitment channels and engage with community partners.
- Avoid recruitment agencies offering "fake work" for candidates with disabilities.
- Offer internships to provide low risk experiences for company supervisors and for disabled individuals.
- Create a special fund to relieve BU leaders from the cost of engaging initial candidates.
- Make your company attractive to candidates with disabilities by making disability inclusion priorities evident in marketing and communication efforts.
- Ensure managers understand their roles and accountabilities around workplace disability inclusion.
- Build a reputation for being a leading employer of people with disabilities.
- Reduce fear of interacting with colleagues with disabilities by providing etiquette and workplace accommodation training at all levels.
- Measure for success – identify existing and needed metrics/analytics to measure workplace disability inclusion across all aspects of the employment process and use them to regularly measure progress.

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## About this Report

To further understanding of workforce inclusion of persons with disabilities in China, and to identify practical ways forward for employers, [The Conference Board China Center](#) and the [K. Lisa Yang and Hock E. Tan Institute on Employment and Disability \(YTI\) at Cornell University's ILR School](#) partnered to explore how companies can tap the talent pool of people with disabilities and improve their employment outcomes.

The scope of the research encompassed a series of interviews with disability rights-focused NGOs in China, a detailed literature review, a comprehensive review of China's regulatory framework supporting employment for persons with disabilities, and a detailed assessment of the demographics of disability and the status of people with disabilities in China such as prevalence rates, access to education, employment disparities and resulting poverty and household income rates. A comprehensive collation of all research work conducted will soon be available through Cornell University's [DigitalCommons@ILR website](#).

To complement this work, The China Center and YTI convened a practitioner roundtable in Beijing in September 2018. Participants explored in detail how the official, publicly available data on living and working conditions of persons with disabilities compare to actual experiences of employers in China, whether companies are actively recruiting disabled workers, what the internal and external obstacles are to recruitment, and what the impact of the government quota system is, for good or for bad.

This report summarizes the key learnings from the roundtable discussions. Its aim is to provide practical guidance on what hiring and engagement strategies can be utilized to reduce barriers and improve employment outcomes for persons with disabilities.

A separate report – [Disability in the Workplace in China: Situation Assessment](#) – draws from the broader research findings of the TCB-Cornell collaboration described above to provide business practitioners with an overview of the current situation, challenges, and root causes of employment barriers for persons with disabilities in China.



## For Questions About This Research

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## About The Conference Board China Center

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The Conference Board China Center for Economics and Business provides relevant, practical and readily useful business and economic insights and information to senior executives of member companies who all have a significant strategic interest in China. Our insights are informed by local economic and business research, formulated by our thought leaders in China and around the world, and delivered through our exclusive Conference Board events, publications, indicators, and peer-group CEO Council sessions in China. For more information, visit [www.conferenceboard.org/china](http://www.conferenceboard.org/china).

## About the K. Lisa Yang and Hock E. Tan Institute on Employment and Disability, ILR School, Cornell University

The K. Lisa Yang and Hock E. Tan Institute on Employment and Disability (YTI) at Cornell University in the ILR (Industrial and Labor Relations) School works to advance knowledge, policies, and practice to enhance equal opportunity for all people with disabilities. We do so through our research, training and coursework, materials and resources, development and consultation, and demonstration. We serve people with disabilities, family members of people with disabilities, organizations working with people with disabilities, policy makers, employers, and communities. YTI values inclusion, diversity, equal opportunity, respect, justice, change, and stewardship. For more information visit our website <http://yti.cornell.edu/>.

YTI engages with employers to advance equal opportunity and inclusive workplaces for people with disabilities. Our research and outreach in this area are delivered through websites, see [BenchmarkABILITY®](#), [Employer Practices Rehabilitation Research and Training Center](#), and the [DigitalCommons@ILR YTI Site](#).

YTI is forging partnerships and conducting research around [neurodiversity in the workplace](#). The Yang-Tan Institute serves as a repository of open sourced materials and videos for the [DXC Technologies Dandelion Program](#), a neurodiversity hiring program initiated by DXC Technologies (formerly a part of Hewlett Packard Enterprise).