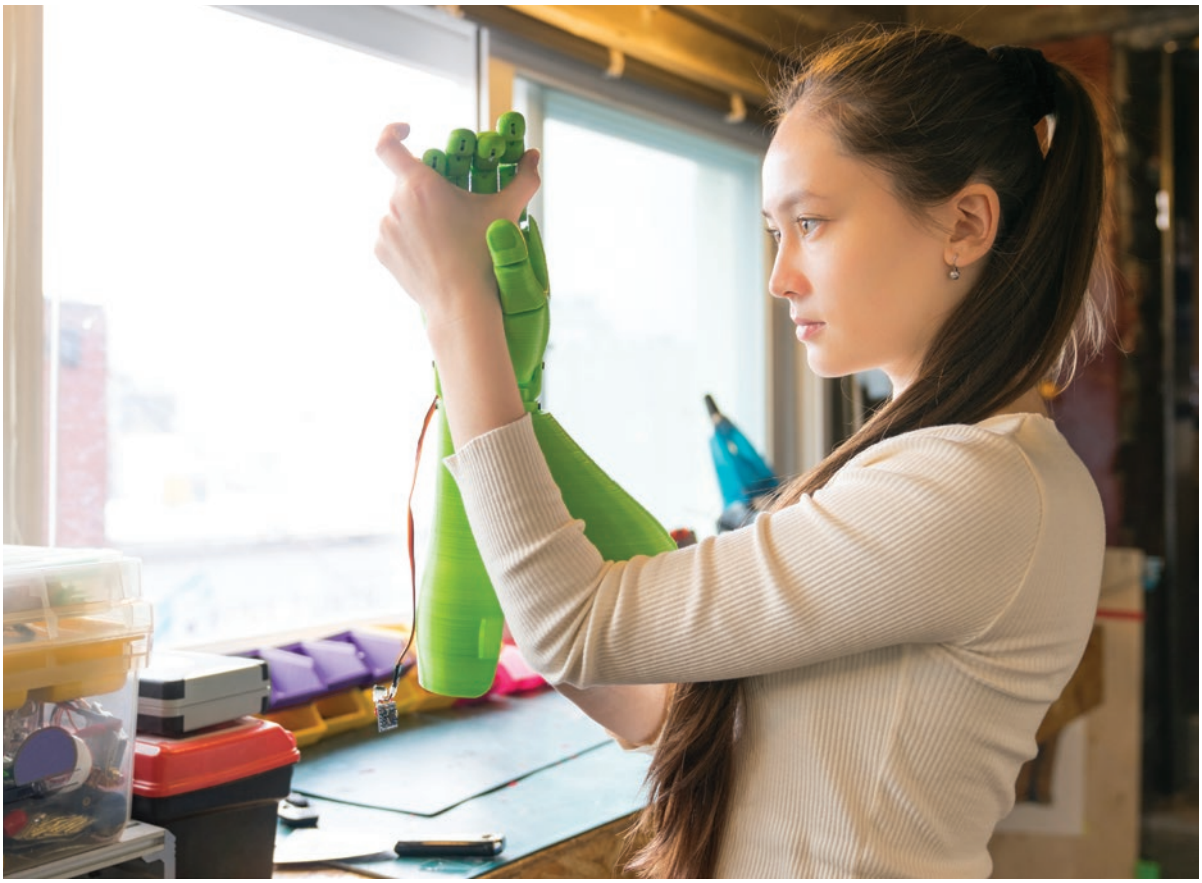
The Institution of Engineering and Technology

Disability in Engineering and Technology



A 2026 report by the Institution of Engineering and Technology

theiet.org/disability-in-engineering-and-technology

Please note this report was based on a UK study, in different regions of the world there will be cultural variances but many of the implications can be applied globally.

The IET would welcome any comments you may have on the contents of this report, and your ideas for future publications. Please get in touch by emailing **inclusion@theiet.org**.

The Institution of Engineering and Technology

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Contents

Acknowledgements

We'd like to extend a heartfelt thank you to the focus group and interview participants who took part in this study, for informing our research by sharing their experiences and insights with us. Alongside the time kindly given to take part, we recognise the emotional and physical impact these personal conversations may have had on those involved. The openness and generosity of participants who shared their experiences enabled us to listen, learn and take action, and we're grateful to them to now be able to share these findings with you.

We also would like to thank all members of the research project Advisory Group, with a special mention to the Chair, Katie O'Neill, whose input helped guide our research in the right direction for impact.

We thank IET Disability and Neurodiversity Network members for their input and support, some of whom also took in the research project's Advisory Group. Additional thanks to Noel Broderick, Katy Deacon and Katie O'Neill for reviewing the final report.

We thank the IET EDI Board and Board of Trustees, with a special mention to Katy Deacon who has passionately championed this work and supported the research team throughout, including facilitating focus groups.

We are very grateful to external research consultants, Sarah Bond and Al Pacifico-France at For Business Sake, for research design, desk review and analysis of data, and for helping to build this report.

The project was led by Laura Norton and Daisy March of the IET EDI team.

For further information, please email inclusion@theiet.org.

Foreword

Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) are central to the IET's values. We believe that for engineering to truly thrive, every individual must have the opportunity to fulfill their potential and feel a genuine sense of belonging.

Understanding the extent of disability within the engineering and technology sector—and actively dismantling the barriers that exist—is crucial to this mission. To engineer a better world, we must harness a vast spectrum of skills, knowledge, and lived experiences. This diversity is what drives innovation and allows us to positively transform society together.

This report highlights the urgent need to make our profession more accessible. There is no justification for the obstacles that prevent talented individuals from succeeding. By failing to be inclusive, society is not only doing a disservice to these individuals but is also stifling the very innovations that could transform our future.

The findings within these pages are a sobering reminder that working environments often inhibit, rather than enable, talent to flourish. We are also missing vital opportunities by not providing inclusive education for young disabled people. As a sector, we must do more to harness the strengths of disabled professionals; doing so improves the working experience for everyone and leads to better solutions for the whole of society.

I am encouraged that this report identifies the necessary catalysts for change. By working alongside those with lived experience, we are learning how to build a more resilient and innovative profession. Disability is a fundamental part of the human condition that will touch almost all of us; by valuing the expertise of disabled professionals today, we prepare ourselves for a more accessible tomorrow.

At the IET, we are ready to lead. We are outlining clear actions we will take as an Institution to improve the inclusion of disabled engineers and technicians. This report provides a roadmap of actions we can all take to build a more equitable environment.

Engineering a better world is only possible if inclusion is at the heart of our decision-making and reflected in our actions. I invite you to join us in advocating for and delivering this essential change.

Katy Deacon MSc BEng CEng FIET
IET Trustee and Chair of EDI Board

This research shows that disabled engineers are expending both their skill and their energy navigating systems that were never designed with them in mind. Much of the labour described here is not 'engineering' per se, but administration, explanation, justification and endurance. In polite terms, this is inefficient. In human terms, it is exhausting.

Participants gave their time, their stories and their energy in the middle of already long days. Some did so quietly, contributing in writing rather than aloud, having learned from experience that speaking openly at work is not always safe. They shared difficult memories and new ideas because they still believe change is possible, even when experience suggests otherwise.

If this report has a message, it is a simple one: inclusion is not a personal favour. It is a design problem. And like any good design problem, it can be solved, but only if we stop asking individuals to compensate for broken systems.

I am deeply grateful to everyone who contributed, especially those who did so while carrying the very barriers this report describes. Their patience, clarity and persistence deserve more than acknowledgement. They deserve results.

This document is not a conclusion. It is a record of what happens when people are finally listened to, and a reminder that listening, on its own, has never been the hard part.

Katie O'Neill
Advisory Group Chair

Executive summary

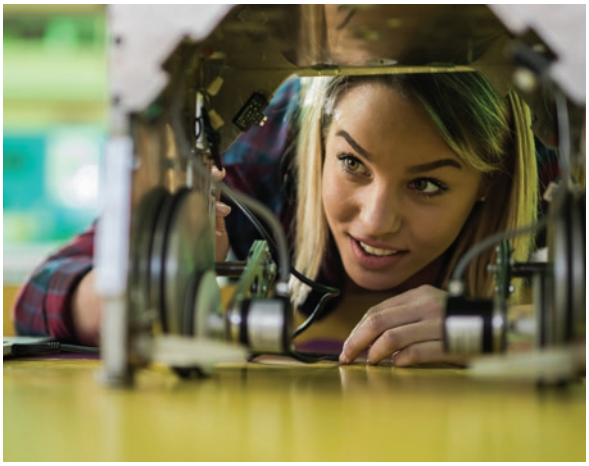
This report presents the findings of a study we have conducted to explore and understand the lived experiences of disabled engineers and technologists in the workplace, identify barriers and enablers to inclusion and career progression, and highlight actions for change. It follows on from a study we published in 2023 into the lived experiences of neurodivergent engineers and technologists, which can be accessed **here**.

Our research began with a review of information published since 2022 on the experience of disabled engineers and technologists at work. These findings informed our approach to data collection, which included eight focus groups and four one-to one interviews with 32 participants in total, including 23 disabled engineers and technologists, five line managers, and four HR professionals. Further details of the methodology behind the study are given in Appendix 1.

Key findings:

Many employers within the sector struggle to build adequate systems and shape a culture that ensures disabled people have an inclusive workplace experience. As a result, disabled engineers (and their line managers) have to work really hard for inclusion.

Disabled engineers and technologists, their managers and HR professionals alike described the barriers to creating an accessible working environment for disabled people, ranging from a lack of awareness to the challenge of navigating unclear and complex systems.



It's not all negative, they also identify several enablers, including supportive managers, workplace flexibility, peer networks and fast-evolving technology, all which can make a real difference to the lived experience of disabled engineers and technologists at work.

The study also highlights the specific talents disabled engineers bring to the sector, including systems awareness, adaptability, inclusive design insight and the confidence to challenge and improve processes. Employing disabled engineers is therefore not only a matter of equity, but a strategic opportunity to improve innovation and performance.

What is evident is that the main barrier to disability inclusion is not a lack of information, but instead a lack of clear accountability and consistent implementation. Advancing inclusion for disabled engineers and technologists requires a big shift in approach, from accommodating individuals, to redesigning systems that have inclusion built in.

Relationships with line managers stood out as pivotal to workplace experiences. This was not because they're expected to have all the answers, in fact, we found that the most important role of managers is to be willing to listen to disabled team members, and to work in collaboration to find what works.

The report concludes with several suggested actions for organisations, HR professionals, line managers, disabled engineers and technologists, and the IET itself, focusing on practical support and solutions.

1. Introduction

This report presents the findings of a new study into the inclusion of disabled people in engineering and technology. The study focused on the under-representation and lived experience of engineers and technologists with physical disabilities, long term conditions and sight and hearing impairments.[1]

The aims of this study were to:

- Understand the lived experience of disabled engineers and technologists at work.
- Identify barriers and enablers to inclusion, participation, and career progression.

Why did we conduct this research?

- There is a talent shortage in engineering and technology. Disabled people are currently under-represented in the sector.
- It provides unique insights into the lived experience of disabled engineers and technologists, which will help inform evidence-based action for the future.
- It considers the perspectives and insights of disabled people along with those of line managers and HR professionals. Through involving all three stakeholder groups, we reinforce that achieving inclusion for disabled people depends on a shared system of relationships and responsibilities.
- It highlights the structural, cultural and behavioural changes that need to take place to build more inclusive workplaces for disabled employees.

Our findings show that many organisations know what needs to be done but struggle to embed disability inclusion into everyday practice. The findings offer both evidence and inspiration for how the engineering and technology sector can address the barriers and make disability inclusion standard practice for the future.

2. The case for disability inclusion

2.1 The economic case

Disabled people represent a vast, underutilised talent pool. Globally, there are 1.3 billion disabled people, this represents one in six of the world's population.[2]

In the UK, 10.2 million working-age adults (24%) identify as disabled, yet their employment rate is just 53%, compared with 82% for non-disabled people. This represents a 29% disability employment gap across the UK workforce.[3]

In engineering and technology, the gap is even wider: only 14% of people in engineering identify as disabled[4] compared to 19% in other sectors. Just 6% of the tech workforce is disabled despite making up almost a quarter of the working-age population.[5]

This provides a significant missed opportunity for a sector facing an annual shortfall of 37,000–59,000 engineers to meet UK skills demand.[6] Closing the disability employment gap across the UK could increase innovation and productivity, boosting the economy by £17 billion annually.[7]

According to a 2023 report by Accenture, companies that lead on disability inclusion achieve 1.6x higher revenue, 2.6x greater net income, and are 25% more likely to outperform their peers on productivity.[8]

2.2 The legal case

Under the Equality Act 2010, UK employers have a legal duty to make 'reasonable adjustments' to ensure that disabled people are not 'substantially disadvantaged'[9] in recruitment, employment, or career progression.

Examples of reasonable adjustments may include flexible working, assistive technology, accessible facilities, or modified duties. Failure to comply with legal requirements on disability has tangible costs.

In 2023–24, the rate of disability discrimination employment tribunals increased by 40%, and the average award for disability discrimination in UK employment tribunals was £44,483, with the highest recorded award reaching £964,465.[10]

The UK government's Access to Work scheme provides financial support for specialist equipment, support workers, and travel. But it currently serves less than 1.5% of disabled employees, with processing delays averaging 85 days, and over 62,000 applications pending as of early 2025.[11]

The European Accessibility Act (2025),[12] which came into law in June 2025, sets accessibility standards for any business (including UK businesses) that provides goods and services to consumers in the EU. It relates particularly to digital technology such as computers, smartphones and banking services, requiring products and services to be Perceivable, Operable, Understandable, and Robust (known as POUR) which it describes as the 'underpinning principles' of all digital accessibility.

2.3 Organisational performance and innovation

Evidence highlights the benefits of employing disabled people on organisational performance.

Research shows that employees with disabilities:

- Have 48% lower turnover rates than non-disabled peers,[13]
- Are of equal or greater productivity, with fewer workplace accidents,[14]
- Drive innovation, particularly when designing for accessibility,
- Bring valuable skills in resilience, adaptability, and creative problem-solving, precisely the qualities needed for the engineering and technology sector.[15]

The UK's 'purple pound' (meaning the consumer spending power of disabled people) is worth £249 billion a year.[16] Organisations that include disabled engineers and designers are better placed to understand this market and serve their needs, and to ensure that innovation breakthroughs themselves are inclusive.

In 2025 for instance, Apple launched a range of accessibility features for iOS, opening a whole new global market for its products.[17]

2.4 The talent and contribution case

This study also highlights the professional talents disabled engineers bring to the sector. Participants described capabilities shaped through lived experience that directly strengthen engineering practice and organisational performance.

Key strengths include:

- **Inclusive design insight** – practical understanding of accessibility and user needs.
- **Market awareness** – alignment with diverse customers, including the 'purple pound'.
- **Culture leadership** – shaping inclusive teams, networks and working practices.
- **Systems awareness** – identifying gaps, inefficiencies and risks in processes.
- **Constructive challenge** – confidence to question assumptions and raise concerns.
- **Adaptability** – pragmatic problem-solving in complex environments.

Disability inclusion is therefore not only about removing barriers, but about recognising and leveraging capability within the profession.

2.5 The personal case

The emotional and practical toll of exclusion came through very clearly in the focus groups and interviews. Participants described the fatigue and burden of self-advocacy, and a persistent fear of disclosure due to stigma and prior negative experiences.

Many spoke of the 'disability tax' – the extra time, energy, and emotional labour required to navigate systems not designed for them.

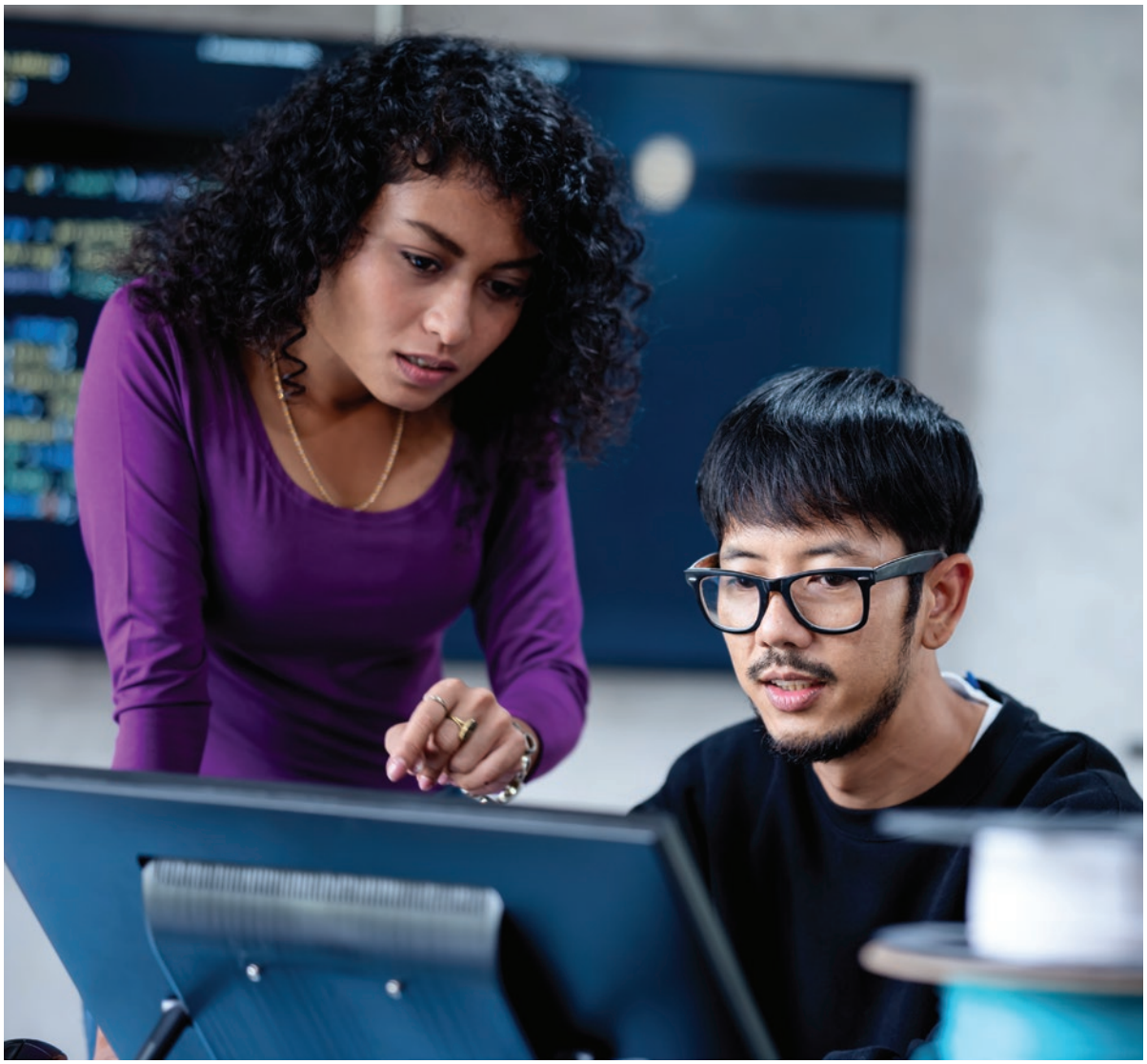
Others described being made to feel like 'poster children' for disability inclusion, compromising privacy to increase employer awareness. We will return to this in more detail later in the report. But where inclusion worked, participants reported an increased sense of safety, belonging, and contributing to their organisation.

The personal case is clear:
inclusion enables disabled people to thrive.

3. The vision of inclusion for disabled engineers and technologists

What needs to change to create a more inclusive environment for disabled engineers and technologists – one in which they feel they are respected and belong, and that their talents are appreciated, utilised and developed?

In summary, advancing inclusion for disabled engineers and technologists requires a shift in approach, from accommodating individuals to redesigning systems.



3.1 Where are we now?

Participants described a sector characterised by what is known as structural ableism, defined as a 'system of historical and contemporary policies, institutions, and societal norms and practices that devalue and disadvantage people who are disabled and privilege people who are positioned as able-bodied'.[18]

The lived experience of structural ableism is that disabled people must continually self advocate to access the working conditions that others take for granted. In practice, this means that disabled people have to initiate any conversation about the accommodations and adjustments they need at work, coordinating between HR, line managers, occupational health, IT, and facilities, repeating their story multiple times.

Such interactions tend to be rooted in an abelist view of disability, in which the individual's disability is something that needs to be 'fixed'.

Figure 1 illustrates the impact of this. Energy and effort are constantly flowing from the disabled person into their environment, contributing to the disability tax described above, and leading to advocacy fatigue (the fatigue that disabled people experience in constantly having to advocate for themselves and their own needs and requirements in an ableist environment).

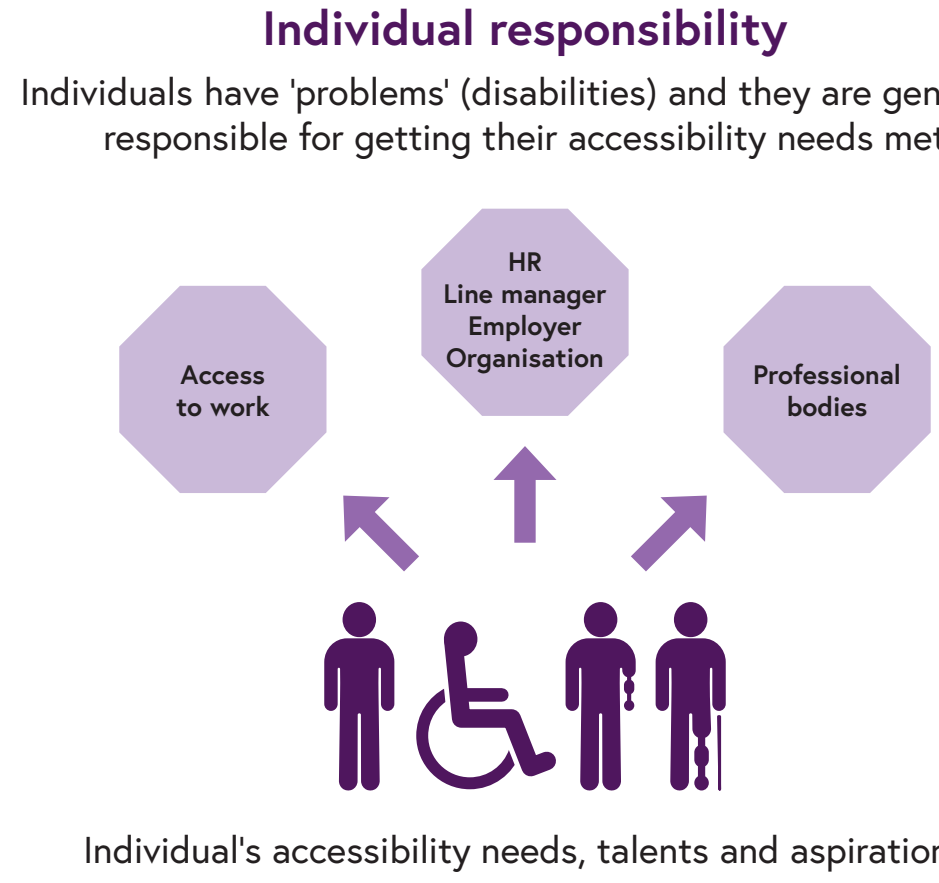


Figure 1

3.2 What is the vision for the future?

The vision for the future is one in which energy and effort flow in the opposite direction, from the environment towards the disabled person, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Engineers and technologists also have a unique and important role to play in the inclusion of disabled people. By designing and engineering with accessibility needs in mind from the very start, they can contribute to building a future that everyone can fully participate in.

In this context:

- Line managers, HR and colleagues are aware of how to create disability inclusion and work with the disabled person to ensure their physical, psychological and social needs are met
- The physical environment, policies, procedures and other systemic structures are designed with disability inclusion already factored in – indeed, they're co-created with disabled people
- Cultural attitudes are inclusive and unconscious biases are surfaced and addressed.

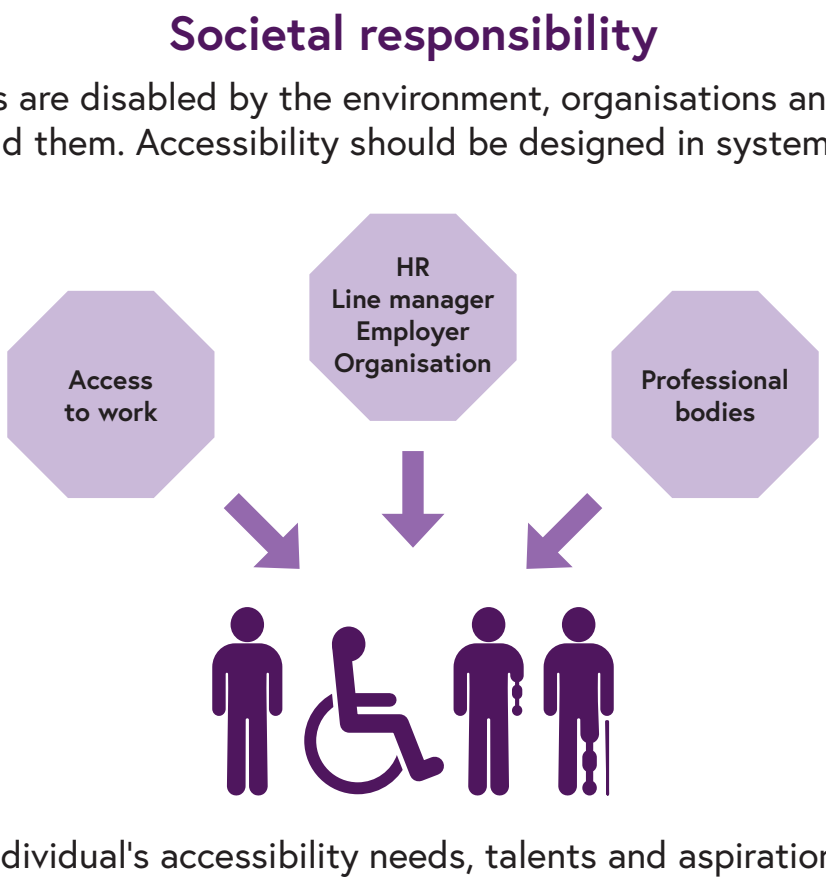


Figure 2

Achieving this vision is complex and will take time. The insights and actions in this study provide a clear roadmap for individuals, line managers, HR professionals and organisations to follow to achieve it.

4. Enablers of inclusion and participation

Despite the enduring barriers to inclusion and participation encountered by disabled people in engineering and technology, participants shared some very positive experiences of inclusion. These experiences highlight the factors that enable disabled engineers and technologists to feel included at work.

4.1 Supportive and empathetic managers

Participants consistently identified the relationship with their line manager as the single most influential factor in their experience of inclusion.

When managers demonstrate empathy, trust, and a willingness to listen to disabled colleagues without passing judgement, or pre-empting solutions, disabled people experience a strong sense of psychological safety and belonging.

An important point to note here is that the disabled people's sense of inclusion at work wasn't related to their manager's level of knowledge on specific disabilities or on reasonable adjustments. What mattered was their manager's willingness and capability to have a compassionate, curious, supportive conversation with their disabled team member about their experiences and needs.

This is an important finding as it cuts across the disability 'knowledge gap' that can sometimes prevent non-disabled managers from talking about disability with their team members. Disabled engineers and technologists do not want or expect their manager to have all the answers; they want a trusted relationship with a supportive, empathetic manager.

In practical terms, having an empathetic manager makes it easier for disabled people to be more open about their needs, more likely to have those needs met, and more likely to perform at their best.

> "One of the best line managers I had, when I disclosed [my disability] to them, looked at me and kind of paused. I was like, 'eek, should I have said that?'. And he just went, 'I don't know what that means, but tell me what you need and we'll sort it'. And I'm like, 'I can work with that'".

Trust in managers is built through 'everyday conversations' rather than formal processes, but it's clear that this is a skill not all managers have. What's needed is training that equips managers to respond to their disabled colleagues with confidence and sensitivity, rather than with the fear of 'getting it wrong'.

4.2 Psychological safety and disclosure

Psychological safety is defined as a workplace climate where individuals feel safe to speak up, share ideas, or disclose personal information without fear of stigma or reprisal.

Creating this is key to the experience of inclusion for disabled employees. There are some moments when the need to establish psychological safety is heightened, for instance, when talking with a line manager about a disability for the first time.

Psychological safety is also important in teams, enabling people to be themselves and contribute. Participants particularly valued environments where personal information was handled sensitively by team members and line managers, confidentiality was maintained, and disclosure led to meaningful support rather than gossip or judgement.

4.3 Flexibility

Flexibility – in working hours, location, workload, approach to work and type of work – emerged from this study as a cornerstone of disability inclusion.

Several participants described their working environment as inflexible, but some participants had more positive experiences of flexibility. They described how autonomy and flexibility over when, where and how to work are essential in managing fatigue, living with their often fluctuating conditions, and overcoming accessibility barriers.

Like manager empathy, participants see flexibility not as a 'concession' to the needs of disabled people, but as an enabler of performance and trust. When disabled engineers and technologists can adapt their work patterns to meet their needs, they are more able to maintain both well-being and productivity.

The absence of flexibility on the other hand often triggers a sense of self-doubt and in some cases, complete disengagement from work.

> “Flexibility has been so, so important for me to keep working basically.”

When participants are supported by their managers to adapt their work patterns, they feel their managers respect them and believe in their abilities. Flexibility is experienced as a form of trust.

4.4 Technology as an enabler

Technology is a powerful enabler of disability inclusion, in three different ways.

1. Participants really appreciated the efforts that some companies went to, to ensure their day-to-day technologies are accessible. This is not about leveraging technology for specific impairments, but instead across-the-board accessible technologies, for example, in recording HR data. When accessibility features are built into new technologies from the start, rather than retrofitted, it normalises inclusion for disabled people and demonstrates a visible commitment to ensuring participation.
2. For some participants, the shift to hybrid or digital working during the pandemic in particular (facilitated through technology) had enabled professional opportunities that would not previously have been available.
3. Accessible technologies, particularly remote and assistive tools, were identified as powerful enablers of disability inclusion. There is no one-size-fits-all on assistive technology; it is dependent on the needs of individual employees. But as one engineer commented, the pace of change of accessibility technology is 'frightening', 'which is great'.

4.5 Peer and network support

It's not just line manager support that makes the difference on disability inclusion, but connection with, and support from, other disabled people in the sector who share similar experiences.

Several participants described having accessed peer networks, often known as employee resource groups (ERGs), for validation and to share and find practical solutions on navigating often inaccessible working environments.

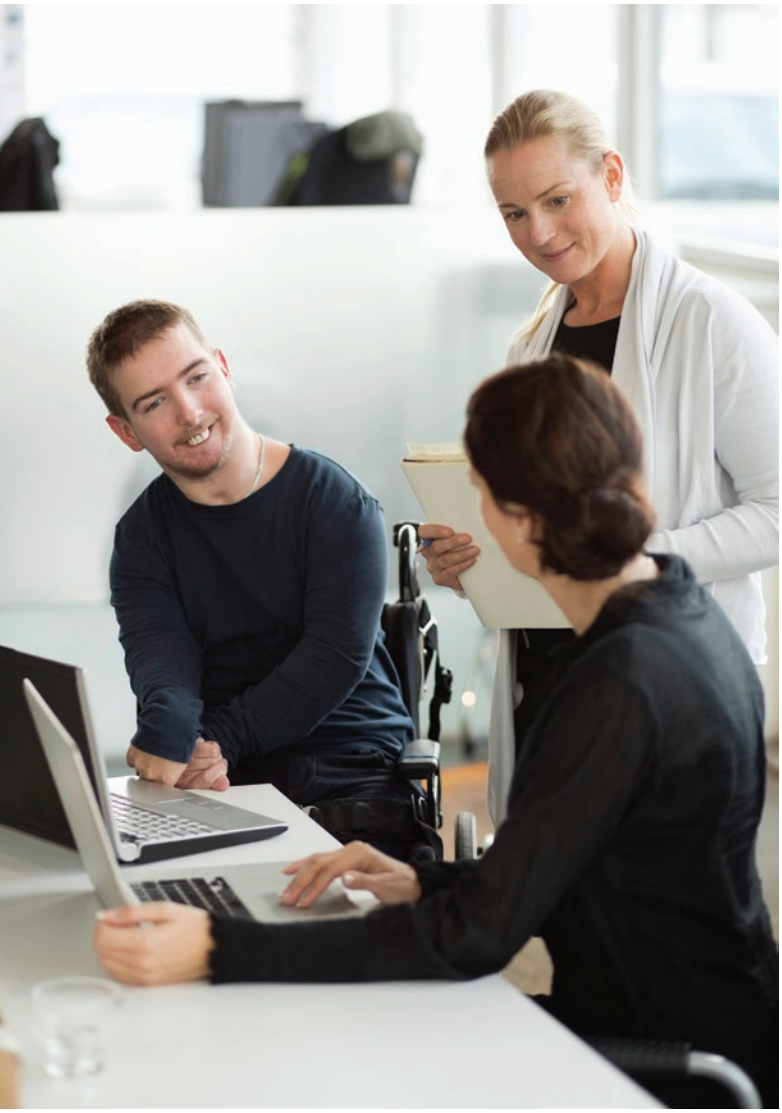
Participants experienced ERGs and other informal peer communities as places where they could 'drop the mask' – places of belonging, learning, and emotional support.

The groups also play a key role in advocacy, shaping organisational change from the ground up by providing organisations with insights into lived experience in safe, collective ways.

> "We have a disability network to help support and provide a voice for our employees with disability. That's really good."

> "Within our networks people are constantly supporting each other and helping each other with things industry related and not."

> "I think ERGS are really, really helpful just to meet like-minded people. I definitely recommend that."



4.6 Purpose and Recognition

Purpose and recognition were enablers for disability inclusion.

Participants described how feeling valued for their professional contribution rather than being defined by their disability helped reinforce a sense of belonging.

For many participants, recognition and career progression confirm their identities as capable, trusted, and ambitious. Recognition was experienced as both a motivator and a form of dignity, signalling that their participation contributed to rather than burdened the team.

Managers and HR professionals also noted that recognition for disabled engineers worked best when appraisal systems, career frameworks and productivity metrics were inclusive and flexible.

Inclusive systems are flexible enough to accommodate diverse working patterns and to recognise contributions, leadership, and influence, focusing on outcomes rather than presenteeism.

5. Barriers to inclusion and participation

The focus groups and interviews revealed the extent to which disabled engineers and technologists face significant and enduring barriers to inclusion and participation at work.

5.1 The triple burden of securing reasonable adjustments

Disabled participants described administrative, emotional and organisational burdens in securing and maintaining reasonable adjustments.

Administrative burden

Processes to get adjustments in place were described as lengthy, inconsistent, and emotionally draining, requiring individuals to repeatedly justify and explain their accessibility needs. This 'adjustment fatigue' left many feeling that organisational systems were inadequately designed or developed.

> "We have policies and things in place, but people don't necessarily think the whole thing through."

Line managers and HR professionals also felt the complexity and inefficiency of internal processes. As one line manager said, 'there weren't defined roles for people, you know, responsible for things and you had to kind of make it up as you went along'.

Many felt 'caught in the middle' between the organisation and the needs of disabled employees, in the absence of more streamlined procedures and clearer accountability for decision-making. An HR interviewee described it as sometimes feeling like 'talking to a brick wall. And sometimes it's for the company to actually take responsibility and change and they don't want to do that'.

Emotional burden

Alongside the administrative burden, participants described in compelling terms the emotional burden of advocating for their own inclusion. This includes repeatedly explaining the need for reasonable adjustments, sometimes re-living the trauma of acquiring their disability, advocating for implementation of adjustments, educating colleagues and challenging bias.

For many participants this work comes on top of the day-to-day management of the impairment itself. As mentioned before, this is known as a 'disability tax' - the additional work required, on top of the day job, to navigate working environments that were never designed with disabled engineers and technologists in mind.

> "I'm trying to be an engineer and on top of that I'm trying organise these [adjustments]."

> "I call it the disability tax of having to do many things that we don't necessarily want to do but have to do."

HR professionals and line managers also recognised the impact of self-advocacy on disabled colleagues. One manager described the ways in which they try to mitigate the need for self-advocacy by disabled employees by being 'curious around you… and almost like to try and take the burden off the employees'.

Burden of organisational change

Linked to this was a recurrent finding that disabled employees are often expected to take on responsibility for driving organisational awareness and change around accessibility and reasonable adjustments.

Participants described being called upon to educate others, shape policy, or act as informal advisers. This work can be empowering and create a huge sense of personal worth and satisfaction; however, it is often done without recognition, support or evidence that their advocacy makes a difference.

To disabled people the efforts at inclusion can feel performative.

> "You keep telling them how it could be fixed…but they just don't. They just don't do it. It just doesn't happen."

A pervasive sense of fatigue emerged from disabled participants' reflections on their long-term engagement with disability inclusion work. Many had seen minimal sustained change over several years, despite repeated commitments, reviews and initiatives from employers. This sense of 'stuckness' erodes trust and optimism.

Their fatigue was not only from the effort of self-advocacy, but from the dispiriting experience of sharing experiences and insights with organisations that appear to listen, but don't act. As one disabled participant commented, 'we've been talking about the same issues for years – when does change actually happen?'

5.2 Ableist bias

Several participants described experiences of 'misunderstanding, bias, microaggressions' at work, and stereotyping from colleagues and managers about what it means to have a disability.

This was particularly the case for employees with invisible disabilities, who sometimes felt their credibility as a disabled person was being questioned, or that they were suspected of trying to get 'benefits' they were not entitled to.

As one interviewee recounted: 'It's almost like they sit you down and go - so why are you disabled? When that question comes up it's not the words but what they're implying'.

Experiences of individual bias are compounded by an engineering culture that doesn't yet expect to be employing disabled people. As another interviewee said: 'How our engineers work and the equipment we give them, the expectations we have, the laptops we have, all of it's just baseline assuming no one has any disabilities or additional needs'.

Decisions about whether to share one's disability sometimes felt risky. Some participants had experienced breaches of confidentiality or unwanted sympathy following disclosure; as a result, disabled people were weighing the decision to share information about their disability and their needs against the potential damage to their reputation, and their career progression.

> "When I was a fresh-faced graduate, full of hopes and dreams and ready for my new opportunities, my director told me that I would never make it past senior engineer because I was disabled."

The cumulative effect is a lack of psychological safety for many disabled people in engineering and technology. As one participant said: 'I'm happy to talk about it. But I know lots of people aren't because they just have the embarrassment of what will other people think'.

This fear is perhaps more acute given the lack of diverse representation within the sector, and ongoing attitudes within the sector that engineers and technologists should just 'get on with it'. One participant described the experience of moving jobs from a predominantly male-dominated engineering environment to one which was more gender balanced, saying 'the difference was amazing. If I'd have got my diagnosis when I'd been in my purely engineering role, I think I would have really struggled…they wouldn't have dealt with me very well at all'.

5.3 Systemic and practical barriers

In addition to attitudinal barriers, participants also described a range of systemic and practical barriers to inclusion.

Cultural ableism: Systemic barriers include a culture in engineering and technology that values visibility, physical presence, and long hours as indicators of commitment.

As one participant described: 'At that point sadly I had a really bad manager who wasn't interested in supporting me in any way. He just wanted me to be like everybody else and come to all the meetings he wanted me to be at, five days a week'. Those unable to conform to these norms described feeling marginalised or unwelcome at work, 'like falling through a trapdoor'.

Reflecting on their own experience of working with disabled employees, one line manager commented on the barriers that were being put in the way of disabled people at work:

'What's coming across is people aren't looking for the best engineers, they're looking for the most physically able, which doesn't really make a lot of sense to me'.

Inaccessible working environments: Despite advances in technology and policy, many participants also encountered inaccessible working environments, with physical, digital, and procedural barriers.

Office spaces, laboratories, and technical environments were often designed without accessibility considerations in mind, whilst digital systems, including HR software and security protocols, were not always compatible with assistive technologies.

One HR manager described the lengthy frustration of trying to get assistive technologies in place:

'When we were going to our IT people, to our cybersecurity people, they were just like, 'oh, it's not a priority because it's not for everyone'. And we're like, 'but it could be used by everyone and it doesn't matter if it's only one or two, if one or two people need it, you need it. And it took five years'.

Resource constraints: Another HR interviewee described the resource constraints that mean that standardising disability awareness is often not a priority for engineering and technology employers:

'They probably have limited resources in terms of supporting managers to learn more. So I think it's perhaps the resources, just the resource to make that time and effort and to put it on the agenda'.

Lack of implementation: Participants consistently highlighted the gap between awareness and implementation. They felt that many organisations knew 'what good looks like' but fail to translate that understanding into consistent practice.

Many employers have policies on disability inclusion, yet accountability for implementation was often not clear. This inconsistency left disabled employees feeling frustrated and undervalued, and in some cases to leaving the company.

As one HR interviewee commented: 'There's a lack of accountability because eventually people get tired of fighting for what they need and will just leave, either leave the company or change job roles'.

5.4 Manager variability

It's clear from the study that the experience of inclusion for disabled engineers and technologists is heavily influenced by the relationship with individual managers.

Participants described inclusion as a 'postcode lottery', regarding the empathy, awareness, flexibility and willingness to learn of their line manager. Some participants described managers who acted as strong allies, but others experienced managers who were inattentive, dismissive or inconsistent.

This variability created a lot of anxiety for disabled employees, leaving them unsure about the support they would receive if their manager changed.

As one disabled employee said, 'Line managers. They can make or break you'. It also highlighted the gap between organisational commitments on disability inclusion, and the day-to-day experience of being managed.

The study highlighted a range of challenges that line managers committed to disability inclusion themselves face when it comes to implementation:

- **Managers not feeling empowered to support disabled employees** in the ways that they would like, often through lack of confidence about how to do so, or lack of familiarity with the reasonable adjustment process. As one disabled engineer commented, 'I've seen disabled employees not being supported the way that their managers would like because policies are so prescriptive and don't actually give power to line managers to make the right decisions'.
- **The actual or perceived cost of reasonable adjustments on disability inclusion.** When the conversation about adjustments becomes about money, disabled people's accessibility rights are threatened. One participant commented 'Certainly in our business [some managers] would be focused on utilisation and bottom line and anything that distracts from that they're less flexible about'.
- **Misunderstandings about 'fairness'.** Managers sometimes struggle with a sense that providing reasonable adjustments to disabled people is somehow 'unfair' to those without disabilities. Participants said that adjustments were sometimes seen as 'special treatment' rather than as enabling equity. As one HR participant commented, 'I have heard from so many line managers over the years. Well, if I do that for that person, it's not fair on anyone else'.
- **The fear of 'getting it wrong'** when it comes to talking with disabled team members about their experiences of disability inclusion, describing 'an environment that doesn't enable that openness about the issues and solutions' as a 'key blocker'.

5.5 Visibility and role models

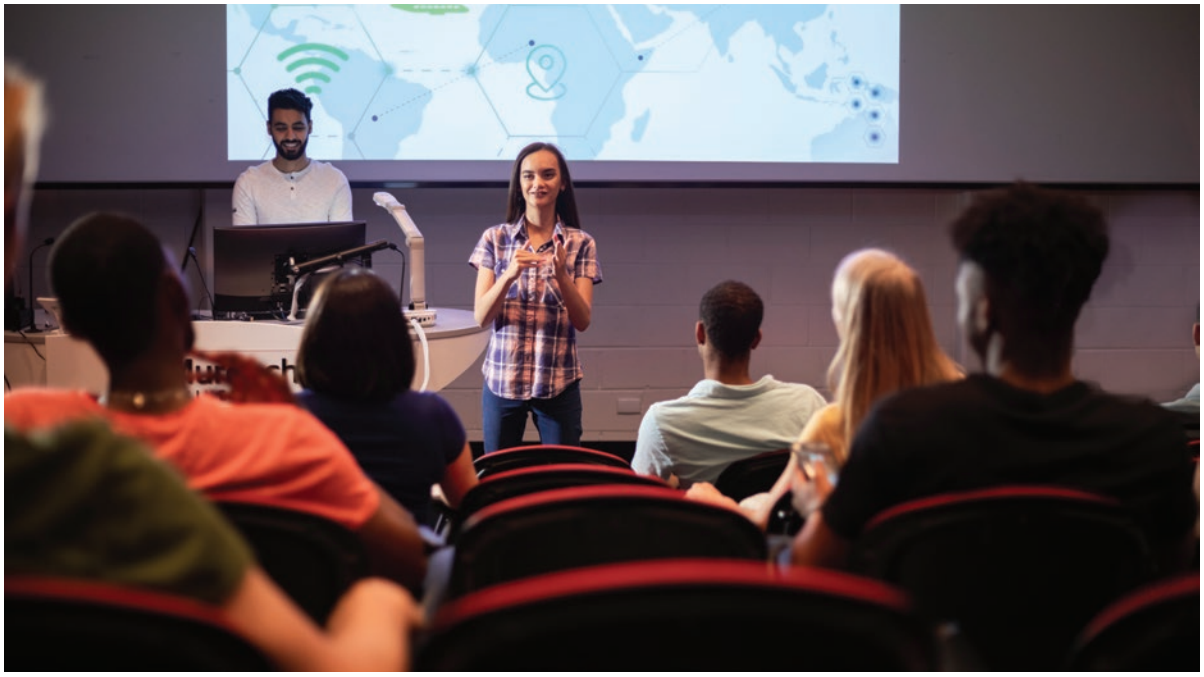
The absence of disabled role models in senior and leadership positions was seen as both a symptom and a cause of the under-representation of disabled people in engineering and technology.

Access to role models helps disabled people see themselves in senior leadership positions. As one research participant commented: 'having those kinds of role models, [you think], I can be an engineer because I can see that person'.

The lack of disabled people in senior positions reinforces the belief amongst both disabled employees and organisations that disability and leadership are incompatible.

Where role models do exist, they can provide inspiration and confidence to disabled people, and to employers. As one disabled participant commented: '[organisations] need like a real-life example that they can relate to before they start paying attention…they don't have the confidence to take the risk'.

At the same time, there is some scepticism about the disingenuous use of role models by organisations to communicate a commitment to disability inclusion that disabled people don't experience in practice. As one participant commented: 'You just don't want to be that token'.



5.6 Recruitment processes

The presence of senior disabled role models indicates – and depends on – organisations implementing inclusive recruitment and progression practices.

Several participants commented on the barriers to recruitment and progression faced by disabled engineers and technologists. One HR participant noted the disconnect between intention on disability inclusion in recruitment, and implementation, and how recruitment often fails to consider the process from the perspective of the disabled person:

> "It's that thing of going, right, we want people to apply for the job... Applying is part of the process. But once they've applied the people who design these processes sometimes think it ends there, because they don't have to go through it, [but it doesn't]."

Outdated practices also act as barriers to inclusion. One participant described the resistance encountered in implementing a more inclusive approach to recruitment by sending questions in advance. Offering all candidates the questions in advance would remove a barrier for those who may require more preparation time and minimise the risk of it being seen as an unfair advantage.

5.7 The role of volunteers

The experience of disabled volunteers was raised by participants.

The unpaid and often unrecognised voluntary effort that disabled people put into organisations to shift culture and practice, in addition to their day job was highligted during our research. One participant talked about the hope that there would be better recognition of the time that volunteers put into this work.

A small number of participants raised concerns about gaps in legal protection on disability, particularly for volunteers and those in non-traditional or freelance engineering roles. They noted that while the Equality Act (2010) protects employees, it does not extend to volunteers. This is an important consideration in the experience of engineers and technologists on voluntary technical committees, for example, as it leaves them feeling they have no legal protection in cases of discrimination or exclusion. As an organisation that works with over 4,000 of our own valued volunteers, it is clear something must be done to ensure they receive adequate support and protections.

6. Action for disability inclusion

This section draws on the experiences and insights from focus group participants and interviewees about the practical actions that can help create more inclusive environments for disabled engineers and technologists.

The actions are collated for five different stakeholder groups:

- engineering and technology employers and
- HR professionals
- line managers in the sector
- disabled engineers and technologists
- and the IET.

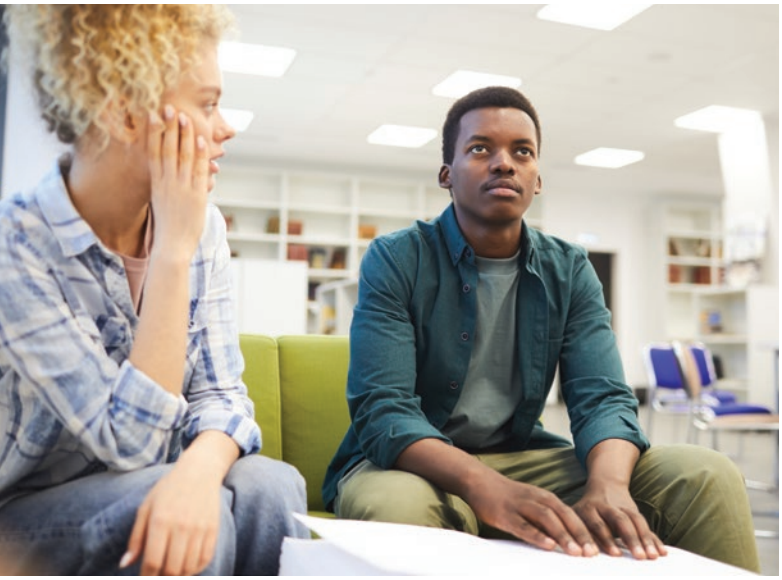
6.1 Actions for engineering and technology employers

Creating inclusive organisations requires a systemic, organisation-wide approach. Four actions for engineering and technology employers are suggested below.

6.1.1 Inclusive leadership

Invest in building managers' confidence and capability in leading disabled employees through practical learning, coaching, and storytelling.

Partner with disabled leadership role models and gather employee stories to demonstrate what disability inclusion looks like in practice.



6.1.2 Inclusive design and systems

Budget for accessibility, embedding inclusive design into project planning and infrastructure rather than seeking funding reactively.

Advocate for universal design and accessibility-by-default principles across all physical, digital, and procedural systems, both of which help ensure access for disabled stakeholders.

6.1.3 Cross-sector collaboration

Partner with professional bodies, charities, and SMEs to share resources, templates, and good practice on disability inclusion.

Support and facilitate communities of practice across the sector focused on accessibility implementation and innovation.

6.2 Actions for HR professionals

HR teams have an important role to play in translating intention into practice on disability policies. HR's leadership in standardising adjustment processes and embedding principles of accessibility as universal is fundamental to sustained, systemic change.

6.2.1 Standardise adjustment processes across teams

Create a single, transparent adjustment process that outlines responsibilities, timelines, and escalation routes. This helps ensure a clear standard of treatment and reduces reliance on individual goodwill. Partner with disabled employees to ensure their lived experience informs the design of the process.

Create a template for a 'statement of accessibility requirements' which can be used organisation-wide by all disabled employees and line managers and reviewed regularly as needs and environments change.

6.2.2 Integrate accessibility-by-default into HR systems

Review HR systems across the employee lifecycle, including recruitment processes and platforms, onboarding materials, and HR portals to ensure they meet accessibility standards from the outset. Again, partner proactively with disabled employees to ensure their experiences and perspectives inform the design.

6.2.3 Provide training for line managers to develop the skills of inclusive leadership

The skills of inclusive leadership, identified by participants as an enabler of disability inclusion, include flexibility, listening, empathy, openness to feedback, and not needing to know all the answers.

Participants suggested reciprocal mentoring as an effective way of developing disability awareness; other sources suggest that storytelling and developing an understanding of other people's perspectives are also effective.[20]

6.2.4 Reinforce line manager accountability

Consider including line manager action on reasonable adjustments as a key performance indicator or developing other accountability mechanisms.

Partner with the line managers of disabled people to co-create an approach that works. Accountability is important in ensuring the shift from intention to implementation.

6.2.5 Provide 'Know Your Rights' guidance for all employees

Develop concise, accessible information explaining the rights and responsibilities of disabled employees under the Equality Act and Access to Work.

Ensure this is provided to all employees, for instance at onboarding, not just those known to have a disability, and is always available for employees to consult at any time. Information like this helps demystify processes and empowers both employees and managers.

6.2.6 Collaborate with the IET and sector bodies to share best practice and tools

Partnering across the engineering and technology sector facilitates access to case studies and learning, particularly for smaller organisations that lack internal expertise and resource.

6.3 Actions for line managers

Line managers are pivotal in shaping the everyday experience of inclusion – or exclusion – for disabled employees.

They do this through modelling an inclusive approach to leadership, as well as through influencing the practical implementation of reasonable adjustments. Actions for managers are below.

6.3.1 Develop and model the skills of inclusive leadership

The skills of inclusive leadership include empathy, flexibility, the ability to listen and openness to feedback. Learning and modelling these skills through everyday interactions with all employees, including those who are disabled, is vital to creating disability inclusion.

Remember, line managers do not need to know the answers!

6.3.2 Initiate early conversations about needs

Build trust with disabled employees through initiating early conversations about accessibility needs, ideally at onboarding or during role changes. The ease and curiosity with which line managers initiate conversations will help signal safety and respect to disabled team members.

6.3.3 Champion role models and stories of disability inclusion

Share examples of disabled role models, particularly at senior level. Allow your disabled employees time at work to be advocates (to share their stories and be part of networks, for example).

Increasing the visibility of disabled colleagues, with their explicit consent, helps normalise inclusion and challenges the narrative that there is no career progression for disabled people.

6.3.4 Frame adjustments as fairness, not privilege

Build your own understanding of why reasonable adjustments are not 'special treatment'. Disability inclusion is about equity, defined by the Institution of Civil Engineers as providing 'support and resources based on individual needs to ensure equal opportunities', rather than about equality (treating everyone the same).[19]

Communicate clearly and repeatedly that adjustments level the playing field through increasing fairness rather than creating privilege, and that they contribute to productivity and performance at a team and an individual level. Repeating this message is key to shifting attitudes toward the perceived unfairness of reasonable adjustments.

6.3.5 Advocate for templates and transparent processes for adjustments

Consistent and simple forms, pathways, and escalation routes help reduce confusion and ensure fairness in reasonable adjustments.

Work with HR colleagues to develop templates and processes that help everyone – HR, line managers and disabled people alike – understand 'what good looks like' when it comes to requesting and implementing reasonable adjustments and reduce the expectation on disabled people to set standards for accessibility.

6.4 Actions for disabled engineers and technologists

This section suggests six actions for disabled people to take that may contribute to a more inclusive working environment in engineering and technology.

Some of these actions are about disabled people supporting themselves; others focus on advocating for system change.

Disabled people supporting themselves

6.4.1 Create time for self-care

Self-care is a priority and can help to mitigate 'advocacy fatigue'. Self-care actions will take different forms for different people; try out a few and schedule time for the ones that suit your needs.

Examples include:

- Prioritising healthcare appointments and routines, including taking medication and doing physiotherapy.
- Time on your own, counselling or other options to manage emotional needs.
- Peer networks and informal communities of support, which can provide much-needed solidarity.

6.4.2 Review adjustments

Disability inclusion is dynamic; your needs, available adjustments and your environment will evolve over time.

Be sure to regularly review your needs and adjustments to ensure they are relevant and sustainable. It might also be helpful to partner with peers, HR, and line managers to ensure your adjustments reflect what is available now to support your needs.

6.4.3 Develop your own 'statement of accessibility requirements'

Make a record of your needs and accessibility requirements. Share this statement with your line manager to ensure continuity of support and accountability during role or line manager changes.

Especially when embedded in HR systems, such documents reduce the need to repeatedly explain or justify your accessibility needs.

Advocacy to create organisational change

6.4.4 Consider sharing stories of lived experience

Share your personal stories - through reciprocal mentoring, internal networks, awareness sessions or case studies. This can help build awareness, challenge stereotypes, and change people's attitudes, making your life easier.

However, be conscious of when and where feels like the right time for you to share your story. Participants in this study were clear that the act of sharing should be voluntary and consent-based, avoiding the dual traps of becoming an assumed representative for all types of disability inclusion or a 'token' for organisations where individual stories are not underpinned by more substantive organisational commitment.

6.4.5 Co-design inclusive systems

When your workload and energy levels enable you to, get involved in co-creating processes and tools with HR and line managers, from recruitment to securing workplace adjustments or introducing statements of accessibility needs.

This will help ensure that accessibility is built into processes from the outset (known as 'accessibility-by-default') and that accessibility measures reflect the lived experiences of disabled people, rather than assumptions being made on your behalf.

6.5 Actions for the IET

Participants saw the IET as having an important role in setting standards, amplifying visibility of disabled engineers and technologists, and influencing systemic change with employers across the sector.

6.5.1 Setting standards

- Champion universal design and accessibility-by-default principles across the sector.
- Establish and promote standards for disability inclusion across the sector, including establishing partnerships with other professional institutions.
- Create a Disability Inclusion toolkit with sector-specific examples, including for SMEs.

6.5.2 Visibility and representation

- Celebrate and promote the visibility of disabled role models through case studies, panels, and events, whilst staying alert to the additional emotional and practical burden that this may place on disabled employees.
- Facilitate networking and peer connection amongst disabled members, volunteers and the wider community.
- Establish sector-wide awareness and development programmes, such as a reciprocal mentoring scheme pairing disabled and non-disabled engineers and technologists.

6.5.3 Good practice recognition

- Recognise inclusive leadership and organisational good practice through IET awards and communications, and consider establishing an award specifically for disability inclusion.
- Encourage organisational benchmarking on disability inclusion and tracking of representation.

6.5.4 Advocacy and policy

- Advocate for policy change, including protections for volunteers under equality legislation.
- Share insights and innovations in accessible technologies to influence industry-wide adoption and improvement.

Appendix 1: Methodology

Project purpose

This project builds on our ongoing commitment to progress equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in engineering and technology, ensuring that barriers are recognised and understood, and action taken to address them, through evidence, collaboration, and lived experience insight.

Project team and governance

An Advisory Group provided valuable input into the design of the project and analysis of initial findings.

The project team and the Advisory Group included members with and without disabilities, to ensure the lived experience of disabled people informed not just the outcomes of the project, but also its purpose, design, direction and governance.

Desk review

The study began with a review of publicly available documentation published since 2022 on the experience of disabled engineers and technologists at work.

Key findings from the desk review included:

- Despite minimal industry-specific data, we know that disabled people are underrepresented in engineering and technology, and those in the industry face considerable challenges.
- There is a lack of detailed guidance for managers of disabled people in engineering and technology.
- The under-representation of disabled people in engineering and technology is not due to the lack of information, but more likely to the lack of implementation. This raises the question; what prevents employers taking action to address this, and how could IET enable them to do so?
- The role of new technologies, such as AI, have an important role to play in addressing under-representation. How can the IET use its position to explore this in project outcomes?
- Co-creating the work with disabled people is vital to the quality, credibility and impact of the project overall.

These insights helped to establish the evidence base for the project, identify gaps in understanding, and inform the design of the next phase of the study, including the development of research questions and the approach to identifying participants.

Interviews and focus groups

The second phase of the project was a series of interviews and focus groups conducted with disabled engineers and technologists, line managers and HR professionals.

Between September and October 2025, the project team conducted eight focus groups and four one-to one interviews with 32 participants in total. The 32 participants comprised 23 disabled engineers and technologists, five line managers and four HR professionals.

Participants in the study were recruited by the IET. The approach to recruitment involved direct contact with known disabled engineers and technologists, circulating information about the project amongst professional networks, and leveraging IET social media and that of project team members.

The interviews and focus groups were conducted by one or more members of the project team, and Advisory Group members. The focus groups were facilitated in pairs. For the lived experience focus groups, efforts were made to ensure the facilitating pair included someone with lived experience of disability, and this was generally the case.

The interviews and focus groups explored six key questions designed to address both barriers and enablers of inclusion, and to generate practical actions for employers, managers and professional bodies.

The questions (which were slightly adapted for different stakeholder groups) aimed to establish psychological safety, accessibility and respect for lived experience, and encourage open, reflective discussion regarding both individual and systemic challenges, as well as examples of positive practice:

1. What do you need right now to help you feel safe and participate fully in this group?
2. What positive experiences have you had, working as a disabled engineer or technologist?
3. What are the main barriers that you face to inclusion in employment as a disabled engineer or technologist?
4. What is needed to create an inclusive culture and working environment for disabled engineers and technologists, enabling them to enter and remain in employment?
5. What would help increase employers and managers' awareness of disability inclusion, and the implementation of solutions required by disabled engineers and technologists?
6. What else needs to change to improve the lived experience and increase representation of disabled engineers and technologists?

The study was designed using an inclusive research approach. All the interviews and focus groups were conducted virtually, and participants were offered a range of ways of contributing: verbally, in chat or using Mural.

Participant feedback helped shape the questions, ensuring the voices of disabled engineers and technologists were front and centre of the design and interpretation of the findings.

Data analysis and sense-making

All focus groups and interviews were conducted on MS Teams and transcribed with the permission of participants.

An initial analysis of the data was conducted using two different AI tools: ChatGPT and Delve. Each transcript was reviewed to identify key phrases, experiences, and examples related to disability inclusion, barriers, enablers, and organisational context.

The initial themes were developed and findings compared across the three participant groups – disabled engineers and technologists, line managers, and HR professionals – to identify points of similarity and difference.

The findings were then grouped into overarching themes: barriers to inclusion and participation; enablers, and actions.

A collaborative approach was taken to sense-making, testing interpretations, validating themes and co-developing our compelling messages and recommendations. This approach ensured that the findings were analytically robust and authentic to the lived experience of disabled engineers and technologists, treating participants as knowledge partners.

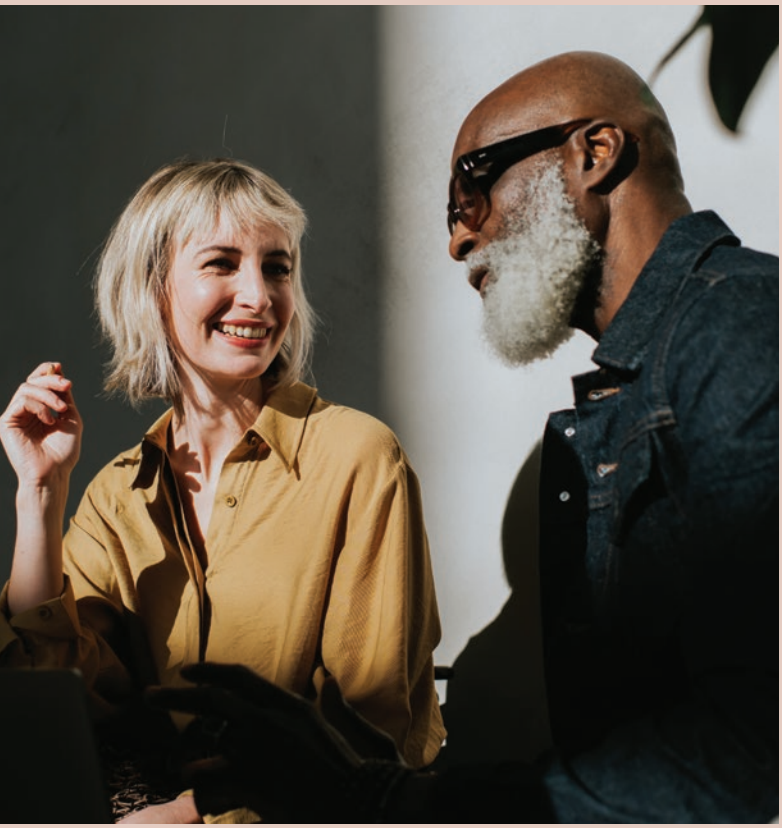
Ethical considerations

Ethical practice underpinned all stages of this research, contributing to ensuring that the project was not only about disability inclusion, but also modelled inclusion in practice.

- Participants provided informed consent and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality.
- Sessions were conducted in accessible formats with flexibility around communication preferences and participation methods.
- The research team aimed to maintain sensitivity to emotional and psychological wellbeing throughout, ensuring that individuals could withdraw or pause participation at any point.

Appendix 2: Insights from the project team

In this section the project team shares some of their reflections and learnings in conducting a participative research study into the enablers and barriers of disability inclusion in engineering and technology.



We share these insights in the belief that they will have relevance for employers planning to conduct 'listening' sessions with disabled employees in the future, as well as for future research in this area.

Prioritising listening

Several participants commented on the positive experience of the interviews and focus groups.

The feeling of being seen and listened to was clearly extremely important; as one member of the project team said, 'participants felt like their stories were heard and they mattered'.

Sometimes this meant the project team prioritising listening over getting through all the questions in the focus groups and interviews, which was a decision we initially struggled with, and then embraced.

Creating the conditions for participation

Participants were given a number of different ways to contribute to the conversations: in chat, verbally, on Mural, with their cameras on or cameras off.

As a project team we quickly learned three things:

- What works for one participant does not necessarily work for another. For instance, rather than enabling participation, Mural created a barrier to inclusion for some participants.
- That creating a psychologically safe environment where participants felt they could openly share was essential.
- We needed to let go of our own discomfort and disappointment at not 'getting it right' first time, and be flexible in adapting our approach to meet the varying needs of the participants.

The vital importance of lived experience

Having facilitators with lived experience of disability was important and helped focus group participants and interviewees feel less 'othered' in the sessions.

At the same time the physical and emotional toll of hosting the conversations was significant; in the interests of building connection and creating safety for participants, facilitators sometimes shared their own stories of living with a disability.

The additional load that disabled facilitators experienced is similar to the emotional toll referred to in relation to engineers and technologists in the body of the report. This was not something we talked about as a project team in advance and on reflection we could have done more to raise our collective awareness of, and respond to, the need for emotional and practical support for disabled facilitators.

We recieved an unexpected request from participants to enable the ability to connect with each other following the focus groups. Given the anonymised nature of the data gathering process, we were unable to facilitate this in the moment, however are exploring ways to connect disabled engineers and technologists in the future, as a result of this request.

A human approach

The importance of a 'human' approach was key to the focus groups and interviews – not 'othering' participants, or seeing them simply as a source of 'research data', but instead focusing on building a real human connection.

A microcosm of the wider context

There were a number of ways in which the experience of the interviews and focus groups represented a microcosm of the wider context for disabled engineers and technologists.

- We struggled as a project team to recruit line managers and HR participants to take part in the project. We used several different approaches to contact these two groups and invite participation, but with very limited success, and we wondered to what extent this reflected a potential lack of experience and engagement in disability inclusion from employers. As one of the project team commented, 'It feels like no-one has the time to give unless it's something directly about themselves or something they see as an organisational priority or meeting a KPI. Inclusion in the workplace certainly doesn't feel like everyone's issue.'
- Sometimes the conversation in the group mirrored the stereotypes and bias described in the report and encountered by disabled engineers and technologists daily, for instance around the 'fairness' of reasonable adjustments. In such cases, the project team responded by clarification, or by challenging ableist narratives, depending on their personal approach. We did not discuss in advance how we might handle such challenges or the support we might need to do so; on reflection this is something we would do for the future.
- Despite having disabled facilitators on the project team, ableism appeared in our questions in the first draft, which asked about strengths related to disability. This reinforces the point above and highlights that, as disabled people, we too have work to do to break free of abelist mindsets.

Glossary

Ableist/ableism
In an ableist society, it's assumed that the 'normal' way to live is as a nondisabled person[21], and as a result, disabled people are either not considered or viewed as 'abnormal'. Ableism includes discrimination, bias, or exclusion based on disability. It shows up in everyday assumptions, for example, expecting disabled people to 'fit in' to inaccessible systems, questioning someone's capabilities, or assuming you know what support they need. It also appears in organisational practices, such as inconsistent adjustments, recruitment processes that exclude, or workplaces designed without disability in mind.

Accessibility-by-default
Designing systems, environments, and technologies so they are usable by everyone from the outset, without the need for individual adjustments.

Co-production
A collaborative approach where those with lived experience are equal partners in designing and evaluating policies, systems, and research.

Disability tax
The "disability tax" refers to the extra emotional, cognitive, financial, and time burdens that disabled people carry to access, navigate, advocate for themselves or succeed in environments that weren't designed with them in mind.

Equality Act 2010
UK legislation requiring employers to make reasonable adjustments to prevent disabled people from being placed at a substantial disadvantage.

Inclusive design / Universal design
The design of products, services, and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without adaptation.

Lived experience
First-hand knowledge and insight gained through direct personal experience, used here to describe the perspectives of disabled engineers and technologists.

Psychological safety
A workplace climate where individuals feel safe to speak up, share ideas, or disclose personal information without fear of stigma or reprisal.

Reasonable adjustments
Changes made by an employer to remove or reduce disadvantages experienced by disabled employees, as required by the Equality Act 2010.

Reasonable adjustment passport
Refers to a document that records individual workplace adjustments and is adaptable and updated as needed. The document travels with an employee through role or line manager changes, reducing the need to re-disclose or rearrange, providing continuity. Recognising that the word 'passport' might reinforce a sense of 'othering', organisations might want to create their own terms, such as a 'statement of accessibility requirements'.

Statement of accessibility requirements
Also known as a 'reasonable adjustment passport'. This is a written record of accessibility requirements that details a person's accessibility needs. It mitigates the need for a disabled employee to experience the emotional and administrative burden of repeating their needs when changing roles or when their line manager changes.

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