

“Did we really need to wait 60 years for programs that benefit everyone?”

Designing for the Most Excluded



U

ntil the 1960s, it was simply expected that a woman would leave her job if she became pregnant.

Then some progressive-for-their-time firms started offering unpaid leave for new mothers. A couple of decades later, some firms started adding leave for new dads too. In 1993, the US government passed rules requiring most companies to offer a minimum of 12 weeks of leave for the birth or adoption of a child. Now, as we move through 2022, many corporate parental-leave policies have extended-leave benefits allowing employees to take time off before an adoption or pregnancy. Those benefits are available to all parents-to-be, including single people and same-sex partners.

Progress is always a good thing, but this example

brings up a couple of big questions: Did we really need to wait 60 years for programs that benefit everyone? What if these policies had been designed inclusively from the start? Over the years, how many parents have rushed back to work to ensure that they kept their jobs—often at the risk of their own health or even their child’s?

Modern organizations have so many challenges to deal with—from reducing their carbon footprint to finding new customers to increasing retention rates to expanding employee development opportunities (to name just a few). Firms are designing all sorts of programs to address these challenges, and I’m sure many will find solutions that ultimately work. For the most part, we still design programs with an “average” person archetype in mind. Usually, although not always, that person is a healthy, white, professional male. They’re the most common

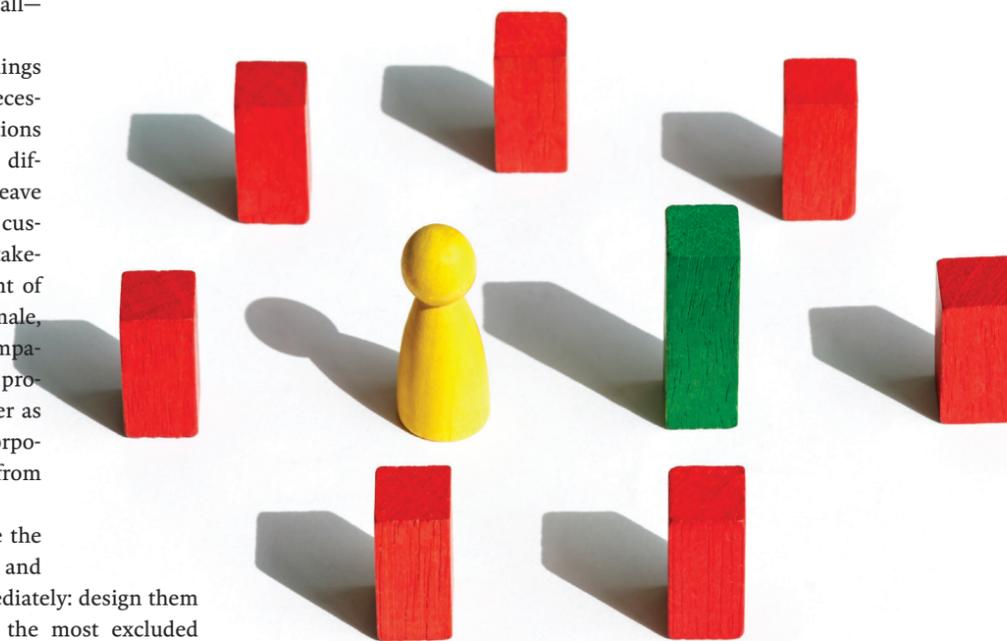
people in the workplace, after all—at least for now.

On one hand, that makes things simpler. No extra effort is necessary to take into account variations from this norm. But ignoring differences is probably going to leave a lot of your own employees, customers, investors, or other stakeholders dissatisfied (47 percent of the S&P 500 workforce is female, for example). Inevitably, companies will have to tweak their programs or policies over and over as they realize they should incorporate needs and perspectives from underrepresented groups.

There’s one way to improve the odds that policies, products, and strategies will work well immediately: design them inclusively, and think about the most excluded members of the population first. That “most excluded” group could be a different group from firm to firm. It might not encompass many people, but its members are by no means outliers. Understanding the challenges this group experiences can help an organization glean insights and perspectives so that it can design innovations for both the small group that’s already affected and the much larger group that isn’t yet. For instance, in any situation involving reducing a carbon footprint, inclusive design would consider the stakeholders who are already being affected by climate change.

I can see this happening right now as organizations design hybrid work programs. Unfortunately, too many are being designed according to the needs of top leaders. It’s a situation that will probably lead to months of employee dissatisfaction and, in the process, stifle innovation. In addressing hybrid work, companies that consider the toughest remote-work cases first—such as people who have health issues or lengthy commutes—will probably come up with a policy right away that will satisfy most people.

Inclusive design can be used by nearly every department of a company to tackle nearly any challenge. About a decade ago, a very large shoe



“There’s one way to improve the odds that policies, products, and strategies will work well immediately: design them inclusively.”

manufacturer heard from a customer with cerebral palsy. The customer loved that the brand offered his feet a lot of support, but his disability made it practically impossible for him to tie his shoelaces. Over the next three years, the shoemaker set out to create a line of high-support footwear—in consultation with people with disabilities—that anyone could put on or take off without using their hands. Turns out lots of people, disabled or otherwise, liked those hands-free shoes. The company expects the shoes, which were first released in 2015, to be a \$250 million annual business in its next fiscal year. █

Polonskaia is a global leader of Korn Ferry’s Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Consulting practice.