

WORK THAT INCLUDES:

Insights and Lessons from Inclusive
Hiring in India's Manufacturing Sector

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SETTING THE SCENE

Across India's manufacturing sector, assembly lines and packaging floors power the country's economy. While the sector employs millions, it has historically excluded large numbers of people with disabilities (PwDs). For most companies, the challenge has been less about intent and more about how to make inclusion work safely and efficiently within complex, high-volume operations.

Atypical Advantage is a social enterprise built around that "how." Founded in 2020, Atypical Advantage connects talented PwDs with livelihood opportunities across creative, service, and industrial sectors. In recent years, it has partnered with leading manufacturers like Nestlé, Godrej Consumer Products Limited (GCPL), NIVEA India, Tata Motors, and Micron to demonstrate that inclusive hiring in manufacturing is both practical and value-adding when approached intentionally. Working through a structured process, Atypical Advantage helps firms translate diversity goals into real jobs. Its model combines the insight and access of a recruiter, the empathy of a counsellor, and the diligence of an implementation partner to move beyond notions of CSR¹ or charity to turn inclusion into a comparative advantage.

This insights report captures what has been learned through these collaborations. Drawing on interviews with company leaders, factory managers, HR professionals, and PwD employees from four partner firms,² it distils how inclusion happened in practice, what enabled success, where challenges emerged, and what lessons can be used to guide others. The report is written for policymakers, corporate leaders, and ecosystem partners who are shaping India's future of work. It aims to show that inclusion in manufacturing is not a corporate experiment, but rather a replicable practice with clear social impact and business cases.



1 Corporate social responsibility

2 Nestlé, GCPL, NIVEA, Tata Motors

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“Inclusion in manufacturing isn't an act of charity, it's a business strategy. When done right, it strengthens both people and performance.”

- Vineet Saraiwala,
Atypical Advantage | Founder and
CEO



ATYPICAL ADVANTAGE'S MODEL AND IMPLEMENTATION STORY

Atypical Advantage has developed a practical, replicable model that guides companies through the entire journey of inclusive hiring, from early readiness to sustained retention. Rather than functioning as a conventional recruiter, Atypical Advantage positions itself as a strategic inclusion partner, accompanying organisations shoulder-to-shoulder throughout.

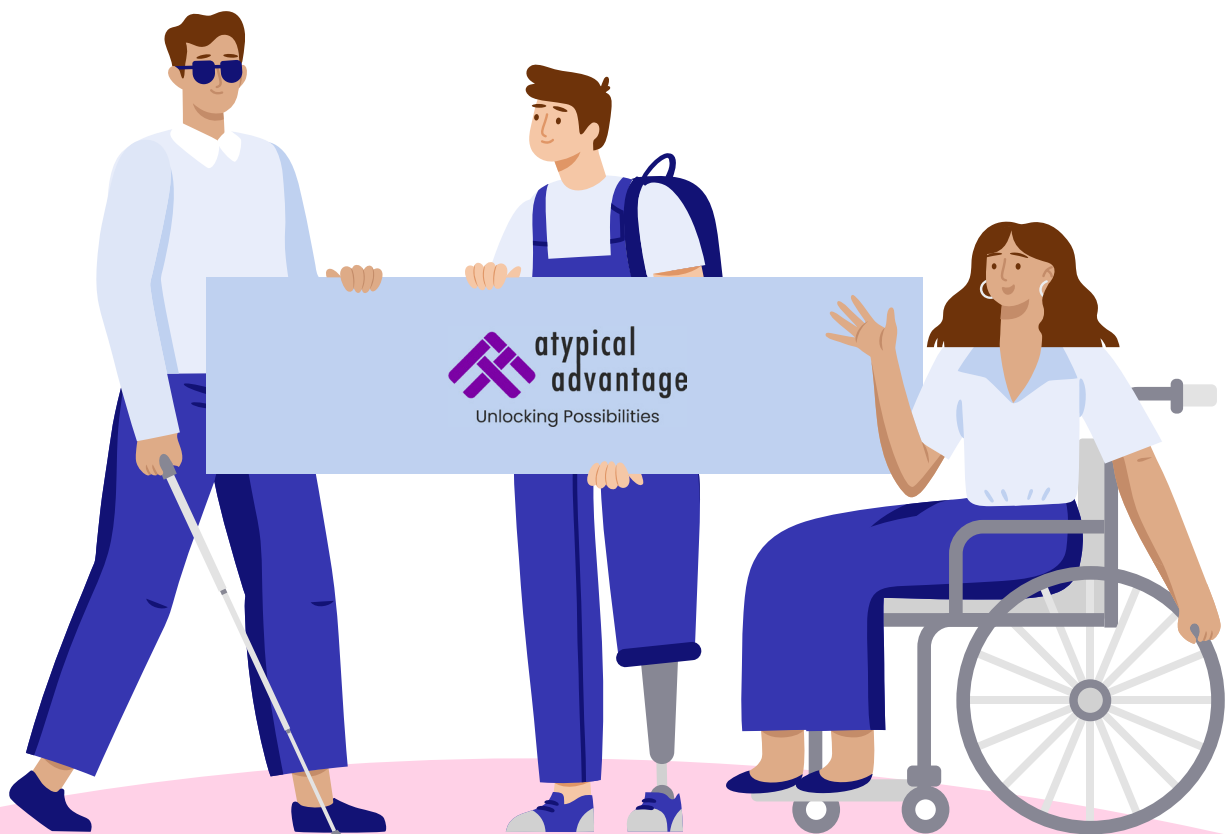
How Inclusion Took Shape in Practice

When Atypical Advantage began engaging manufacturers, most partners had already expressed interest in employing PwDs. What they lacked, though, was an actionable roadmap. Atypical Advantage's inclusive hiring model helped partner companies realise their inclusive hiring visions through a structured, end-to-end process that supported both employers and candidates. Atypical Advantage combined readiness assessments, workplace preparation, job matching, and ongoing post-placement support to make inclusive hiring effective, practical, and lasting:

1 Readiness and job mapping: Each collaboration began with a readiness assessment to understand company priorities, map production sites, identify roles suitable for PwDs, and review existing infrastructure. Factory-level audits assessing infrastructure, safety, behaviour and communication, and operational systems helped partner companies identify suitable roles for potential candidates and to determine the adjustments needed to enable accessibility.

2 Preparing the workplace: Based on the findings from the audit and in close consultation with HR and factory leaders, Atypical Advantage helped factories introduce small but meaningful design tweaks such as the installation of ramps, tactile markings, visual alarms, and Indian Sign Language (ISL) signage to ensure the smooth integration of PwD hires once selected. Additional interventions such as introducing a "buddy" system, uniform modifications, and equipping PwDs with vibrating pagers for safety were also implemented upon hiring. In parallel, Atypical Advantage also developed company-specific ISL glossaries – customised visual vocabularies and video modules tailored to each factory's processes and workforce composition – to ensure that communication on the shop floor remained clear, consistent, and sustainable over time.

- 3 Sensitisation:** Before onboarding, Atypical Advantage conducted workshops and trainings with company supervisors and co-workers to build understanding, empathy, and confidence to operate mixed-ability teams. ISL training and role-play exercises helped raise awareness, dispel myths, and prepare the intangible aspects of the workplace (e.g., perceptions, culture) to complement the physical changes in advance of PwD onboarding.
- 4 Matching, sourcing, and onboarding:** Drawing from its database of over 40,000 registered PwDs, Atypical Advantage sourced candidates whose skills and interests aligned with identified roles. Screening interviews helped confirm fit, while coordination with HR teams ensured accessible interviews and smooth onboarding. Once selected, candidates received pre-placement orientations on safety procedures and workplace expectations. Atypical Advantage remained closely involved through the first months of placements, mediating feedback and providing hands-on support to both employees and supervisors.
- 5 Post-placement and retention support:** After placements, Atypical Advantage continued to engage with factories to troubleshoot early issues, facilitate adjustments, and strengthen retention. Regular site visits and check-ins allowed challenges to be resolved quickly.





Nestlé: from pilot to policy in inclusive manufacturing

For Nestlé India, inclusion has long been embedded in its culture of “Respect.” After years of focusing on gender equity, the company expanded its vision in 2021 to include PwDs, recognising that inclusion must both reflect the diversity of Indian society and extend equitably across its own workforce. The Head of DEI observed that excluding PwDs from hiring would be like *“missing an entire voice of the society we serve.”* The company was equally determined to make inclusion tangible in its factories *“to prove that inclusion can work in a core manufacturing setup, not just offices. That’s where most of [Nestlé’s] workforce is, so if inclusion doesn’t reach there, it’s incomplete.”*

In 2022, Nestlé became the first FMCG company in India to partner with Atypical Advantage, piloting inclusive hiring in its Sanand factory. The collaboration began with readiness assessments and factory audits to identify suitable roles and accessibility gaps, followed by job mapping, infrastructure upgrades, supervisor sensitisation, candidate onboarding, and post-placement support. At the Sanand factory, Atypical Advantage’s recommendations led to tangible changes in the workplace: ramps, accessible washrooms, vibrating safety pagers, uniform modifications, and visual signage for emergency alerts were added. Each new PwD hire was paired with a buddy, and entire teams were trained in disability sensitisation and basic ISL. This end-to-end support helped teams overcome initial hesitation. *“At first, there was hesitation from the line managers. They weren’t sure how it would work on the floor. But once people saw results – the productivity, the teamwork – the fear disappeared,”* a factory leader reflected.

While the initial plan was to hire 5 PwDs at Sanand, this goal quickly expanded to 23 hires across two cohorts (2023, 2024). *"It changed how we think about capability,"* shared a factory manager. *"Now, inclusion feels like part of our everyday operations."* Nestlé has since codified its inclusive hiring learnings into an internal playbook and committed to 10% PwD representation at its new Orissa plant, embedding accessibility from design to delivery. One factory manager explained: *"The idea is to embed accessibility right from the design phase, not retrofit later like we did here. The Sanand experience gave us a template that's now being standardised."*



WHAT WORKED AND WHY

A win-win: stronger businesses, empowered employees

Over the past few years, Atypical Advantage's partner companies have each charted their own journey toward inclusive manufacturing, moving from pilot cohorts to a more confident intention to institutionalise and scale. Across all partners, Atypical Advantage's model demonstrated that inclusive hiring in manufacturing is not only possible but beneficial for both businesses and PwDs:





For **companies**, inclusion unlocked new value. Inclusion efforts led to tangible improvements in workforce culture, productivity, and retention. Managers reported that PwD employees brought higher focus, discipline, and consistency to routine tasks, meeting productivity expectations and often outperforming peers in attendance. The process also built stronger team cohesion and empathy among co-workers, improving morale across shifts. Factory leaders observed that inclusive hiring helped “professionalise” shop-floor management, encouraging clearer communication, standardised safety protocols, and more structured training. *“Pager alarms, sign language videos, and clearer signage actually made things better for everyone. People were more alert and worked more confidently. It didn’t just help PwDs, it improved safety for the whole team,”* noted a Nestlé representative. For many firms, partnering with Atypical Advantage strengthened their internal Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) agendas, moving them from strategy to practice.

For **PwDs themselves**, the impact has been transformative. Many entered formal employment for the first time, gaining financial independence, self-confidence, social recognition, and a sense of belonging. PwD employees spoke of being treated *“like any other team member”* and of earning recognition for their reliability. *“This job gave me independence and courage,”* said a PwD employee. *“Now my family sees me differently.”* Atypical Advantage’s support, spanning interview preparation, onboarding, and ongoing counselling, helped candidates navigate professional and personal transitions. Employers reported PwD attrition well below the workforce average, reflecting job satisfaction and effective integration.



These experiences show that inclusive hiring delivers multiple returns – strengthening business performance through higher engagement, safety, and retention while transforming lives by creating pathways to dignity, confidence, and equality at work.

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“Initially, we thought this was just about hiring differently. But we soon realised it was also about managing differently. We had to rethink how we give instructions, how we communicate safety messages, how we make people feel included. It has made our team more aware, more empathetic, and in a way, more human.”

- Nestlé Factory Manager

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“We are absolutely thrilled to see their dedication and the way they work. Whether you talk about quality, delivery, productivity, morale – all parameters – they are just 100 out of 100. It’s a clear business case. It’s not just that we’ve done some charity or just wanted to help someone who is not so privileged. We have now brought them into the mainstream.”

- Tata Motors HR representative

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“When we started seeing the data – things like attendance rates, quality, and retention among PwD employees – it became easier to convince business heads. We could show that inclusion wasn’t just ethical; it made operational sense.”

- GCPL Head of DEI

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“Our PwD hires are very committed to their work and very curious to learn. Since we hired them, there has been no absenteeism and no drop-outs. These are essential qualities when you work in any manufacturing setup.”

- NIVEA HR Manager



Godrej Consumer Products Limited: Inclusion as a driver of operational and market insight

GCPL began its PwD inclusion journey in 2023, partnering with Atypical Advantage to integrate PwDs into its manufacturing operations. For GCPL, this wasn't a CSR activity; it was a deliberate business strategy. *"Inclusion isn't charity; it's capability building,"* explained the company's DEI Lead. *"It makes us better as a workplace and as a company that serves a diverse society."*

GCPL invested heavily in readiness to ensure that PwD hiring succeeded both operationally and culturally. As a critical partner, Atypical Advantage provided accessibility audits, job mapping, sensitisation, onboarding, and retention follow-ups, and helped establish workplace accommodations like ISL signage, visual alerts, assistive device which has a two way communication system along with geotagging and a strong buddy system to ensure safety. of GCPL's approach was to make its two-month technical training programme accessible for PwD candidates by bringing in a resident sign language interpreter for seamless communication and taking steps to create accessible content for future use. For candidates who came from non-technical education backgrounds, GCPL partnered with a specialised training institute to deliver an intensive curriculum on manufacturing processes and safety, supported by Atypical Advantage interpreters (who covered signage in relevant regional languages). At the end of the programme, trainees showed strong technical and workplace readiness. As the Head of Manufacturing noted, *"We wanted them to start strong. Skill readiness matters in manufacturing, and we owed them the same preparation we give any workforce we want to succeed."* This investment of both time and financial resources – an industry outlier – reflects GCPL's belief that PwDs are a talent worth developing.

In addition to PwD capacitation, workplace sensitisation efforts helped overcome initial hesitation. *"The first week people were unsure,"* recalled the Head of Manufacturing, *"but once they saw the focus and discipline these employees brought, the team became proud to work with them."* At GCPL's Chennai plant, inclusion triggered an especially striking cultural shift: several female non-PwD employees learned ISL so quickly during early workshops that they received "Quick Learner" awards. When interpreters were unavailable, these women stepped in to support communication on the shop floor, an example of internal championing and evidence of material workforce commitment.

PwD employees themselves reported high levels of belonging, confidence, and pride. One PwD candidate who works on the packaging line shared, *"People here support me. They help if I'm stuck. I feel like I'm part of the team."* Another candidate who works in warehousing spoke of the significance of financial independence and the supportive environment around him: *"I can now support my family. I feel confident coming to work every day."* He added that he often encourages friends to pursue similar opportunities: *"I tell them not to be afraid of these workplaces. The systems are in place, the facilities we need are here."*

Beyond cultural integration, GCPL operational leaders observed clear performance gains from PwD inclusion: *"They're more focused, more methodical, more consistent,"* noted the Head of Manufacturing. *"When you see fewer errors and stronger discipline, you realise inclusion improves operational excellence."* Furthermore, attendance among PwD employees has remained significantly above the industry average, reinforcing the notion that inclusion strengthens productivity as well as workplace morale. At the same time, GCPL leaders highlighted the strategic insights that come from representation, noting that having PwDs on the shop floor enhances the company's ability to innovate for diverse consumers. As the DEI Lead explained, *"Our workforce should reflect the population we serve. Having PwDs on the floor builds understanding that influences how we design and market products."*

To sustain momentum, GCPL is embedding disability inclusion into long-term capability systems by integrating disability-awareness and ISL modules into its internal Learning Management System (LMS), making inclusive communication and leadership part of core training pathways. Today, GCPL employs more than 20 PwDs across its factories, with plans to expand across additional roles and locations. For GCPL, inclusion is now firmly positioned as a strategic advantage, strengthening its capabilities, evolving its culture, and deepening its connection to the diverse consumers it serves.





NIVEA: Localising global inclusion standards

For NIVEA, inclusion is not just a local initiative; it's part of a global mandate. The company's inclusion journey began in Brazil in 2023, where NIVEA successfully integrated PwDs into its manufacturing and office functions, creating a model now being replicated across its global operations. In India, this vision took root at the Sanand factory in Gujarat, where NIVEA partnered with Atypical Advantage to implement its global standards in the local manufacturing context.

The journey for NIVEA India began in 2024 when it committed to piloting PwD hiring in its packaging and production units. The goal was not only to meet diversity targets, but to embed accessibility and empathy into daily operations. Working closely with Atypical Advantage, NIVEA conducted a readiness assessment that mapped PwD roles, safety systems, and workplace adjustments. Rather than focusing on expensive infrastructure retrofits, the adaptations focused on behavioural readiness: equipping teams with awareness, empathy, and communication tools. Supervisors and line workers received ISL training, participated in sensitisation workshops, and communication signage was installed.

Building on this foundation, NIVEA translated its global standards into actual hires. While the company's global benchmark set a target of 5 PwDs per plant, NIVEA India set an internal goal of 10 – and within six months, the company exceeded its goal by hiring 11 PwDs. These individuals have since integrated seamlessly into factory operations, performing on par with their peers in quality and productivity. Looking ahead, NIVEA India is seeking to expand PwD hiring beyond production roles and to create structured pathways for long-term career growth. *"We realised inclusion doesn't need to be perfect to begin,"* the HR Lead added. *"It needs to be genuine."*





Tata Motors: scaling inclusion through leadership and systems change

Tata Motors has long believed that business must go hand in hand with social responsibility. In 2023, the company formalised its PwD commitment through the creation of a DEI Office, signalling a new phase in its social and operational evolution. The company's inclusive hiring strategy was implemented in earnest in FY 2024-25, starting with a pilot in Jamshedpur, its oldest factory. This site became the test bed for operationalising inclusion through the company's Lighthouse Framework, a ten-pillar model guiding gender and disability inclusion across its plants. The pilot began with a target of 20 trainees but expanded to 36 individuals with hearing impairments in assembly and packaging roles. The plant intends to expand this number to 100-150 PwD trainees by the end of the financial year.

Tata Motors' partnership with Atypical Advantage was a key element of its success. With Atypical Advantage's support, the company conducted a detailed accessibility audit covering more than 100,000 square feet of the facility, mapping every touchpoint from the entry gate to shop-floor workstations. Safety systems were then adapted: audio sirens were replaced with visual indicators, content and signage were translated into ISL, uniforms were modified, and canteen layouts were adjusted for ease of use. Over 1,000 employees were trained in basic ISL before the first cohort joined, ensuring day-one integration rather than token onboarding. For PwD selection, Atypical Advantage screened nearly 2,000 profiles to meet Tata Motors' candidate requirements.

Tata Motors' model stands out for its depth of care and human-centred considerations. During recruitment, the company hosted 'open-houses', inviting parents to accompany candidates for a tour of the factory and meet supervisors, with room and board provided for two days. *"We wanted them to see where their children would work and feel assured they'd be safe,"* explained an HR Lead. This care extended beyond the recruitment phase, as onboarded hires were offered company-arranged housing and daily transport, ensuring both safety and independence.

Results to date have been promising. Productivity, attendance, and morale among PwD trainees exceeded expectations, with zero attrition in the first year. Supervisors reported consistent quality and precision on the production line. *"We treated this as a business project, not a CSR one,"* the HR Lead emphasised. *"They meet every target of quality, delivery, and productivity. That's the real business case."*

Building on these lessons, Tata Motors' partnership with Atypical Advantage expanded to refine its inclusion model and to replicate it across newer plants, aligning Tata Motors' operational systems with inclusive design. Under the partnership, Tata Motors expanded its focus beyond hearing impairment to include locomotor and mild cognitive disabilities, identifying practical job roles across assembly, logistics, and warehouse operations. The company has now onboarded over 200 PwDs across its plants.

"For Tata, inclusion has always been part of our story," said a senior DEI manager. *"There is continuous work that has to be done to sensitise the leadership, to build the channels, to create the allies in the system...It's a journey we want to see, and the trajectory has been phenomenal."*



Key success factors

Companies' inclusive hiring efforts succeeded because they were planned, not improvised. The success of inclusive hiring across Atypical Advantage's partner companies stemmed from a blend of leadership intent, operational readiness, and continuous support. Key success factors included:



Visible leadership commitment and alignment: Inclusive hiring took root where senior management set the tone. In each company, leaders spoke of inclusion as part of a business strategy linked to productivity, talent diversification, and organisational culture. This high-level ownership signalled clear intent, encouraged buy-in from teams, and secured resources quickly for accessibility improvements. Atypical Advantage's close engagement with decision-makers, from plant heads to central HR, helped move inclusion from an experiment to a system-wide practice. *"Inclusion stuck because it was everyone's responsibility, not just HR's... That's when it started to sustain itself,"* noted a Nestlé factory head.

Practical role design and workplace readiness: Companies credited Atypical Advantage with helping to identify where inclusion fit operationally. Through site accessibility audits and job mapping, PwD hires were placed in roles that matched their abilities, while accessibility adjustments enhanced both inclusion and overall safety. Importantly, the suitability of PwDs' technical skills to the required roles meant that productivity and performance were unaffected, further reinforcing the business case for inclusive hiring if it is done accessibly.



Clear and sustainable communication systems: Beyond physical accessibility, companies highlighted the importance of communication systems tailored to mixed-ability teams. Atypical Advantage supported this by creating company-specific ISL glossaries and video modules covering technical terms, safety instructions, and everyday shop-floor vocabulary. As ISL varies across regions and lacks standard terms for many manufacturing processes, Atypical Advantage worked with deaf employees to co-create company- and industry-specific signs. These resources reduced long-term dependence on interpreters and enabled factories to embed inclusive communication into routine operations.

Continuous engagement and follow-up: Atypical Advantage's post-placement visits, troubleshooting, and responsiveness helped maintain trust and momentum after hiring. Follow-ups and early interventions such as resolving shift issues, adjusting workflows, and celebrating successes built confidence among employees and supervisors, helping inclusion take root in daily factory operations.



Together, these factors turned inclusion from a pilot into a routine part of factory operations.

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“Initially, there was hesitation at every level, from supervisors to line managers. But once leadership backed it, others followed. That support from the top made all the difference. People realised this wasn’t a short-term trial; it was a serious business priority.”

- Nestlé HR representative

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“Our leaders have one thing to say: if we do it, then we’ll do it right. There will be challenges, we’ll have to figure out solutions, but this will not stop us.”

- Tata Motors HR representative

Atypical Advantage's unique value-add

Atypical Advantage's model filled a crucial market gap by bridging the divide between social inclusion goals and on-the-ground business needs. Unlike traditional placement agencies, Atypical Advantage acted as a holistic inclusion partner, combining talent sourcing with advisory, training, and long-term retention support. Atypical Advantage's expert, shoulder-to-shoulder support helped employers overcome operational and mindset barriers while creating meaningful employment for PwDs.

Atypical Advantage's distinctive strengths include:

- **End-to-end facilitation:** From role mapping and candidate training to post-placement monitoring, Atypical Advantage managed the full inclusion cycle, reducing friction for employers. Atypical Advantage's structured support lowered risks and built confidence, allowing firms to move from pilot to more intentional and systematic rollout.

"Atypical Advantage wasn't just a recruiter. They stayed with us through the journey. That made the difference between an initiative and an ongoing practice."

- GCPL HR Manager

- **Thematic expertise:** Atypical Advantage's team is comprised of dedicated subject-matter experts.
- **Bridge of understanding:** Atypical Advantage understood both the business imperatives of factories and the lived realities of PwD candidates, effectively translating the needs and expectations of both sides into mutual action.

"Atypical Advantage helped us go beyond compliance. They showed us how to make inclusion part of our system, in line with quality, safety, and efficiency. That's what made it sustainable."

- Tata Motors HR Lead

"This was very new territory for me. I had so many queries. Atypical Advantage was very proactive – their response time and project execution were very good. They are professional in whatever they do, they are subject experts."

- NIVEA HR Manager

- **Sustainable communication systems:** Atypical Advantage strengthened companies' long-term inclusion capability by building durable communication assets to reduce reliance on external support. Atypical Advantage translated each company's operational context into clear, accessible ISL resources, producing reusable video modules and sign banks that aligned with shop-floor processes. This approach gave companies a self-sustaining toolkit for inclusive communication, reducing future dependency and ensuring consistency as teams grow or change.
- **Proof-of-concept for scale:** By demonstrating success in complex factory environments, Atypical Advantage provided a tested model that other manufacturers can replicate with confidence.



NAVIGATING THE JOURNEY: CHALLENGES AND LESSONS

While the results to date have been overwhelmingly positive, the journey has not been without its hurdles. These experiences offer valuable lessons for others looking to scale inclusive hiring across India's manufacturing sector.

Challenges in implementing inclusive hiring

Initial mindset, awareness, and confidence gaps: While many companies had inclusive DEI aspirations, there was some initial hesitation at the more operational levels stemming from limited exposure of working with PwDs. Some factory teams feared slower output or safety risks while some HR departments viewed inclusion as a compliance exercise rather than a productivity investment. *"The biggest barrier wasn't infrastructure. It was fear of the unknown,"* recalled a Nestlé HR Lead. However, all companies noted that these barriers were overcome through continual sensitisation and the introduction of other measures that have enabled PwDs to integrate seamlessly and effectively into the workforce.

Candidate readiness and matching supply to demand: At times, companies' appetite for hiring PwDs in manufacturing outpaced the available pool of qualified candidates. Several partners noted that while interest was high, some potential applicants required further training or certification to meet factory role requirements. The gap was especially evident outside major metro areas, where access to vocational programmes and assistive technologies is still growing. However, rather than a constraint, many saw this as an opportunity to strengthen the talent pipeline through targeted skilling partnerships.

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“Initially, there was nervousness. People thought this was a CSR or social decision, not a business one. We had to show that it made operational and cultural sense. Once the data came in – attendance, quality, retention – the perception changed.”

- GCPL leader

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“The Government of India recognises 21 disabilities, each with a different enabler. We have started in phases. Hearing impairment was one of the easier ones to go for, so we went for it. We also got locomotor adjustments done in two of our buildings, and for any new building structure we will compulsively have a ramp and a lift. This is how we are enabling ourselves for the other disabilities.”

- Tata Motors HR Lead

Disability representation narrow but evolving: Inclusion to date has mostly involved individuals with hearing impairments, as this group is often most easily absorbed into manufacturing environments in terms of production, safety, and communication systems. Expanding inclusion to other disability types (e.g. locomotor, visual, or cognitive) requires additional investments into infrastructure, assistive technology, and tailored supervision models. Nonetheless, the intention to explore wider disability mainstreaming is there. As one Nestlé factory manager noted, *“We started with hearing-impaired candidates because it was safer to start where communication and visual signals could be managed easily on the line.”* Other companies echoed similar experiences, emphasising that starting with one group has helped them build confidence and systems before expanding to other disability types.

Retention and progression: While PwD retention has been strong, factory managers have cautioned that without intentional engagement, pathways for upward mobility for PwD employees will be limited. GCPL’s DEI lead reflected, *“We’ve done well on hiring, but we now need to think about what’s next: how to grow these employees, give them mobility and development opportunities. Inclusion can’t stop at the gate.”* PwDs also voiced a desire to learn, grow, and train others. *“I like my job and my team, but sometimes I wish there was more training to learn new work,”* said one employee. Another added, *“Atypical Advantage and the company helped a lot in the beginning. Later, I wanted to do more, but there were fewer chances.”* Sustaining inclusion depends not only on recruitment and retention, but also on continuous learning and upward mobility.

Reflections on the inclusive hiring journey

Across Atypical Advantage's partner companies, several lessons emerged on how to make inclusive hiring succeed in practice and be sustained over time:



Inclusion begins with leadership and intent: Visible support from plant heads and HR leaders legitimised the effort and motivated teams to engage seriously. Where leaders treated inclusion as a productivity, performance, and culture-building opportunity, results were stronger and faster.

Preparation drives performance: Success depended on readiness before hiring through site audits, job mapping, and team sensitisation. Factories that invested time in planning saw smoother onboarding, fewer safety incidents, and higher retention.



Investing in both the 'hardware' and the 'software': While physical adjustments are crucial, sustained inclusion also depends on mindset and cultural change. Regular sensitisation sessions led by Atypical Advantage proved transformative. Sessions helped colleagues understand disabilities, build empathy, and learn inclusive means of communication, thereby supporting integration and workplace cohesion. Factories that ran refresher sessions every few months reported stronger teamwork and better communication.

Buddy systems enable smooth integration and retention: Assigning workplace "buddies" to new PwD employees was a simple yet highly effective inclusion strategy. Buddy systems created immediate support networks, easing communication and confidence for both PwDs and their teams. These pairings helped PwD hires adapt faster to routines and safety protocols while also encouraging co-workers to take ownership of inclusion.





Inclusion is a journey: For most partners, disability inclusion was uncharted territory. Companies that treated inclusion as ongoing improvement – e.g., regularly reviewing roles, retraining staff, and addressing accessibility gaps – achieved deeper change and have been better positioned for wider institutionalisation.

Partnerships make inclusion possible: Atypical Advantage’s facilitation bridged intent and implementation, helping companies navigate candidate sourcing, role design, and early troubleshooting. Co-ownership between Atypical Advantage and factory teams ensured effectiveness and accountability on both sides. In the future, there is scope for further partnerships – such as with government and academia – to address some of the outstanding challenges facing inclusive hiring in manufacturing.



Celebrate and communicate success: Sharing stories of inclusion internally and externally helps sustain momentum, build accountability, attract new allies, and encourage other industry peers to commence their own inclusive hiring journeys.

“We realised inclusion is like quality control: you improve every cycle.”

- Nestlé Factory Manager

Persistent ecosystem barriers: systemic gaps holding inclusion back

Despite clear progress, several systemic barriers continue to limit the scale and speed of inclusive hiring in India's manufacturing sector. These extend beyond individual companies and require coordinated action across government, industry, and the wider ecosystem.

- **Weak vocational pathways limit the pool of skilled candidates:** The national skilling ecosystem for PwDs is not fit-for-purpose. Few training institutes provide courses aligned with industry-specific needs or roles, resulting in a narrow pool of job-ready PwD candidates.
- **Limited awareness of policy incentives and weak industry mandates:** Although national schemes such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) and various incentive programmes encourage inclusive hiring,³ government policy does not mandate PwD hiring among private manufacturers. A lack of awareness of incentive schemes, in combination with limited mechanisms to compel action, means that inclusive hiring is left to the volition of individual industry actors.
- **Inconsistent data and accountability mechanisms:** Reliable data on PwD employment in manufacturing is scarce, making it difficult to track progress, benchmark success, or design targeted interventions. Without clear reporting norms, inclusive hiring remains difficult to measure, publicise, or reward.
- **Persistent social perceptions:** Deep-rooted stereotypes continue to shape attitudes toward disability and productivity in both blue- and white-collar settings, which influence hiring decisions. PwDs are often either put on a pedestal or seen as charity, rarely treated as unique contributors of value. Several companies noted that across industry, inclusion efforts often rely on "champions" rather than on mainstreamed notions of PwD value-add. PwDs are thus not perceived as unique sources of product design or market insight, despite this perspective being severely under-represented in the workplace.

These ecosystem-level gaps underscore that while company-led inclusion is possible, broader systemic support is essential to move from isolated successes to widespread industry adoption.

³ Under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act (2016), the Government of India encourages inclusive employment through schemes that reimburse private employers' contributions to Provident Fund and State Insurance for PwD hires, and through complementary initiatives supporting workplace accessibility and skill development.

LOOKING FORWARD

From pilot to mainstream: making inclusive manufacturing the new normal

Nonetheless, the experiences of Atypical Advantage and its partner companies have shown that inclusive hiring in manufacturing is not a mere aspiration; rather, it is achievable, valuable, and scalable. The pilots have demonstrated that when inclusion is treated as an iterative learning process with intent, PwDs can thrive and contribute to business success. The next step is to move from proof of concept to scale. Doing so will require aligned action from industry, government, and the wider ecosystem. Implications and potential actions for relevant actors include:

1 For companies: embed inclusion as a business practice

- **Test out the business case:** The experiences of Atypical Advantage's partners have shown the value of integrating PwDs from a design, productivity, and retention perspective. Companies should not be afraid to pilot PwD hiring, taking the lessons from other first movers to minimise risk of experimentation. Having more manufacturers take this move will help mainstream PwD hiring across the industry.
- **Learn and integrate inclusion by design:** Document what works in pilot sites and embed lessons into new site planning, machinery procurement, HR systems, and standard operating procedures (SOPs). Planning for accessibility from the outset is more efficient and cost-effective than retrofitting later, and ensures inclusion becomes part of standard operations rather than being a siloed initiative.
- **Build and diffuse internal champions:** Empower plant heads, supervisors, and HR managers with training so inclusion becomes part of everyday leadership. Train peer mentors who can carry forward inclusion practices even when staff rotate and deliver periodic refresher sessions to maintain momentum. Capacitating staff includes embedding sensitisation and training into new staff induction curriculums to build cohesion from the start.

- **Create growth pathways:** Move beyond just hiring to career mobility. Offer skills upgrading, mentorship, and transparent promotion routes so PwDs can progress from line operations to supervisory roles to retain motivation, value, and dignity. This includes ensuring that PwDs are trained in line with changing industry technologies so that they are not left behind and can continue delivering value to company operations.
- **Diversify disability profiles:** Expand hiring beyond hearing impairment by piloting roles for people with locomotor, visual, or cognitive disabilities using adaptive tools and mentorship models to support rollout.
- **Track and communicate success stories:** Track metrics such as attendance, retention, productivity, and satisfaction to demonstrate impact and build the business case for scale. Share inclusion journeys internally and externally, normalising the idea that hiring PwDs strengthens both performance and purpose.

2 For government and policy actors: create enablers for adoption and scale

- **Expand vocational skilling pathways:** Invest in inclusive technical training aligned with manufacturing needs, in collaboration with private industry and vocational institutes. Upgrade Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) to ensure content is available and accessible to prepare PwD candidates for manufacturing roles.
- **Use policy ‘carrots and sticks’ to normalise inclusion in industry:** Combine incentives with accountability requirements to encourage inclusive hiring. Bolster and publicise existing benefits for employers and build awareness at the state and district levels. Consider introducing recognition schemes such as an “Inclusion Champion Factory” label for companies that meet accessibility and retention benchmarks. At the same time, embed simple accessibility checks within routine labour audits to enhance enforcement of existing laws⁴ and integrate inclusion into compliance frameworks, without adding new bureaucracy.
- **Develop national data systems:** Introduce regular, disaggregated, and holistic reporting on PwD employment across sectors to track inclusion and guide targeted interventions.
- **Promote accessible transport and infrastructure:** Partner with industrial parks and local governments to improve last-mile accessibility for workers with disabilities.

⁴ India has a range of legal and policy frameworks mandating accessibility in workplaces and public spaces, including the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016); the Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan) launched in 2015; and the Harmonised Guidelines and Standards for Universal Accessibility in India (2021), which build on the National Building Code (NBC). However, enforcement and adoption remain inconsistent, particularly in industrial and factory settings, where physical accessibility standards are often overlooked or only partially implemented.

3 For Atypical Advantage and ecosystem partners

- **Broaden and strengthen the talent pipeline:** Partner with ITIs and other skilling partners to align vocational programmes with the requirements of manufacturing roles, building close industry-academia partnerships. Help expand training outreach to include a wider range of disability groups to support more diverse and sustainable inclusion across the sector.
- **Facilitate local ecosystems of inclusion:** Act as a convener linking companies, local training providers, and community organisations to help bridge gaps in candidate readiness, transport, and housing, ensuring PwDs are supported both inside and outside the factory.
- **Leverage technology for access and scale:** Invest in and explore how assistive technologies, mobile learning formats, and digital tools (e.g., ISL-enabled modules) can make skilling and workplace training more accessible. Provide companies with digital toolkits to help monitor inclusion progress and identify needs early. Ensure PwD candidates are adequately skilled and upskilled in line with moving industry technologies to mitigate redundancies.
- **Foster cross-company learning and advocacy:** Work with industry associations to host peer exchanges, factory visits, and storytelling campaigns that normalise inclusion. Amplify stories of success, especially from manufacturing leaders, to influence broader industry norms and inspire replication.

Looking ahead to scale inclusion

The story of inclusive manufacturing in India is no longer about whether it can work, but about how far and fast it can go. Atypical Advantage's partnerships with India's leading manufacturers have shown that hiring people with disabilities is both achievable and smart business. The next step now is to move towards diffusion and scale, treating inclusion not as an exception but as the norm across the sector. As the country's manufacturing sector continues to expand, embedding accessibility and inclusion will not only unlock a vast, untapped workforce but also yield clear commercial and social dividends. If scaled with the same intent and collaboration that shaped these first steps, inclusive manufacturing could help turn India's factories into engines of both equity and growth.



