

Driving inclusive hiring in India's manufacturing sector

In our Insights series, TRANSFORM shares successes and learnings from our projects to:

- Help the SME and entrepreneur community gain knowledge and learn from our projects
- Showcase to funders what can be achieved through impact-led initiatives

PROJECT AT A GLANCE:

CONNECTING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES WITH CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Atypical Advantage is an online platform that trains and connects people with disabilities (PwDs) with job opportunities in the manufacturing sector. Through its work with large manufacturers in India, Atypical Advantage is demonstrating that inclusive hiring is practical, safe and adds value when approached intentionally.



Collaboration is key to scaling impact enterprises. Learn more about the successful programmes that other enterprises and funders have delivered together. Read more stories here.

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THE CHALLENGE

In India, there are over 70 million people with disabilities, yet they make up less than 1% of the workforce. While manufacturing employs millions, the sector has historically excluded PwDs. For most companies, the challenge has been less about intent and more about execution. In safety-critical, high-volume manufacturing environments, concerns around safety, cost and productivity have limited employers' confidence in hiring PwDs.

THE INNOVATION

Atypical Advantage addresses these concerns through an inclusive hiring model that supports both employers and candidates through a structured, end-to-end process. The organisation works across the full hiring journey, from candidate readiness through to on-site integration.

With the support of TRANSFORM, Atypical Advantage established a training academy to build employability skills and job readiness among PwDs. Alongside this, the team worked closely with manufacturing plants to assess roles, align safety criteria and support onboarding.



THE IMPACT

With TRANSFORM's support, Atypical Advantage has worked with more than 15 manufacturing plants and placed over 410 people with disabilities into full-time roles. The initiative has demonstrated that inclusion in manufacturing can be safe, viable and beneficial. For companies, inclusive hiring contributed to stronger workplace culture, productivity and retention. For PwDs, access to formal employment brought financial independence, confidence and social recognition.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Atypical Advantage plans to scale its model across India by expanding into additional industrial clusters – areas where many manufacturing plants are located close together – and by working with more manufacturers. Having demonstrated a successful proof of concept, the organisation has open-sourced its learnings through TRANSFORM and is encouraging industry, government and NGOs to replicate the model at scale.



INSIGHTS:

TURNING DISABILITY INCLUSION INTO OPERATIONAL REALITY

1. PREPARE ROLES AND SITES IN ADVANCE TO REDUCE RISK AND BUILD CONFIDENCE

Uncertainty is the biggest hiring barrier.

Manufacturers' initial concerns around safety and productivity often stemmed from uncertainty rather than resistance. Atypical Advantage found that investing time upfront — through job mapping, site assessments and team sensitisation training for disability awareness and understanding — was critical to overcoming hesitation. By matching candidates to roles they could perform safely within existing safety requirements, Atypical Advantage helped build confidence and enable successful early placements.

2. PROVIDE END-TO-END SUPPORT BEYOND PLACEMENT

Early experience showed that training and placement alone were not enough to make inclusive hiring work in manufacturing.

By providing sustained on-site support, engaging supervisors and addressing challenges in real time, Atypical Advantage helped ensure placements worked for both employers and employees beyond initial onboarding. This ongoing engagement reduced drop-off and improved retention, allowing inclusive hiring to move from short-term pilots to stable, long-term roles.



3. ENGAGE LEADERS TO ACCELERATE UPTAKE

Disability inclusion is often perceived as a compliance task.

Inclusive hiring gained traction when HR teams, plant heads and operational staff collaborated and backed the effort. Atypical Advantage positioned disability inclusion as a productivity and culture opportunity, rather than a compliance task. This visible leadership backing helped unlock resources, legitimise experimentation at operational level and encourage supervisors and teams to engage with inclusive hiring in practice.

4. SCALING IS MORE EFFECTIVE WHEN EFFORTS ARE GEOGRAPHICALLY CLUSTERED

Scaling inclusive hiring is challenging when the impact is not visible.

Focusing on manufacturing industrial clusters allowed Atypical Advantage to optimise resources by supporting multiple plants within the same geography. Once one manufacturer successfully adopted inclusive hiring, others in the cluster often followed, building momentum and creating a ripple effect. By proving the model in one cluster, the organisation established a replicable blueprint that can be scaled across India.



TRANSFORM is an impact accelerator that unites corporates, donors, investors and academics to support visionary enterprises across Africa and Asia. Together, we test and scale new market-based solutions that build inclusive, sustainable economies, empower marginalised communities, and drive climate-resilient growth.

Combining grant funding, business insight and research, TRANSFORM is advancing the development of innovative business models to help solve global challenges. It was established in 2015 and is led by Unilever, the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and EY.