



The Inclusion Illusion: How Tech Companies Quietly Eliminate "Liabilities"

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The uncomfortable truth about diversity in tech: companies that loudly celebrate neurodiversity, mental health awareness, and inclusive hiring practices often quietly eliminate employees who actually need accommodations. The rainbow logos and mental health benefit announcements are performative inclusion designed to attract talent and improve public image—but when employees actually use these resources, they mysteriously find themselves "reorganized" out of existence.

I've been watching this pattern for over a decade, since I first wrote about [living with bipolar disorder in tech](#) in 2016. The responses were telling: public praise for "brave transparency," private warnings about career suicide, and a consistent pattern of people reaching out to share their own stories of discrimination they couldn't speak about publicly

There's an entire underground network of tech workers sharing stories about disability discrimination—people who can't speak publicly because they're still trying to work in an industry that punishes authenticity about mental health and chronic illness.

The message was clear: mental health advocacy is celebrated as long as it remains abstract. The moment it becomes concrete—when someone actually needs time off, medication adjustments, therapy appointments, or accommodation for cognitive differences—the celebration turns into quiet elimination.

The Performance vs. The Practice

Let's examine the gap between what tech companies say and what they do:

The Public Performance

Tech companies have perfected the art of performative inclusion. They proudly announce their commitment to neurodiversity, mental health support, and creating inclusive environments for employees with disabilities. Comprehensive therapy coverage sits alongside mental health days, meditation apps, wellness programs, and on-site counseling services—a suite of benefits designed to signal progressive values.

During Mental Health Awareness Month, leadership speaks eloquently about psychological safety while HR departments roll out suicide prevention resources and employee assistance programs. Specialized neurodiversity hiring programs promise ADHD-friendly work arrangements and accommodations for various learning differences. Employee resource groups create visible support networks for people with disabilities, mental health conditions, and chronic illnesses.

The messaging is consistent and compelling: we celebrate different minds, we support human struggles, we recognize that mental health is health. The public face projects genuine commitment to inclusion.

The Private Practice

Behind the public messaging lies a different reality. Employees who disclose mental health conditions or request accommodations often find their performance reviews becoming more critical, focusing on productivity metrics that conveniently ignore the impact of their conditions

This is systemic gaslighting—making employees question whether their illness is affecting their work or whether the company is manufacturing reasons to eliminate them. The ambiguity is intentional.

. What was once considered acceptable work suddenly requires improvement.

Requests for reasonable accommodations meet bureaucratic resistance disguised as thoroughness. Managers ask probing questions about "business necessity" while suggesting employees "figure out another way" to meet standard requirements. The message is clear: your needs are burdensome.

Social dynamics shift after mental health disclosures. Colleagues and managers begin treating employees differently—not with obvious hostility, but with the subtle distance that makes collaborative work increasingly difficult. Professional isolation becomes the new normal.

When layoffs and restructures arrive, they disproportionately affect employees who have disclosed conditions or requested accommodations. These eliminations are carefully disguised as business decisions, complete with paper trails suggesting performance issues while ignoring how untreated or under-accommodated conditions affected work quality.

The Mechanisms of Quiet Elimination

The process is sophisticated and deniable:

The Setup

Companies create psychological safety that encourages "authentic" disclosure—not accidentally, but to identify liabilities. Once employees reveal conditions, medication needs, or accommodation requests, documentation begins. Performance tracking intensifies, seeking declines correlated with treatment. Simultaneously, managers build cases suggesting professional struggles.

The Execution

Armed with documentation, companies deploy targeted pressure: PIPs with unrealistic goals timed during mental health challenges; role changes to positions unsuited for disclosed conditions; "reorganizations" that coincidentally eliminate disclosed employees; hostile environments designed to force resignation rather than risk termination lawsuits.

The Cover

Every action includes plausible business justifications that would survive legal scrutiny. Departures get framed as performance issues, cultural fit problems, or business necessities—never discrimination. Companies maintain their public image as inclusive employers while privately eliminating "liability" employees. The process serves a dual purpose: removing perceived risks while discouraging other employees from disclosing conditions by demonstrating consequences.

The Personal Cost

The impact on individuals is devastating:

The personal toll extends far beyond job loss. Years of professional experience and carefully built relationships get destroyed simply because someone sought help or needed accommodation. Financial devastation strikes precisely when medical expenses and treatment costs are highest, while job loss often means insurance loss, interrupting critical mental health treatment during the most vulnerable periods

This creates a cruel cycle: seeking treatment leads to job loss, which leads to treatment interruption, which worsens symptoms, which makes finding new employment harder.

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Psychological trauma compounds existing challenges as betrayal of trust, systematic gaslighting, and professional isolation layer new wounds onto old ones. Industry blacklisting follows as word spreads through professional networks, making new positions harder to secure in an industry obsessed with

"cultural fit" and network references. Perhaps most damaging, employees begin internalizing shame, believing they're actually inadequate rather than recognizing systemic discrimination designed to make them feel exactly this way.

The Systemic Patterns

This isn't isolated incidents—it's systematic discrimination disguised as business practice:

The Vulnerability Assessment

Companies systematically identify "liability" employees: those disclosing mental health conditions, requesting accommodations, taking medication affecting availability, requiring ongoing treatment, or needing environmental modifications. These employees get marked in systems tracking accommodation costs and management overhead.

The Risk Calculation

HR departments conduct cold calculations weighing accommodation costs against elimination expenses. They compare legal fees for wrongful termination versus discrimination lawsuits, accommodation expenses versus severance and replacement costs, productivity concerns versus diversity and inclusion reputation, management burden versus public relations benefits. When elimination appears cheaper or less risky than accommodation, the process begins.

The Business Justification

Every elimination gets packaged as a legitimate business decision. "Performance issues" ignore accommodation needs while focusing on productivity metrics. "Cultural fit" concerns pathologize neurological differences as personality problems. "Business restructuring" coincidentally affects disabled employees during convenient reorganizations. "Productivity requirements" refuse to account for reasonable modifications, creating impossible standards designed to justify removal.

The Industry-Wide Impact

This systematic discrimination has profound effects on tech culture:

The systematic discrimination creates cascading damage across the industry. Companies lose experienced, capable employees whose conditions don't actually impair their technical abilities, while simultaneously reducing innovation by eliminating neurodivergent thinking patterns that often drive creative problem-solving and breakthrough approaches. The industry becomes more cognitively and neurologically homogeneous, trading diversity of thought for false comfort.

Trust erodes as employees learn not to trust company mental health resources or diversity statements

The EAP (Employee Assistance Program) that's supposed to help you becomes the documentation system that's used against you. Mental health days become performance issues. Every resource becomes a trap.

. People with conditions learn to hide them, creating underground support networks and reducing authentic workplace relationships

Masking mental health conditions and disabilities becomes a survival skill in tech, creating enormous psychological stress and preventing people from getting the support they need to do their best work.

. Each successful elimination emboldens other companies to adopt similar practices, spreading the discrimination across the entire ecosystem.

The Contradiction

Here's what's particularly infuriating: many of the conditions tech companies discriminate against are precisely what make people excellent programmers, designers, and technologists:

The irony deepens when examining what companies actually eliminate. ADHD hyperfocus—the same trait that makes meetings unbearable—often enables the sustained concentration required for complex technical problem-solving. Autism spectrum traits like pattern recognition, attention to detail, and systematic thinking represent core strengths in software development. Depression and anxiety frequently correlate with heightened sensitivity to user experience, edge

cases, and potential system failures—exactly the kind of anticipatory thinking that prevents disasters. Bipolar creativity can generate breakthrough insights during manic episodes that benefit entire organizations, while OCD precision produces higher quality, more reliable code through obsessive attention to detail and systematic approaches.

But instead of designing work environments that leverage these strengths while accommodating the challenges, companies eliminate the people entirely

The tech industry's loss of neurodivergent talent isn't just morally wrong—it's strategically stupid. Many breakthrough innovations come from thinking patterns that are pathologized in traditional corporate environments.

The Legal Landscape

Companies exploit weaknesses in disability rights enforcement:

Companies exploit systematic weaknesses in disability rights enforcement. While the Americans with Disabilities Act provides theoretical protection, enforcement remains complaint-driven and expensive for individual employees who must prove discrimination while companies control both documentation and narrative. The "business necessity" defense allows companies to justify almost any decision if documented properly

"Business necessity" is a legal magic phrase that transforms discrimination into legitimate decision-making. Courts rarely question it if the paperwork looks right.

At-will employment laws in most states permit termination for any reason that isn't explicitly protected, leaving wide latitude for creative discrimination. When cases do arise, settlement culture ensures they resolve privately with NDAs that prevent public awareness of discrimination patterns

NDAs ensure that discrimination patterns remain invisible. Each victim thinks they're alone because previous victims are legally prohibited from warning them. The silence is enforced by law.

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What Real Inclusion Would Look Like

Genuine inclusion would require fundamental changes across organizational culture and structure. This begins with **universal design** that works for diverse neurological capabilities from the beginning, rather than retrofitting accommodations onto systems designed for neurotypical minds. Instead of forcing everyone into standardized processes and then creating exceptions for those who struggle, inclusive design considers cognitive diversity as a basic design requirement.

Flexible scheduling becomes the norm, with systems that optimize for output quality and impact rather than physical presence or rigid time blocks. This recognizes that different brains have different peak performance windows and that forcing everyone into identical schedules reduces rather than enhances overall productivity.

Multiple communication channels accommodate different interaction preferences naturally. Some people process information better through written documentation, others through verbal discussion, and still others through visual diagrams or collaborative workspace tools. Inclusive workplaces provide various ways to participate rather than forcing everyone through identical communication funnels.

Sensory-conscious environments consider that what feels comfortable to some employees can be overwhelming or distracting to others. This means providing options for lighting levels, noise management, workspace configuration, and meeting formats that don't inadvertently exclude people with sensory processing differences.

Performance evaluation systems factor in accommodation needs and recognize neurodivergent strengths rather than penalizing different cognitive styles. This requires moving beyond one-size-fits-all metrics to evaluation frameworks that capture diverse forms of valuable contribution.

Strength-based roles align individual cognitive capabilities with job requirements in ways that optimize both personal satisfaction and organizational outcomes. Instead of forcing square pegs into round holes and then wondering why performance suffers, inclusive organizations design roles around human capabilities rather than abstract job descriptions.

Leadership modeling involves executives openly discussing their own mental health journeys and accommodation needs, normalizing these conversations rather than maintaining the fiction that successful people don't struggle with psychological challenges.

Genuine confidentiality in mental health resources means protection without professional liability concerns, allowing employees to seek support without fear that their career advancement will be secretly compromised by their health history.

Finally, **success celebration** includes rather than hides disability status, recognizing that many breakthrough innovations and valuable perspectives come from minds that work differently, and that this difference is worth celebrating rather than concealing.

The Path Forward

Change requires action at multiple levels:

Individual Protection

- **Document everything**

Email yourself contemporaneous notes. Save every communication. Document every conversation. You're building evidence for the discrimination lawsuit you hope you'll never need to file.

- communications, meetings, performance feedback, and accommodation requests

- **Consult employment attorneys** before disclosing conditions or making formal requests

- **Build networks** with others who share similar challenges and experiences

- **Work with disability rights organizations** for support and resources
- **Consider carefully** whether disclosure is worth the professional risk

The sad reality: disclosing mental health conditions in tech is often career suicide. The calculation isn't whether to be authentic—it's whether you can afford the professional consequences of honesty.

Systemic Reform

- **Stronger ADA enforcement** with real penalties for violating companies
- **Mandatory reporting** on accommodation requests, approvals, and retention rates
- **Public databases** of company disability practices and discrimination records
- **Support for legal test cases** that establish stronger precedents
- **Social pressure** through media and professional networks to expose patterns

A Personal Note

As someone who went public with mental health challenges in tech, I've seen both the positive and negative responses. The positive responses were overwhelmingly from individual contributors who were grateful to see someone speaking openly about conditions they were hiding.

The negative responses were more subtle but more systematic—fewer speaking opportunities, more scrutiny of technical decisions, quiet exclusion from strategic conversations, and the persistent sense that I was now seen as "damaged goods" despite continued technical contributions

Speaking openly about mental health in tech has been professionally costly in ways that are hard to quantify but impossible to ignore. The support from individual contributors has been worth it, but the institutional response has been exactly what this article describes.

This article isn't speculation—it's documentation of patterns I've observed, experienced, and had reported to me by dozens of people over nearly a decade of mental health advocacy in tech.

My sensitivity to these discrimination patterns was heightened by [previous experience with systematic psychological manipulation](#)—recognizing how institutions, like individuals, can exploit trust and vulnerability for their own purposes while maintaining plausible deniability about their actions.

The Choice Before Us

Tech companies cannot continue claiming commitment to diversity while systematically eliminating employees who actually need accommodation. The current practice is morally bankrupt and strategically counterproductive.

Real inclusion requires more than benefit packages and awareness campaigns—it demands fundamental changes to performance evaluation, work environment design, and how we treat colleagues who think differently.

The choice is clear: either commit to genuine inclusion that accommodates real human differences, or stop the pretense

The pretense is almost worse than open discrimination. At least honest bigotry doesn't gaslight you into believing you're safe before destroying your career.

. Performing inclusion while practicing elimination is systematic betrayal of the most vulnerable people who trusted your public commitments

The betrayal is worse than outright hostility because it weaponizes trust and hope against the people who need support most. It's systematic gaslighting disguised as corporate social responsibility.

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We can build a tech industry that genuinely supports neurodivergent thinking and mental health differences. But first, we must stop pretending that rainbow logos constitute inclusion while quietly eliminating the people who need what we claim to offer.

This investigation of systematic discrimination builds from personal experience documented in [The Cost of Transparency](#), which examines discrimination patterns across healthcare, employment, and community contexts. The broader technological exploitation of psychological vulnerabilities appears in [The Algorithmic Mental Health Crisis](#), while the systematic destruction of human character through engagement optimization unfolds in [The Algorithm Eats Virtue](#). The identity fragmentation that makes authentic disclosure dangerous emerges in [Digital Chakras: Our Scattered Online Selves](#), and the pattern of idealistic groups betraying their stated principles connects to [When Values Eat Their Young](#). The foundational understanding of manipulation patterns that scale from personal relationships to institutional behavior develops in [The Unexpected Negative: A Narcissistic Partner](#). The personal journey and broader thematic exploration continue in [Mental Health Journey](#) and [Mental Health & Technology](#).

These patterns find their advocacy foundation in James Charlton's exploration of disability rights and self-advocacy in *Nothing About Us, Without Us*, connect to Steve Silberman's comprehensive history of autism and neurodiversity in *Neurotribes*, deepen through Bessel van der Kolk's investigation of trauma's workplace impact in *The Body Keeps the Score*, extend through Robert McRuer's cultural analysis of disability and discrimination in *Crip Theory*, and require engagement with Americans with Disabilities Act resources and complaint processes for practical protection.

"Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance."

"The ultimate measure of a person is not where they stand in moments of comfort, but where they stand at times of challenge."

"Justice is truth in action."