

ESSAY

## “Wobbling” on a Forklift: Precarious Inclusion in Corporate Organizations

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### Abstract

This essay explores and discusses inclusion in corporate organizations. Drawing on both autoethnographic data and ethnographic cases involving disabled workers, I argue that organizations fundamentally foster precarious inclusion, which results in greater exclusion rather than genuine inclusion. I support my argument through three core claims. First, corporate organizations predominantly adopt neoliberal values, which influence ideal worker standards and cause individuals perceived to deviate from these standards to experience social precarity. Second, neoliberal values are reinforced by Universal Design principles that help to standardize workplaces. Standardization can create moments of inaccessibility for disabled workers, leading them to make short-term, microactivist affordances while facing long-term physical and digital precarity. Third, even when organizations attempt to be inclusive, their efforts often manifest as doubled-edged swords that create an illusion of inclusiveness while masking ulterior corporate motives. Finally, I offer a brief perspective on addressing precarious inclusion through encouraging a reconsideration of the role that anthropologists can play.

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## **Keywords**

Inclusion, Corporate organizations, Organizational culture, Neoliberal values, Universal Design.

## **Introduction**

At the back of a 30-storey skyscraper in Hong Kong, where the industrial lift for garbage disposal was hidden, I sat upright on a standard office wheelchair with no arm rests. Right knee bent and left leg stretched out in a tightly bound rehabilitative brace, waiting to be rolled onto a forklift by two security guards. Since accessing my workplace through the main entrance required walking up a staircase, standing on an escalator, and finally taking a lift, using the back industrial lift that was accessible via forklift was deemed by the security guards as the least troublesome and best solution. However, as soon as they started pushing, my chair began wobbling. I also began panicking. One guard shouted, “sit still and hold tight!”. I responded, “I’m trying!” as I gripped the edges tightly to avoid falling whilst thinking to myself, oh is this seriously the best that can be done?!

The above vignette, which describes my journey to my former workplace after a knee surgery, illustrates the overlooked barriers in accessing public spaces that cause unexpected physical precarity. As a commonly publicized issue in Hong Kong (Choy 2022), such instances of inaccessible access (Robinson, Carew, and Groce 2025) not only reveal infrastructure gaps but also prompt a broader discussion on the concept of inclusion – a key topic in disability studies (Ferguson and Nusbaum 2012). In recent years, anthropologists have begun to lend grist to core discourses about disability and inclusion through social anthropological efforts (Ginsburg and Rapp 2020). From the ethnographic research conducted by Valeria Aydos and Helena Fietz (2017), Rebekah Cupitt et al. (2025), Michele Friedner (2015), and Stefanie Mauksch and Pascal Dey (2024), a key theme emerges primarily around the inclusion of disabled workers in various organizations. Through observing workplace interactions, these ethnographies shed light on how the presence of inclusion or its lack, often framed as exclusion, are shaped by the values and ideologies, especially neoliberalism, identified within the anthropology of organizations (Wright 1994). In this essay, considering these studies, I advance and build onto their foundational discussions. Specifically, I critically analyze inclusion and the extent to which inclusion leads to further exclusion at work.

I write this essay from the intersecting perspectives of a former employee with a temporary physical disability and a scholar trained in medical anthropology. Although I primarily construct my arguments from existing literature, it is crucial to recognize that my interpretation of this

material inevitably intertwines with my own lived experiences besides my academic repertoire. Thus, I embed my personal biography as an autoethnographic source throughout this essay, allowing almost two years of lived experience to intersubjectively shape the overarching tone and structure. Furthermore, to locate my exploration in a specific area, I delve into the context of corporate organizations, which I will refer to interchangeably as corporates, companies, and organizations. Moreover, apart from anchoring my essay in medical anthropology, I also extract insights from disability studies, sociology, psychology, and organizational research to develop a holistic discussion.

I begin by exploring how organizational factors influence inclusion in the first section. More specifically, I argue that corporate organizations predominantly uphold neoliberal values, which enforce ideal working standards that restrict the inclusion of diversity whilst creating social precarity and long-term stigma (Goffman 1963) for individuals perceived to deviate from these standards. Following this, I expand on the significance of Universal Design (UD) principles in supporting organizations to standardize neoliberal values across workplaces, irrespective of geographical location (Hamraie 2012). I argue that physical and digital spaces largely cater to able-bodied workers, undermining the access needs of disabled bodies whilst pushing them to make microactivist affordances (Dokumaci 2020) that reinforce precarity and possibly danger. Furthermore, I discuss the limits of internal corporate inclusion initiatives. Despite being framed as inclusive, I evince how they mask underlying intentions to reap corporate benefits and fulfil policy commitments rather than accommodate disabled workers. I reiterate the continued precarity created by these initiatives that consequently lead individuals to seek alternative employment in more supportive environments, even at the risk of exploitation (Friedner 2014). These arguments will enable me to defend my overarching thesis – that corporate organizations foster a liminal and juxtaposed state of precarious inclusion, which results in greater exclusion rather than genuine inclusion. Finally, I end on a reflective note, encouraging a reconsideration on the role of anthropologists and anthropology as a discipline in response to the presence of precarious inclusion.

### **Organizational Values and Neoliberalism**

Existing ethnographies showcase the contextualization of inclusion across a breadth of organizations and societies. For example, Friedner (2014; 2015) explores the inclusion of deaf workers in the technology and business sectors of India. In Brazil, Aydos and Fietz (2017) investigate the workplace dynamics in the commerce and professional services industry through their ethnography of Thomas, an intern diagnosed within the autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). Furthermore, Mauksch and Dey (2024)

focus on the working experience of blind massage therapists at an organization called Magic Fingers in Nepal's hospitality sector. Despite cross-cultural differences, these studies share a common approach in examining organizations by anchoring their interpretation of cultural issues in organizational values (Wright 1994). Collectively, their interpretations reveal the dominance of neoliberalism, an ideology which corporates often adopt in managing their workplace (Morningstar 2020). More specifically, neoliberalism typically manifests through the three values of independence, autonomy, and self-sufficiency (Ganti 2014). As described by an able-bodied employee in Friedner's (2015) ethnography, the environment within an organization which champions neoliberal values often feels "competitive and cut-throat" (2015: 114).

While neoliberalism has been conceptually debated, many anthropologists have also drawn upon it in studies of inclusion of disabled workers. Their rationale for utilizing this concept relates to two reasons proposed by Thomas Hylland Eriksen et al. (2015). First, organizations often establish ideal worker standards either by adopting neoliberal values directly (Aydos and Fietz 2017) or developing relevant competencies, such as leadership and communication proficiency (Mauksch and Dey 2024), that reference these values. The concept of neoliberalism can, therefore, provide a conceptual bridge for understanding the dynamics and tensions between individuals and organizations. In Friedner's (2015) ethnography, she echoes this perspective through observing how the pressure to showcase neoliberal values to secure employment resulted in deaf workers copying the information from each other's curriculum vitae. Second, even if ideal worker criteria are not formally established, individuals may still allude to neoliberal values if they are inherently rooted in the company's organizational culture (Eriksen et al. 2015; Grinker 2020). This logic is employed by Aydos and Fietz (2017) to interpret the comments from Thomas' co-workers about his work performance. Through their analysis, they conclude that, despite consistently fulfilling all his assigned tasks, Thomas was not offered a permanent job after his internship as he was perceived to deviate from the ideal independent, autonomous, and self-sufficient worker that his company inherently expects all permanent employees to exhibit.

By considering neoliberalism, I argue that it offers valuable insights into how neoliberal values influence inclusion within corporate organizations. Primarily, we can apply the logic shared by Nora Groce (2018) and other disability anthropologists concerning the socio-cultural effects on perceptions of impairment to similarly interpret how neoliberal values influence views toward inclusion at work. To illustrate this, I refer to two examples, starting with my personal experience followed by Aydos and Fietz's (2017) ethnography of Thomas to reinforce my claims. My experience relates to a work performance review that I had with a

manager roughly three months after my surgery. During this conversation, the manager remarked how I looked "more tired, less proactive" and was "taking much longer to recover" than a colleague who had returned to work around two weeks after a knee surgery. In response, I tried to justify my extended recuperation period by explaining how our surgeries were different because there is more than one type of knee surgery. Moreover, unlike this colleague, I was rehospitized for an unexpected complication that occurred after my surgery which delayed my recovery. Nevertheless, I still offered assurance that I would remain committed to my job, to which the manager replied: "I understand your situation, but everyone faces setbacks every so often in life which shouldn't affect your work. You simply need to get over them and move on." This experience highlights two insights. First, the manager's initial comment concerning my lack of proactiveness clearly alludes to the neoliberal value of self-sufficiency as a critical indicator of a satisfactory employee performance. Second, the concluding remark about how my condition is separate from my work relates to a belief raised by Tom Shakespeare, Nicholas Watson, and Ola Abu Alghaib (2017) upon reviewing Gordon Waddell and Mansel Aylward's (2010) version of the biopsychosocial (BPS) model. Essentially, the BPS model frames disabilities as common health issues that are matters of "conscious choice" (2010: 21) which individuals can manage through self-treatment. The model also highlights returning to work as a beneficial form of treatment. Thus, being included as an employee in a corporate organization that upholds neoliberal values means complying to the ideal worker standards established by these values, which influence how individuals are judged by their peers.

Thomas' case extends support for the influence of neoliberal values on peer perception at work. I highlight the comments mentioned by three different workers in his workplace that best illustrate my claim. The first is the HR Manager, who clearly felt that Thomas exhibited the opposite of independence as she said: "We do not have enough people to take care of him" (Aydos and Fietz 2017, para. 33). Second, despite describing Thomas' performance as in line with the job description for which he was originally hired to fulfil, one of his co-workers articulated that "[Thomas] had a problem connecting with people" (2017, para. 31). According to this co-worker, this behavior was internally viewed as problematic because, to be a permanent worker, one must also be a "team player" (2017, para. 31), which reinforces the value of autonomy within Thomas' workplace. Finally, Thomas' supervisor, Mr. Luis, emphasized the necessity of self-sufficiency, primarily by being vocal and proactively taking the initiative of handling additional tasks without being asked, as a key permanent worker criterion. However, he felt that Thomas did not satisfy this as "he remains quiet at his desk until someone comes and gives him more work to do" (2017, para. 26). Collectively, although Thomas and I experienced noticeably different circumstances, where I

had a temporary and visible disability whilst his ASD is lifelong and invisible, both cases demonstrate how our peers judged us through neoliberal values. This, I assert, reflects an important reality within corporate organizations – that fulfilling neoliberal values comes first, regardless of whatever disability one may have.

By prioritizing neoliberal values, I argue that corporate organizations inevitably restrict inclusion to a certain extent. This is because these values impose strict ideal worker standards, whether formalized or implied, which contradict inclusiveness by “[obscuring] forms of difference through privileging sameness” (Friedner 2015: 101-102). Particularly for individuals with ASD like Thomas who often find “unconventionalized social rules” (Belek 2018: 161) challenging to follow, neoliberal values create unnecessary barriers for workplace participation. Concurrently, the BPS model frames disabilities as common health issues that can lead to misunderstandings regarding the relationship between work and disabilities, which often bear hidden costs that make them more physically and mentally exhausting than they may seem (Miserandino 2020). This can further exacerbate misjudgments when corporates overlook the costs of disabilities on an individual’s performance, as evident in the comments from the manager at my former workplace. Ultimately, neoliberal values restrict inclusion to those that can fulfil the standards established by these values, while causing employees perceived to deviate from them to find themselves unfairly blamed as victims of peer misjudgment and the consequences of the BPS model.

Through restricting inclusion, I contend that neoliberal values in corporate organizations contribute to two consequences for disabled workers. The first is peer exclusion, which is a consequence of an individual perceived to deviate from the ideal worker standard everyone strives to follow. This is evident in Thomas’ case, as his colleagues typically “observed him from a distance” (Aydos and Fietz 2017) during lunchtime rather than sitting and dining with him. Second, at the very extreme, individuals can experience stigma (Goffman 1963) for consistent non-conformity. In Thomas’ case, he expressed this sensation most clearly when he questioned if the HR manager “was prejudiced towards ‘people with difficulties’” (Aydos and Fietz 2017, para. 29). Roy Grinker (2020) also adds that stigmatization can persist over time as organizations typically continue to promote neoliberal values irrespective of socio-economic and political changes. From my experience, I would argue that stigma can eventually evolve to become the standard that informs peer perceptions. This is why the affinity that had characterized my relationship with the manager prior to my surgery did not fully return. This stigma was further exacerbated by the fact that I temporarily utilized a crutch for better mobility, of which colleagues within my workplace interpreted as a symbol (Geertz 1973) of my non-conformity to our ideal

worker standards. The fact that they still openly questioned whether I had physically recovered even after I stopped using the crutch further reinforces the longevity of stigma that Grinker (2020) postulates. Collectively, exclusion and stigma contribute to a feeling of social precarity felt by individuals. This feeling becomes most apparent when their peers judge them as deviant from the ideal worker standards promoted by the neoliberal values within corporate organizations.

### **Universal Design and Microactivist Affordances**

To this point, I have demonstrated how corporate organizations, through imposing ideal worker standards, restrict inclusion. Subsequently, individuals who deviate from these standards may experience exclusion and long-term stigma which collectively contribute toward a feeling of social precarity among their peers. Given the dominance of neoliberal values, are there other ways in which they can perpetuate their influence on inclusion? In this section, I argue that neoliberal values are also embedded in the fabrication of the actual working spaces of corporate organizations. To make this argument, I first identify the relevant ethnographies that have explored such spaces followed by the concepts which they draw upon.

To date, there are two ethnographies in the existing literature that specifically address the working environment within an organization. Friedner’s (2015) exploration of the physical offices at the company Phillips Morgan and other India-based IT businesses is one example. Another example is Cupitt et al.’s (2025) investigation of video-mediated workspaces. In both cases, they either directly reference or allude to UD, an architectural concept that emphasizes “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design” (Mace 1998: 1). The principles of UD are internationally adopted in different settings, from residential estates to office buildings (Imrie 2012). Specifically for corporate organizations operating in multiple societies, UD guides the global implementation of a standardized office design. This is evident at Phillips Morgan, which Friedner (2015) describes as a “prestigious *multinational* ITES corporation [...] [with] gleaming office buildings” (2015: 107, my emphasis) boasting “open floor” (2015: 109) work environments. My former workplace also featured a similar open floor design, which was internationally adopted across all our offices. Furthermore, Cupitt et al. (2025) add that UD informs the design of digital technologies for online work and virtual conferencing.

By being “usable by all” (Mace 1998: 1), UD intuitively appears to sound inclusive of all user types. However, disability scholars argue that this framing is misleading – a point best illustrated by Cupitt et al. (2025). Leveraging Erin Durban’s (2021) claims regarding ableism, they reason

that UD typically guides designs to support able-bodied users, who are treated as the idealized or “default” users. Contrastingly, accommodations for diverse body types, particularly disabled bodies, are often neglected. To illustrate this view, they draw on their own autoethnographic account, which is detailed in Kelly F. Robinson, Mark T. Carew, and Nora E. Groce’s (2025) book, *Inaccessible Access*. Titled “*The Spotlighting Incident*” (Cupitt et al. 2025: 144), this account illustrates how conflicting access needs arose in a digital space, namely an online Zoom roundtable session, which is supposedly designed for all users. These needs surfaced when an attendee asked to turn on Zoom’s spotlighting feature, which is universally designed to fix or highlight the active speaker on every attendee’s screen. While spotlighting supported the attendee’s engagement in the conversation by making it easier to identify who was speaking, other participants shared different experiences. For example, Sara Acevedo, Cupitt’s co-author and a prominent autistic scholar, described how “disoriented” (2025: 145) she felt when the other attendees disappeared from her screen. This reaction was in reference to how spotlighting would hide the panelists that were not talking, as they liked to see who they were speaking with. Overall, the contrasting experiences of Acevedo and the attendee demonstrate how digital access and inaccess can be simultaneously created by the same design, thereby underscoring the limits of UD in real practice. Consequently, rather than delivering “seamless and [supporting] perfect communication” (2025: 141) as Zoom’s marketing promises, this account demonstrated how the platform’s design functioned in the opposite way, revealing how features that claim universality can still exclude certain users.

Furthermore, while UD originally proposed engaging disabled users in the design process, tapping into their disability expertise (Hartblay 2020) to produce user-centered accommodations, this active involvement has gradually faded over time. Aimi Hamraie (2017) argues that this shift stems from the way UD has conceptually evolved. He claims that the primary trigger was because Ronald Mace, the founder of UD, refocused the design process to favor the perspectives of manufacturing and marketing professionals, of whom he relied on to help UD obtain the level of public awareness required to become a global success. These professionals worked for organizations that espoused neoliberal values, which in turn influenced their promotion of UD. Specifically, to advance its marketability and the efficiency of implementation, they prioritized portraying UD as a design approach demanding little or no adaptation across societies. While this framing makes UD appear universal, Hamraie (2012) argues that it concurrently exposes a contradiction. This is because UD, in demanding little or no adaptation, essentially promotes a one-size-fits-all approach that neglects diverse user needs and, thus, undermines inclusiveness. Subsequently, without including disabled workers in the design process, spaces that leverage UD, such as corporate workplaces, typically provide minimal barrier-free wheelchair routes that

only accommodate the needs of one disabled group or, in the case of my former workplace, offer no support at all.

The criticisms toward UD suggest that, for corporate organizations following its principles to design their workplaces across geographies, global standardization seems to be the inevitable result rather than the inclusion of diverse bodies. Based on my former workplace, I would also assert that standardization enables organizations to retain a consistent design, ultimately reinforcing support for the same neoliberal values in all their offices. Additionally, given the “multinational” presence of Phillips Morgan (Friedner 2015: 107), it is likely that the company followed a similar standardized design approach across their offices as my former workplace did. Scholars outside of anthropology argue that such design standardization indirectly “nudge” employees toward ideal neoliberal worker standards (Thaler and Sunstein 2009). This is particularly evident in open floor layouts. By removing fixed structures, such as private desks and enclosed offices, open floor layouts place responsibility for managing space directly on individual employees (Roderick 2016). Subsequently, workers are expected to self-organize daily, from choosing where to sit to arranging work around that choice. In reinforcing these daily acts of self-management, open floor layouts normalize underlying expectations of autonomy and independence. Concurrently, the lack of physical barriers creates constant visibility, which also makes productivity performative; that is, employees feel they must *look busy* and continuously demonstrate efficiency. This sentiment was evident at Phillips Morgan, which also adopted an open floor layout as mentioned earlier, as able-bodied employees frequently spoke of “a general sense of pressure” (Friedner 2015: 114) for everyone to work hard and remain productive – comments that resonate with critiques of how standardized open floor environments intensify neoliberal demands for autonomy and individual efficiency.

Subsequently, standardization in corporate organizations creates side effects that disabled workers feel most prominently. Specifically, in moments when they attempt to access workspaces, they instead encounter inaccessible access (Robinson, Carew, and Groce 2025) as the environment is not designed to accommodate diverse body types. Such moments can occur in both physical spaces, as described in my introductory vignette, and digital spaces, especially through video-mediated platforms that are typically designed for supporting able-bodied workers (Cupitt et al. 2025). When inaccessibility occurs, Arseli Dokumaci (2020) argues that disabled workers may try to gain access through microactivist affordances; that is, subtle, daily acts of adjustments often through tinkering or improvisation with objects, routines, and spatial arrangements that enable situated agency. These affordances can manifest physically, as observed when I attempted to use

the back entrance to access my workplace, and digitally. Through this framing, Dokumaci expands on James Gibson's (1979) theory of affordances, showing how designing for a presumed "typical" user renders many possibilities inaccessible to people with diverse bodies or needs. Subsequently, improvised workarounds are triggered and inclusion is undermined.

Cupitt et al. (2025) explore digital affordances in another ethnographic study. Specifically, they highlight affordances in practice by observing group meetings across geographically dispersed offices of the Swedish Television network, SVT Teckenspråk, from 2010 to 2013. Due to an internal policy aimed at promoting inclusiveness, these meetings operated in a dual-language format that involves the live translation of Swedish Sign Language (SSL) into spoken Swedish. In practice, this format worked in single-office settings when all participants gather in the same space. However, when participants were physically spread across multiple offices, Cupitt et al. (2025) highlight how communication became repeatedly disrupted by technical issues. The root of these issues, they observe, came from the design of the video meeting technology which did not adequately support the dual-language policy. Subsequently, employees participating in dual-language meetings from different offices often enacted affordances to overcome technical issues. These affordances included readjusting the camera angle, ensuring it focused on the SSL signer's entire body as the original setup typically presented a partial view, to asking the signer to "move toward the center of [their] screen, directly in front of the camera" (2025: 152). Consequently, Cupitt et al.'s (2025) ethnography reveals that, despite the existence of a workplace policy that supports inclusiveness, design that assumes minimal adaptation can in practice restrict inclusion.

Furthermore, when peer support is unavailable, microactivist affordances become self-led. For example, I worked from home temporarily after my surgery. For the purposes of recovery, I had to keep my left leg constantly stretched out, meaning that sitting upright on a chair with my knees bent at 90 degrees to work was not feasible. Subsequently, I enacted an affordance by repurposing my sofa as my office space as it allowed me to access my laptop whilst keeping my leg stretched out. Similarly, in Friedner's (2015) ethnography, she observed how deaf workers independently formed "deaf bubbles" (2015: 110) for better information sharing within their designated workspace. As these group conversation circles require the ease of visual communication to form (Bauman 2024), it is likely that the workers had to self-tinker as their allocated space, which was an office made up of two conference rooms with ergonomic furniture and computers, had barriers that would not support their needs (Edwards and Harold 2014). The fact that support from able-bodied colleagues was not mentioned in the

ethnography further reinforces the likelihood that deaf workers enacted affordances independently.

While microactivist affordances provide disabled workers with access in inaccessible spaces, this relief is only temporary. This is because, from Friedner’s (2025) personal reflection on making affordances as a professor to teach in her classroom, having to self-tinker daily requires “actual material, physical, and emotional labor” (2025: 164) which can lead to exhaustion. I also realized that working 8.5 hours on my sofa each day was only temporarily beneficial and ultimately painful, which hindered my access to working for long hours. In certain scenarios, affordances also create danger for the individual attempting to gain access, which I personally experienced as described in my introductory vignette. Moreover, as Dokumaci (2020) explains, there is a limit on the number of possible affordances that the environment permits. Once this limit is reached, inaccessibility re-emerges and remains. By continuing to work in a standardized environment that does not accommodate diversity, this leads to physical and digital precarity. Precarity is further reinforced by the implementation of ideal neoliberal worker standards, where standardized office designs nudge individuals toward conformity whilst socially excluding and stigmatizing non-conformers (Thaler and Sunstein 2009). This was evident at Phillips Morgan, where deaf workers preferred socializing with other deaf colleagues in their designated space, whilst commenting how “the atmosphere became more formal and slightly awkward” (Friedner 2015: 110) whenever able-bodied workers entered. Cupitt et al. (2025) also explain how, apart from technology, “people, colleagues, and organizations can all collude to make the workplace accessible” (Cupitt et al. 2025: 154). Ultimately, corporate organizations reinforce precarity through standardizing workplace design to nudge individuals toward ideal worker standards rather than accommodating access and inclusion.

### **The Limits of Corporate Inclusion**

As I have discussed, neoliberal values and standardized workplace design influence inclusion, restricting corporate organizations from being inclusive to diverse bodies and accommodating their needs. While these issues are important, it is equally valuable to consider the efforts that organizations have made to encourage inclusion for a holistic evaluation and to identify possible limitations. Therefore, in this section, I specifically examine the corporate inclusion initiatives mentioned across all the ethnographic texts I have reviewed.

To analyze corporate inclusion initiatives, it is important to begin with an overview of their origins. In organizational research, corporate inclusion initiatives have been observed since the 1960s, typically within the private sector (Warren 2022). They appear as voluntary activities

aimed at addressing specific social and environmental goals relevant to an organization's industry and the wider community in which they operate. Promoting the inclusion of disabled individuals at work (Vijay et al. 2024) is an example of such a goal. While different initiatives exist, the most common approach is through hiring disabled talent. This trend has been notably embraced in the technology industry in response to the "Autism at Work" movement (Platzer 2019). This movement places emphasis on the claim that individuals falling within the ASD are predisposed to excel in certain technical, routine-oriented jobs. Multinational organizations including Google and Microsoft have actively embraced this movement.

Corporate inclusion initiatives may also be supported by specific inclusion policies. Such policies are evident in two forms. The first are internal policies developed by independent organizations. For example, as mentioned earlier, SVT Teckenspråk employed a dual-language policy to ensure that deaf employees could be included across their offices. Specific initiatives derived from this policy included requiring the presence of in-house SSL interpreters during work meetings and encouraging hearing employees to take SSL lessons to improve communication with deaf colleagues (Cupitt et al. 2025). In my former workplace, our internal inclusion policy led to the creation of monthly company-wide panels aimed at providing an opportunity for disabled workers to share their perspectives about work and life. While these examples differ in their approach, both ultimately aimed at cultivating awareness and support for disabled workers within an organization. The second type are industry-wide policies enforced by local governments. Under such policies, organizations are legally required to implement specific rules to satisfy inclusion expectations. For example, Brazil's Affirmative Action Law mandates that all private companies with over 100 employees must employ "2 to 5% of people with disabilities in their workforce" (Aydos and Fietz 2017, para. 10). This is supported by the government's *Living Without Limits* training program that Thomas took before his internship, which equips disabled workers with relevant skills and ensures that companies adhere to the hiring policy. Similar trends in hiring and vocational training are observed in India, where at least 5% of the private sector workforce must be disabled (Friedner 2015). Thus, regardless of whether they are internally or externally derived, inclusion policies help to guide the implementation of corporate inclusion initiatives aiming to support marginalized groups by providing employment and engagement opportunities.

Similarly to UD, while corporate inclusion initiatives sound inclusive, I argue that this is purely a surface level impression. This is because these initiatives are double-edged swords, often masking an underlying intention to gain "brownie points" (Friedner 2015: 122) through fulfilling disability hiring commitments. Doing this allows

organizations to reap three common benefits. The first is a valuable source of cheap and immobile labor as disabled workers generally have limited employment opportunities compared to able-bodied workers (Friedner 2015). This can be supported in Thomas’ case, where his company offered him a part-time job to comply with Brazil’s hiring policy and attain cost efficiency by splitting the workload of one employee across multiple disabled workers (Aydos and Fietz 2017). The second benefit is improved Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). In my former company and at Phillips Morgan (Friedner 2015), both organizations have won national awards in recognition of showcasing their disability inclusion policies in action through relevant initiatives. The third benefit is improved public identity through conveying the organization’s commitment to philanthropy and inclusion to the public. At Magic Fingers, which was frequently marketed as “a pioneering example of disability inclusion” (Mauksch and Dey 2024: 629), the founders deliberately leveraged this perception to attract significant private donations from British funders and to build a supportive client base. Therefore, exactly *who* benefits from these corporate inclusion initiatives? Clearly, it seems that the organizations are the ultimate breadwinners.

Furthermore, corporates may utilize the voices of disabled workers in company-wide discussion panels as part of their inclusion initiatives. While this seems to encourage the possibility of “nothing about us without us” (Charlton 1998), a movement calling for the direct involvement of people with disabilities in making decisions that concern them, Friedner (2015) cautions the underlying motive of engaging disabled employees. She highlights how companies frequently use disabled employees to provide inspiration for able-bodied workers. In doing so, companies encourage able-bodied employees to work harder towards fulfilling the ideal neoliberal standards rather than to truly attend to the needs of disabled workers. To develop this critique, Friedner (2015) draws on an encounter she witnessed at a different organization, where disabled employees were intentionally spotlighted by their employer at an awards ceremony. At this event, disabled workers were awarded “best buddy” (2015: 117) prizes for excelling in teamwork and for being inspirational to able-bodied workers. The able-bodied workers responded with thunderous applause, remarking that they “[felt] good about” (2015: 117) how inclusive their company was. In contrast, the deaf workers were less enthusiastic, concerned instead about being passed over for promotions. This stark difference in reactions underscores how companies may use disabled employees strategically as sources of inspiration rather than genuinely attending to their needs. Moreover, by spotlighting disabled workers as inspirational to able-bodied workers, this further reinforced the segregation between the two groups rather than being inclusive to both. This ultimately enables organizations to

continue upholding the ideal neoliberal standards which all employees are expected to follow, whilst projecting a more inclusive public identity.

Consequently, I contend that even when organizations attempt to be inclusive, this is largely an illusion masking an underlying motive to reap corporate benefits through fulfilling disability hiring commitments. This was the case for Thomas, whose company “did not inform the employees [about his] specificity” (Aydos and Fietz 2017, para. 30) – critical information that could have helped his colleagues interact with him more effectively. Rather than exploring his strengths, such as his exceptional ability to memorize highly detailed information, the company instead placed him into a routine and mundane product tagging role. Through this arrangement, the company met the minimum regulatory requirements in Brazil, where private companies with over 100 employees must have “2 to 5%” (Aydos and Fietz 2017, para. 10) of their workforce comprised of people with disabilities, and gained certain tax exemptions, all without genuinely considering how Thomas could contribute meaningfully.

Subsequently, by being part of an unaccommodating environment, I argue that the type of inclusion created by corporate organizations is purely a state of precarious inclusion. One that is liminal (Turner 2011: 95) and juxtaposed. Neither fully excluded, as individuals have met the basic hiring requirements needed to be part of the workforce, nor genuinely included, as this necessitates accommodations through disability expertise that clash with workplace standardization. In other words, precarious inclusion is essentially like “Wobbling on a Forklift”. Metaphorically, it is comparable to being on the unstable chair that I described in my introductory vignette. Ethnographically, it is identical to how the female massage therapists at Magic Fingers often felt. This is because the founders expected them to uphold neoliberal values by self-initiating small talk with their clients, even though they knew about but chose to ignore the Nepalese gender norms that contrastingly nurture females to be obedient and modest (Mauksch and Dey 2024). This precarity is best verbalized by an interlocutor named Gunita who, despite demonstrating the necessary skills to be hired, claimed that she “had to learn to be friendly” (2024: 635) in an apologetic response to the founders, reinforcing her conflicted position of being hired but not fully included.

Is precarious inclusion the final fate for disabled workers in all organizations? For those who remain in corporate organizations which predominantly champion neoliberal values and standardized designs, I argue that this is typically the case given that such workplaces simply embed employees rather than accommodate them. For those who are unable to withstand precarity, Friedner (2014) argues that they often leave to seek employment in alternative organizations. In a separate study, she follows a different group of deaf workers that found

employment solace at a multi-level marketing company in India called Silver Venture. While such companies promoted pyramid schemes that are typically considered to be exploitative and unethical (Koehn 2001), deaf workers were nevertheless attracted to join them as they offer a space for “deaf development” (Friedner 2014: 502). Conceptualized as a collective effort to establish support for all deaf people and promote public appreciation for sign language, deaf workers at Silver Venture could cultivate deaf development by engaging with and recruiting like-minded members of the local deaf community. This contrasts with the environment in corporate organizations that typically segregate able-bodied workers from disabled workers, especially since disabled workers, unlike able-bodied workers, must undergo vocational training before they are hired. Moreover, despite paying 30,000 rupees (US\$500) to join the company and eventually losing this amount after Silver Venture was shut down due to fraud allegations, the deaf workers still appreciated the opportunity to engage in deaf development (Friedner 2014). Therefore, to escape the precarity created by corporate organizations, disabled workers seem to be willing to seek alternative employment elsewhere, even at the risk of being exploited.

### **Moving Beyond Precarity**

The presence of precarious inclusion in corporate organizations presents an opportunity to reconsider how anthropologists may play a role and how such experiences might help to shape ongoing discourses within our discipline. I respond to these questions in this final section, starting with an overview of how anthropologists have traditionally been positioned. Owing to our training, anthropologists often adopt an observational role within organizational contexts, combining first-hand immersion with interpretation (Jordan 2019). However, in recent times, the call for an applied approach to anthropology that emphasizes a shift “from words to action” (Podjed, Gorup, and Mlakar 2016: 53) has received growing support. Primarily, this movement rests on the argument that anthropological thinking and practice hold value in non-traditional domains. Prime examples of such domains are those focused on problem solving, including design thinking processes (Pullum 2022) and entrepreneurship (Koycheva 2025). Moreover, the outcomes of applied anthropology have been increasingly showcased and discussed at global conferences, reinforcing the relevance of anthropology as a discipline with real-world impact (Podjed et al. 2020; Tivasuradej 2020).

In recognition of the applied anthropology movement, I argue that there is value in taking an applied approach to address precarious inclusion within corporate organizations. This approach would involve an interdisciplinary collaboration between anthropologists, employees, and practitioners, primarily those responsible for making decisions on

workplace policies and initiatives in their company. This form of collaboration facilitates a three-way relationship with anthropologists utilizing their skills in interpretation and building rapport to serve as intermediaries, acting as both translators of employees' perspectives and advisors to practitioners. In the case of this essay, anthropologists within this relationship would help to amplify the voices of disabled workers experiencing precarious inclusion and ground actionable recommendations in the disability expertise they share. On this basis, these recommendations can be used to support practitioners in designing new policies or adjusting existing initiatives to better respond to key needs and pains. This would also allow organizations to better involve disabled workers in making decisions and ensure their perspectives inform corporate inclusion initiatives and even workplace design. In turn, this can encourage a balance between necessary standardization and meaningful accommodation to benefit all employees, irrespective of their backgrounds and skillsets. Through this, corporates can become better equipped to move beyond precarious inclusion and toward more genuine expressions of inclusion.

As I mentioned in my introduction, my primary goal throughout this essay has been to critically analyze inclusion and the extent to which inclusion leads to further exclusion at work. In arguing for the support of an applied anthropological approach to address precarious inclusion, I acknowledge speaking beyond the scope that I originally described, and my arguments may elicit contrasting reactions concerning our discipline and roles as anthropologists. In truth, I do not argue against anthropology's descriptive tradition nor am I proposing that we abandon our observational roles. Instead, I am encouraging an alternative use of thick description (Geertz 1973), one that, when conveyed responsibly, has the potential to contribute to broader impact in society. But why, you may ask, would this be of value to anthropology as a discipline specifically? My response to this is two-fold. First, anthropologists often encounter questions regarding the nature of our discipline and, more importantly, its practical application (Vangkilde, Breslin, and Lex 2025). In my own experience, such questions typically emerge in conversations outside of academic contexts, often with industry practitioners. While there are certainly multiple ways to respond, I have personally found that demonstrating how anthropological thinking applies to practitioners' concerns best explains its logic and value. Thus, an applied anthropological approach offers a clear way to confront the existential questions frequently encountered in our careers. Second, conveying anthropology in a relevant way to practitioners can help us to secure wider recognition for our discipline. This can lead to new avenues for ethnographic research within corporate organizations, which in turn helps to extend ongoing discourses regarding organizational culture and other relevant topics. Consequently, by helping to translate employee views and advise on actions, anthropologists can empower organizations

to move beyond precarity while simultaneously driving disciplinary discussions forward. Ultimately, such engagement ensures that anthropology itself remains included in critical conversations that shape our world.

## **Conclusion**

In this essay, I have primarily demonstrated how corporate organizations shape inclusion in three dimensions. First, corporates primarily establish ideal worker standards based on neoliberal values. These standards influence peer perceptions, leading those who are perceived to deviate from the ideal to experience blame, social precarity, and long-term stigma. Second, by adopting UD principles, corporates reinforce neoliberal values consistently across their offices through employing a standardized design that nudges employees towards ideal behaviors. These designs typically cater to the singular, able-bodied worker rather than leveraging disability expertise to accommodate diverse body types. This leads to moments of inaccessibility when disabled workers try to access their workspaces. While microactivist affordances can help, their relief is only temporary, leading individuals to long-term inaccessibility that further reinforces physical and digital precarity. Third, even when corporates attempt to be inclusive, their inclusion initiatives essentially manifest as double-edged swords, which mask underlying intentions to reap corporate benefits by creating an illusion of inclusiveness to disabled workers. Using disabled workers to inspire able-bodied workers further reinforces the segregation between the two groups whilst enabling corporates to continue maintaining their neoliberal work standards. As a result, the type of inclusion corporate organizations essentially create is, I argue, a liminal and juxtaposed state of precarious inclusion. One that feels neither fully exclusionary, since individuals have met formal hiring criteria, nor genuinely inclusionary, as this necessitates accommodation which conflicts with standardization. In short, the sensation of precarious inclusion is like "Wobbling on a Forklift". For those who are unable to withstand this instability, they often leave to find alternative employment that provide better collective support, even at the risk of being exploited. However, for those who remain, they must ultimately endure continued precarity that resembles the sensation one feels when sitting on a wobbling and standardized office chair to access an inaccessible corporate workplace.

By discussing precarious inclusion, I also attempted to weave in a brief perspective on how anthropologists could play a role in addressing this. Specifically, I illustrated how an applied approach invites anthropologists to move from words to action, positioning scholars at the center of a three-way collaborative relationship with the opportunity to act as both translator and advisor. Through fostering collaboration, I also

highlighted how organizations can benefit from the support of anthropologists, particularly in shaping critical decisions to enhance inclusion. Furthermore, while the necessity of applying anthropology in real-world practice is debatable to an extent, I rationalized my perspective by presenting two points of consideration that I encouraged scholars to reflect on. These points endeavored to articulate the value that taking an applied approach can offer, namely by highlighting how anthropological thinking can help practitioners address organizational challenges concerning inclusion. In return, anthropologists can gain an insight on the real-world relevance of their skills and further advance disciplinary discussions concerning corporate organizations. Consequently, I hope that my essay has not only deepened the anthropological understanding of corporate organizations through the lens of inclusion but also provided scholars with food for thought on their contributions as anthropologists. From my experience, sitting on the wobbling office chair is unsettling, yet it is possible to address precarity through a collaborative effort that anthropologists have the skills to support. Thus, by helping to amplify the voices of those facing precarious inclusion and working with practitioners to drive meaningful change, anthropology as a discipline can sustain its continued relevance and be actively included in dialogues influencing the collective future of our world.

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