BeAccessible

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Measured Against a Norm

Disability and Leadership Assessment

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Key findings in brief

Leadership assessment has moved from measuring skills to measuring "mindset" and "potential", but disability has been left out of the evidence that these tools are fair.

1. **No published disability fairness data.** Across nine assessment providers and distributors reviewed, we found no publicly available, disability-specific fairness results for any leadership assessment tool.
2. **Fairness claims stop at gender, race and age.** Where providers publish fairness claims, disability is usually absent.
3. **Access has improved; fairness has not been shown.** Several test publishers offer screen-reader support and adjustment guidance. Being able to take a test is not the same as being scored fairly by it.
4. **The risk is real.** New research and formal complaints suggest standard selection tools can disadvantage autistic, Deaf and other disabled candidates.
5. **Mindset tools carry extra risk.** Traits such as composure, rapport and self-confidence can be read differently for disabled people with the same ability.

6. **In South Africa, the burden sits with the employer.** Section 8 of the Employment Equity Act requires assessments to be fair and unbiased against any group. Employers cannot rely on evidence that is not available to them.

Background: the rise of mindset assessment

Executive search firms now sell the idea that a leader's mindset matters more than their CV. That shift brings personality and potential testing to the top of organisations.

The argument is that fast, technology-driven change demands humility, curiosity and agility in leaders, and that a CV cannot show these. Some firms now profile candidates against leadership "mindset" or "agility" models, scored with a commercial personality questionnaire.

Other firms take similar approaches. Korn Ferry measures traits, drivers and learning agility (Korn Ferry). Egon Zehnder assesses curiosity, insight, engagement and determination (Egon Zehnder). The message to employers is consistent: measure the person, not just the record.

The question this brief asks is simple. When these tools measure a leader against a norm, has anyone shown that disabled leaders are measured fairly?

What we reviewed and how

In October 2026, BeAccessible reviewed publicly available information from nine assessment providers and distributors. We looked for four things: accessible test formats, published fairness data that includes disability, adjustment guidance, and public complaints or concerns.

Assessment providers and distributors reviewed

Group	Providers reviewed
Executive search firms	A global search firm's mindset model, Korn Ferry (KF4D and related tools), Egon Zehnder (Potential model)
Test publishers	Saville (Wave), Hogan, SHL, Aon (ADEPT-15)

Group	Providers reviewed
AI-driven interviewing	HireVue
South African distributor	JvR Africa Group

We also reviewed recent peer-reviewed research, public complaints, and the legal position in South Africa, the European Union, the United States and the United Kingdom. This was a desk review. We did not test platforms hands-on or request unpublished data from vendors.

Findings

1. Disability is missing from published fairness evidence

None of the nine providers and distributors reviewed publishes disability-specific fairness results for a leadership tool. One search firm's published fairness claim for its leadership tool, for example, covers gender, race and age, and does not mention disability. This matches a wider pattern: US regulators noted in 2022 that vendors' de-biasing work had focused on race and gender rather than disability (Reed Smith).

2. Access has improved more than fairness

Several publishers now offer real support. Hogan provides a screen-reader compatible portal and untimed personality questionnaires. SHL publishes adjustment guidance across six disability areas. Saville publishes UK disability guidelines (JvR Africa Group, SHL, Saville).

But access is not the same as fairness. Hogan itself does not recommend its timed cognitive tests for neurodivergent people, because they have not been validated for that group. SHL describes its platform as working toward WCAG 2 AA rather than meeting it (SHL).

3. Research shows standard tools can disadvantage disabled candidates

A 2026 study in *PLOS One* compared 107 employed autistic adults with 99 neurotypical adults. Autistic respondents scored lower on personality, cognitive and situational judgement tests. The situational judgement gap remained after allowing for ability and personality, and personality scores were much less reliable for autistic respondents (Whelpley and colleagues). The authors describe the findings as preliminary.

4. Complaints are emerging

- In 2024, the ACLU asked the US Federal Trade Commission to investigate Aon's ADEPT-15 personality test, alleging it disadvantages autistic people and people with mental health conditions. Aon disputes this (HR Dive).
- In 2025, a complaint on behalf of a Deaf Indigenous employee alleged she was refused human captioning in a video interview for promotion. Intuit and HireVue deny the claims (HR Dive).

These are allegations, not court findings.

5. Mindset measures carry a specific risk

Leadership mindset tools score traits such as composure, self-confidence, rapport, engagement and interpersonal savvy. Anxiety, autism, Deafness, speech differences and some physical impairments can affect how a person answers questions about these traits, or how they come across, without affecting their ability to lead. This is our analysis of the risk; no named tool has been tested for it publicly.

6. Search firms publish the least

Test publishers that sell to many employers have written disability guidance. The executive search firms that sell mindset and potential models at the most senior levels have published the least about disability. That is where decisions about who leads are made.

Why this matters in South Africa

South African employers carry the legal burden of showing their assessments are fair, and disability is part of that test.

- **Section 8 of the Employment Equity Act** prohibits psychological testing and similar assessments unless they are valid and reliable, can be applied fairly to all employees, and are not biased against any employee or group (Acts Online).
- **HPCSA certification no longer settles the question.** The certification requirement was removed from 1 January 2025 (same source). What matters now is the evidence.
- **Reasonable accommodation applies to selection.** The Code of Good Practice on the Employment of Persons with Disabilities covers recruitment and assessment.
- **Disability targets need a fair pipeline.** Employers working towards disability targets in their employment equity plans cannot meet them if senior selection tools quietly screen disabled people out.
- **Global rules are converging.** The EU AI Act will treat AI used to screen, evaluate or promote people as high-risk from 2 December 2027 (Mondaq). South African multinationals and the global vendors they buy from will be affected.

Recommendations

For employers and HR teams

1. List every assessment used for leadership hiring, promotion and talent pools.
2. Ask each vendor for written evidence of fairness for disabled people, not only for gender, race and age.
3. Have each tool tested by disabled people using assistive technology.
4. Offer adjustments before the test starts, and a non-test alternative such as a structured interview or work sample.
5. Never use a single assessment score alone to rule someone out of a leadership role.

For assessment vendors and search firms

1. Publish adverse impact results for disabled candidates, broken down where sample sizes allow.
2. Include disabled and neurodivergent people in norm groups and validation studies, and report the numbers.
3. Test whether your tools measure the same thing for disabled and non-disabled people.
4. Commit to WCAG 2.2 conformance, independently audited, for every candidate-facing platform.

For standards bodies and regulators

1. Name disability explicitly in fairness requirements for employment assessments, including in national AI standards now being developed.
2. Require that fairness evidence for employment assessments be available to the employers who rely on it.

Limitations

- This is a desk review of public information in October 2026. Providers may hold disability data they have not published; where we say "not found", we mean not publicly available.
- We did not test platforms hands-on or review material behind log-ins or paywalls.
- We found no South African research on leadership assessments and disability. That gap is itself a finding.
- Complaints cited are allegations, not court findings.

Sources

- Korn Ferry: technical manuals
- Egon Zehnder: Understanding potential
- Saville Assessment: Disability guidelines for UK clients (PDF)
- SHL: Disability guidelines FAQs

- SHL: Accessibility on client systems
- JvR Africa Group: How global assessment leaders approach accessibility (December 2025)
- Whelpley and colleagues, PLOS One (2026): Using selection tests to hire autistic employees
- HR Dive: ACLU complaint against Aon
- HR Dive: Intuit and HireVue complaint
- Reed Smith: EEOC guidance on AI under the ADA
- Acts Online: Employment Equity Act, section 8
- Mondaq: EU Digital Omnibus on AI enters into force

About the author

Fadila Lagadien is an AI-Enabled Accessibility & Disability Inclusion Specialist and the founder of BeAccessible, based in Cape Town. She has more than 20 years of policy development experience, including involvement in drafting the Employment Equity Act and advisory work with the International Labour Organization. Her MBA research on employment barriers in South Africa produced the 3-Gap Framework, which identifies perception, commitment and systems barriers to disability inclusion.

BeAccessible's Inclusive Hiring Assurance package helps organisations show that the way they hire and promote is fair to disabled people. It combines an Employment Equity Act disability compliance check with an audit of every assessment they use. Contact hello@beaccessible.co.za.

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Findings rely only on published information and could understate the work of providers who hold unpublished evidence. That is why this brief says "not publicly available" rather than "does not exist".

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