

Transcript: Establishing a Disability Friendly Corporate Culture; Thomas Foley. AccessibilityPlus 2022.

Hello and welcome to Establishing a Disability Friendly Corporate Culture.

My name is Thomas Foley.

And I am the Executive Director of the National Disability Institute in Washington DC.

A little bit about our organization. We're the first and only disability organization that works exclusively on issues of financial inclusion and economic empowerment for folks with disabilities. And so a key element of our work is around employment, not only helping folks with disabilities go back to work after being separated from the workforce, but also working with corporations, governments to better include folks with disabilities in their workforce.

It's an absolute privilege to be here today.

Really excited to be able to work with all of you to build more inclusive employment outcomes, inclusive of people with disabilities.

So without further ado, let's go to the next slide.

So many companies want to become a workplace that is welcoming to people with disabilities. They want to be recognized by the community as a place where people with disabilities want to work and choose to work.

And they want to see people with disabilities, you know, progress up the corporate ladder to become senior leaders.

And this is all part of sort of a broader DEI or a diversity, equity, and inclusion movement.

For a number of years, disability really wasn't part of this landscape, but over the last few years, disability has really joined in the DEI community as a group of folks who have been underrepresented in the past and bring tremendous value to not only the corporate workforce, but government and nonprofit as well. But what we're really talking about is bringing talented people in who bring a diverse perspective that lead to a better financial bottom-line for corporations.

And so just a couple of things to stress here. One is the key to doing this is intentionality, and that's really the key around any inclusion work or diversity work. As long as we're going to do it, we might as well be really intentional about this.

And we're also coming at this from an equity lens through an inclusion lens and also, I'll put forth the word belonging. So this isn't about compliance. This is making sure that we're bringing new people in who have talent, something to bring to the workforce, and we want to do it in a really sort of authentic way.

And I just want to give you an example. I was talking with a colleague yesterday, and she was going on about how she really appreciated a particular coffee chain. And the reason they did that is right around the corner from her house there is there's a store where everybody knows sign language. And this organization also does a lot of work with veterans. And, you know, there's a representative authenticity that, you know, disability inclusion can bring to the diversity, equity, and inclusion movement. And you know, the disability community also knows when people are really interested in including them or if it's just something they're doing to check a box.

So I think what we want to talk about today is really being authentic about it. Really doing it intentionally. And making sure that everybody who can contribute is put in the best position to succeed. I think probably anyone watching this knows that one of the most important resources in a corporation is its people that includes folks with disabilities. And so we want to make sure that, you know, from the beginning of employment to when somebody leaves, we're making the most inclusive, welcoming, and belonging atmosphere that we can.

So why don't we start at the beginning? Let's go to the next slide and talk about recruitment promotional materials and job descriptions. So, you know, when you're trying to bring somebody in, what does that recruitment messaging really say?

So, you know, 15 years ago, maybe more, a lot of times, you know, at the end of a job, a job ad, you'd see some of that EEOC language. Right? You know, ABC Company is an equal opportunity employer. And then the long list of folks that it included. And, you know, maybe it was the last two sentences at the end of a job description and it just it really, really became sort of a boilerplate sort of thing.

And so one of the things we've been seeing recently in the past, recently in the immediate past, is that, you know, companies are starting to move some of this language further up the job ad. And also building in language around diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. Really making statements that while we are an equal opportunity employer, etc., etc., we are particularly interested in reaching out to diverse candidates with diverse abilities to fulfill our roles. And I have to say, as somebody with a disability, I'm completely blind. You know, this is something that I've noticed in my own job search.

If there's just a little boilerplate language at the end. Okay, great. You know, people are probably doing that because they think they need to.

But boy, if it's something that's mentioned early or more importantly, or if it's something that's mentioned often, that's something that's really going to get my attention and attention of folks with disabilities. It is it really conveys the message that this corporation or whoever is really interested in reaching new talent from the disability community. Another issue to pay attention to is does the outreach get to where qualified people with disabilities are going to see it?

So one of the examples I like to use here is, you know, there are a couple associations of blind lawyers. So, you know, you can put a listing out on your own corporate website. But, you know, if you needed a lawyer and you want to recruit people with disabilities, there are, you know, disabled lawyers' associations online that you can find. Another great thing is to look for disability groups on LinkedIn or Facebook. And in that way, I mean, you're directly reaching out to these communities with with two messages. One is, hey, we have a job and we want you to see it. And two is, wow, you're making the effort to really reach out to my community. And that's something that, you know, is going to register for me, something I'm going to tell my friends about. And we're going to know that XYZ Corporation has a genuine interest in disability.

So job descriptions. Let's talk about that for a minute.

So we want to make sure that the job description captures the work that is to be performed and make sure that it's also free of unnecessary issues or requirements for work that's not being performed.

So you've probably seen this. Must be able to lift 50 pounds. Must have a driver's license. Must be willing to travel. And so, you know, when we're reviewing, we've helped many, many companies review their job descriptions. And one of the things we hear all the time is "oh, I have no idea if this job requires any lifting. It's just been in there for the last 15 years. So we leave it in there." Or, "you know, this person won't drive. But, you know, that's sort of been left over from again, from a historical perspective."

So we want to really make sure that, you know, we are using job descriptions that are really tied to the jobs being performed. You know, I can't think of many roles at this point that would require lifting 50 pounds. You know, driver's licenses is obviously going to leave out anybody who's visually impaired or blind. And is that really the intent in the job description when it comes to those qualifications?

So just thinking proactively about everything in a job description.

Is it really necessary? Or is this just sort of a holdover from back in the day?

And also, you know, sometimes you know, you can make active choices around qualifications. We'll talk about that a little bit more later. But, you know, we want to use every opportunity we can to make job applicants realize that there are accommodations possible and that the employer is willing to make those accommodations if the person is qualified for the position.

So let's go to the next slide and talk about sort of engagement in the screening and interviewing.

So I think one of the things that's important to talk about is really making sure that there's an awareness and an understanding of disability.

So kind of with our last example. Well, you know, it says it needs a driver's license. Okay. Well, a lot of people don't have drivers... A lot of people with disabilities don't have driver's licenses. So is that really something that's required?

But also, you know, when it comes to the interview process, like many people, many people with disabilities may not interview well, but they might do the job really well. So I just want to tell you a little story around this.

A number of years ago we were doing some direct service with somebody who was on the Autism spectrum. They did not interview particularly well. And so this was made aware to the employer ahead of time. And we made some accommodations to the interview process.

And the person got through the interview. And, you know, what it led to was somebody getting a job. And it was a very technical job.

And it was the sort of technical job that a lot of people really don't like doing. Right? But this was right up this kid's alley. He really enjoyed the very, very specific pieces, you know, looking at numbers, where the numbers belong, where the numbers didn't belong. Even really like finding errors in other people's work. So in a big database where there might be 50, 60 errors per person, his work usually came out with maybe one or two errors.

So one of the things he was able to do, and he grew into this over time, was he was able to sort of go through other people's work, make those corrections and, you know, really climb the corporate ladder from a technical perspective because he was just so good at that job.

So what we really want to make sure of in an interview process is that we're getting to the functions in that job, you know, not we don't want to hire people who interview well. We want to hire people who do the job well and have the skill set and the motivation to do it.

Another big important thing in interviews is making sure that, you know, there is an opportunity for people to request accommodations. So, you know, how will applicants know how to ask for an accommodation? How will they know it's okay to ask? You know, it's often really important to make sure that we talk about making accommodations in multiple ways in multiple, multiple contexts. But you know, what we think of around accessibility and accommodations is making sure that, you know, it's not really an accommodation.

It's really a productivity enhancement. Right? We want to make sure that people, again, are put in the best position to A) be successful and B) contribute to the corporate bottom-line. You know, this reminds me of an example. A friend of mine, who's also blind, talks about, you know, she talks at big national conferences. Do you remember when we all used to go to big national conferences? And she'd be in a big ballroom, you know, maybe three stories underground, and she'd look up and she'd say, "these lights that are turned on in this room are an accommodation for people who can see." She certainly didn't need them, but everybody else in the room did.

And so that's a productivity tool.

That's a productivity enhancement. And so when we're thinking about making accommodations, I think of it more as a way to make sure that that employee is put in the best position to be successful and contribute to the bottom-line. It's also really important to talk with the applicant about what works for them. Again, I'm completely blind, and a lot of times I show up at something and someone hands me, you know, an inch or two of Braille.

Oh, that's great. Nobody talked to me about it. And I have a confession to make. I don't read any Braille. So, you know, what might have been a good idea is to talk to me beforehand to see what works for me, because sometimes we all make assumptions, but let's not make assumptions and make things any harder on ourselves. You know, ask the person what works for them.

Ask them to be part of the solution. And oftentimes, you know, being part of the solution leads to, you know, productivity enhancements, not only for that individual but for other people with similar disabilities and something that can be learned through learned from an HR perspective as well.

So let's go to the next slide. Inclusion and accommodation. So again, what we're talking about is becoming welcoming and accessible.

And I would also say, you know, creating a sense of belonging has... You know, you can make sure that a door is open. But, you know, it's important that people feel a sense of belonging at work as well. You know, not only because it makes it easier to go to work. You have a more cheerful employee but as an employee who's having fun at work is also going to be a lot more productive.

So obviously, we need to make the workplace more physically accessible. Not only for employees, but for customers as well. So, you know, if the entrance to the establishment for someone who is a wheelchair user, is the door through a loading dock. Well, that's not very welcoming. So, you know, we want to make sure that everybody has, you know, equal access. Right? And a sense of belonging.

I'm not sure that I would have much of a sense of belonging if I had to come in a separate door. So this a lot of this is just sort of common sense, but making sure that, you know, bathrooms are accessible, hallways are wide enough for a

wheelchair to get through, you know, all the sorts of stuff that many of us have heard over the years. But, you know, it just creates a more welcoming, inclusive, and belonging environment. Technology.

So we want to make sure that all technologies are accommodating and available to everyone.

So, you know, a lot of times we forget about this and it turns out that maybe, you know, with the expense software that we use isn't accessible. Or the timesheet software that we use might not be accessible. You know, even though oftentimes an outside vendor is used for background check. I've run into this myself. An organization was excited to bring me on board and they sent me to the background check.

And the background check website was completely inaccessible. And, you know, that makes it a lot more harder to onboard somebody, especially if it's something you're trying to do quickly.

From the accessibility standpoint, too, but you also want to make sure that the websites, other internal processes are accessible and that the external facing is accessible as well. I had a great story about this in the last election. I was very interested to support a particular candidate and I went to their website and I got about a third of the way through the website trying to donate some money.

And it just didn't work with screen reading software. And I just want to take a step back to say that again. I was trying to make a donation on a website to support someone, and it didn't work with, you know, screen reader technology. I was literally, literally trying to give them money and it was making it impossible for me to do that. And that's how important accessibility is. So, you know, make it easy for me to give you money. Accessibility key element there.

In addition, we want to build flexibility into organizational, create procedures and processes.

I think one of the biggest examples of this is that everybody has seen during COVID is working from home and much more flexible schedules. For years and years and years, people with disabilities have been saying, "hey, you know, it's much easier for me to work from home rather than come into the office every day. Is there any flexibility around that?"

And, you know, some employers were able to work with that, but many of them said no. And then it happened. And one of the things we've seen is all of a sudden everybody was working from home and it became much more acceptable.

So this kind of flexibility, you know, built-in ahead of time is key. And, you know, this working from home and this much more flexible working environment. Maybe that's working from home.

Maybe that's working a flex schedule, maybe early in the morning or late at night. You know, if it works for an organization. One of the things we've seen is, even in a pandemic, we're beginning, we've seen some of the highest employment rates of folks with disabilities in the United States history. The workforce participation rate is higher than it's ever been. And this is just as we're beginning to come out of a pandemic. But we've set up flexible procedures and flexible schedules so people with disabilities can work from home. And that's made a huge difference.

But even if we're in the office, you know, one of the one of the traditional pieces around this is, you know, nobody's allowed to keep food at their desk. And that's just a rule for everybody.

Well, that makes sense until, you know, maybe you have an employee who's diabetic. And so it's important for them to be able to keep food or chocolate or whatever at their desk in order to make sure that their blood sugar is in a good place and that, you know, they can remain productive and contributing to the bottom-line every day.

So that kind of flexibility around disability, you know, is really important, again, to make sure that we're not unnecessarily making things more difficult for somebody who's trying to be part of the team.

So we want to make sure as well, you know, that we're building awareness and flexibility into the culture of the workforce.

So the awareness piece... You know, a number of years ago, we were working with a very large national nonprofit. And, you know, they had a they certainly had a commitment to disability, but the awareness piece was just key So they had I think two, maybe three employees who were wheelchair users. And when we came when it came to scheduling the annual Christmas party, the Christmas party was held in a room that was up three stairs. And it's just the people who were putting it together, you know, disability kind of fell off their radar. Their awareness, their situational awareness around it just went right out the window. And so very unintentionally, you know, three people were left out.

But, boy, that did not send a message of inclusion. It did not send a message of equity. And it certainly didn't send a message of belonging. So that that awareness, you know, not just for HR, not just for the team, but really organizational-wide is just key to avoid those sorts of situations.

The other flexibility, and I've experienced this as well... So in my previous employment, I worked with somebody who was significantly hard of hearing. And, you know, when they joined us, their office was kind of in the back, you know, off in a corner with their back to the door. And you can imagine, you know, you might knock on the door and this person wouldn't hear it.

And then you'd say their name and they might not hear it. And you walk up and you touched their shoulder and they jumped nine feet in the air. So that was easy

to fix. We just moved her position to more in the front in the office where her back was to the wall so she could see people approaching. You know, not a big deal, but just, you know, again, being situationally aware of the specific needs of specific individuals with disabilities.

We've even had even had this situation where, you know, the back office was way, way, way too warm and the person in the back, you know, just hated it.

And the person in the front was cold all the time. So you know, I'm not sure that was disability related or not, but we swapped the offices. Everybody was really happy. And, you know, productivity enhanced because nobody was uncomfortable at work. You know, modern AV systems really can make for different outcomes from the office.

But let's go to the next slide.

A welcoming, and I will add, belonging environment.

So developing internal champions is really important. And if they can be leaders within the organization, maybe at the C-Suite level, that goes a long way to messaging that disability and inclusion is important in this particular culture. So, you know, having, you know, leaders talk about, you know, disability being important to them, maybe there's a disability of their family, or maybe they've just seen someone in the workforce and, you know, how they were given a chance and they're doing a great job now goes a long way to making sure that people, you know, pay more attention to disability. Because if it's important to the C-Suite, it's important to leadership. It will be important to everybody else.

Also, the opportunity to create affinity groups. This has been great.

So, you know, there's, you know, an association of Latin folks at work, an association of Black folks at work, an association of People with Disabilities at work as well. We've really seen this take on new importance within the corporate world.

And it's also that new products, ideas, shared support within the people who are part of the affinity group. And really, you know, be a tremendous resource, not only to one another, but also a great resource to leadership.

So, for example, if you were going to launch a product that might be trying to focus on inclusivity within the disability community, an affinity group is a great way to kind of do some market research and market testing within one's organization.

Also reaching out to the disability community.

Maybe just to put together a disability advisory group. You know, you can reach out within, you know, depending on your location. Organizations across the breadth of disability. So have members there from the deaf community, blind community,

people with mobility impairments, intellectual and developmental disabilities, are often, again, a great resource to leadership. So to hear what's going on, to hear the concerns around, you know, breaking issues within the disability community. Again, kind of a market research market study for an important part of, you know, not only the workforce, but an important part of potential customers as well.

Again, lastly, it's really important to take the time to understand the strengths and the needs of the employee. Again, taking a look at this from the productivity standpoint. Making sure that any accommodations we're making are to help that person be more efficient, be more productive, and to be, you know, really contributing to the bottom-line.

So if we go to the next slide.

So again, I am with the National Disability Institute. NationalDisabilityInstitute.org. But for a number of years, we have had the Inclusive Employment Solutions team. You know, when I was talking with this team earlier, they said 15 years of experience. And we went around the room and I said, you know, between everyone on this team, there's over 100 years of experience. And they said, "don't say that because it makes us sound old."

But you know, we've been doing this work for a number of years, making sure that we can not only help folks with disabilities, you know, find work and often re-enter the workforce, but also working with corporations and governments and nonprofits to better hone their disability inclusion messaging, to reach out to the disability community, to look at internal systems, how they can be more welcoming, more inclusive, and create a sense of belonging. So we offer our Consulting Services, tools and resources to organizations and corporations. So if we can be of service, please don't hesitate to reach out to us at IES@ndi-inc.org and we'd be happy to help out.

I want to just thank all of you for being here today. It's been an absolute privilege to be here, and thank you for your interest in creating a more inclusive environment for people with disabilities. We've been working in this area of financial and economic inclusion for quite some time, and the first step to any economic advancement and financial inclusion is employment. We see every day how employment changes the lives of people with disabilities, how they build a financial future for themselves and their family.

But we could not do it without your help. So thank you for being intentionally inclusive, including people with disabilities, and changing financial outcomes for an entire community. I really appreciate the opportunity to be here today. Thank you. And go into the next slide. I'd be happy to answer any questions that you have at this point. And again, really appreciate the opportunity to be here today.