

## Work in Progress Episode 308: A Discussion About Whether and When to Disclose a Disability at Work

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

You are listening to Work In Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work In Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators and decision makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Everett Bacon:

My name is Everette Bacon. I am vice president of Blindness Initiatives with Aira. Aira is a service that provides visual interpretation for individuals who are blind or low vision through a smartphone camera. A lot of people don't realize the capacity of blind people or people with disabilities, they take for granted that maybe we're not exactly capable of doing the same things without certain accommodations and employers don't realize what those accommodations are.

Becky Kekula:

I am Becky Kekula. I'm the senior director of the Disability Equality Index at Disability:IN. We've come a long way when it comes to giving people with disabilities an opportunity to work in entry level jobs, but there's still a lot of areas for improvement when it comes to retention and advancement. There are a lot of people with disabilities who don't even know that there are opportunities for people like them. If we make it more front and center that people with disabilities are welcome across the board, employers are making it known that someone can ask for an accommodation from the job application, to interview, to onboarding, to retention and advancement, to serving customers, making sure everyone knows that they're able to bring their full selves forward may be more encouraging for those people with disabilities who never really thought that there was an opportunity to work.

Deb Dagit:

I am Deb Dagit and I'm a consultant in diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility with Deb Dagit Diversity, LLC. Like all marginalized communities, if you're thinking about working for a company, you want to ask other people if you can, who are already at that company, how good a place they are to work for people with disabilities. First impressions with a manager who's a newbie to hiring and managing someone with a disability. You can check the box that you were a candidate with a disability without that being visible to either the recruiter or the manager. That, you should do. There's a difference between self ID and self-disclosure. Self ID is anonymously checking the box, whether you're an employee, a new hire, or a candidate. Self-disclosure is saying, "I have PTSD," and if you don't need an accommodation, you want to be thoughtful about when you do that.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

For people with disabilities, finding meaningful employment can be a challenge. Unemployment did hit a record low last year, but...

Kirk Adams:

The sad fact remains that if you look at the numbers of workforce participation, roughly 35% of working age adults with significant disabilities are in the workforce as opposed to about 70% of the general population, and those numbers have not moved significantly in decades.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

That's Kirk Adams, managing director of Innovative Impact. He is blind and has spent his career advocating for people with vision loss. Adam says that while progress has been made, people with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed and underemployed.

Kirk Adams:

As far as the Bureau of Labor Statistics unemployment rate, which is people actively seeking work, if it's 4% of the general population actively seeking work, it'd be 8% of us with significant disabilities. So by any measure, our employment outcomes as people with severe disabilities is either half as good or twice as bad as the general population, however you want to slice it, and those numbers are really stubborn. And if you dig even deeper, of the 35% of us who are working, a third of us would say we're underemployed as opposed to something like 22% of the general population, and we're in a much narrower band of occupations. We don't advance up the org chart at the same rate as people without disabilities, so our incomes are lower. A third of blind people live in poverty. Homeownership is one-tenth that of the general population.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Given these statistics, it's not surprising that employees and job seekers may be reluctant to disclose their disabilities, especially if they're not apparent.

Kirk Adams:

If they're trying to become employed, they're afraid they won't get the job if they disclose. And if they are employed, they fear if they disclose, they'll be losing their job. So it's a great strategy that all good employers should be focusing on to create that culture where a person can feel comfortable and confident in saying, "Hey, this is my disability and this is how we can work together to make me the most productive employee and the most satisfied employee that I can be."

Research shows that employers have a kind of defined set of fears that aren't based on data. One is that people with disabilities will pose safety hazards, safety risks, be prone to more workplace accidents and injuries. One is that firing a person, terminating a person with a disability will lead to litigious wrongful termination lawsuits. Another is that it will negatively impact morale amongst other employees and also that it will adversely impact perceptions of customers if they are trying to interact with a business that has people with disabilities involved. All of that is exactly wrong.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Not only that, data show that employees with disabilities can thrive. At Walgreens distribution center in South Carolina, 30% of employees have disabilities. Their turnover rate is 40% lower than employees without disabilities. The company says it's because they invest in these employees through partnerships with social service and vocational rehabilitation programs and through special company training and a study by DuPont shows that job performance of their workers with disabilities was comparable to their non-disabled workers and their job satisfaction was higher. Although misconceptions about disabilities still exist, more employers are beginning to see how these employees can be assets, according to Wendi Safstrom, president of the SHRM Foundation,

Wendi Safstrom:

The more that we can do to address some of the myths and some of the misnomers, create processes, help HR professionals and people managers create cultures that are inclusive to all, and we give some examples. Certainly, we have really compelling stories of where individuals with disabilities have done

beautiful jobs at other organizations across different industry sectors. The more we can get HR professionals to learn and listen to one another in terms of some of the opportunities that they've had in staffing their organizations and getting people into their organizations and some of the great experiences they've had working with individuals who have disabilities, I think are a great way to really amplify that particular message. Progress has been made, but certainly not enough has been done. That's why we're continue to be committed to this kind of work across all of our untapped pools of talent, audience work.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Because not every workplace is welcoming for people with disabilities, coming out as disabled, especially if the disability isn't apparent might be a daunting decision. There's a very real fear of being overlooked for a job opening or a promotion. Safstrom says there isn't a legal requirement to disclose a disability or the perfect time to disclose, but if accommodations are needed, it's important to share that with the employer.

Wendi Safstrom:

What we've noticed more and more is that companies are actively working to learn more about employees with disabilities so that they, the employees, can be better supported once they join our workplaces and our workspaces. And there are two main ways that companies are really gathering information about disability status and identity or self identification. The first being self identification. When an individual self identifies, that's typically initiated by a request that the company, most often HR, makes for an employee to enter disability status into their talent management system during the application process. And the second option is simply for the individual, the employee, to discuss the disability and talk about some of the accommodations that could be needed during the recruitment process.

Really, the timing depends on the employee or the job seekers if they have not yet disclosed obviously needs and their level of comfort. And if a job seeker has a disability and thinks that they need a reasonable accommodation to apply for or interview for a position, they really should share that with the employer as early as they can in the recruitment process. And then if that job seeker or a candidate, applicant or employee, if they feel that they're going to need an accommodation to perform essential functions of the job in which they're seeking or that they received, they should, but they're not required to tell the employer during the interview.

Again, I think it all just kind of comes down to level of comfort for the individual who is applying for the position and level of comfort certainly for the employee once they've been hired. I think that sometimes the prospective employee could worry that the employer believes some common myths about learning and thinking or about working with an individual that has a disability, especially if they're disclosing in advance, and that's why when you're disclosing a disability. Another suggestion that we have as part of our work in this particular space is to mention perhaps successes and strategies that have worked in other places, perhaps that individual's worked, and employees may want to address some kind of common misunderstandings or consider even offering to talk more specifically with the employer about what their disability is and how they can best address it once they've been employed or on the job.

Examples of reasonable accommodations include providing interpreters or readers or other kinds of personal assistance, modifying to some extent, not lessening, but modifying job duties, maybe a basic restructure of their workspace, talking about flexible work schedules or work sites and providing accessible technology or other kinds of workplace adaptive equipment. I mean, I've worked with people who have asked for standing desks before, different kinds of headphones, even perhaps a dimming or a

different kind of overhead light because fluorescent lighting is often difficult. But the point is to discuss with your employer and HR, I think it was a great starting point to talk about what a reasonable accommodation is under the law, and those are the conversations that should happen, again, one-on-one with your employer and you all as an organization and as an employee can work out what that looks like.

Sam Estoesta:

I am Sam Estoesta. I'm a project manager with a social innovation specialization at TD. I have multiple invisible disabilities. I have a panic disorder. There's different things that make career advancement, especially if you have a panic disorder, really challenging. When I started at TD, I started in the operations and communications role and it took one executive to believe in me to choose to say, "Okay, let's actually start our equity and innovation framework process." And so it's having those executive champions, it's having those people manager champions who can see the work that you're able to bring and not just thinking about it within a certain limited scope. And so I've been able to have those individuals push me into careers that I didn't start here at TD and I don't know what my last career is going to be at TD, but I know that the people and the culture here is going to support me in any decision that I make.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

COVID-19 changed the way employers thought about who needed to be in the office and who didn't. It demonstrated that they could be flexible and accommodating with some type of jobs. Work from home policies continue to shift with some companies now saying workers must return to the office if they want to keep their jobs, but Scott Hoesman, CEO of inQUEST Consulting says workers with disabilities might find themselves in a better position than they were pre-pandemic.

Scott Hoesman:

I think there's even a greater demand and employers see the power of the opportunity by looking for candidates with disabilities, partly because of the unfortunate and awful COVID experience. We've proven that we can do work and conduct our work in a variety of ways, and it's not just in person, and that has greatly benefited the disability community at large. The research is starting to bear that out, not in all cases, and I don't want to imply that COVID was good for the disability community by any stretch because there were a lot of really negative downsides for the community with COVID, but in terms of variability in the way we work and engage in our workplaces, there do seem to be some silver linings.

I want to pause too, because we try to make this really clear with our clients that we consult with. The onus of disclosure should not be solely and initially only placed on the candidate's shoulders. If I had my wishes, every interview would begin when the scheduling happened of that interview, whether it's virtual, whether it's in person, whether I'm flying someplace, whether I'm doing it at a coffee shop, every scheduled interview would begin with a question, "Are there any accommodations that would make this interview more successful for you?"

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Hoesman agrees that disclosing a disability is a deeply personal decision, but he has a few suggestions for job seekers and employees considering it.

Scott Hoesman:

The first is no one understand what is really important to you, and what do I mean by that? If you know that your ability to thrive and succeed in this job or this work environment relies heavily on your ability to be out and disability proud, then lean into that, and that would mean to me, that'd be a signal if you know that, it'd be a signal that earlier in the process, disclosure may be most appropriate for you because why would you want to go through the process and not disclose and uncover that the environment really isn't going to be that place for you?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Hoesman says, job seekers should be on the lookout for indicators that a company is welcoming and accommodating

Scott Hoesman:

Regardless of when in the process you are thinking about disclosing. I would deeply encourage everyone to do a little bit of research and fact finding first. Does this employer have overtly stated disability inclusion public policies? Do they have something on their website that indicates that disability inclusion is important to them? Go to their DEI portion of their website, do they have a disability employee or business resource group? Those are some signals that give you clues that this is an organization or culture where it may be more likely for your disclosure to be met with positivity.

And then the last tip I'll offer on this question is, don't be afraid to test the waters. I mean, with that, you can ask predisclosure some seemingly benign questions of the interviewer or the HR representative or the recruiter. There are things like, does this organization, are you aware, do they have a disability inclusion employee resource group? How active are they? How do they engage with employees and team members? How does one become a member of these groups? You can kind of get a sense from some of those answers on how comfortable with disability inclusion or disability as a topic the interviewer is, and they may not speak for the whole company, but at least you'll get a sense on what their perspective is.

Candidates with disabilities are increasingly sought out in the corporate landscape. More today, I've been doing DEI work for over 28 years. We're at a place now where the outward and overt need, want, searching for candidates with disabilities is higher than I've ever seen it. Many employers, not all, not all by any stretch, but many employers are actively seeking candidates with disabilities, and so they are signaling in some ways, you can look for those signals that this is a place that wants me and lean into that earlier in the disclosure or in the interview process as you feel comfortable. Again, that aligns with what your personal needs are in the workplace.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Hoesman adds that it's important for all employees to have allies in a company, and that's especially true for disabled employees. Larger and even mid-sized companies are increasingly likely to have resources and advocates for those employees with disabilities.

Scott Hoesman:

Many organizations have employer business resource groups. These are groups where employees are gathering around a dimension of diversity or difference that they may have or have an affinity towards. So there are women's groups or LGBTQIA groups, racial or ethnic employee groups and disability inclusion groups or caregiver groups. When an employer has those groups, those important EBRGs, as a job seeker, you can ask, "What sort of access will I have to these EBRGs?" Or, "How do I contact somebody from that group to be a mentor or buddy should I be employed at your organization?" It can

be a great signal that you're willing to engage beyond just the work and companies invest heavily in these groups and the DEI efforts, so that may be a good way for you to engage.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

There's growing awareness that hiring managers are not just doing a favor to job seekers with disabilities by offering employment, but they are actually doing their company a favor. Often, workers with disabilities can bring a perspective that other workers can't. Safstrom says the companies should want their employee base to reflect the customer base, a customer base, which naturally includes people with disabilities.

Wendi Safstrom:

Ultimately, we all want increasingly our employee base to be reflective of our customer base, and I find some of the research that's most interesting is that individuals with disabilities often bring some of the most compelling and interesting ideas in terms of new product or concept designs. Folks who reflect an increasingly diverse workforce are increasingly reflective of who our customer bases are. People want to do business with organizations that they feel are doing good on behalf of their communities, the folks that work there, and ultimately so that businesses thrive. And so that I would just encourage people to think through the broader impacts of hiring one individual and the difference it can make, not only to their existing workforce and the folks in their places of work, but the impact that it can have on the broader community and the amount of attention and goodwill it can build so that businesses and communities and ultimately people do thrive.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

This has been a special edition of Work In Progress on disclosing disabilities in the workplace. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.