

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're 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.

In March, South by Southwest EDU, WorkingNation brought together a panel of experts on expanding opportunities for people with disabilities in the workplace. This panel focused on an untapped source of employment for people with disabilities, apprenticeships. WorkingNation Advisory Board Member Josh Christianson is with the US Department of Labor's partnership for inclusive apprenticeships. He moderated the panel. Joining him in the discussion was Zariah Cameron, an Equity UX strategist, David Fazio, Founder and President of Helix Opportunity, and Mike Hess, Founder and CEO of The Blind Institute of Technology. Josh kicks off the conversation.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

I've been working in the space almost 10 years and originally started working on accessible technology. And then apprenticeship became a part of that because we figured if people with disabilities are developing technology, they're going to be aware of accessibility. So, started working on it. And really, Department of Labor kept building upon IT especially.

And so, the registered apprenticeships that we try to use, which are ways to learn a specific role and set of skills that directly an employer wants. And it's a pathway to be hired immediately upon completion of your apprenticeship. I always like to know you earn why you learn in apprenticeship. You don't start at the full wage that you do when you would be hired at the end. But they vary and scale goes up. It usually starts maybe anywhere between 50 and 70%, and can go up over time. And registered apprenticeship specifically is recognized, so the credentials and the certification and knowledge you take will be recognized across the country, different states.

We are charged to focus on what they call high growth, high demand sectors at Department of Labor, which are sectors that they cannot find enough talent for, that the companies in this country are having a hard time finding enough people with this kind of expertise. And so, we focus on IT primarily, but also healthcare, finance and clean energy is our second big one. And trying to as apprenticeship is really growing, and the US government is investing in apprenticeship and trying to convince employers to use that as a tool, just ensure that they're inclusive of everyone and aware of accessibility as they develop programs.

So, let's start talking a little bit high level about apprenticeship. And I wanted to ask you Zariah, who I know did an apprenticeship or two in IT, just to discuss high level the benefits of a registered apprenticeship for apprentices, or at least what you got out of it and how it helped you in your journey.

Zariah Cameron, Equity UX Strategist:

Yeah, so I mean, a lot of my work, for context, I started out as a designer. I went to school and realized that I really wanted to venture out into the user experience space, user experience design space, and really wasn't receiving that type of, I guess, education.

As you all know, if you have been in academia, you work in academia, sometimes, the pace of the industry versus what is being taught in schools can be a lot farther behind what you're wanting to do. So, I was able to have opportunities while I was in undergrad to participate in sort of a apprenticeship-like spaces that afforded me just opportunities to venture out into the world of UX design along my sort of self-taught journey of that space.

And for me, it was an opportunity for me to grow outside of the classroom. I was in a space for me to expand and create a community of people. I think that's really important to me in terms of values is concerned is creating a space of community, creating a space of safety and care.

And I think the one thing that I would say as it relates to apprenticeships that I wish was more expanded in from my experience is really focusing also on the space of wellness and mental health. And when you're in those spaces, you're just taught the skill and you're there to get the job.

But unfortunately, a lot of times we're not teaching these students are learners to also understand what care boundaries look, how to really take care of themselves, how to not overextend themselves in these spaces because it's very easy to get burnt out, especially in the technology industry that is constantly evolving and changing. And so, I think now moving into what that looks me giving back to my community, it is definitely centered on care on that regard.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

And I love how you sit through that. I'm going to ask you specifically to speak more about that in a little bit.

Zariah Cameron, Equity UX Strategist:

Okay.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

Mike, if you were just talking generally, and you had to explain to someone, what is the benefit to employers of apprenticeship, what would you say some of the benefit that employers get out of sponsoring and partnering with a registered apprenticeship and/or your pitch for people with disabilities and benefits to employers of hiring people with disabilities?

Mike Hess, The Blind Institute of Technology:

Great questions. So, I grew up in tech, and I do not have a college degree. However, I do have technology stack certifications. And in the world of tech, certification stacking is an absolute viable career path. And so, seven years, 2017, we kicked off our very first workforce development program. It wasn't yet an apprenticeship program, but we were putting together the infrastructure for it and it was through the Salesforce ecosystem.

Salesforce is absolutely the most digitally equitable business enterprise application on the planet. So, allowing individuals like myself who use screen readers and/or braille displays to equitably join that tech stack vertical. Because we are teaching such a pervasive ubiquitous platform Salesforce, because it's in edu, it's in healthcare, it's nonprofit public, it's for-profit, it's everywhere. It's an easier conversation for us to talk about employment for the hardest to serve community, which is the people with disabilities.

And so, when we go to organization A, I mean, again, Salesforce is ubiquitous. And so, when we talk to these employers about hiring someone like me who is blind, the conversation of reasonable accommodation always comes up. And we literally just say, "Hey, guess what, Salesforce is the reasonable accommodation." So, it helps these employers feel more comfortable, not exactly totally comfortable, but more comfortable when we talk about employment for the hardest to serve.

And from the student perspective, it's literally letting them know, "Hey, tech is a viable means for an amazing career." Again, I've been doing tech since shortly after the Mayflower landed, and it has been an incredible career path for me as a blind person in the private sector able to compete and earn a six-

figure income. And it's due to equitable digital stacks like Salesforce that make that just an easy sales pitch to people with disabilities.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

Yup. And whenever I ... I see you, coming in just a minute. Whenever I pitch accessible technology to people, I always tell them, the best products out there already do it. And Salesforce is an example of that right there. They wouldn't be so successful if they didn't approach user design, user experience from accessibility. But all the best products digitally that are user-friendly are designed with accessibility in mind. So, it does really make that end. Before I come to your question, I want to, because this is exactly on topic, ask David to explain specifically, what Helix Opportunities does with the registered apprenticeship on accessibility and design.

David Fazio, Helix Opportunity:

Thank you, Josh. Yeah, we do something quite a bit different than what Mike's organization does. So, we've created a digital accessibility developer apprenticeship program. And the reason why we don't call it a digital accessibility apprenticeship program is because being so involved in industry as we are, we have come to discover that most companies no matter how big or how small, have very small accessibility teams. They usually have developers, designers that devote maybe 5% of their time to accessibility projects.

So, if you're just focusing on accessibility testing, reading guidelines, and manual testing, or running automated tests, you're going to have a really limited career opportunities. But if you create a developer that knows accessibility or teach a developer that knows accessibility and how to create accessible code and check that code, they can become a stem cell and go anywhere in the organization and always be gainfully employed, always have a job to do.

And rather than focusing on the technologies that are accessible, we support our apprentices day in and day out through the lifetime of our program, which is designed to be one year. And a lot of that support actually ends up becoming mental health support. A lot of it is confidence issues. A lot of it is overwhelming, just being overwhelmed and talking people through things, letting them know when to take breaks.

We work with the supervisor as well, not just the employee, the apprentice, but we work with the straight-up frontline work team to make sure that they know how to work together better and they create that relationship. So, at the end of the apprenticeship, they have this relationship already. So, they can say, "I don't want to go out and recruit globally, I want this person." And we operated as a staffing program. So, they're not just we're not recruiting internally for us. But we're trying to lower the cost of digital accessibility around the world.

So, the big deal about the apprenticeship program that we're doing with accessibility is digital accessibility services are so freaking expensive right now, because so few people know how to do it. It costs anywhere from fortune \$50 an hour and up just to get your website audited. That's more than it cost to even get it developed.

So, by doing this and stacking out people with disabilities in accessibility apprenticeship around the world, we're hoping to lower that cost and that barrier of entry through cost to have accessible websites, products, environments, and services, while giving good paying meaningful employment to people with disabilities. And sorry, I just go off, man.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

No. That's great. And I'll actually add on for the demand for accessible technology is so high and the number of people that know how to do it is so low. And so, when you think about high growth, high demand industries, I firmly believe it is a great field to get into, because it's going to only grow.

One of the reasons in the United States of America, they haven't been able to enforce regulations around accessible technology, which they have determined as covered by the American Disabilities Act, is because the regulations were so slow and couldn't keep up with technology. The group that David said he works on, W3C, has already made and continues to improve guidelines for technology that are agnostic of any one particular product that allow to be a guide for any development. And that's been referenced in lawsuits.

And once that's accepted as yes, you could meet this to be accessible, it's going to be a lot more in demand because it's going to be really important to companies to be able to do that.

David Fazio, Helix Opportunity:

Just to add to that, outside of the US, many countries have enacted into their law the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines and Section 508, which is a requirement for anybody receiving federal funds, i.e. education, is required to follow Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

So, there's no shortage of work.

David Fazio, Helix Opportunity:

Absolutely.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

Accessibility field. You touched upon, you're talking about your apprenticeship that not only do you help them learn the technical skills, whatever, but you help them learn about the workplace and support them. And it sounded like you were erring towards what Zariah talks about with centering care. And when I read Zariah's, it says you describe yourself as a "UX researcher centered in care". And I'd love to hear more about what you mean by that, and how it can help and support the inclusion of traditionally underrepresented folks.

Zariah Cameron, Equity UX Strategist:

A little bit of context of additional of my background is that went into the space of research and design. And I knew from earlier on in school that I wanted to have some sort of impact on the world in some form. And for me, personally, I just wasn't seeing a lot of representation of people that like look me who are also disabled. And I think it's important to also understand the intersectionality of when we're talking about disabilities, when we're talking about accessibility, and what that looks in the digital world.

But in terms of care, I realized that we as people in general, in some form or fashion, we have experienced trauma, whether it be acute or large. And seeing how that does impact the way that we show up, it impacts the way that we interact with the experiences on the day-to-day basis. And if we as researchers and designers don't take that into account, then we are failing the people that we're intending to serve. And we can always have good intention, but what is the impact and overall outcome that we are having on the products we're creating.

And so, a lot of my work, especially now that I'm moving into more of the UX research space. I'm also in grad school, so I'm studying inclusive design centered on the area of creating liberated and equitable workspaces centered on an ecology of care. And so, what does that look from an employee experience perspective? People who are disabled, people who have intersecting identities, and how is their environment, how are we creating and cultivating an environment that is supportive of their well-being, supportive them to do their best work, which in turn influences the accessible products that we create. And so, both work in tandem. And I realized that if both do not coexist with each other, then we are essentially not creating an accessible and equitable product going forward. And so, when I think about care, it is expansive of everything, the internal care, the external care for our employee experience, as well as our customer base experience. And so, that's sort of how I see that.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

Thank you. And if we have time later, I'll give my pitch around why I think accessibility is so key to intersectionality. And the ability to help welcome and bring in other groups. But I realized you mentioned failed the people. I failed the people. I invited them to ask a question and [inaudible 00:15:33] raised his hand, and I said, I would come back and then I just kept going. So, sir, if you want to go to the mic, if you still remember, I apologize.

David Fazio, Helix Opportunity:

While he's going to the mic, two quick things. The National Council on Disability does these reports every year. And there's one called Barriers to Employment. And it's a long title for many years ago. People disabilities fare much better in organizations where they have mentorship. And this is a large reason why we need mentorship and leaders that we can turn to for guidance, for help and for solace and stuff this to make sure that our needs are met emotionally and professionally. That's one thing. And the other thing is we have a maturity model that we're working on in the W3C that you all can access to help embed these things in the workplace to have successful operations. Thank you.

James Mathers:

I'm James Mathers. I'm from San Antonio, Texas. I have a question. It's important and also concerning. It's that a lot of people with disabilities are stuck in rehabs, sheltered workshops, even the workforce. Because several years ago, before I had the job I have today, you had to go to the old days, you used to go to the business, shake the person's hand, and get to know the person and you start sampling. But it's very different now. You had to go to the business. And to apply online and the technology is harder because the yes and no questions have different situations.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

What is harder? What did you say is harder?

James Mathers:

The technology piece with it, ask questions of different scenarios, situations you have to deal with. And either businesses don't want a job coach or a job developer to help that person. And my question is, I'm worried by my generation who've been stuck in rehabs and sheltered workshops will never have an opportunity to work. And they want to work, but the problem is we have no benefits to encourage to stay or to put more money on voc rehab services to help support employment opportunities for people with IDD.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

Yes. Thank you for sharing that. And there has been way too little support and investment in people disabilities and for folks that don't know, there was a lot ... So terrible, I like to forget its name, so I do. But really, they would relegate people with disabilities to meaningless jobs in a way and pay them next to nothing.

And it started as a good idea, to bring some people in. Because for some people, depending upon your disability, there's a broader range, but especially people with intellectual developmental disabilities, it was good to have a routine to get out, have experienced it, enjoyed work, but then it just became overused and greed took over and companies are paying people to 20, 32 an hour or something, and knew they could do that and make a killing themselves. It's pretty gross. And that they're making a lot of progress and getting rid of it. Thankfully.

I am glad. I think there's more support of people with disabilities and ways to get involved and true to form, I really think registered apprenticeship is a great way for folks to get in. It doesn't require other traditional paths. It doesn't require higher education. It really trains you for a specific role and job that's needed, and then leads to a placement. So, everyone is different. You have to find what fits but I'm encouraged by apprenticeship. You also mentioned voc rehab, vocational rehabilitation. Every state has this office. And they're charged with supporting people with disabilities, with finding work in their search.

And David works directly with vocational rehab. I'll let you speak on anything you'd like. And then in a moment, I will just say in my experience, not all voc rehabs are created the same. Depending upon where you are-

David Fazio, Helix Opportunity:

Don't get me started, Josh.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

... it is discouraging, how much money is put in and how little output I feel the clients receive from the services, but some are better than others. Some are now doing innovative and things and why don't you just take a minute and explain your relationship.

David Fazio, Helix Opportunity:

Let me spike that poll for you. Yes, so, every state and US territory and actually many countries around the world have vocational rehabilitation programs. It's not just the US. And so, in the US, the federal law tells them everything that they're supposed to have to do, but they have autonomy within their states to enact in our local laws and whatever and how they execute their program.

What we do is we work with our apprentices and anybody that comes through any of our STEM staffing programs through voc rehab is we teach them self-advocacy, not just in the workplace, how to self ID and say, "I need this accommodation," but what resources are available to them to the vocational rehabilitation system.

The good news is if you're a disabled person, you have voc rehab for life. That means free education, free resources. For me, they paid for the funding to start up my business, okay, but very few people understand what services are available to them because they're mired in regulation. So, we explain that to them.

And that's why we work with the supervision team and the immediate work team and the employee at the same time to figure out what those needs are. Because you can tell your voc rehab counselor, "You need X,Y and Z," but you still have to justify it. They have to justify it to their rehabilitative services administration. How do you know how they do that? Well, we know because we battled the system for 20 some odd years. So, we help them articulate that case.

And if us as a service provider say to the voc rehab system, "This is what the employee needs to be successful to meet the needs of the work that they're doing," by law, they're actually required to provide it because we're the experts. So, we work with them with that relationship, teach them how to do that for life, and make sure that it's successful that way.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

Yeah, thank you.

Anthony Case:

Anthony Case, and I'm from Raleigh, North Carolina. I work for a community college there. And we have a pretty vibrant apprenticeship program. But it's heavily weighted towards the skilled trades, which is not always conducive to those with disabilities. We have been trying to expand that into other areas, such as information technology and health care.

Hard to break ground on that because those industries are not traditionally welcoming or just not used to apprenticeships. It was something new for them. So, my question is, in light of that, what type of conversations can you have with prospective employer? Whether it be IT, health care, to get them to be interested to have apprenticeships for those with disabilities?

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

Yeah, great question. Yes, traditionally, when I first thought of an apprentice, I think of a blacksmith, old school, but yeah, plumbing, in construction, electricians, whatever. And they have a really strong, long-term history of using an apprenticeship. And it got put in place. And part of it was because unions are heavily involved. They saw it as a benefit to their members. And so, they took on a lot of what's called the related technical instruction. I should have mentioned. Registered apprenticeship has different cycles.

One is called, it's basically learning the foundation of whatever you're going to learn, related class learning. So, you're going into something. It's like, "Okay, let's give you the basics." And then, there's on-the-job training, as well. So, the union's had that and provided it, and it's not a cost to the employers.

So, there are many problems and resistance for new employers in these other sectors to embrace it. What I would say is, they are, they being the Department of Labor, and states are working hard to alleviate those and increasingly invest in what could make it easier and more enticing for those companies. And there are centers of excellence setup for around the US, their national, every state has one, that are there to help any employer understand, get through the red tape. There are people now that are paid to do it for them.

David Fazio, Helix Opportunity:

Intermediaries.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

Intermediaries. And they're not good at advertising it and making you know where it is, but they're trying to get better. But there are things out there that could really answer questions for employers and alleviate costs, effort, whatever, incentives. They're just not all that well organized and promoted.

David Fazio, Helix Opportunity:

Mike and I both run what are called intermediary programs, which means we're not recruiting internally for our organizations. We're working with other employers that want to participate in an apprenticeship, but don't want to go through all the red tape. They don't want to start it themselves, or they don't know how to. So, you can work with an intermediary and pay them a fee to actually help you start an apprenticeship at a company, or I believe both our programs, Mike, I believe we don't charge people, we just staff for them at their organizations and hope that they hire those individuals, correct me if I'm wrong about your program.

Mike Hess, The Blind Institute of Technology:

Nope, that's our model.

David Fazio, Helix Opportunity:

Yes, that's what I thought. Yeah. So, with our models, we actually train them up and then we stopped them as staffing agencies and that's how we make our revenue. But other intermediaries, you would basically pay as a consultant to help your college or the employers that you partner with, to create those apprenticeships. And what we have is called non-traditional apprenticeships, anything outside the trades, anything that's not physical labor. And those are the most conducive to people with disabilities.

But I would also say don't fully discount the trades. There are a lot of people that physical labor, it's what they want to do. It's all they can do, maybe.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

Well, and that's a good point. If you're not really familiar with disability, just to understand that it is as broad as you can imagine, it is the expression of the human experience. You may be thinking of one type of person that, "Oh, they're blind like Mike," or whatever, there are so many kinds of disabilities that some people would be totally suited for the trades. It's just that's often not what we think about when we think about people with disabilities.

But there really are people that are charged with making this easier for the new sectors. And an example of one was Salesforce. Mike, I want you to explain this golden hoodie, how you got it, why you got it.

Mike Hess, The Blind Institute of Technology:

I'm wearing a golden hoodie?

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

Yeah, yeah, you are. Yeah.

Mike Hess, The Blind Institute of Technology:

Okay. So, Salesforce has the largest tech conference in the world. It's called Dreamforce. Every year, so far it's been exclusively in San Francisco, and they bring in 170,000 people when it's in person. So, it's a really large conference, tech conference. And the two co-founders, Marc Benioff and Parker Harris, at

their keynote session every year, they give an award to an individual or organization that's doing cool innovative things within the Salesforce ecosystem. And it's a trailblazer award. And the award is a golden hoodie. And so, yours truly was on the biggest tech stage in the world on September 12 of '23.

And Salesforce literally put the conversation of disability accessibility and employment on the largest stage ever in history. So, it's an honor to have the golden hoodie from an organization that is truly ... So, they're the only tech company in the world that has a fully funded workforce development initiative for people with disabilities. Only one. They are a unicorn.

And trust me, BIT is out there talking to all sorts of other tech companies talking about workforce development for people with disabilities. Salesforce is a leader in this space. They are not perfect. They know their technology is imperfect. They are working hard to continue to make sure that people with disabilities are represented within a talent acquisition pipelines.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

Thank you. And one reason I point that out is not just because it's really cool. But to point out, they don't do it to be nice. Salesforce isn't doing it because they have a good heart. They might, I don't know. But they're doing it because they want to have the best product and be competitive, and make all the money they make to have the biggest IT conference in the world.

And they see it as a benefit because it is. I don't know why there are studies out there that show Fortune 500, like the stronger their inclusion of people with disabilities, the better their profits are, the better their revenues are. They picked it up and good for them. And hopefully, more people will follow in. There was a question here that I missed.

Leah:

Hi, my name is Leah. And I'm a transition services coordinator, so I work with students with disabilities transitioning out of high school into a career. And with COVID, there was actually the push for remote work, which actually helped a lot of my students get positions after high school, but now it seems to be a pull away from remote work. So, my students that have physical disabilities, when we go through applications, there will always be a requirement to lift 25 pounds, which is a job about IT. So, there is this weird, they don't know if they should apply, or is this discriminatory.

And it's a part where I don't know if policies or companies are even aware that this is a requirement for a job position. And I just see a lot of confidence go down when they're applying for a remote position or even an office position.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

One thing I would notice, there's lots of outdated and irrelevant job descriptions. And some people do it better than others. But there are guidelines for employers to write a job description that would not have people self-select out. Because a lot of them are written in a way that they're not the necessary characteristics qualification.

So, there's various websites that I think do a really good job with disability. One of the TA centers out of Department of Labor, I've worked with this EARN, and it's AskEARN, E-A-R-N dot org. And they have a lot of great tips on job descriptions, so does Pete Works. If you did disability in Department of Labor in search, search engine and job descriptions, there's some really good guidelines out there. And not just should be on the employers, but I think for individuals to know and ask questions and pushback around a job description, that kind of interesting.

The other thing I would note is people with disabilities have always been one of the most underemployed populations in this country. During the pandemic, at a time when people were losing their jobs left and right, it was the only time in history that people with disabilities had a jump in employment. And they were employed at a rate higher than any other group or demographic. And that's because of remote work, which people with disabilities has been asking about for years. Remote work, bring your own device, ways that they could participate and live and do their job and live.

And so, it really was a huge boon for people with disabilities. And so, as there is sometimes more a pullback to people getting the office and whatever it is for them, I don't know, get around the water cooler, or whatever their reasoning is to control their workers. I don't know. It's important, I think that we push back and keep in mind that working from home and telework, if done right and accessibly is an incredible tool for any company to have a bigger talent pool to find people that are capable and great for the job. But that's a big part of it for some people.

David Fazio, Helix Opportunity:

You only have to be able to do the primary job duties. So, those lifting, things like that, those are usually just ancillary things that ... But as a person with disability according to the law, you have to be able to perform the primary job duties with or without reasonable accommodation. That's the first thing. And if that's not readily apparent from the PD, you can always ask, position description, you can always ask the employer and I would apply anyway. So, that's the first thing.

And the other thing is in terms of physical disabilities, not being able to get to the workplace, this is one of the things that we help in our programs with the STEM staffing and the apprenticeship. We had one individual with autism that got a job working for Northrop Grumman. And he is making \$109,000 a year now, started out at \$65,000 a year. But he almost didn't get the job because he didn't drive. And it was in Sunnyvale, which is a 30-minute drive from where he lived in the East Bay in Fremont. And he's like, "I don't drive. What if I have to get there. This just isn't for me." And his parent was like, "This is too much stress."

And I said, "Well, what about paratransit?" "What's paratransit?" "Oh, you don't know paratransit? Every metropolitan area in the United States has a paratransit system, where it's a low cost, door to door service for they will pick you up when accessible vehicles, take you to where you're going, even if it's a bar, even if it's a unsavory place that you don't want people to know about, they will take you there, and you pay them a minimal fee. And back and forth. It's a lifesaver." So, this is why it's important to know the resources that are available to you and to work with organizations can that can assist you.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

Thank you. And I would also make a plug for as registered apprenticeship grows, they too are aware of support services more than your average employer. So, even not just for people with disabilities, for other folks, there are more registered apprenticeship programs that think about transportation or childcare or others so that they can include more traditionally underrepresented workers. So, it's another reason apprenticeship can be, I think, a benefit for folks that have had a hard time.

Zariah Cameron, Equity UX Strategist:

I'm hopeful that things start to evolve in the workplace, because I've definitely seen your high school students is the same thing that's happening currently to professionals happened to me, and just the shifts of the way that people are like, "Well, hybrid or completely onsite is the way to go." And people

think that remote work is a privilege, when really it should be a right. And it's actually it allows for more freedom and autonomy within a person's life.

And really, the reality of it, which sometimes people don't really want to say is that onsite and hybrid work allows for there to be a power trip. It allows for the people who are in power to have more control over the situation to watch and see if you're actually doing your work or to micromanage a lot easier. It also is a lot of politics involved in that of who gets promotions, who doesn't, playing favorites.

And with remote work, it levels the playing field with that, creating spaces, cultivating environments that center on, again, giving back people their power and giving back that autonomy that a lot of times can be easily lost in hybrid work or onsite work depending on what the job is.

But I would definitely encourage your students to keep going because I mean, there's plenty of ... The right place for them is the right place for them. I definitely would encourage earlier on allowing them to figure out what they're establishing what their values are early on, because then they know the places that will actually respect them and take them on as a person, not just because they're looking for a job.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

She said something I think is really important. She talked about remote work and then monitoring. Telework remote work is clutch for people with disabilities. And the increased use of artificial intelligence, especially with monitoring does not work well for lots of people with disabilities. Sometimes they measure how much they use the mouse. Well, people might not use a mouse. Sometimes its eyes up or whatever it may be.

And so, I will not go into it. But I would be remiss without saying thinking about artificial intelligence and fairness and how to use a tool that from the onset is set up to kick out the outliers is very important. You hear people talking about it nonstop in the workplace. It's just a way to discriminate on steroids if we don't develop it and use it in a proper way.

Speaker 9:

Okay, and I don't know if this is really a question or more of a statement. I think James over here when he started talking about the IDD population, I work at a nonprofit in Birmingham, Alabama. And we work very closely with our vocational rehab in our state. And I think we're doing a really good job. We recently created in collaboration a pre-apprenticeship program for our students. And we're in the manufacturing industry, because manufacturing in Alabama is a huge industry.

But a barrier that we've seen working with some of our employers is that they want our students to come into the pre-apprenticeship already with some CTE credits from high school. And because of our deployment pathways, specifically probably in Alabama, a lot of our kids don't get CTE classes.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

Which is, CTE?

Speaker 9:

Career technical education. So, if they're in high school, they would be already getting exposure to that, HVAC or manufacturing industry. But a lot of our students don't get that. I guess that's a barrier that we've experienced with employers is trying to create a pre-apprenticeship program within an employer that has a registered apprenticeship. They're wanting the students who physically can do these jobs. They just need the support and the training to come in with those credits. So, what is the DOL doing to incentivize employers to allow students to come in without that related experience from high school.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

They're going to kick off a pre-pre-apprenticeship program, and they're not. But when I started working in apprenticeship and workforce, which I was not familiar with about three years ago, apparently, we're talking about pre-apprenticeship all the time is key. And then over the years, it kind of waned because they realized they didn't have it set up well. They didn't have it defined well. They were having a hard time connecting to the registered apprenticeship.

So, I don't have an answer for you. I do know it's something that the Department of Labor continues to see as a need. So that registered apprenticeship can take off, they need to do pre-apprenticeship. And I feel they're thinking about it now. Right now, there's some proposed rules for change making to apprenticeship. And I think pre-apprenticeship will be addressed in that so they can make it a little more codified. I don't know if other people have an answer for you, particularly with their need, except I would push back on the job descriptions is like, if they do this pre-apprenticeship, are they ready for the apprenticeship? Because if they are, then let's just let them do that and they don't necessarily need that barrier. But it's tough.

David Fazio, Helix Opportunity:

That's the whole point of apprenticeship. Really, it's beyond me why this conversation with that employer doesn't say, "We're just going to package this CTE requirement into the RTI, the classroom training or whatever." That should be pretty simple in theory.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

Yeah. I think the woman behind you first and then you could come. Yeah.

Zariah Cameron, Equity UX Strategist:

If you're able to stand.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

Yeah, and thank you. We've got about 15 minutes, so we'll try to be...

David Fazio, Helix Opportunity:

I love all these questions.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

Yeah.

Michelle:

Thank you. My name is Michelle and I work at a postsecondary workforce development, nonprofit called JobTrain, which is in Menlo Park, in California. And we provide free career development, as well as career training. And it's awesome. So, my role is to manage our instructors. And I'm wondering if you all could share about ways to make our classrooms more inclusive and to help support students with disabilities or neurodiversity in the classrooms? And then sub-question is how we can better vet employers to make sure that our students and our clients are going into jobs where they're treated fairly.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

Okay. Mike, do you have any answer for that?

Mike Hess, The Blind Institute of Technology:

On our, our website, blindit.org, under our Resource tab, we actually have a free resource that allows us ... It's an advocacy digital guide. So, because within today's tech space, the layperson is supposed to be able to talk to developers and engineers like they know what they're talking about. And there's this huge gap.

And so, we put together this digital advocacy guide that is completely free. So, you can make any digital environment accessible. And here's the language to speak to coders and engineers, whether you're an educator or just part of the business. Your job isn't to be able to speak nerd. Your job is to be able to work with your individuals. So, we put this digital advocacy guide together so you can actually speak this language to make sure any digital environment is completely equitable.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

I was going to plug BIT, but there are also other places and URLs. Be happy to share. I just want to throw them out now that could I think support people. And sorry, you have something to add?

Zariah Cameron, Equity UX Strategist:

Yeah. And also, happy to talk afterwards. But a lot of the work that I've done related back to creating inclusive workplaces and environments for students and professionals really related back to starting on grounding on a space of building trust with those students and ensuring that they know that they can trust you and that that is a brave space for them to feel like they can be themselves. Because the moment that they feel like they are silenced or explore and learn in the way that is best suited for them, they may just shut down.

And this is coming from my own personal experience, but also just experience that I've heard from other students of not having a environment cultivated that centered them and supported their needs. And it goes back to the workplace, too, that can still be embedded in school, giving them the autonomy and freedom. A lot of students, they don't really have that. They're told what to do. They're told how to be. And that goes all the way from their parents to their guardians all the way to their teachers. And that, unfortunately expands into how they're expected to act and be when they go into the workplace.

And so, I would definitely encourage we can, again, I said, we can have this conversation afterwards. But there's also ways for you to have cultivate different things relating to focus sessions to allow them to freely create on their own time completing task and things like that. I just wanted to give that helpful resource for you.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

And I did want to plug one thing because you mentioned about trying to find vendors and third parties. There was a great TA Center also funded by ODEP. That is Partnership on Employment and Accessible Technology. It's PEATworks, plural with an S, dot org. And they have a specific section about procurement and language and things you can put so that when you're hiring a vendor or a third party, you have a better chance of getting someone that's going to come in with accessibility.

Jane Singleton:

Hi. Thank you all for doing this panel. It's fabulous. My name is Jane Singleton. I've been working in building a special education, learning support programs in independent schools for the past 13 years. And I actually noticed this huge gap in self-advocacy from school to career. And so, I started my own coaching business. And I got my executive coaching certification. And so, I specifically focus on working with neurodivergent individuals, but also want to help make ... I think there's a lot of training for neurotypical people, a lot of training. And so, I'm really big on education.

One thing, I wanted to know if there's research ... I think the trickiest topic for me is I think there's so much discrimination out there. I do teach self-advocacy and think once there's trust like sharing, like "I have autism," or whatever that might be going on that might impact so that your boss or mentor can help you better and communicate more effectively. But I'm curious about if there's any research for all the jobs you can self-disclose if you're veteran status, for example, and they also have a disability status. And I'm wondering kind of twofold. One, does this just lead to why they don't get the job by claiming that they have a disability? That is where my gut tells me to go. And is that even for my own knowledge, sometimes I'm like, "Well, are they including autism in that? Are learning disabilities really more physical disability?" Because I just wanted some guidance on that more black and white question that have a design question for you.

David Fazio, Helix Opportunity:

The federal government has a template that you have to use for self IDs. So, it's very standardized-

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

For registered apprenticeship.

David Fazio, Helix Opportunity:

Well, no, just being in general.

Jane Singleton:

Any job.

David Fazio, Helix Opportunity:

Any job. Yeah, and I have a real big issue with this with this neurodiversity trend and kick that is going on these days, and I love it. But the issue with it is that whenever these or most organizations, I said "these" but I'm very involved in this autism at work and whatever. But most organizations when they focus on neurodiversity, they focus on people with autism. Most recently, people with ADHD, but only high functioning individuals. They ignore people with mental health disabilities, for the most part, emotional disabilities, brain injuries. This is all neurodiversity. You know what I mean?

And most people with these kinds of conditions aren't the super high functioning types that can code and they're like Rain Man, and you dropped some sticks, and you can automatically know how many there are. So, I would just implore you to please be aware of this and cognizant of it as you move forward with your program and this and that, but there is standardized language. It's not really PC or even legal to collate a lot of this data. You know what I mean? But in terms of discrimination, most organizations have a very hard time of getting people to self ID, anyway. There's only one company that has done the 7% and that's Northrop Grumman.

Josh Christianson, Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships:

This transcript was exported on Mar 31, 2024 - view latest version [here](#).

And organization, WorkingNation, I'm on their advisory board. They partner with South by Southwest EDU. Ramona somewhere helped us get this panel together. They have a series all about self-disclosure in the workplace with multiple kinds of media bombarding to really try to raise awareness around the benefits of it, the myths around it, et cetera. You should check out WorkingNation. They're doing a lot of work around disability that they didn't traditionally do.

The [inaudible 00:45:06] that is said it's coming out from WorkingNation highlights the person that we worked with and hired from inclusively. They really help across different kinds of disabilities, help navigate what the needs are between any of the employer and individual.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That was the WorkingNation panel on apprenticeships for people with disabilities at South by Southwest EDU in March. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.