

Transcript “Disability Inclusion Introduction” & “Removing Physical and Digital Barriers to Accessibility”

Welcome to Diversity Lab's Disability Inclusion Knowledge Sharing series. We are thrilled that you've chosen to join us to learn more about this important and often overlooked aspect of DEI. In this four-part series, you will hear from incredible speakers about their lived experiences and what organizations can do to create more inclusive cultures and spaces for people with disabilities.

Thank you to all of those who shared their insights and stories with us to enrich our learning about disability inclusion, including Diversity Lab's Disability Inclusion Advisory Group, who helped us to create the Disability Inclusion Commitments List, a list of 10 actions that organizations can take to advance disability inclusion.

Visit Diversity Lab's website for more information on the Disability Inclusion Commitments List and find out which legal organizations have already committed to taking action. We hope that you enjoy this discussion and share these insights across your organization.

Good morning and good afternoon to everyone who's joined the call. Thank you so much for being here. This is our Mansfield Knowledge Sharing Disability Inclusion II call, Removing Physical and Digital Barriers to Accessibility. So please rename yourself, if you can, to include your name and your organization. And, if you'd like to use closed captioning, we've enabled it for this call. Please hit More and then Captions and Show Captions to be able to use them or see them.

This is a knowledge sharing call with all four of our Mansfield cohorts. So that is our large, midsize, UK, and legal departments. So thank you to everyone for attending. If you want to chat, you can chat directly with the host and co-host. So please send us-- if you have materials or questions, and we'll try to make sure we get to all of those. And this call will be recorded for future viewing.

So, first, before we get into the specific topic, I want to highlight the Disability Inclusion Commitments. More than 90 law firms in the US, UK, and Canada are partnering with Diversity Lab to continue building a culture of inclusion for people with disabilities by implementing one or more of the actions on the Disability Inclusion Commitments List. And those are covered in these webinars.

But firms have already taken steps outlined in the commitments to create a culture of inclusion for disabled individuals, but they've also signed on to take further steps next year. And those steps include increasing opportunities to hire disabled people, ensuring firm and client in-person and online events are inclusive and accessible for their colleagues with disabilities and their clients, creating opportunities to discuss inclusive actions and language related to disability at their firms, and working with experts to enhance the digital accessibility of websites and their client portals and more.

These are just some of the commitments, so please see that list. And, if you're interested in signing on and just didn't get a chance to yet, please reach out to us, specifically kavita@diversitylab.com, so we can get you signed up. So, for today's topic, Removing Physical and Digital Barriers to Accessibility, we have some really, really great guest speakers. Kate Strickland, who is from Harvard Law School-- she's a student there. She's on the Harvard Disabled Law Students Association Board.

Michael Hatcher, a partner at Sidley Austin and a member of our Disability Inclusion Advisory Group. Chris Fawcett, Clifford Chance UK Inclusion Manager. And he's also on UK Law Society's Disabled

Solicitors Network. And Geoff Freed, Director of the Digital Accessibility Consulting at Perkins Access, who has been training and supporting us here at Diversity Lab on making our materials more accessible. So thank you and welcome to everyone. I'm going to start with our first question, which is, please talk about your background, including your connection to disability advocacy. I would like to start with Kate, please.

Great. Thanks so much for that introduction, Courtney. And welcome, everyone. I am so happy to be with you all here this morning to talk about a topic that is near and dear to my heart. As mentioned, my name is Kate. And I am a student at Harvard Law School, and actually one week away from finishing my final exam and final semester here at Harvard Law.

So my connection to disability and disability advocacy began a little over 10 years ago now. Back then, I was a slightly obsessed cyclist who loved to spend every morning on a bike. And, six weeks into my freshman year at the University of Texas at Austin, I was hit by a car, which led to me breaking my neck, sustaining a spinal cord injury and becoming quadriplegic. So what that meant is my experiences drastically changed at my university.

And, within the year, I was able to go back, but found that the environment was no longer inclusive in the same way as it was before I was disabled. Students would pretend not to know me, didn't want to work with me. Professors didn't know how to use accommodations, et cetera.

And these challenges, I found, were not unique to just me. I joined the Disability Advocacy Student Coalition at UT and found so many other disabled students with similar experiences, which led me to do research and write a thesis on why a university that largely complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act and other laws that intended to provide for accessibility nevertheless disadvantaged students with disabilities.

This work led me to law school, where I continued to pursue disability advocacy in a number of ways, including the Harvard Disabled Law Students Association, working at the Disability Rights Section at the Department of Justice, and various other things, including a clinical project working with the National Disabled Law Students Association to explore the experiences of disabled law students and the challenges that they continue to face. So something very important to me, and I'm very happy to be here today.

Thank you so much, Kate, and we're happy to have you. Next, Mike, can you answer just about your background, including your connection to disability advocacy?

Certainly. So, currently, I'm a partner at Sidley Austin. I practice in intellectual property litigation. I'm also the co-head of Sidley's Disability Affinity Group that we call the Disability Diversity Alliance. Going back in time, I went to the University of Miami on an Air Force ROTC scholarship, got an undergrad degree in electrical engineering and physics, graduated with commission as an officer, and went off to fly jets for the Air Force.

About halfway through pilot training, I got on the back of a motorcycle and hit a bridge head on at over 50 miles an hour. 13 skull fractures, four facial fractures-- I broke my neck as well, Kate. And a bunch of other things happened. But the big thing that was long lasting is that I paralyzed my right arm and the upper right side of my body.

So I can no longer fly jets for the Air Force. I was medically retired, had to figure out what I was going to do with my life, decided I was going to be a litigator, went off to law school. They saw I was an electrical engineer and said, you're going to do patent litigation. I said, fine. But I didn't-- I was not involved, really, in disability advocacy in any way initially. And it was really-- it took a client. And it wasn't until I was a partner seven, eight years ago.

But a particular client-- it was Microsoft-- who has robust diversity initiatives, and always have, added disability to their program, or had added it, and I noticed it. And it was the first time I really thought about disability as an affinity group and all that entails. And that's actually what led me to-- within Sidley, help found the Disability Diversity Network-- or, excuse me, Alliance, and then go on to co-lead it for all these years.

Awesome. Thank you. I love that inclusion led to advocacy for you. That is really great. Thank you. Chris, can you please give us information on your background and connection to disability inclusion?

Thanks, Courtney. And thank you ever so much for inviting me onto this panel today. It's a real honor in Disability History Month. and just a few days after IDPD. So it's a real privilege to be here, and thank you. So I've been working at Clifford Chance law firm for about a year now. That's my first venture into the legal sector. And, before that, I was working for many years in the education sector. I was born with a visual impairment, and-- it was there. It wasn't too severe.

But, basically, I was advised all the way through my life not to disclose it, not to seek adjustments, for fear of being treated differently. So that perpetuated all the way through my schooling, through university, and through a big chunk of my career in the workplace as well. And I was hiding it. I was masking it, probably to my detriment. Couldn't see blackboards and projectors in education settings. But, hey, that's what it was.

And, about seven or eight years ago, my eyesight took another downward spiral, unfortunately, where I couldn't physically work without some assistive tech and getting some extra support in. So I had to come out about my disability within the workplace at that point, and that was a bit of a journey. And I think, possibly, the change of mindset led me into realizing the barriers and inequity, not just in workplaces, but in society in general.

Pardon the pun, but it was a bit of an eye opener for me. And that's what led me into the big world of accessibility and disability equity. And I've been fortunate enough-- in my last place, I set up a Disability Employer Representative Group in the UK and took that globally. I've met some fantastic people in the UK and in the States and globally as part of that journey.

And, now, I'm very happy to be working in the legal sector as an inclusion manager within Clifford Chance, focusing on disability and equity and accessibility. There are some specific challenges in the legal sector, but I suspect we'll come on and unpack those in a bit as the course of this call goes on. Thank you, Chris. We really appreciate your work that you do. Lastly, Geoff, can you talk about your background and connection to disability advocacy?

Sure. Yeah. I have been involved in disability technology and in advocacy and accessibility for almost 38-- actually, I think this week it might actually be 38 years-- when I started my career in the field of closed captioning for broadcast television in 1985. I have been involved in various accessibility aspects of broadcast TV and in film for many years.

And, in the early '90s, I shifted my focus to online accessibility. And, at that point, I got involved in not only helping to create solutions for making digital materials accessible, but I also became involved in the field of regulations and standards and policy. And I've contributed to most of the accessibility standards under which we all operate in my field. If you've heard of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, that's one of them. Federal regulations, such as Section 508, which is a law here in the United States.

And I've been involved in a number of government-funded research and development studies to find new ways to make digital materials of all types accessible to people with all types of disabilities. And so I have seen a lot of change in the world in all of those years, and I'm happy to say that a lot of that change is positive-- slow in coming, but beneficial for everybody.

Thank you. Thank you, Geoff. Thank you for everything that you do. So our next question is just about personal experience that you've faced with digital or physical barriers to accessibility in your career. Chris, can you start us off, please?

By all means, yeah. Thanks, Courtney. I mentioned a few minutes ago that I came out about my disability reasonably recently-- well, about seven or eight years ago. And one thing that I encountered as a barrier was the lack of understanding of the support that I needed in that particular part of my life.

The company I was working for-- they wanted to support me. They didn't know how to support me. And they were asking me, well, what adjustments, what accommodations, do I need? I don't know. I didn't know. This is all new to me, as it is to them as well.

And so that left me in a bit of a quandary, actually. So I had to go off and basically find out myself. I had to go and speak to learned professionals about what adjustment requirements I needed. I didn't know whether I needed a screen reader or zoom software, or this, that, or the other.

But there was an expectation that I would automatically know. Having acquired or disclosed this disability, I would know what the solution is. That isn't the case, and I suspect it's the case for many disabled people that acquire a disability at some point in their lives, rather than being born with it.

So anyway-- so that was a bit of a barrier for me, so-- as well as adjusting and working out what accommodations I actually needed to actually physically support me, I was having to have conversations with my management chain about why I'm not actually doing the work that they're asking me to do because I can't see my screens, as well as innovating process for the HR departments in the company I was working for. So all of these things came about at the same time, whilst I was dealing with the psychological aspects of my new world environment.

So the question was about, was there a barrier? Yeah, there was a barrier. It was a multifaceted barrier that all came about at once. And it touches on policy. It touches on process. It touches on digital accessibility, both in terms of what Geoff was talking about earlier, in terms of accessible documents and the way we interact with them, but also the hardware and software to actually interface with that.

So, yeah, in a nutshell, lots of barriers. Didn't know what those barriers were. And, yeah, I guess there's a learning curve within that, in terms of understanding that people don't necessarily know what their needs are at that particular point in time that they disclose their disability.

Thank you for that insight so much. Part of disability inclusion means being aware of things like askjan.org that lists impairments or tasks and tells you different accommodations. Because people may know they're struggling, but they may not know the bridge, because, if they did, they might be using it

already. And so just being educated or just knowing where to go to look is really, really important. Thank you. Kate, did you have any personal experiences you wanted to share about physical or digital barriers? Yeah. I would be happy to. Thanks, Courtney. Before I discuss them, I just want to give a caveat that these are my personal experiences. So, while my challenges were unique to me, they're not necessarily generalizable to everyone. And disability is so, so unique-- and just caveat-ing that to start.

But I think I want to talk about the summer experiences I had this past summer. I worked at two different law firms, and I had some challenges at both places. And I think the first one I'll talk about-- I'll talk about two. The first one is that the interior accessibility was a challenge at both places. So, again, I fully expect both of these law firms complied with the laws and the regulations around accessibility.

But, when it came to actually functionally using the space, I struggled. There were turnstiles that I couldn't use myself, elevators that needed key cards I couldn't access myself. Off of the elevator lobbies, there were doors that I couldn't open myself, and they didn't have buttons to enable me to open those doors. I was able to navigate both of these spaces by bringing someone with me every day and having a personal care assistant with me. But the interior accessibility just wasn't going to work for me at either place.

The second experience barrier that I faced was with bathrooms, actually. The PCA that I was able to bring with me for most of my summer was male. I am female, so that meant that the typical accessible bathroom stalls in your women's bathroom or even the men's bathroom wasn't going to work for us. At my first firm, it wasn't a problem because they happened to have single-stall non-gendered bathrooms on two of their 12 floors, so that was super convenient for us. We were able to just go to a different floor and be able to access a bathroom.

But, at my second firm, that wasn't the case. They only had male or female bathrooms. So I went there on my first day and had nowhere to be able to go to the bathroom. I raised this with their legal recruiting and personnel department, and we did create a solution. But I don't think that it was a fully inclusive solution. They ended up posting a sign outside of the men's restroom on my floor. And, whenever I needed to use the bathroom, my PCA would then have to go in, make sure the bathroom was empty, turn the sign around, and I was able to do that. And it was a fine solution for four weeks, but I don't think that would have been a permanent solution had I chosen to accept the job there.

So I think the takeaway for me and the barrier that I faced is that, similar to the university, just because you're complying with federal law and regulations doesn't mean that your space is going to be functional for your disabled employees, and to think a little bit more about how to go beyond what the law requires to create inclusive spaces.

Thank you so much for sharing. So firms and organizations need to be thoughtful about, how does a person go about asking for these questions that you might not want to discuss with everyone, and you might not want to have to take a journey to figure out how-- where do I go to get this sorted out? Is there a centralized accommodation system? How does this work, and how should it work? Mike, did you have a personal experience to share about a physical or digital barrier?

Sure. So I would echo Kate. And I really do think it's-- and there in the area of barriers, it is often unique-- or maybe not unique, but tailored to each individual and what they're experiencing. For me, I've experienced both extremes.

As a pilot, I experienced the barrier that I could not fly a jet with only one hand. And, thus, I was pushed out because there is no accommodation to be made with fighter jets. You can't make them one-handed flying. And that's part of why I went to the legal career.

As a lawyer, and at Sidley in particular, things I've encountered-- just getting in the door with a badge. If I have anything in my hand, I can't get my badge out to get in the door. Sidley's been nice enough that there's a table next to the door on my floor that I can set down whatever I have, and it's just there permanently, to take out my badge and get in the door. And it's always been there across-- we've moved three different times now over the course of my career.

More generally, for me and my issue with having only one hand, is courtrooms, and how do I handle my papers, exhibits, a cup of water or a bottle of water, getting up and down from the witness stand in a timely manner. Especially for patent trials, if anyone's familiar, in the Eastern District of Texas and the Western District of Texas, they're timed, and you're on a very strict time limit.

Making multiple trips is actually problematic to go back and forth because it just eats into your time to present all your witnesses. So I actually have-- somebody will help me carry stuff up at the initial point so I'm set up and ready to go and not having to make multiple trips.

But, more than anything else, for me, it's all surmountable. It's more about an issue of planning and thinking ahead of time and understanding the situation and knowing that I need to go up with a binder-- everything-- how it's going to hang on the ledge. It's going to be caught. It's not going to fall down if I can't hold it with my hand the whole time. It's just-- it's a whole bunch of little things that you have to think about ahead of time. And I think that's true across-- for many disabled people, or at least physically disabled people

Thank you, Mike. That is something to think about-- the fact that people with disabilities are doing this other work, aside from just the thinking about their job and getting their tasks done. There's other energy that is going into the work day and just life working, and so it is important to be mindful of that. So what are two to three steps that organizations can take to create more inclusive and disability-affirming workplaces related to digital and physical accessibility? Geoff, can you please start us out with that question?

Sure. I'd be happy to. I want to start by just emphasizing something that Kate said, which is that just because you conform or comply with a rule or a regulation does not necessarily equate to usability. And this is a primary tenet in the world of physical and digital accessibility, is that conformance and compliance does not necessarily mean usability.

And so one of the things that organizations can do as they're striving to meet accessibility regulations of any kind is involve people with disabilities as they create solutions and as they test solutions. There's nothing worse than the sinking feeling that you might feel after having spent months or years creating an asset of some kind and then finding out that certain people can't use it, despite your best efforts. And that's an expensive mistake.

So, when you're designing something, from day one is when you take into account perspectives of all people, and that includes people with disabilities. Including people with disabilities in design meetings and then in testing-- in iterative testing so that you can find errors, correct them, and test again-- that's of crucial importance when you're creating new materials.

And then, after you've created something, whatever that thing might be, be it a building that you've built or a website that you've built, you want to make sure that people can contact you and give you feedback. And, when I say this, often people say, oh, if I make it possible for people to contact me, they're going to contact me and complain. But that's what you want, is that you want to hear feedback from your audience, especially the audience of people with disabilities, to find out how you can continue to improve something after you've made it.

Great. Thank you, Geoff. Mike, anything on steps organizations can take for a more inclusive environment?

Sorry. Let me take myself off mute. To me, and in my personal experience, the biggest step that I think an organization can take is to create an affinity group-- a disability affinity group. My personal experience within Sidley over the course of many years was always positive and accommodating and including. And I thought it was that way for everybody throughout Sidley, and everybody realized that Sidley would be that way.

But seven, eight years ago, when we took the steps to set up the Disability Diversity Alliance within Sidley and made the first announcement about it, and I sent out the original email-- or I was the person that sent out the original email, sending it out-- the initial reaction was-- I got five, six, seven, eight emails from different associates within Sidley from all over the world just thanking me.

And what it made clear to me is that, even though I realized that my organization was doing what I thought it needed to do, that it doesn't necessarily mean that everybody within your organization thinks that. And I think that publicizing it and creating that diversity, the disability affinity group is a wonderful step to show everyone within your organization that you are committed to it.

Thank you, Mike. That is a big one. In many big organizations or firms, each individual can be having vastly different experiences with the people they work with or just what they think about the place or what they assume. And so that is a great way to help more people get on the same page about what the organization's mission is. So thank you for raising that. Kate, did you have any steps organizations can take to be more disability-affirming workplaces?

Yes, of course. So I think-- I'll focus on two things. One is-- the best way to make a more inclusive space is to have more people with disabilities within your organization. So the first thing for me is especially-- I'm a law student, so I'm going to speak from the legal perspective-- is law firms need to be recruiting more disabled law students.

Having just come off a project. speaking to disabled law students across the country, there are a lot of us out there who want to work for law firms if they're going to be inclusive. And so what that means for law firms might be to connect with these disability affinity organizations that are cropping up across the country. And it's also giving those disabled students the support they need to be able to effectively complete summer internships and first years.

So I think my first firm was almost a master class in how to be accessible. So, to briefly go over some of the things that I thought they did incredibly well, is, one, that we had discussions about accommodations so early on, well before my summer with them, in terms of what I needed, in terms of me bringing someone with me to navigate the barriers that I knew were going to exist. All of that was accommodated. But we also talked about the social events and making sure those were inclusive.

A big thing firms like to do is have events at partner homes. Personal homes are notoriously inaccessible. And they managed to make sure that we built a huge ramp to one of the partner's houses. We picked a partner that had an accessible home already. That was navigated, and that was incredible.

They also made sure that I was able to see the space before I started my internship, which was amazing. I was a Zoom interview generation, so I wasn't able to be in the office before accepting my job. And so they met me on a Sunday to go through the office so I knew what I was rolling into on day one. They also didn't stop once I started. I had conversations with people from this firm throughout the summer about ways in which they could be more inclusive, or they could incorporate more accessibility, even internally. And we continued to talk. Even after the summer and I accepted my job, we still had conversations about even more accommodations that could make the space more inclusive to me. So I think that was incredible. I think the second thing that organizations should do is think about universal design in the workplace.

That means, how can we make opportunities for things to be inclusive for everyone? And that's things like non-gendered bathrooms. It's also things like flexible space or using furniture that's not fixed in place and can be moved and navigated for wheelchair accessibility.

It's also things like giving features to everyone so someone with an invisible disability doesn't have to out themselves by using it. For example, my first law firm-- they recently moved to a new space, and everybody has adjustable standing desks. That's a game changer for someone like me in a wheelchair to be able to use my space and adjust it.

But it's also super important to others who may have invisible disabilities that didn't want to disclose that disability publicly and would otherwise have to do, so if they were the only one with a standing desk. When everyone has one, nobody has to be called out as the disabled person in the office. So two steps-- more proactive recruiting, more support, and then thinking about ways to incorporate universal design. Thank you so much, Kate. I'm glad that you've had such a great experience in that-- I'm looking forward to hearing more about what that means in the future. Chris, can you let us know some steps organizations you think would help improve their inclusivity?

Absolutely. Thanks, Courtney. I don't want to go over what colleagues have already said just now, but I completely echo and support everything that's just been said. So something that we haven't necessarily touched on, and this links into the existence of the Diversity Lab commitments, is buy-in from leadership-- understanding from leadership in an organization that disability equity is hugely important.

And, in order for it to work, it needs to be built into DE&I strategies on par, in an equitable way, with other aspects of diversity. And the commitments that Diversity Labs have put out are a brilliant example of how organizations can actually get on board with that. So that's brilliant. So leadership buy-in and leadership driving the change is important.

And, linking it back to what Mike was saying, another aspect is the importance of affinity networks and groups of people within an organization to come together and start driving the change of culture, supported by the leadership, to make an organization more equitable and welcoming, and, ultimately, more accessible.

And once these things start to kick in-- and, again, forgive me, Kate. I know you mentioned this already. But-- as did you Geoff, I think, as well. But the application and the use of the knowledge, skills, and experience of disabled colleagues is really broad. It's not just in the development of products. It's not just digital stuff. It's not just built environments.

But, if organizations start thinking about and engaging with disabled people to identify if there are barriers, or where the barriers are in recruitment, where they are within career progression. We've already mentioned about the physical office spaces, but in terms of the way we operate in meetings or the way we attend events.

But a really holistic view, including HR policies, actually-- so engage people with lived experience to help inform if there's any barriers up front that can be ironed out in anything that an organization is doing. So really embodying the notion of inclusive design, as well as universal, but inclusive design-- to consult as many different types of groups of people that may have barriers so that you can eradicate as many up front as the organization is going about its day-to-day business. It sounds a heavy lift, but if you've got the leadership buy-in and you've got your networks, it's not actually too bad. It's a cultural journey, but it's one well worth doing.

Thank you, Chris. It is definitely a journey I think organizations are increasingly including disability in their DEI. But many still have it closely connected with a medical issue and a private issue. And so there's reluctance to think about this as something that we can talk about and collaborate on and work together to improve, separately from anyone's personal history.

So thank you. So, to you all, what is essential for people to understand about disability and disability inclusion more generally? I'd like to start with Kate, please.

Thanks, Courtney. So I think I might have mentioned this before. But, just to highlight, I think it's so, so essential that everyone can understand that disability is not a monolith. Disability is incredibly diverse. Disability presents in different ways in every individual. For example, Harvard Law School currently has five wheelchair users, which is high for us, which is incredible. And we love that.

But the five of us need very different things. While door openers may be useful for all of us, the specific accommodations and our specific needs are different. And being able to treat them as different and engage in conversations with each of us is so crucial to our success.

And I think the second thing I would add is that it is so important that we talk about disability and that we involve the needs of each individual that's within the organization. But, at the same time, it's incredibly important that we don't place all of the burden and all of the onus on individuals with disabilities to start those conversations. It should come from leadership. It should come from individuals with or without disabilities.

I myself love to talk about disability. I'm an advocate. I will bring it to whatever organization. I will host whatever discussion you want me to host on disability. But that's not everyone's perspective, and that's not everyone's preference. And respecting how each individual relates to their disability is really important. It's not central to everyone's identity. It's central to my identity. But, for others, it's just a piece of who they are and not something that they always want to highlight.

Great point. Thank you so much, Kate. Mike, did you have anything you want people to understand about disability inclusion?

Well, Kate really hit my point there. Because to me-- and I think I said this earlier during the call-- it's incredibly nuanced across different people and what they're having to experience. And everybody needs to approach it in that manner, and how they can best serve the particular individual at issue and what the particular disability is that they have.

To add something else beyond what Kate said, I would say that, as an organization, I think it's important to establish at least some framework for your accommodation policy so that there is a process to be followed that's publicized, and that the people within organization know at least the first steps they need to take if they have an accommodation that they'd like to be accommodated.

Thank you. Very true. That is necessary. And that's something that firms and organizations are working on, and we're very thankful. Chris, anything that is essential for people to understand about disability and disability inclusion in general?

There are so many things, Courtney. I'll try to be concise and just pick on a few. I'm going to hit up some stats. A couple of 80% stats-- apparently, 80% of disabilities are acquired during the working force age, so whilst we're in the working-- between the ages of about 16 and 65.

So there's sometimes a perception that most disabled people are born with disabilities-- not so. And that relates into the point I was raising earlier. So be considerate of the fact that, if someone acquires a disability, as 80% of people do during the working force age, that there is-- they may not know what they need. So bear that in mind.

Another 80% stat-- it's estimated 80% of disabilities are non-apparent to other people. So-- and, as Kate mentioned, hugely broad spectrum of disability types-- physical, mental. The list is almost endless. And it's not a one size fits all.

Even within someone who has sight loss, say, me, for example-- I've got the adjustments that I need in place, or the accommodations that I need in place. Those are going to be quite different to someone else with the same diagnosis who's had a different journey. So everyone is an individual, and we need to consider what their requirements actually are. And without going on too many points-- let me just round out.

But there's lots of good research out there. If you go to the McKinsey reports, for example, organizations that employ and support people with disabilities are more profitable. There's a lower staff turnover. There's a better culture within them.

There's a lot of research out there that shows that this isn't just a nice to have. It's not a tick box. 1.3 billion people in the world have a disability. And employing people with disabilities is the right thing to do, but it's also-- it makes good business sense as well.

Thank you, Chris. Geoff, did you have anything that is essential to understand about disability and disability inclusion?

Sure. I'm with Chris. We could talk about this all day, so I'll be brief. One thing to keep in mind is a point that Katie-- Kate-- touched on as well-- sorry-- is that accessible design means that everyone can participate. And that goes for people who develop disabilities during their life, as Chris pointed out. But it also goes for simply the aging population-- is that, while aging is not necessarily a disability, with it comes things that are associated with disabilities, like diminished hearing and sight, diminished mobility,

and so forth. And so keeping in mind that, when you design something accessibly, that means everyone can use it.

One thing when we talk about universal design is that the idea is to design something that everyone can use, regardless of their approach. And, when it comes to corporations and organizations, what this often means is that the things that you provide for your employees-- you never know when someone with a disability is going to be accessing those things.

If you think of something as simple as a time sheet application-- is that-- people with disabilities need to fill those out as well. And an accessibly designed time sheet application will make it easier for someone with a disability of any type to use. But it also makes that thing easier to use for all your employees.

And so this comes down sometimes to a question of procurement. When you're buying things for your organization, be it desks that can be adjustable, as Kate mentioned, or software that everyone needs to use to participate in the organization, you need to think about the accessibility of those things as you're even buying them.

Thank you so much. Very, very important. Any other insights to share on this topic, Removing Physical and Digital Barriers to Accessibility? Anyone wanted to add anything before we check if there were other questions?

I'd like to just add quickly-- or, actually, what I'd like to do is hammer home the point quickly that, when you make things accessible, people will use them. And, when you make things accessible, you may be surprised at how people find ways to use them in ways that maybe you didn't expect.

A really good example of this is captions. Captions were originally developed so that people who were deaf or hard of hearing could watch TV-- broadcast captions, at least-- so they could watch TV independently, or watch TV programs with their friends and family who were hearing.

And now, 40-- almost-- well, 50 years later, since captions were introduced to broadcast television, you can't look at any TV in a public space that doesn't have captions turned on, practically. And, in fact, captions are available on 100%-- nearly 100% of the programs that you watch on TV today.

And one of the reasons is because it was quickly discovered that everyone benefits from captions. You can watch TV with the sound turned off. You can watch TV in a bedroom where someone is sleeping. And captions have educational impact as well. So always keep that in mind when you're designing for accessibility-- that everyone benefits.

Thank you very much, Geoff. I'm a huge fan of captions, and I say that I can't hear without them. So thank you for that point. Kate, there was a question about some of the organizations that you brought up. Who are they? How can people connect to maybe recruit from them?

Yeah, of course. So I think the question is about the student organization. So I'll answer from that perspective. So there is a National Disabled Law Students Association, which is an overarching body that seeks to connect with and resource some of those student organizations. That's a great starting point, is to reach out and connect with them. Their website is NDLSA-- so ndlsa.org.

They have a list of their member organizations, but you can also reach out to them directly. That organization is in contact with a lot of these disability-focused student organizations on campuses. Harvard has a pretty active DLSA on our campus. You can always reach out to us. Our website is available online, and you can find our contact information. But there's several organizations.

The NDLA website has a list of member organizations. They're working on updating it, so, right now, there may be some older and outdated information, but there is information there to try to find some of these student organizations that you can reach out to and start to connect with.

Thank you very much. So there's a comment-- I'm very interested in learning more about the delta between what the legal requirements are for workplace accessibility and digital access versus the practical and ethical actions. Does anyone want to talk about that space between what is legally required, and what else is going on outside of that?

I can take a stab at it. I'll preface by saying I'm not a lawyer, but I do have opinions. And it's important to remember that, while you may need to comply with regulations or laws, you can think of those as the floor, is that, you must do these things to meet accessibility regulations in physical spaces or in digital spaces. But that doesn't prevent you from doing more.

And one of the ways that you can learn to do more is by involving people with disabilities in your decisions. That way, going back to the point we talked about earlier, you're not just dealing with essentially check box accessibility-- yes, I meet these regulations. But you're actually developing or using something or creating something that is usable by everybody, including people with disabilities.

Thank you, Geoff. Let's see if there are any other questions. Well, there is one question, which will be our next topic, but if anyone had insight here about starting disability affinity groups and how to go about that and what types of things you know about affinity groups discussing or focusing on.

I'm happy to jump in on that one, Courtney. And I don't want to give any spoilers, because I'm sure the next session is going to be absolutely fantastic as well. But one thing to consider is thinking about what-- when you're setting it up, what are the parameters? What is the group actually doing? Because, at a really high level, there's different types of group.

There are true affinity networks to share lived experience and potentially start raising awareness. And then there's another type of group the more business resource groups, which are bolted onto the side of an organization and are part of driving the strategy of an organization. And then, somewhere in the middle, you've got the concept of an employee representative group too.

So, in terms of knowing what type of group you're setting up, each of them adds lots of value. But setting up some parameters and working within the organization as close or as far away from the actual core of the organization is part of the consideration process when you're actually starting one of these things up. But, as you say, there's a whole session on that, and I'm sure we'll get into a lot more detail on that-- yeah.

Thank you. Another point I wanted to raise is that people will form groups if you allow that and facilitate that. Your employees will have groups where they discuss these things, and you'll be working on making things more accessible. And you, of course, always will be taking accommodations requests.

But another thing to note is, there are impairments that a lot of your employees might not realize they have. When I say-- I didn't-- I hear better with captions, I actually have something called sensory processing disorder, which-- a lot of people who have that wouldn't know if they didn't have other diagnoses and they weren't already looking into any difficulties or barriers that they sensed.

And so, as you're thinking of programming and thinking of ways to improve your materials and spaces, remember that not everyone will have a doctor's note, and not everyone will be able to articulate the ways that they're impaired.

But that doesn't mean you can't do things that make things better or more accessible to them, which prevents burnout and just makes the work product and the time that they're having better. I recently asked all of my friends who are-- many are autistic-- just what's hard about being in the workplace. And almost all of them talked about the lights, and just the harshness of the fluorescent lights, and just how miserable that they feel in the building, aside from maybe chatter and things like that that are more specific to them. But that is-- just the environments-- you can think about ways that it's just been the same for a long time, but that people are saying, this is actually a problem to some people, and not everyone even realizes that's the case for them. So another question is, how do we help lawyers and others feel comfortable disclosing that they have a disability?

Well, so I would say, on that, that goes back to having the disability affinity group at your firm or your organization and getting that out there. And part of what we've done as part of that is, at least once a year, we reach out and encourage disclosure. Obviously, it's not required. There's nothing strong armed about it. But we do reach out and encourage it because I truly believe that it will build on itself. The more people that disclose, the more people that will feel comfortable disclosing.

And, as the numbers grow, they will continue to grow. It's almost a self-fulfilling prophecy. So you just have to continue working at it year after year after year. And you will eventually reach a point where you have-- you're never going to have full disclosure, but a good percentage of disclosure within your organization.

Great. Thank you. Yes. That's-- another thing is that some people just won't disclose. And they've maybe heard things that confirm their decision not to disclose, and that is just part of life and part of their rights, the same way with other demographic groups-- that you're not necessarily-- it's not necessarily what you're doing. They've made the decision for themselves in their careers. And you can do your best, and you can think of ways to benefit them anyway, regardless of the fact that they haven't disclosed. Chris, your hand is raised.

Yeah. Thanks, Courtney. I just wanted to come in on that one. So I was going to mention some research that was conducted. This is UK focused. Forgive me a moment. But I think that wider application will span the pond. There was some research conducted by the Law Society of England and Wales's Disabled Solicitors Network back in 2020 where they surveyed about 500 disabled solicitors and barristers in the UK.

And it flagged up shocking disclosure rates, particularly within the solicitors professional of-- and it unpacked the reasons why. It's really quite interesting research, and there are some issues across the sector-- across the legal industry. And it's well worth reading that. But, just coming back to how do you get people to disclose, well, you can't force people to, and you'll never get everyone to disclose, and nor should we get everyone to disclose, to Mike's point.

But something I mentioned earlier was the cultural acceptance and the psychological safety of disclosing. So the more that we do, the more we publicize accommodations policies, the more we see leaders not

just within an organization, but within the sector, full stop, within the profession, full stop-- to build on Mike's point.

Again, as Kate mentioned before, a US example-- but, in the UK, the Law Society's Disabled Solicitors Network is a great go-to point outside of a person's individual organization that can provide support and advice and can start building that kind of comfort and culture about exploring how to navigate disclosure and what it actually means.

Thank you, Chris. So we got another question. While disability is not a monolith, is there a basic audit practice we can use to confirm where your gaps are? Did you all have any suggestions on how to figure out what the gaps are-- how to-- do you ask everyone? Do you-- what would you think, or what would make you feel included, as far as getting the best result possible?

So I think one of the things that's helpful is inviting that feedback-- is asking-- maybe, if you don't have employees that have chosen to disclose their disability, just asking writ large about accessibility and thoughts if anyone has feedback to bring in. I think, because my disability is very apparent-- I use a power wheelchair-- there is absolutely no hiding my disability. I'm an easy point of contact to ask about accessibility, which is exactly what my summer firm did. And they really did invite very specific feedback from me, and that made me feel like they were committed to creating a more inclusive space.

So I think, really, the best thing that an organization can do is to have conversations with those with disabilities who have chosen to disclose, and, if not, if that's not an option, to generally just invite feedback from everyone. Of course, I'm sure there are plenty of external accessibility experts one can access if that is within your resources and within your interest. But, generally, just starting within, I think, is a really good starting point.

To add to that, as an external resource who would be happy to help anyone who has questions about accessibility, physical or digital, I'll second what Kate said. Getting everyone's input-- people with disabilities, people who don't identify as having disabilities-- is important.

One thing about people who don't necessarily identify about having disabilities is that they may have family members with disabilities. And so they will bring that perspective as well to the conversation. Not necessarily having direct experience, but having an experience with somebody with a disability is always valuable as well.

Thank you so, so much. Any final thoughts before we wrap up?

I think it's important to remember that, as somebody said earlier, accessibility is a journey. And that journey is never ending. In the world of accessibility, both physical and digital, the speed of change will always stay somewhat ahead of the speed of change in terms of accessibility and accommodation.

So it's important to always pay attention to the people who work with you and who work for you, especially to get their perspectives when it comes to accommodation, and just to remember that all the work that you do benefits everybody in your organization and outside of your organization too.

Awesome, and very true. Thank you so much, Geoff. Thank you, Kate, Chris, and Mike as well for being here. We're going to wrap up. Our next call will be January 4, and that is on establishing affinity groups in the disability inclusion context. So thank you very much for coming, and thank you for all your contributions. Have a great day.

Thanks.



Thank you.