

**Transcript “Disability Inclusion Webinar 1/19/25: Disability & Intersectionality”**

Good afternoon. Welcome to today's Mansfield community disability inclusion knowledge sharing call. I am Courtney Munnings, and I'm honored to help present on the topic of intersectionality in the context of disability. But first, I'd like to ask for you to please rename yourself, if you can, to include your name and your organization. And if you'd like to use closed captioning, we've made that available for this call. Please go to More Captions and Show Captions.

And I think that lots of my colleagues from Diversity Lab will be on this call eventually today, so they probably will have Diversity Lab in their name. So you can message them if you need to send anything to them or you have a question, and they can communicate directly with me. I won't be able to read the chat and talk at the same time, but I will eventually see if you just want to send something to me maybe after the call.

And if we have time for additional questions, we will definitely try to get to everyone's questions. Just please send those to my colleagues. And we're going to save the chat temporarily. But before we get into it, I want to remind you of our next Mansfield community knowledge sharing call on the current state of DEI in the US following the 2024 election with Seyfarth Shaw entertainment-- I mean-- sorry, employment experts. And so I'm going to paste the link to register in the chat. OK.

So today's conversation is about disability and intersectionality. And intersectionality is a concept that was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a distinguished law professor, pioneering scholar, and writer on civil rights, critical race theory, black feminist legal theory, race and racism in the law. And with intersectionality, Crenshaw was describing the double bind of simultaneous racial and gender prejudice.

A judge had dismissed a Black woman's discrimination case arguing that the employer hired both Black people and women, and so Crenshaw countered that hiring Black men for manual labor and white women for office jobs didn't negate that there was discrimination against Black women. A Black woman faces overlapping challenges at the intersection of race and gender. And so the intersectionality metaphor is that Black women were positioned at the intersection of those different forces and facing overlapping dilemmas.

And over time, other people adopted and iterated the intersectionality concept to frame our many identities and experiences of privilege and oppression at once. And there are innumerable combinations of abilities, types of disability, race, sexuality, gender, education level, age, religion, national origin, social class, and so on. But the more personal perspectives we hear, the more empathy and understanding we have.

And so today we have wonderful guest speakers who are willing to share about their backgrounds and identities and challenges and resilience, and their ideas on how we can better include and support and respect more people. So our guests are Catherine Ames. She is CEO of Fierce Hope Patient Advocacy and Consulting. Evelyn Clark. She is an international trade associate at Thompson Coburn. And Trevor J. Hardy. He is a shareholder at Littler. So thank you so much for coming.

And I'd like to start with you, Catherine, for the first question. Can you please introduce yourself, including your background and your connection to disability inclusion?

Good morning, everyone. Thank you so much for being here. Thank you, Courtney and Diversity Lab for having me. My name is Catherine Ames. My relation to disability is that I am someone living with a disability. I was not born with my disability. My health collapsed around age 20, in the middle of my college experience, and I ended up having to take time off, got diagnosed with lupus. And suddenly, like many people, I'm sure, with disabilities, was forced into the world of advocacy.

It was necessitated by the position I found myself in, and was interested in knowing my rights, my legal rights. I got introduced to the Coelho Center at Loyola Marymount in Los Angeles. They have a disability law fellowship, and just fell in love with advocating for people with disabilities and other patients. Specifically, my intersecting identities that I think will be relevant to the conversation today are the fact that I am a woman and that I'm a young woman.

So I work a lot with adolescents, ages 13 to 25, who have disabilities and chronic illnesses, so who are really utilizing the ADA primarily for school accommodations, IEPs. So I help educate young people on how to advocate for their own rights, but I also work a lot with parents. And I will toss it to you, Evelyn.

Sure. Hi, good morning and afternoon. Thank you all so much for coming. Thanks for inviting me. So I also was not born with a disability. Nine years ago, I had an accident with a T6 spinal cord injury, the left knee paralyzed from the chest down. I celebrated my nine-year anniversary this week. So it was six months after I graduated from college, and basically was in the hospital for six months, had a lot of recovery, and then went to law school the next year.

I don't practice disability law, but when I was in law school, I was on the Journal of civil rights and social justice and wrote my note on ADA enforcement and how plaintiffs are treated not only by federal judges, but the media. And did not think that people would be interested in that topic as much as they were, and have received a lot of feedback and interesting conversations and opportunities from that.

I think, just as a person who navigates the world from the wheelchair and also studied the law, I've become kind of a academic talking head, I think, in this space. But I don't myself work in disability law.

Thanks, Evelyn. Trevor.

Courtney, I really appreciate the invitation to be here today and love seeing that there are over 200 people on this call interested in this topic. It's really encouraging to see that. My name is Trevor Hardy. I'm a shareholder at Littler Mendelson. I'm based in the firm's Cleveland office, and like Catherine and Evelyn, I wasn't born with my disability. I had health issues that presented a number of years ago when I was diagnosed with primary progressive multiple sclerosis. Back in 2018, I was also diagnosed with POTS, which is postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome. So once the floodgates opened, they really opened for me.

And I was already a lawyer at that time who was practicing. I was busy. I was that associate who needed to get all the hours and do all the things, and my life changed really dramatically, really quickly. And I had a lot of access issues. Like Catherine mentioned, I was not believed. People didn't think that I had something wrong, and I can remember a doctor telling me, I'm not even sure why you're here. And I knew I was-- I was educated in the law. I was a lawyer. I was practicing. And if I couldn't get the care that I knew I needed and was entitled to, what was happening to other people?

So I quickly got involved with the National MS Society and health care advocacy and health equity and understanding what that meant, understanding how to make change not just at the local level, but nationally and internationally. And I started partnering with friends who I found out had MS. I am openly gay as well, which adds another dynamic and speaks to that intersectionality question and concept that Courtney mentioned at the beginning.

And as a male with MS, there aren't a lot of men with MS. It took me over a year to find another man who was diagnosed with MS, and that was only when 500 individuals with MS got together in DC for a national conference. So there's that piece as well. And I've been with Littler Mendelson for about three years now, and I do practice in disability law. I'm one of the firm's subject matter experts in leaves and accommodations, and one of my niche areas is service animals. And I have a service animal behind me. But that's a lot of my practice, is advising people on animals in and out of the workplace.

And so I've seen what that education piece does, and I'm so glad that Catherine's educating. I'm so glad that Evelyn's educating. And I'm trying to do the same thing because I find that just conversations, they lead to a different type of understanding. They move all of us forward. So I so appreciate the opportunity to do this today.

Awesome. Trevor, thank you so much. You raised a great point that I try to talk about often, stemming from when I was fighting for accommodations, most of which were free, and I couldn't do it as a lawyer. I just couldn't get it. And so I imagine those people who are in different industries who just don't have a shot. So thank you for raising that. I'm going to stick with you, Trevor. And you did touch on it, but can you talk about some of the main identities that shape who you are and how you show up, and even how others see or relate to you?

Yeah, absolutely. I think one of the biggest things for me was, I came out about two years before I was diagnosed with MS, so I had another coming out whenever I learned about my disability and had a name for it. And my work life changed. My social life changed. All aspects of my life changed. And when I was applying for jobs and looking for a new position, I found Littler, and I was looking for a place that practiced what it preached. And I found that and more when I landed here.

And I was super bold in my interview. I met my then managing partner, and I said, what do you do to ensure that individuals with disabilities have the opportunity to succeed? What do you do to make sure that LGBT-plus individuals have the opportunity? And I was expecting one thing, and then I got, well, here's this option, here's this option, here's this option, here's this other thing. And oh, we're starting this, and you could be on the ground floor with that. And my identity wasn't something that made me different. It made me a part of the conversation. It made me a part of what we were doing at the firm.

And it opened opportunities for me to meet other people like me, meet other people who were successful, who had managed a disability in the workplace. And that really stood out to me as an opportunity to grow, but to also realize that this is one great part of me that makes me more relatable to clients. I can't tell you how great it is to talk to someone about service animals, and then I unblur my screen, and there is my 55-pound lab in the background, who helps me every day. And if I can unblur right now, I will try and figure out how to do that. But you can see that there is Tristan sitting in the corner, my faithful guy who goes on every work trip with me.

But I think being able to show up as myself has made me such a-- it's made me a much better advocate not just for myself, but for others. So seeing how my identity intersects with what I do at work and outside of work, it's made me show up as a whole person every day. And I think that makes me the best that I can be. It's best for the firm, and it's best for the people I work with every day.

Thank you. I'm really glad that you had that experience and that people find you relatable and accept you, and some of the issues that people anticipated haven't been a huge part of your story. Evelyn, I'd like to go to you next. Can you share some of your overlapping social identities?

Sure, yeah. So I am also gay. I started coming out freshman year of college, and as we all know, it's a process. At the time, I really wanted to work in government and politics, and thought being a lesbian from Southern Virginia, that would never be the case. So I pivoted a little bit more to law school than politics and then after college got hit with my accident and had a whole other coming to terms with who I was going to be.

I'm very fortunate I had the opportunity in my one whole year of law school to go to Lavender Law, which is the annual conference put on by the LGBTQ bar. And I had the opportunity to talk to people in person and say, look, my one whole year of law school was my first time living on my own in a wheelchair, trying to get accommodations. I couldn't get in the front door of the school. They didn't have a bathroom on the floor where classrooms were that I could get in with my wheelchair. I had to get all my case law books in PDFs, which is not typically how I like to learn.

So my first year of law school was hard. And my grades were fine, but they weren't great. But I was able to go, because I'm gay, and I had this opportunity to go to Lavender Law and talk to these firms in person and say, I'm a really good worker. I'm really smart. This past year was hard, and if you give me the opportunity, I can prove that. And talked to a lot of great firms, and really fortunate where I am as well at Thompson Coburn.

And they're understanding, and they're offering to do anything that I would request and being able to be out and comfortable. And it's a unique experience that I think not everyone has. I think being in DC may also play a part in that. But yeah, I mean, it's-- in the day to day, I'm in a wheelchair, my partner is not. And so when we go out, no one would ever assume we're a couple. Typically, it's sister or she's my caretaker, and people talking to her instead of me.

We've been together six and a half years. We're going to get married this October. So I think that'll be nice to have that solidity, but also recognizing that a lot of people with disabilities, who are on disability or need caretakers, are not able to get married. And that's another source of marriage inequality in our country, where if they get married, they lose their benefits. If they get married, the state says, well, your partner can be your caretaker and you don't need one, while the partner is not getting paid for that labor.

So it's interesting to navigate the world, as I'm sure everyone here can imagine, with different identities, but I'm just super grateful to be where I am and have the life I do. And I think a lot of that is due to my accident and having that opportunity to see the world from a different lens and how great I have it and taking advantage of that experience and talking about it with other people.

Well, thank you so much, Evelyn. Catherine, can you please talk more about your identities?

Happy to. I think in the context of this conversation, I want to frame my response around the invisible versus visible disabilities. My disability is invisible, so I'm a tall, thin, cishet, white woman. If you saw me walk into a room, you would never know that I am having conversations in a meeting through crippling chronic pain, like just trying to keep it together.

And when my disability-- when I became so sick that I needed to start engaging really complex health care, I was 20 and I didn't know anyone who had gone through anything similar to what I had gone through. I was also starting at a new school. College-aged kids are not the most forthcoming when it comes to even matters of mental health. It's still taboo, and it's hard to find a community when you're going through something really adverse at such a young age.

Even people who have experienced profound grief at that age still find it difficult to relate to people their age and their college community settings. So my way of coping with that was pulling a Carrie Bradshaw from Sex and the City and starting a column in my school's newspaper called Chronically Catherine, and telling my story and putting an email at the bottom in hopes that people with chronic illness and disability would come to me and kind of chum the waters a little bit.

I had no expectations going into it. If anything, I just thought some of the things that I was experiencing, the health care system, were hilarious, and I cope with humor. And to my surprise, I was flooded with messages from not only students, but staff and admin who were telling me they have scoliosis and none other fraternity brothers understand why they can't participate in certain activities. Someone reached out to me with chronic migraine, and my teacher gaslights me when I say that I can't take notes manually, that I need to listen to or have headphones in during class.

And I realized that my invisible disability was actually an asset. And that's the one thing I hope people walk away with today, is that both Trevor and Evelyn have illuminated that not only these sort of major life changes really get you in tune with empathy and compassion, but that empathy, compassion is an absolute asset in the workplace and people who have disabilities are incredible professionals.

And I think within disability, we need to remember that there are also intersections. Perfect example is that within disabilities, some people have visible disabilities and some people don't. It doesn't mean that one is more real than the other. And I think that intersectionality within disability is something that can sometimes get lost. And I'm glad that we have a representative range of intersecting identities within disability too because mine is invisible, and it usually takes me having to introduce my disability to my either manager or director or whoever my direct reports is.

And that conversation can be really hard, and it can be confusing and intangible because they don't really see what's wrong with me. And so that kind of crunchy intersection within disability is also something that we need to be aware of, especially in the workplace. But for sure, I hope that people take away that all of these intersecting identities, including disability, make professionals with disability an absolute asset. So I'll toss it back to you, Courtney.

Thank you. And I agree with what you've said. Thank you all for sharing. I think in this group, we've all been really kind of thoughtful about what our identities are and how the world is reacting to them. But just like with privilege and unearned advantages, we don't always know the characteristics people are responding to when we face discrimination, and they don't always know when they're discriminating the people or the systems.

I know in my early childhood mind, I was a Black person, and we lived in a rural town. And my family talked about and celebrated our Blackness. But the kids called me N-word in pre-kindergarten, and the school said, well, they're not used to Black people. And then in middle school, I moved to a new city and began hearing things like, you're pretty for a dark-skinned girl. And so that's when I learned about another vulnerability. I wasn't just black. I was dark-skinned.

And then in the practice of law, I learned that, in addition to being one of the few Black people around, being a Black woman meant something specific in that setting, and Black women almost never made partner. But with all that education and experience I had, I still never thought about or heard about, well, what happens to a disabled, dark-skinned, Black woman lawyer? And in hindsight, I can see that ableism was apparent in people's reaction to me and in their opinions on whether I belong there.

But we don't have to know about it for it to be happening to us. And so in this work that we're doing and trying to include people, we can't just wait for people to say, this is what's happening to me and why, because they don't always know yet. And I think it's important to think critically about the obstacles people are facing, because they may not be able to articulate them, but it doesn't mean it's not happening.

And so on that note, I want to go to our next question. I'll start with you, Evelyn. What are some challenges? You did touch on a few, but just-- if you want to talk more about challenges relating to your identities and the world's reaction to them and how you've built resilience.

Yeah, so I think speaking of privilege, I don't know. I think about it a lot. I don't know where I would be if I grew up using a wheelchair, but instead I had 22 years being told by society that I can do anything and be anything I want, and I had a goal to go to law school, and the wheelchair was not going to stop me from that. So I feel really privileged in that.

And having that narrative from society that, oh, I wasn't always this way, I think, comes up a lot. I mean, it's been nine years now, but it's still like I'm just like you other able-bodied people. I just use a wheelchair. And recognizing that, no, I'm disabled. I have this experience, and it's real. And I do have a lot of insecurities on meeting clients and going on meals with clients. People would think DC is one of the most accessible places, but it's not, to say the least.

So there is always that concern. I think COVID has been really nice with normalizing phone calls and video calls where people have met me and they've gotten to know my work and my work product, and they know that before they may meet me at a conference and have their view of my work possibly tainted by the fact that I'm disabled. But I think, like Catherine and Trevor have said, it makes us really great workers. We're problem solvers. We've had to. The world is not built for people with disabilities, so we're always having to figure things out.

That really comes into play with my line of work, and I'm sure with all lawyers, but with international trade and the dynamic, the way it is right now and all the news, and having to come up with solutions and help clients that are US businesses just importing. I think something that is also forgotten, especially in law school, the way that law is taught, where you're just reading these cases, is that the legal profession is a human profession.

We have to be able to work with people and connect with people. And oftentimes interacting with a lawyer is probably the worst time in someone's life. And being able to recognize that and not just read a case in torts about someone who was horribly maimed and decide how much their suffering is worth, but really realizing that these are people going through traumatic events. And I think those of us who have had some sort of traumatic event or experience the world in a different way, we're better able to process that and humanize it, which I think is really necessary for lawyers.

Thank you so much for that insight, Evelyn. I want to go to you, Catherine, next on some of the challenges you face and how you've built resilience.

I think the challenge that I want to address mostly has to do with-- being a woman, you're expected to be in pain once a month. And there's this assumed level of pain tolerance that women have. And communicating to my doctors sort of what my pain is, how it manifests, how it prevents me from activities of daily living has been a major, major challenge.

We know that women of color, specifically Black women, receive far less pain treatment and pain recognition than white women and white men. My disability, because it's invisible, requires such a high level of capacity to articulate how I'm feeling. And even at that point, I can't tell you the number of times that doctors have not-- when doctors actually listen, is when I just-- is when I just start to cry.

So despite my intense ability, and as a writer, I have made it my job to be able to articulate what it's like to live with disability, the challenges I face every day, being a representative for my community, being highly educated in this space, usually what gets provider's attention is tears. And I have found that to be a major challenge in simply just having treatment or access to treatment that improves my day to day life, my day to day quality of life. And for me, that's been pain management.

And pain management was actually the last specialty I was introduced to. I saw 15 doctors of various specialties before I was introduced to pain management. All that being said, I think talking about physical pain is not only a challenge for me personally, but it's really hard for friends and family to understand, and it's also really hard for workplaces to get their head around. Because I have disclosed to employers before that I have chronic pain.

And as much as I hate to admit it, I do think it kind of changed the way that they view my productivity or how they view me sitting at my desk, maybe engaging in some accommodations, like a heating pad or an ice pack. I have had the experience of some unconscious, ableistic comments as a result of disclosing. So the world's reaction to when I disclose my pain has been difficult to overcome.

But the upside is that when I meet somebody who gets it, we're immediately in lockstep, and the work that we can accomplish together, the mutual understanding and respect we have for each other, usually means that things get done way faster. It may look different. I may work different hours. I may come in at abnormal times. I may have to work on the weekends. But things get done way quicker when there's a mutual understanding and respect of your body works differently than mine.

That doesn't mean you're not a productive member of society. You just need to do things at a different pace and what's atypical in the workplace. Our bodies can't fit a 9:00 to 5:00 sometimes. They can't comply with this social construct of sitting in an office chair all day.

And it is true that when you meet an employer or when you meet a manager who is understanding of that, who is respectful of that, and in fact says, great, I trust you as the professional you are, do what you need to do to get the work done, people with disabilities soar. And like I said, they're an asset. They become irreplaceable in their positions. So building resilience around that has honestly been not losing my authenticity.

When I am authentic with employers or when I'm up front, like Trevor said, about what I need in a workplace, I weed out pretty quickly places I want to work and places I don't. And ultimately, working in places that are conducive to my health not only improve my health, but I feel invigorated by the work that I'm doing, and I'm a more motivated employee. And I think there's this misconception that people with disabilities just want to be freeloaders, and that is so not the case.

The world is just not built for our bodies. These social constructs around ableism really do affect our ability to even get things like advanced degrees. I always like to say the best physicians are people with the conditions that they're studying themselves. But medical school, sometimes law school is just an institution that is inaccessible to people who are not able-bodied. The hours alone are impossible. But people with, let's say, lupus who want to become rheumatologists, they'd be the best rheumatologists.

So yeah, I think that my challenge is relating to pain, but it spirals out into just a world that is confused and misunderstanding of pain, of women's pain. But I have found that my resilience is maintained by being authentic, and therefore meaning authentic employers, authentic professional colleagues. So I hope that helps, continuing to tell the truth. And I think that's a lot of what the legal profession is.

Catherine, thank you so much. You touched on some major points in my life and just in the disability world, being believed and having to become smarter and more persuasive about describing your pain, because people naturally don't trust you. And it's just such a weird and uncomfortable place to be. I always turn down the doctor's note at the end of the appointment because I don't want them to think I was just trying to get out of work and I'll just hope that my job believes me. And thankfully, I'm in a really inclusive place that believes me, and so I'm not having to do those things.

But I'm also more likely to turn down medication because I don't want to be seen as drug seeking. I just want answers, and I'll just figure out the pain on my own. I mean, you talked about Black women and beliefs about our pain tolerance, and I have this dilemma where growing up, I always believed that to be treated like a human and like an equal, I should always be put together, my hair and makeup should be done, my clothes should be neat. And then I show up at the doctor, and I don't look sick enough.

And so there's the question of, what's really going on? And it's just like, I wanted you to treat me like a human, that's it. And it's difficult to navigate. And people just think the only issue is the pain or the learning disability or whatever you may have, but there's just a whole world around that that you're trying to figure out. And you also don't want to confuse people about your capacity and your productivity.

Just because I have a migraine today, it doesn't mean I'm not going to work double tomorrow. I'm super committed and super thankful to be here. I just have a different time table than the average person has. So thank you so much for raising all those. I want to go to you, Trevor. Could you share more about the obstacles you've faced and building resilience?

Absolutely. And I come from a perspective. I used to run all the time. That was my stress reliever. And I was running 40 to 60 miles a week, and I would do 5K before and after work. I'd do a half marathon on Sundays. I'd run a little on Saturday. Like, my peace was in nature. And I went from that to tripping over my left foot and having trouble walking, and then needing a cane, and then a wheelchair, and then back to a cane. And so one of my major obstacles was, how do I relieve my stress?

I'm dealing with this disability. I'm dealing with this life-altering news. And then you take that to the workplace, where to Catherine's point and to Evelyn's point as well, sometimes your abilities are questioned. And I can remember hearing, not at Littler, but hearing in other places, well, I guess the partner track is not right for you. Or well, this case has depositions, so we're not going to put you on that, because what if you can't show up to the deposition? And I thought, I've never missed a deadline. I've never missed anything. I'm billing more than anyone else in this department, and nothing is changing.

And I kept thinking about, especially through the pandemic, because I sat behind a screen most of the time. But to Evelyn's point, then I would walk into a room, and you'd see me walk in with a cane. And that wasn't the image that matched the chest-up view on Zoom. So there were a lot of advantages to that because people knew my work. They knew what I could do. They knew how I communicated. And then when I got in front of them, they saw, oh, there's a carbon fiber cane. What's that about? Or, he's not able to move very quickly. What's that about? And then adding the service animal in has been another dynamic that's been added in.

But to Catherine's point as well, I started to identify great people around me who knew I had a disability but that didn't change the way they looked at me. They looked at me as Trevor, the person who was there to be the friend, the employee, the coworker, whatever it happened to be at that time. And so I learned to identify those individuals who supported me as a person. They saw the things that made me different, but that wasn't something that excluded me or kept me out.

And then my resilience was really when I took ownership of who I am, the conditions I have, the assistance I need, and the ways I make my life work. And I was able to discover a lot of resilience when I started to share my story. And that was something that I really did here at Littler, because the minute I shared it, it wasn't just, oh, I'm so sorry that happened to you. What I actually got was, well, here's what's happened to me, and here's how I've navigated that. Or do you know that this happened to me when I was in this situation? And I got more support than I ever thought I could.

And it really was this, we're going to build you up as the person, as the attorney, as the person who's contributing, and here are the million ways that you can use that in your everyday. I've never felt like the burden. I've never felt like the person who's asking for too much. It's more like, well, what else can we do? How can we help you? And just being able to communicate with others has been great. And I take that into how I communicate with new associates when I'm working with them. I love to do red lines, but my first question is, how do you want to receive feedback? Do you like verbal feedback, or do you like written?

And I was telling everyone before we got on the call that-- I'm teaching disability law at my old law school for the first time this semester. And one of my first questions is, do you want me to record the classes? Or would you prefer to just have them live in-person so you see them once and you're done? And if the way I'm teaching isn't really working, let's talk about different ways to communicate information, because I understand, to Katherine's point, invisible disabilities are all around us. There are a lot of invisible aspects to the disabilities. I have. Some are very visual, but others are not.

So just understanding and meeting people where they are, it makes me more resilient, but I feel like it makes the tent where everyone fits in even bigger. And my resilience, it gets even stronger as those around me feel resilient and feel heard, seen, accepted, brought into the conversation. And I've done disaster preparedness advocacy, and one of the biggest things that was ever relayed to me was, don't plan for me, plan with me. And I take that to work. I take it to my relationships with friends. I take it to the community work I'm involved in.

There's a lot going on. I know what I know, but I also know what I don't know. And the more I learn from others and plan with them, not for them, we're going to reach a better outcome. That's where resilience comes from for me.

Awesome. Trevor, it sounds like you're a great professor and a great partner to work with. So thank you so much for what you're doing. Notice that Trevor didn't say, people with a doctor's note can tell him how they want to learn or how they want to receive feedback. This type of thoughtfulness is for everyone, to everyone to do better and not those that are aware of a disability. And so, Trevor, I want to stick with you for this question about allyship. How do you think that allies can be more thoughtful and inclusive?

I've seen it in action. And we were planning our office holiday party last year, and one of my colleagues reached out and said, I think the place we're looking has some stairs. Is that good for you, or do you want to look at somewhere else? And I thought they care. They're doing something they want to make sure I'm a part of it. And I had another colleague, who's also a great mentor of mine. He's in our Chicago office. His name is Jeff Novak, and he writes a blog on the FMLA. And it's one of the coolest things. It's called FMLA Insights.

But he did a blog post last year about trying to understand what it might be like for an individual with a disability in the workplace. And he explained, I come from a certain place where I don't have a disability, but here's how I want to make sure the work I'm practicing, helping and advising people on these things, these are the things. These are our blind spots. If we don't have a disability or aren't experiencing these things every day, he opened a conversation.

And I think what I see in allyship is people who, to Katherine's point, are authentic about it. It's not performative. It really is, hey, let's talk. Let's have a conversation. And it's one I normally initiate, but it's one where there's an equal exchange of information and there's an equal dialogue. And it's where I'm seen as the person, not a burden, but just, hey, we're bringing you in. Let's talk about this. Or what do you think? It's as simple as, what do you think? Or how can I support you? And I find that it creates a better relationship.

And when I talk to people in the office, I generally say, I know you're a good attorney. I know you're here. I care about you as the person, as the friend, the father, the mother, the brother, the sister. There's so much behind all of us in addition to our titles, our roles. And I frankly don't care what someone's title is. Everyone deserves respect. They deserve understanding, and they deserve the time to listen. So if you are in a role that doesn't have a certain extra letter or two next to your name, I don't care. I still want to know you.

I still want to know who you are, what makes you tick, what makes you happy, what is exciting to you, because we're going to be better friends, better partners, better colleagues out of that, and I find that there's better teamwork. So I think allyship extends to just getting to know people, getting to understand what their life's like. Because even though my disability impacts me in a certain way-- there are individuals who I work with who are caretakers for individuals with disabilities, and I understand that has an impact on their work.

They may not have a disability themselves, but they see it through a different lens that I can learn from and I can learn to accommodate and think about when I'm scheduling or planning and just going through that. And that's where that allyship comes from, is the communication piece. I think that's such a huge part that-- it's really not that uncomfortable for me to have that conversation. It may be for others, but I'm pretty open with others about what I'm willing to talk about, and that I'm more of an open book on that front.

Wonderful. Thank you so much, Trevor. Catherine, I'd like to go to you next. Do you have any thoughts on how we can be more inclusive?

Yeah, I think, saying in the vein of being authentic, I did not consider people with disabilities before I became disabled. Didn't really know people with disabilities growing up. No one at my school had a visible disability. There was that one awful case where someone in your high school maybe gets diagnosed with childhood cancer, and everyone does a race for them one day. And then we kind of forget about it, and then we don't want to address it.

For 20 years of my life, I did not think about people with disabilities. And I share that because I think the first step towards allyship is admitting you don't know what it's like and admitting that you have a blind spot. And it is OK to realize and admit to yourself that you maybe need to do a little bit of self-education and coming to conversations like this. I mean, everybody who's on this call today, thank you for being here, because it means that you're willing to acknowledge and admit that you have things to learn, like people with disabilities do.

And I appreciate the question about how allies can be inclusive, because sometimes the most beautiful moments I've had of allyship have been when I've told friends that I have lupus, and the next time I see them they say, I googled lupus. Is this what the symptom is like? Literally, something as simple as a Google search. It makes me feel like they listened. So doing a little bit of that work on your own time, I think will not only allow people with disabilities in your life to feel heard and seen, but it immediately makes us want to bring you into the fold.

We're like, oh, wow. OK. OK, you want to learn? Great. I'll catch you up. And that sort of initiation on your part and admittance of, man, I don't know what I don't know, not only applies to being an ally for people with disabilities, but it applies to being an ally for any marginalized and oppressed group. Really, it's just-- when I realized that I needed to do some internal work in education on things like critical race theory, I did it in the quiet and comfort of my own home, and that's a great place to start.

And the same thing applies to being an ally for people with disabilities. Just taking that first step, being on calls like this, starting to get yourself familiar with some of the vocabulary, even just hearing a word today that you don't know and you're going to do a dictionary search on, that's a great place to start, because we want to bring you into the fold. We want to tell you about our lived experience. We want to tell you what it's like to live with chronic pain and then, frankly, move on and just feel like we are included in the workplace, just like people with able bodies. So yeah, there's nothing wrong with admitting what you don't know, and I think that's a great place to start as an ally.

Thank you so much, Catherine. Very powerful. Evelyn, can you explain how you think allies can be more thoughtful and inclusive?

Yeah. Yeah, I think Catherine's so right, especially because everyone needs different accommodations and different things. When I was in undergrad, I started a feminist organization. I always said this is intersectional. We're talking about race. We're talking about ability, because the disability group is the one minority group you can become a part of at any point in time, and then six months later I lived that reality.

But I didn't have much more other than, this is something we should be talking about. I don't know what this group needs, but it should be included in the conversation. And does anybody have ideas? I think now I'm trying to do little things where-- and I think anybody can do this. If you're going to an event or a conference and you say, oh, hey, is there an accessible bathroom anywhere? Are there going to be captions provided? Ask. Just asking. And whether they do or don't, at least now it's on their mind as they're planning their next conference-- someone asked about this.

I think other than that specifically, we need an overhaul of big law and the way it works and the billable hour structure. I feel like I kind of shot myself in the foot, but I was just planning to go to a firm for a few years, didn't think that it would be sustainable, was not planning to be there long-term. I'm now a fifth year and really love the work I do and the people I'm with. And the place where I am is very serious about work-life balance, and I truly do feel like it's somewhere sustainable that I can be.

But also I've met minimum hour requirements every year. Sometimes I've made bonus. And I'm getting to the point where I'm saying, if I'm going to be here long-term, is this still sustainable? It takes me 10 minutes to go and get myself in the car with my wheelchair. Every single thing I do takes longer, and I'm sure other people can relate to that. But just the little things really add up throughout the day.

And realizing I should maybe talk to my firm and say, I really want to be here. Can I get 100 hours less? I'm not quite sure how to go about that, but I think that's a larger big glass structure that I think is a conversation that's happening in a lot of places, because I also think it penalizes efficiency. Would you rather have an associate who works really hard and gets this done in four hours because they're efficient? Or do you want someone who is trying to build as many hours as possible? I don't know. I think it's a conversation we need to have.

But along that same line, I think acknowledging and hopefully compensating in some way all of the unpaid labor, which is often done specifically by women, women of color, Black women, like minorities picking up all these extra roles of planning and business development-- and I'm co-chair of our LGBTQ affinity group at my firm, and I love it. I love doing it. But these things take time.

And people who are in diverse experiences, who are working to share that and get more diversity in the legal field and putting all of this effort, should be recognized when other people don't have to do that or don't want to do that. And I think that's a small thing, but I think affects a lot of us a lot.

Thank you. I agree with everything you said. Thank you so much for sharing that, Evelyn. We got a bonus question that I want to open up to the three of you, and whoever wants to answer, great. When considering or meeting a new or potential employer and their disability inclusion, can you please share some green flags or red flags that you've experienced in that process?

I think I've shared some of my green flags, is having the conversation and having people who are just willing to engage. And I'm sitting in an office where I get that every day, and it happened before I was even employed here. And I think just having people who are open and willing to have those conversations is really great. I think sometimes what I'm seeing more from employers now, not just where I am, but others too, is putting out questions or advice on parking, and here's the closest elevator if you're coming to an interview.

There are things that employers do that aren't overtly like, oh, if you're disabled, here's how we're going to help you, but just really practical guidance on, our office building may be difficult to find. Here's the best way to do it. And I saw one recently. It was like, if you park on the fifth floor in this part, you'll be right next to an elevator. They didn't know that I have a disability, but they were very thoughtful about the way to do that. And I've run into that with my service animal, where some places you only get through revolving doors to get into the building.

Well, I've had some places where I go that'll say, here are the revolving doors, but here are the accessible doors. And it may be less convenient to an able-bodied person, but they're thinking through, let's give people three ways to get in, four ways to get in. And just thinking through with your event spaces, with your conferences, all those things, to Evelyn's point, like, oh, are we doing closed captions for this? Zoom empowers us to do that. Let's do it. And I think that that's becoming more common.

And I think there are more green flags that I'm seeing in job descriptions or with just general employer policies. So I love seeing those, and I love seeing even more. And sometimes there's stuff that I wouldn't think of that, oh, this is going to make it even easier. So those are the bonus green flags as I'm seeing, is just making everything easier without really highlighting that it's disability-focused.

Awesome. Thank you so much for sharing. Does anyone have any final thoughts or guidance on the topic, or if you want people to get in touch with you, anything you want to share?

You go ahead, Catherine.

OK. I'm very grateful for this conversation. And I think there's something that Trevor said earlier, which is that conversations move us all forward, and I couldn't agree more. I think the nature of everyone being on this call today means that there are now 200 soldiers that are going to return to their work day and hopefully carry some of the knowledge that they've gleaned from this conversation into their next meeting or into a next event where they're the one who speaks up and says, just making sure closed captioning is going to be available for this.

Really, sometimes the people who are not disabled, gosh, when we don't have to be the ones to bring it up, it's so nice. Oh, it's so nice. And yeah. So I'm just appreciative of everyone here today. I was given permission from Courtney to platform myself a little bit, so I'm going to take this opportunity. And I am looking to meet more people like you, to work with more people like you. Please reach out on my LinkedIn. I'm actively looking for work.

And this is the work that I want to do, and these are the conversations I want to have. And I'm just grateful for places like Diversity Lab, and continue to connect your employees with resources. Allow people to learn the way they want to and in their own time. And yeah, just very grateful for this conversation. And, Evelyn, I'll let you bring us home.

Yeah, I think a big takeaway is you're fighting for the disability community, but also it could be you any day, and you just never know. And so appreciate the abilities that you have and know that it could not be forever. But yeah, I think having these conversations, especially with people in the legal space and people who are fighting and doing disability advocacy, is really important because I think it trickles down from there. And really, really appreciative to be a part of this and connect with so many of you.

Same here. And I-- yeah, I'm accessible by email. If anyone wants to reach out, I'm always available. It's thardy@littler.com. And just love having the conversation and meeting people who are on today. One of the highlights of my job is getting conversations like this.

Thank you all so much for your bravery in sharing your stories. I know it takes courage to be open each time you do it. It's not like the first time it's hard and then the rest times are nothing. So we really appreciate your dedication to helping create a better world. And so please keep in touch with me and with each other. And everyone else who plans to come to our remaining calls this month, we look forward every time to seeing you. But don't wait to reach out if you do need anything from us. Thank you so much and have a great day.

Thanks.

Thank you very much.

Thank you.

Thanks.

Thank you.