

Transcript

Audio file: [WGA SEED Episode 3-Disability Employment in a Post-Pandemic World \(FINAL\) 1.mp3](#)

00:00:00

(Intro music plays)

00:00:10 – Jim Ogsbury

(Intro music plays in background)

Hello! And welcome to *Out West*, the official podcast of the Western Governors' Association, a bipartisan organization representing the governors of the 22 westernmost states and territories. I'm Jim Ogsbury, Executive Director of WGA.

COVID-19 has had disproportionate impacts on people with disabilities. It has also changed the work landscape in ways that present both challenges and opportunities for disability employment.

Today's workplace is much different from what it was just a year ago, and it continues to change and evolve rapidly and dramatically. This episode of *Out West* discusses how the pandemic has affected the workforce and how to ensure an inclusive economic recovery for all Americans.

WGA Policy Advisor Lauren Cloward speaks with Andrew Houtenville, Research Director of the University of New Hampshire's Institute on Disability, and Jill Houghton, President and CEO of Disability:IN. They explore workforce trends and considerations for employers as people return to work and adapt to a new work environment.

00:01:24 – Lauren Cloward

(Intro music ends)

Great. Well Andrew and Jill, thank you so much for joining us today. Andrew, let's start off by having you tell us a little bit about the Institute on Disability and your research at the University of New Hampshire.

00:01:36 – Andrew Houtenville

Thank you for having me.

Yeah, so the University of New Hampshire has an Institute on Disability which is about 100 people doing various disability related activities – training, technical assistance, research, service, working with schools, working with various organizations and individuals throughout the state. But we also have a national presence as well.

We, in terms of our research as it relates to people with disabilities and employment, we have been fortunate enough to be awarded funding from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research, so that's a lot of words. So NIDILRR, so it's a research institute that funds universities and advocacy organizations in various groups across the country to do research on employment, independent living, and health of people with disabilities.

And so, our research, you know, we have kind of a two-prong attack when it comes to research. A lot of it is revolving around national statistics using Census Bureau, Center for Disease Control, National Center for Health Statistics, all kinds of survey data to try to get a picture of the employment situation for people with disabilities. And it's really, we do a lot of...the two prongs are...one is to do research with those data files to look for patterns and trends and to try to find – the ultimate thing is to try to find causal effects of, say, policies for specific occurrences.

So that's the research side and then we have an outreach side which provides statistics at – on a monthly basis.

The other thing we do is we provide a lot of assistance to others who are looking for statistics, so we'll get calls from the offices of senators and House of Representatives, you know, representatives, state officials, county, city officials looking for statistics about employment in their area. And so, we really tried to push a level of awareness, you know, in our work and, you know, the first level is awareness. Then we try to support availability and then we try to support the community with research findings about what could be done to improve the employment outcomes of people with disabilities. So, I'll stop there.

00:04:24 – Lauren Cloward

Yeah, thanks for that. And how does that better data collection and research lead to those outcomes for disability employment?

00:04:35 – Andrew Houtenville

Yeah, so, you know, with any kind of research or data collection, it's not directly impacting, right? So, it's not actually helping an individual find a job at an individual employer. But as I mentioned earlier, the first level is awareness. So, a lot of individuals that we work with are trying to help make the case to their local officials or federal officials or new appointees in an administration. Trying to make the case for the employment of people with disabilities to be – to receive attention. I remember years ago when Chief Justice Roberts was being interviewed by senators. You know, before his confirmation, we were providing statistics about the employment of people with disabilities, 'cause issues around the ADA were going to come up.

So that's one way that it helps to provide that awareness. But also, as I mentioned earlier, just making it available to people to use. Making it available to companies. Like some of the statistics we've worked on are working with the US Bar Association, working with veterans'

groups, to kind of look – tease out and generate customized statistics that would help them make the case that they're trying to make, to draw attention to the employment of people with disabilities.

00:06:01 – Lauren Cloward

Great, and with that, let's turn it over to Jill. Jill, can you tell us a little bit about your company and what you do there?

00:06:09 – Jill Houghton

Absolutely, and thank you so much for the opportunity to join you today.

Disability:IN is a global nonprofit and we empower over 250 really multinational brands around achieving disability inclusion and equality.

We do that through a wide variety of programs, things like the Disability Equality Index. That's a benchmarking tool to really help companies identify opportunities where they can make, you know, improvements related to disability inclusion, where programs like our program Inclusion Works – that's a peer-to-peer community, really focused on driving disability inclusion, and I would just tell you that everything that we do at Disability:IN is focused on the role that we all have to play in building an inclusive global economy where people with disabilities participate fully and meaningfully.

00:07:17 – Lauren Cloward

That's great to hear and I think looking specifically at, you know, COVID and what's going on with the current health crisis, why are people with disabilities disproportionately affected? What have you guys seen in your work? And I'll open it up to both of you.

00:07:36 – Andrew Houtenville

So, during the pandemic, you know, people with disabilities, workers with disabilities have been hit really hard, just like everyone else. I think what we're seeing is a lot of the economic impact was really at the very, very beginning, right, when we didn't have masks, we didn't have PPE, we had the national shut down, right, and you know, I don't know about other organizations, but the University of New Hampshire was scrounging around for plexiglass to separate people at, you know, at windows and shopping around for sanitizer and shields and all kinds of stuff.

You know, that economic impact was really the big hit, back in April, and what's really been happening is we've been kind of recovering since, right, and also battling the current outbreak and the summer outbreak in the southern part of the country. And, you know, I think as an economy, we've gotten better at handling, you know, the shutdowns and shutting down specific sectors or parts of the country or parts of a state so the economic impacts aren't as deep, but I think we really are still recovering from that initial hit in April. And from the statistics that I've been tracking with Kessler Foundation through the National Trends and

Disability Employment webcast that we do, is that people with disabilities are slower to recover. That just like we saw with the Great Recession, people with disabilities are either in jobs or themselves are not being recalled as fast as people without disability.

I think both groups got really hit hard, but people with disabilities are kind of reentering the workspace slower and that's a concern, because it was really something we saw in the Great Recession – that people with disabilities lost their jobs at around the same rate as people without disabilities but were slower to recover, slower to reengage into the workforce.

00:9:45 – Lauren Cloward

And Andrew, why do you think that is? Why do you think that for people with disabilities that recovery is slower?

00:9:52 – Andrew Houtenville

Yeah, so I think there are a number of reasons. I don't know for sure, right? I don't know. The data is not collected in that amount of detail. What I would suspect is that many jobs are kind of crafted and just like everyone else, we're kind of – we get into a job, we kind of start customizing it for ourselves. For people with disabilities that may mean accommodations or alternative arrangements.

And when a person loses their job or maybe even goes out on furlough, you know, temporarily losing their job – it may be harder to get back to that crafted situation, right? And so those kinds of accommodations and patterns of work are potentially not feasible in COVID-restricted environments and/or just may be difficult to rebuild them after they've been broken.

You know, I have a colleague who works in the hospitality industry and, you know, we had a major employer basically cut their workforce down – 90% cut in their workforce and you talked to the current employees and they're doing all the jobs. Their jobs that the current employees that that were lucky enough to keep their jobs are still doing all kinds of jobs and so the job arrangements at companies in particularly hard-hit industries are really kind of re-sorting things and it may be more difficult for people with disabilities to get the accommodations and the arrangements that they need to succeed.

00:11:38 – Lauren Cloward

Thanks, and Jill, from your perspective and in your work, does that resonate with you? What are...why do you think that people with disabilities are disproportionately affected in this recovery?

00:11:52 – Jill Houghton

So, I'm not a researcher like Andrew, but more an anecdotal...I think when we think about people with disabilities and we look and we realize that, you know, just in the US alone, that one in four Americans have a disability or if we look around the globe and we know that 15% of

the population has a disability – and in fact because of COVID, that number is probably going to grow, right? – because disability, we're learning, is becoming...could become a result of COVID, so it's possible that that our population is going to grow in terms of people with disabilities.

I think people with disabilities have been disproportionately affected, like even before there was a global pandemic. And the global pandemic perhaps becomes even more of a challenge as we work in a remote manner, et cetera. So, if you think about how in March many industries moved into that remote workforce – well, that becomes like an opportunity to look at the technology that we're using, right? And is the technology that we're using accessible?

And in many cases, it's not.

And so, it becomes a barrier. So, if we think about people like our board chair at Disability:IN, Jenny Lay-Flurrie, who's deaf, and the Chief Accessibility Officer at Microsoft. She obviously works in an environment where they're driving the accessibility of technology and making sure that products are accessible to all people, but I think she'd be the first to tell you that it's a journey.

And that even with their products, they're not 100% there yet. And so, um, I think that people with disabilities have been disproportionately affected by this global pandemic, and it has really presented an opportunity for us to try to advance the work around accessibility, not just of the physical space, right, but of the remote workplace and technology that we're using.

00:14:28 – Lauren Cloward

Yeah, Jill, that's a really great point and I think, you know, obviously that's where the workplace and the workforce is trending, is kind of towards this virtual...increased use of technology. But I think we're seeing a huge acceleration in that with the pandemic. So, you know, I think that's a great point to be made.

And Andrew, I know you touched on this a little bit earlier when you were talking about your research at the Institute, but beyond kind of this slower recovery, are there other trends that you're seeing or you're expecting to see as the pandemic continues?

00:15:08 – Andrew Houtenville

Yeah, so one of the things early on that I was concerned about and had been watching is the degree to which people with disabilities and without disabilities leave the labor market altogether. So, they stop looking for work.

So, unemployment, if you don't know, unemployment is the percentage of people who are looking for work, are on temporary layoff as a percentage of all workers, right? But you can also leave the labor force if you're not actively engaged or not expected to be recalled, you can leave the labor force, and traditionally it's very hard to come back into the labor force. The longer you're out of the labor force, the harder it is to come back in, right? It's called scarring in the labor economics literature. And a big concern early on was, okay, if this is like the Great

Recession and people with disabilities aren't furloughed and aren't looking for work and they leave the job permanently, that could affect their ability to come back in when the economy and when COVID is, you know, in our rearview mirror.

So, I've been tracking that and honestly, it's been really good news that people with disabilities are staying engaged, right? They are less likely to be furloughed nowadays, and more likely to be actively looking for work than they were early on in the COVID pandemic.

However, they're staying engaged, actually more so than people without disabilities, and that could be, well, I say it's a good trend, right? It still could be signs of very difficult times. It could mean that many people are coming into the labor force previously who were out because their families are struggling.

So, I'm not saying that it's a good story, I'm just saying it's a good sign that people are engaged and remaining engaged. More so than people without disabilities, which is actually really good. So, it's still something that's a big concern, especially as this next round of, you know, as shutdowns are starting to happen again with this latest spike, it's something that's really going to need to be looked at carefully.

I also get concerned that people will start depending on longer term benefits like Social Security disability insurance benefits and Supplemental Security Income benefits. Now, those benefits are there for a reason and they help people, but there's also the potential that if you're in those long-term benefits that you may not get out, right, you may stay with those benefits and going back to work threatens those benefits potentially, and that's why, you know, the stimulus packages and keeping the unemployment insurance side of things running, you know, this whole time is really helpful because those are temporary benefits that are designed to kind of support people moving back into employment.

The idea early on, and I'm not sure where it stands right at the moment, that people who have secondary conditions who put them at risk of COVID could potentially not go back to work even though their job was reopened, but because they're in personal danger of dying from COVID, or extreme complications due to COVID, they were allowed to receive unemployment insurance. I haven't seen where that is in the current pantheon of legislation, but I thought that was a really good idea because it keeps people with secondary conditions and potentially disabilities for moving into more longer-term benefits that are harder to get, to move off of.

00:18:54 – Lauren Cloward

Let's turn it over to Jill now. Jill, do some of those trends that Andrew was explaining, do those track with what you're seeing in the businesses you work with? What have been kind of their one or two top challenges in maintaining inclusive workplaces that you've seen as we go through this transition?

00:19:15 – Jill Houghton

Yeah, you know, I think everything that Andrew is saying is obviously right on track.

I think, in terms of trends that we're seeing around top challenges, let's go back to accessibility. Let's use conferences as an example, right? We all, in every industry, have conferences, and we've had to pivot and make these things virtual. And there is not one platform out there that's 100% accessible. So that's a huge challenge. So, when – whether it's an industry or a company, you know, they're having these meetings and they've got these avatars and all this cool interactive, you know, ways to engage. Well, it's not cool, and it's not interactive for all because it's not accessible and so that's a huge challenge around creating an inclusive workplace.

00:20:30 – Lauren Cloward

But Jill, I know part of your work is helping businesses benchmark and measure success for disability inclusion. How do you think that those benchmarks will help businesses ensure that they don't move backwards in terms of disability inclusion as a result of COVID?

00:20:49 – Jill Houghton

I think COVID and this pandemic has actually created an opportunity for companies to be more engaged and to get more individuals across the business that work in the different lines, you know, different parts of the business kind of more connected.

Um, clearly the greatest resource that companies have are their employee resource groups, right? And many companies have a disability employee resource group that they have engaged in working on the Disability Equality Index, which is a benchmarking tool that Disability:IN created in partnership with the American Association of People with Disabilities, and we actually used the pandemic as an opportunity to modernize the tool.

So, we worked together with people with disabilities and allies to lean in and look at things like – it looks at six different categories, so it starts with culture and leadership, enterprise-wide access, employment practices, community engagement, supplier diversity, and non-US operations.

And we modernized the tool by looking at, like, mental health for example, and looking at the benefits subcategory, or digging into the enterprise-wide access accessibility questions, and so the 2021 tool has actually been modernized as a result of the pandemic.

And the pandemic has created an opportunity for companies to be more engaged in using this as a tool really to identify ways that they can do better, right? It's a carrot and not a stick – looks beyond compliance, is a voluntary opportunity for them to find ways that they can do better around disability inclusion.

00:22:59 – Lauren Cloward

Accommodations are obviously an important part of having people with disabilities stay in a job and then also having them return to work and...what are some actions and accommodations

that both states and businesses can implement so that people with disabilities are able to work safely and they don't leave your jobs, their jobs, and are able to stay in the workforce?

00:23:30 – Andrew Houtenville

Yeah, so one of the top accommodations, at least in the research, and this research is kind of old. It's going back to the 2000s, late 90s, when people were first starting to look at the impact of accommodations in relation to the, you know, the start of the ADA was that, you know, flexible work hours was really an important aspect of work that allowed people to adjust in many, many ways. And that was one thing that really came out in the research.

You know, in terms of now in the COVID environment, um, you know, I think dedication to a healthy environment, a healthy workspace is going to be needed. 'Cause many people do have either their primary condition or their secondary health conditions could put them at risk of COVID and I think COVID's going to be around for a while, or the risk of COVID will be around for quite a while.

One thing that I've seen employers do is a person who is susceptible to high risk of COVID infection and complications can change to the front of the house to the back of the house, so to speak; not deal directly with customers, but work in the back of the facility doing some other job.

And, you know, anecdotally, I've seen that happen frequently when it's good in, you know, when people are lucky enough to have the company open, you know, but that's one way of helping people reduce risk who may be susceptible.

00:25:31 – Lauren Cloward

Agreed, and Jill, do you have anything to add there? What sorts of accommodations are business taking and what other actions kind of at the state policy level would really help accelerate some of those actions or accommodations?

00:25:47 – Jill Houghton

I think that states and business, that the greatest resource that all of those entities have are their people.

And it's incumbent upon them to work directly with their employees, specifically their employees who identify as having disabilities and their employees who identify as being allies of individuals with disabilities. And really work together with your people to identify what the issues are, what the opportunities are, you know, kind of where to move forward.

I think that on the accommodation front, people need to know what the policy is, how to find it, how to access it; managers need to know what it is, how to pay for things. People, your people, need to know how to connect with your communities, with your employee resource group. I

think it's an opportunity to prioritize mental health, to lead with humanity, and to prioritize digital accessibility.

Clearly the physical space is an equally important issue that's not fully solved, but COVID has really created a tipping point for us to recognize that the digital space also needs to be accessible.

00:27:24 – Andrew Houtenville

Yeah, I agree with Jill's comments wholeheartedly. I want to kind of piggyback on what she said about mental health and the priority towards mental health.

You know, mental health is many times an invisible disability. You don't know it's there. I think that many times people don't disclose it, right, because of stigma, potential stigma. And I think that supervisors and employers and coworkers have a difficult time talking about it because it's not something they're used to talking about in the workplace.

And I know that at universities and working with students, we're starting to receive training on how to, how to talk about it openly and without, you know, stigma and how to accommodate individuals with mental health conditions, and I think that's something that employers can do. And certainly, the shared anxiety of everyone around COVID could be a nice launching point into talking about health and mental health in the workplace.

00:28:37 – Lauren Cloward

I agree Andrew, and as you had mentioned, you know, mental illness a lot of times – mental health is an invisible disability and so, like Jill was saying, having that personal connection with your employees is obviously very important and critical, especially during these times because there are disabilities that you aren't necessarily able to see outright either.

And with that, Jill, what are a few examples of the accommodations and the actions that you've seen businesses take?

00:29:13 – Jill Houghton

I think that people are taking “no meeting Fridays” to help with mental health. You're seeing companies put parameters around the length of time for meetings, making accommodations around, you know, when you start and when you finish your day.

And so, you know, I think that there's a lot going on around flexibility in the workplace. Around creating additional benefits.

00:29:53 – Lauren Cloward

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Well thank you guys both so much for coming on today and sharing your expertise. Really appreciate all the work that you do in this space and thanks so much for sharing.

00:30:13 – Jim Ogsbury

(Outro music plays in background)

Thanks for listening to this episode of *Out West*, presented in partnership with the State Exchange on Employment and Disability. The State Exchange, known as SEED, is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy, or ODEP, which assists states in developing effective and inclusive workplace policies. SEED recently launched the COVID-19 Policy Collaborative for an Inclusive Recovery. ODEP also funds the Job Accommodation Network, the leading source of free, expert, confidential guidance on workplace accommodations and disability employment issues. To learn more about their ongoing work on disability employment, please visit dol.gov and askjan.org.

WGA would like to thank Andrew Houtenville and Jill Houghton for sharing their expertise on disability employment for today’s episode.

And be sure to join us next time, as we continue to discuss critical issues facing the western United States.

Happy trails, everyone!