

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim editor in chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges. All this week, WorkingNation is reporting from the Disability:IN Conference in Dallas. The nonprofit's mission is to ensure that people with disabilities are actively included in the workforce fully and in a meaningful way. This week, we'll be talking to employers, workers, and job seekers about the challenges people with disabilities face in the labor market and efforts to make it more inclusive.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Joining me on today's podcast is Josh Christianson, the inclusion and accessibility practice lead at Wheelhouse Group. And in that capacity, he recently joined our WorkingNation Advisory Board. He also serves as the project director for the Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeship. Josh, welcome to the podcast and to working nation.

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

Thank you very much. I'm pleased to be here and to join your team.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We want to set the stage for the audience a little bit about... When we talk about people with disabilities in the United States, I think you gave us a number once before. It was like one in five Americans have some sort of disability. Could you kind of give us a definition of that and how you talk about that?

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

Sure. Yeah. One in five American adults in the United States now has identified as having a disability. That's from a CDC report and it's a fairly conservative estimate. Others say it is closer to one in four. But really disability often is broader than what many people think. We focus on the full spectrum of disability. So that's going to include things people think about around vision, around hearing, motor disabilities related to limbs, people often using wheelchairs, but it's also cognitive disabilities, which would cover things like autism, ADHD. It's about learning disabilities, mental health disabilities. There are some genetic diseases that like MS or others that would be considered a disability.

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

So it is a broad spectrum of the impact it can have on a person. It's also important to consider that it can come at different times in your life. It's one of the largest, quote unquote, "minority groups in the world". But it may not be one you're born into. It may have developed later in life. You may have an accident. With aging, many of us naturally acquire disabilities. And so from an employer perspective, I always encourage people to think about whether or not you're looking for it, or someone has identified your employees, you do have employees with disabilities and you also may acquire employees with disabilities in their term with your company.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One thing that was interesting to me is while you said the number is probably closer to one in four, a lot of people don't identify themselves. So they don't self identify themselves as having a disability. Does that impact how they go about finding work?

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

It definitely can. And there are multiple studies that looked into the reasons people don't disclose. There are definitely impacts in looking for a job or say your ability to perform and succeed in the job. A couple of nuances I would mention one is we talk about self identification and self disclosure. Identification might be a generic. Identification maybe a large company survey, or for instance, there are some Department of Labor programs that capture data. Someone can say I do have a disability or I do not have a disability, but it wouldn't be connected to them as a person or it's anonymized, and it's not going to follow them around to their manager or their work. Whereas disclosure, disclosing your ability means like to your employer, to your manager, letting them know you have a disability, probably what that is and beginning to discuss any accommodations that might be needed in the future. So a little bit of difference between identification and disclosure.

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

To your question, the important thing is if you disclosed, then you can have a conversation around what you need to be your best self, what you may need at different times in different contexts, in different settings to do your job well. And so that is really the conversation that can and should happen with the employer as it is part of the Americans with Disability Act and really the right of every individual that is employed to have the accommodations they need to do their job properly.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

In your role at Wheelhouse Group, is it that you advise different companies and employers on what can be done or should be done to make a more inclusive environment?

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

Correct. Really through our work at Wheelhouse, with the department of labor, we've learned so much about disability, how it plays out in the workplace, a lot about technology within the workplace. And we started to work on ourselves and our own company and making it more accessible, inclusive, and being explicit about disability being a welcome part of our company. Through that, we kept learning more and some of our other clients asked for input and advice around how they could be more accessible and inclusive of people with disabilities.

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

That could be anything from looking at a website to make sure that it is designed in an accessible manner, could be advice on protocols and processes, best practices on helping people disclose accommodations, et cetera. And so we are looking to really grow that as a practice at Wheelhouse as it is a growing market and field, and we've seen that in the sector, lots of other companies are paying more and more attention to it. It's both the right thing to do, and it can help you be a differentiator, whether it's around competition and helps you be compliant when you're looking at legal issues as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So there's a business case as well as just a humanity case for being a more inclusive workforce, because you bring in people with different perspectives, different ideas, but also, it feels that you have to really make the environment welcoming.

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

Yeah. I have a background before disability, which is my last eight years in kind of the other traditional DEI without the A. So I worked in education and in workplaces around inclusion of people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, gender, sexual orientation, et cetera. I really believe that the lens of disability helps you, enables you to do a better job of inclusion of all traditionally kind of marginalized and excluded groups, any group that may not be well represented in your workplace that a company may feel it needs to have a stronger support or culture around conclusion.

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

I think disability really helps people get to that and allows them to recruit and retain people at a better level. Part of that is that welcoming environment. Part of that is giving people what they need to succeed. And I talked about and mentioned accommodations earlier. I would just like to proactively admit that some people have that can be expensive or problematic, about half of all employees that disclose they have a disability, never need to require an accommodation from the employer. For the other half to do the mean median expense for an employee, accommodating an employee on their lifetime with that company is less than \$500. So it's not an expensive or problematic issue for employers and the HR division, but it can make a really big difference in people feeling welcomed, included, empowered to bring their best self to work and do a good job.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One thought I had was retention. You know, we talk about hiring a lot when we're talking to different organizations and groups. But I've started talking a lot more about retention because once you get someone in, someone's a good worker to help make that, again, that welcoming environment, helping them grow in their careers is very important. And I think I remember you telling us once before that someone with a disability, the population with disabilities is a much more, I would say loyal employee, they stay longer on the job.

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

Correct. There are a number of studies. Since we're at Disability:IN I should highlight, they in conjunction with Accenture and the American Association of People with Disabilities, AAPD, put out a study a few years ago that highlighted the business case of Fortune 500 companies that pay attention to and are proactive about disability inclusion. And they found real hard numbers of them performing better when you look at revenue and net profit, et cetera. So that they made the business case. And when they look at that, what that translates to is the specifics you're inquiring about, retention, training costs. People with disabilities in a variety of studies have been shown to, again, stay on a job longer. They have less absenteeism, which is often a misnomer that people would have that they'd have highest. They have less absenteeism. They have lower error rates, use lower sick days. A lot of things that people would be almost counterintuitive to disability.

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

And all of those for employers can translate to less cost and training. Right. With lower turnover and the loyalty and engagement piece you mentioned. And so the cost for employers tends to go down and

that's part of the return on investment in business case, around hiring people with disabilities. There are others that I can mention too, as well. Productivity is shown to be higher in a variety of studies. And so there are real value propositions to people hiring people with disabilities. It's not just doing it because it's a feel good thing or ethical or moral thing. It is that too. And we should do things that are the right thing to do. But for my position, I find it very encouraging that there are real and hard statistics that make a business case in the inclusion of people with disabilities.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the things that happens at the Disability:IN Conference each year is a report on companies that are doing a great job at making sure that they offer this inclusive environment. And I know that there are over 500 CEOs who signed on a letter from Disability:IN saying, we are going to be those people. We are going to be the ones. And they're big companies, which is fantastic. What's the kind of overall feeling? Do you think the people are employers specifically getting over these misnomers, these misperceptions about people with disabilities and are improving their place in the workforce?

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

Yeah, and I think to the last point they're doing it because they see it as an advantage for themselves. So what you reference the disability equality index that Disability:IN runs does have all these top scoring companies CEOs signing on to make a difference. And the truth is it's because they see it as a benefit. I mentioned some about hiring specifically people with disabilities, but also companies in market are seeing that you have advantages, competitive advantages with other people that aren't people with individuals. So an example would be especially millennials and Gen Z. They have been shown to be much more inclined to accept a job offer of a company that is representing and promoting their inclusion efforts. And that goes to disability as well. Being proactive around not just your hiring of individuals, but also your processes, your internal tools that a company uses can help you avoid any legal issues, any compliance issues.

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

And I think it has become a competitive edge, especially when you think of like HR information systems or the technology and platforms that people use, because there are legal ramifications to not being accessible and inclusive. And so that may have been the catalyst, but now people say, wow, we're making these tools. We want to promote that we make these tools that are inclusive and all kinds of people can use them. We want to have that be a competitive advantage when we're going out and trying to recruit and retain people at our company. There are multiple studies that show that is helpful. So it's not just including the people with disabilities. It's when you do that, when you embrace inclusion of people with disabilities, you're also able to engage, encourage other employees to feel strongly and positive about their workplace.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

In the intro, I mentioned that you were the project director for the partnership on inclusive apprenticeship. Tell me what PIA is.

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

Sure. It's been around a little over two years. Recently in the United States, this is a project out of the US Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy and Department of Labor is encouraging the use of the notion of apprenticeship increasingly in the United States. And that's been proven to be

very successful in kind of traditional trades. So if you think about electricians and plumbers in construction, they've been using apprenticeship effectively a long time. But now we have certain sectors, high growth, high demand sectors, Department of Labor calls them, where there's kind of a skills gap. There are industries that we know we need to hire people and there aren't enough people there and colleges aren't graduating them enough.

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

And so we are looking to increase apprenticeship as a tool in other sectors. And so we focus on clean energy, IT, information technology, healthcare, and finance as places that do have a skills gap, need to recruit more people to fill the jobs that are needed by these American companies. And apprenticeship is a way to do that. And so the partnership on inclusive apprenticeship is looking at that and just really working with entities that exist already, apprenticeship programs, companies, et cetera, and making sure we're helping as we can to make sure that they're inclusive and accessible for people with disabilities, because we want people with disabilities to be able to access these new opportunities and benefit for these quality jobs that are opening up and will be around for the foreseeable future.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You said that this is about two years old. Do you have any numbers, any statistics on how many companies, how many people have taken part in these programs?

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

We do. They're not going to bowl you over. We're a small shop, but we have, let's see now. We work almost directly with 14, what we would call intermediary partners. So these are people, entities, organizations that are running apprenticeship programs in those sectors I mentioned. And so we meet them where they are. Some are big, some are small, some have been doing apprenticeship forever. Some haven't. Some focus exclusively on people with disabilities. We have one group that just does cohorts with people with disabilities. Some have never even thought about or heard about trying to kind of see people with disabilities as a talent pool.

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

And we just meet them where they are to try to get one step closer to accessibility and inclusion to improve their programs as we can, where they need help. And so our partnership and our kind of technical assistance that we provide looks different depending on the partner. I don't want to fully misstate, but I think out of those almost 14 partners we have in this calendar year, it's going to impact around 2,500, almost 3000 apprentices that are in those programs. And so helping make those more inclusive and accessible, we hope to impact the current ones and then also those in the future. Many of our partners have ambitious goals to scale up their apprenticeship programs over time. And so laying the groundwork now for accessibility will even boost those numbers in the future.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You talked about clean energy. That is an area that we have talked about at WorkingNation a lot, that there's a big growth opportunity in that area around the country. What kind of programs are you involved with that?

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

Unlike some of the other sectors, clean energy has even a tougher gap around apprenticeship than some of the other ones. And so some of the folks we're working with aren't necessarily running their apprenticeship programs, but they're workforce related or their industry associations and so we're socializing the idea of providing them with supports. So we work with American Council of Renewable Energies. IREC is one of the larger groups. That's the Interstate Renewable Energy Council. Solar Energy International, Renewables Forward. All of these are generally kind of associations, groups of companies and entities that are looking to build their workforce in clean energy and looking for ways and partners to tap in and grow their training so they can bring them on board.

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

And there's some exciting new growth. Florida just recently announced a huge solar installation registered apprenticeship program and that is with a couple of our partners as well. And so we hope to see more of that. And so our goal is to just, again, try to inform them with the best practices out there, provide them with resources, technical assistance, make any connections we can so that as they're growing these programs, we can try to ensure that people with disabilities will be able to access them and succeed in those opportunities.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

If I had a disability and I was thinking, oh, I want to be a part of an apprenticeship. Is there a place someone can go to find that information?

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

Yes. So apprenticeship.gov is the largest portal that's run by the Department of Labor's Office of Apprenticeship. And there you'll be able to search by location by kind of interests or sectors, and they'll pull up all sorts of things. There are some resources specifically to people with disabilities that they promote on those sites, but they aren't separate portals. There aren't generally like a pool that you would go to and apply if you're a person with disabilities.

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

Specifically in states, there are entities called vocational rehab that are charged with supporting veterans, veterans with disabilities, people with disabilities, other underemployed groups and they would definitely be a great place for anyone to look at and apply. You get support from a counselor and they would definitely be able to direct you to apprenticeship programs and are equipped and trained to specifically support accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities. And that's kind of a state by state office.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think what you want, I'm putting words in your mouth though, is what you want is that it not be separate in the end that everybody is included in the talent pool, you know, the pool of potential talent. It doesn't have to be a separate entity.

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

Correct. I mean, that is the end ultimate goal of the work we do around accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities. One kind of example, or parallel I'd give with that to your point is for many years I ran another project out of Department of Labor and Office of Disability Employment Policy called the

partnership unemployment and accessible technology. My colleagues still run. It's doing great. And it looks really at the technology that people use. And an example of that would be there used to be before technology advanced along, what they would call assistive technology, where someone kind of have an add-on. Say, I had a disability and I was at the workplace and I had to have to get an add-on to make sure I could read something or access a portal. Increasingly with technology what they're doing is they're developing things so that anyone and everyone with different abilities could access them.

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

And so kind of to your point, the way we can move in the world, whether it's technology or kind of a broader company culture, is to think about like a universal design, human-centered design people approach to work and workplaces and then we will just be better at, again, recruiting, retaining, supporting, engaging our workforce, and it won't need to be separated and segregated and you won't have to go to a certain place to be able to get something to access your company's time and pay portal. It'll just be designed into things.

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

And likewise, when you think about inclusion of DEIA broadly. Right. I mean, intersectionality is a real thing. If anyone is trying to recruit and retain veterans, women, Black Americans, people who are formally incarcerated, all of those, you're going to be better able to do if you come from an inclusion and accessibility perspective, because that perspective is one of universal design and you're trying to do the broadest possible range to allow people to engage with success. And so, yeah, I hope that this notion of accessibility almost would kind of fall by the wayside and it would really just be about equity and inclusion, writ large, and you wouldn't have to even think about the specific demographics or what we need to do or how you access resources, because we're just better at supporting our employees and our colleagues and our peers in our workplace. But we probably have a little ways before we get there.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Well, thank you Josh, for sharing that perspective because I think you're absolutely right. And sadly I think we do have a little ways till we get there, but I want to thank you for being on the Work in Progress podcast today.

Josh Christianson, Wheelhouse Group inclusion and accessibility practice lead:

Thanks so much. I'm glad to be here and look forward to learning at the conference with you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Josh Christianson, the special consultant to the Wheelhouse Group and in that capacity, a new member of our WorkingNation Advisory Board. He's also project director for the partnership on inclusive apprenticeship. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor in chief of WorkingNation. Thank you very much for listening.