

MDA Quest Podcast Transcription

Episode 46

Special Edition

National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) Panel for Jobseekers and Employers

Mindy Henderson: Welcome to the Quest Podcast, proudly presented by the Muscular Dystrophy Association as part of the Quest family of content. I'm your host, Mindy Henderson. Together we are here to bring thoughtful conversation to the neuromuscular disease community and beyond about issues affecting those with neuromuscular disease and other disabilities and those who love them. We are here for you to educate and inform, to demystify, to inspire and to entertain. We are here shining a light on all that makes you you. Whether you are one of us, love someone who is or are on another journey altogether. Thanks for joining. Now let's get started. Well, hello everyone.

Thank you so much for joining us today. My name is Mindy Henderson and I am the Vice President of Disability Outreach and Empowerment and the editor-in-chief of Quest Media for the Muscular Dystrophy Association. October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month. I am so excited to host all of you and this esteemed panel of experts who I am honored to have here today to talk about issues related to disability employment, and a bit about how individuals living with disabilities can better navigate some of the issues that we face. I'd love to turn it over to the panelists at this point, and we're just going to go in order of this slide, which happens to be alphabetical order. And let's start with Donna. And if you would please briefly introduce yourself and share what maybe National Disability Employment Awareness Month means to you.

Donna Bungard: Fantastic. Thank you so much and thank you everyone who's joining us here today. My name is Donna Bungard, pronouns she/her. I am the senior accessibility program manager within marketing at Indeed and I help build disability inclusion and accessibility into our brand's, DNA, along with a whole lot of other people because everyone really needs to be involved in this work.

In terms of what does this month mean to me, growing up I've seen barriers. I usually start off by saying, growing up, I was the only one in my house without a profound disability with physical implications. I am as we'll talk in a bit mysteriously neurodivergent. But growing up and seeing barriers to employment and barriers and how that impacted someone's life long-term outside of just a paycheck or just this or just that, it's a larger community base. And so when I see this, it's like, well, of course disability is a part of our diversity metrics. Of course disability provides innovative insights into brands and into companies and into products. Of course this happens. But what I see as being of course, doesn't actually translate into real world experiences for a lot of people. So I want to be here and I want to shout about this month, all month long because of course we all should be there and working to bring broader equity in this space.

Mindy Henderson: Well said. Thanks, Donna. Nick.

Nick: Thanks Donna and thanks Mindy. I do identify with two disabilities. I am today wearing a black sweatshirt with a white undershirt. I do have receding salt and pepper hair and a salt and pepper beard. I am wearing black rimmed glasses and you can't see that I am also wearing two assistive hearing aid devices in my ears. First of all, I just want to just take a moment to just put a positive energy out there for our friends, family, loved ones, and coworkers who were in the path of these hurricanes and let's just keep them in our thoughts and prayers because this is not a good time for a lot of people and all of us are in this space of caring for others so there's a lot of people being cared for right now, and they're going to need a lot of help afterwards so let's just keep them in our thoughts and prayers.

So for me, the work of inclusion is the work that we're all doing, and I'm proud of the work that this community has done to influence our society. I see it in all the different organizations that we work with together, including MDA. One of the things I always say is, and we think about when the ADA was enacted, it was enacted 26 years after the first Civil Rights Act. So we have been alongside the Civil Rights Act, civil rights movement for years in the disability community, but we've lagged behind many times. So I think having conversations like this will bring forth the fact that disability goes across all dimensions of diversity, and we know that some of us have a disability when we're born, some of us acquire one or two as we or more as we get older. So it's a dimension of diversity that is going to impact all of us at some point in our lives. So it behooves us to understand how we can best support, enable empower, and most importantly be proximate. And I think when Donna talks about how do we create services and opportunities that are relevant and resonate with communities that are of difference, the way to do that is be proximate. So this is one of those conversations where we can be proximate. Thank you and I'm looking forward to the conversation.

Mindy Henderson: Thanks, Nick. Stephane.

Stephane Lebloi...: Hi folks. My name is Stephane Leblois. I'm the chief community and programs officer at The Valuable 500. I use he and him pronouns. And today I'm wearing a black sweater over a green button-down. I too have receding salt and pepper hair. Although Nick, I feel like you're selling yourself short mate. I am wearing glasses and I am wearing a silly-looking mustache that suggests that I'm a lost and very much less debonair musketeer. I'm coming to you from Atlanta, Georgia, and for all those who are in the path of Milton, as Nick mentioned here, some really important work being done by the likes of the World Institute on Disability with Marcie Roth and Access Israel in the realm of emergency and disaster risk preparedness for people with disabilities and aging populations. Milton is already a terrible tragedy for people without disabilities, but people with disabilities are disproportionately and adversely affected by things like this.

So just bear that in mind, listeners, especially folks without disabilities, that this is something that y'all should pay attention to and certainly look into.

But what does NDEAM mean to me? I have the great fortune of working the disability rights space and working for an organization that is de facto inclusive and accessible. So I can bring my whole self to work, and I trust that my employer has my well-being and certainly my identity expression in their interest, and certainly they allowed me to express myself in that way. But many employers simply don't do that. Simply don't provide that trusting, that safe environment for people to bring their whole selves to work, for people to request accommodations when they need it, to strive for equity, and to certainly achieve higher levels of performance, and indeed higher levels of leadership and remuneration. A lot of employers simply aren't at that stage, aren't at that level of maturity where they're offering that yet to all their employees with disabilities. And so what NDEAM means to me is an opportunity to highlight these issues while celebrating the successes that individuals and companies have had in this space, highlighting the fact that there's still a long way to go and that I suppose we can learn from the successes that we may highlight today to, I suppose, lead systemic change tomorrow. So that's it.

Mindy Henderson: Brilliantly said. And certainly last but not least, Theo.

Theo Braddy: Yeah. Thank you Mindy. And to the rest of the panelists, thank you all for allowing me to join you. My name is Theo Braddy. I'm the executive director of the National Council on Independent Living as well as a member of the National Council on Disability. My visual description, a black man, blue glasses. The world has been a little bit meaner to me than the rest of my male colleagues. I only have a salt and pepper beard. I'm a bald man with disability at age 15 due to a high school football accident. So I use a complex wheelchair since the age of 15. My wife says I'm colorblind, so I think I got on an orange and blue white plaid shirt. But again, thank you for inviting me.

Why am I here? I think work is essential to people with disabilities, diverse disabilities, and I think ableism is our greatest challenge. And one of the things I always like to do is collaborate with other organizations to really try to provide some education, because I do believe education is a key to eliminating ableism. And so whenever I get an invite to shed some light on how America got it wrong, when it comes to people with disabilities, I jump at it. And so thank you for inviting me.

Mindy Henderson: Well, thank you all so very much for being here. You are all role models of mine, and I'm just thrilled to have this conversation with you and to be able to bring awareness to this topic. I will also add that I am a white woman with curly light brown, brown hair, a bold red lipstick on, and a blue and white collared top. I'll also add that I myself am a wheelchair user and live with a neuromuscular

condition called Spinal Muscular Atrophy. So this is a topic that is near and dear to my heart.

So I'm going to switch gears just a little bit and start off the conversation with some data. Data and hard numbers I think can be powerful. And I wanted to share a few just to get us started and to underscore how much work there still is to do around equity and inclusion for people living with disabilities in the workforce.

So first of all, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2023, only 22.5% of working age people with disabilities were employed, which is shockingly a record high, but is still far below the 65.4% employment rate of those without disabilities. Next, people with disabilities on average make 66 cents on the dollar versus their non-disabled counterparts according to the census bureau. Now, this statistic is intertwined with the fact that there is still a sub minimum wage that is still perfectly legal in some states, which is yet another problem. And then in 2023, a report released by Accenture, 76% of employees with disabilities do not fully disclose their disabilities at work, which I think really speaks to the stigma and the risk to our opportunities that we all still feel exist heavily in professional settings should a person disclose that they have a disability. And finally, in 2023 Disability In released a report that mentioned that only 24% of employers with a diversity program include disability explicitly in their reporting.

So those are some of the hard data points that I pulled together leading up to today that I think really sets the stage for what we're going to be talking about. So clearly this is a dream team panel of incredibly accomplished individuals, many of whom, as you heard, are living with disabilities. And in addition to the statistics that I just shared, I'd like to have our panelists who live with disabilities talk a little bit about their lived experience and how the lack of disability and inclusion have affected their own professional experiences. And then we'll move into other expertise that they all hold and talk about the solutions potentially to the problems that we're all aware of. So Nick, let's start with you. You grew up with a disability like I did, and I would love to have you share your journey of growing up with a disability, acquiring a second disability, and how those lived experiences have impacted your professional experience over the years.

Nick:

Happy to do so, Mindy. Thank you for the opportunity. So as I said, I do wear two assistive hearing devices. I've been wearing them since I was three years old. I was diagnosed with a hearing disability probably around age three or four. And back then the technology isn't what it is today. I now have Bluetooth hearing aids where I can stream right into my hearing aids and that didn't exist years ago. It was a box with wires. It was almost like, if you remember the old Sony Walkmans with the wires and a big box in the side of your hip clipped onto your belt. And growing up, parents, teachers, and coaches ... Not my parents,

but other parents, teachers and coaches were not so receptive to someone with a box with wires, and you're an active young man wanting to play sports or get involved with the kids.

It was always, oh, Nicky's not allowed. Nicky can't. Nicky's got that thing. Meanwhile, all the children were like, "Let's let him play." So I encountered so many of these can't statements or won't. Like you're not going to be able to. My dad always said to me, Nick can't lives on won't street. That was his famous phrase.

My dad was a World War II veteran, and he would always tell me to go talk to my Uncle Ralph, who was actually one of the first documented triple amputees of World War II. So my Uncle Ralph was a big inspiration to me as someone who had severe disabilities and never let that ever get in his way. He would do everything everybody else would do just maybe in a different way. So when I was always feeling maybe that I had barriers or that I couldn't participate or that I wasn't being going to be accepted, my dad would say, "You need to go look at your Uncle Ralph and see what he can and can't do."

But as I got older and the technology got better and I got more competent and those types of things, I still are faced with microaggressions and biased behavior as time went on. And I say this all the time, we go out to dinner with my family in a noisy restaurant, I can't participate in that conversation because it's too noisy and I'm watching the family and they're all conversing over there, and then I can't really hear. I'm a bit of an extroverted introvert, but I will fall back into myself. So if that happens with people that I love and know and they know me, what happens when we're in places that we're not so familiar with, where people don't really know our disabilities or we haven't disclosed because we're afraid to? So that's why I do the work that I do. I always say, I've been given a gift and the gift is my disabilities.

You mentioned the second disability that I acquired. It's the anxiety and depression. So when I walk into a conference room, my colleagues know Nick needs to sit in a certain place so that he can participate. So my colleagues will all ahead of time be very thoughtful. Let's make sure that Nick sits over here. But sometimes I'll go to offsite meetings and people don't necessarily know Nick that well or don't know that I have a hearing disability. So I can walk into a conference room and I'm thinking about, okay, where am I going to sit so I can be able to participate and read and hear the conversation and have to be able to lip-read and everybody is an active conversation. If I'm not able to do that, the anxiety goes up. And so that's one of the triggers that I have is when I'm not able to have control over my situation and the anxiety will definitely impact me. So it's been a journey. I think that certainly the technology has helped, but also me being able to share my story and lean into conversations with people so that they can understand my lived experience and I can understand theirs. And I

think that's the point, is we have to lean into conversations with people that are not like us so that we can learn and best create those connections.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah. And Nick, I want to come back to something that you said in just a few minutes because I know that from having known you for a while now and worked with you a bit, I know that you and your team have done things at L'Oreal to make that professional workspace a safe place for people to disclose and talk about what they want to talk about and ask for what they need. So I just want to raise that point and come back to that in just a few minutes. But first, Theo, I spent time at the White House with you a few weeks ago and a few hundred of our closest friends as we celebrated the 34th anniversary of the ADA and Disability Pride. You also got, I believe, a private audience with the president and lead the council on the National Council on Independent Living, as you said. And you are certainly a leader in helping individuals with disabilities create independence for themselves, but I suspect this is not where your career began. Do you mind talking a little bit about your experience as you've risen through the ranks and did that as a person living with a disability and some of the challenges that maybe you had to overcome?

Theo Braddy: Yeah. Yeah. No doubt. Living with a disability ... I was a quadriplegic so the first year of my life I was spent in a nursing home. So I know the sting of that. I know the oppression of that and the isolation that comes with that. And so yeah, most of my life I have been fighting to be included just like Nick indicated. At one time, I internalized a lot of the discrimination and ableism that exists. I believed that it was me that need to accommodate myself and make myself go through all the hoops in life that a person with disability go through. This world was not designed for people with disabilities. It wasn't built for people with disabilities. So it called for us to do all the necessary changes. So it took me a minute to really understand that it was not about me, it was about the society who really believed differently about me and other 61 million or so people with disabilities. So I started advocating for change. And throughout my whole career, it's been a fight to push through these things.

I have used people lack of knowledge about me, the lack of expectation, those low expectations they have about me and other people with disabilities. I see that as my greatest motivator. It motivates me to prove people that they're wrong. They got it wrong from the start. They have all these beliefs about people disabilities as subhuman, or we take more than we give, we are less than. And those beliefs, whether intentional or unintentional, cause us to be oppressed. And so I use that to motivate me. I believe that in order to change people ableist thinking, you have to be with them. You have to interact with them. So whenever I get the opportunities to be around ... Especially decision makers and people with power influence, because they are for the most part, the ones that create these systems of oppression and discrimination. So

whenever I get an opportunity, including the president, I will challenge what I call people thinking thinking. S-T-I-N-K-I-N-G. It stinks. They got it wrong.

And whenever you leave something like that, unchecked, it just produces more of itself. And we got to challenge that thinking whenever we can. And so for example, in my early career, probably about 25 years ago ... And I shared this with the Secretary of Transportation, Pete Buttigieg. I shared with him that I decided not to fly because the airlines always destroyed my chairs and made me go without my complex wheelchair for months and months. And so I just stopped flying. There's no doubt in my mind that that had effect on my career, a negative effect on my career path because I just wouldn't put myself through that and my wife do that. And so that's why I worked so hard to push through this stuff. Especially in the area of employment. It's so important in regard to someone's quality of life.

But in the area of employment, a person with disability, it's not taken serious. Especially compared to non-disabled professionals. And so in the area of work buying homes, I had that kind of discrimination. Even healthcare where doctors don't really believe that you know your body and with their unconscious bias, they tell you some really weird stuff about your life and how you should live it. And so that's what motivates me, Mindy, and that's what I try to improve. And like I said earlier, education is the key.

How will you ever know me if you don't interact with me and have a relationship with me? In society unfortunately with a lot of non-disabled folks, they are uncomfortable around people with disabilities but you're going to see me, you're going to hear me and you're going to interact with me, and then you're not going to talk to me about my disability. You're going to talk to me about stuff that you talk to everybody else about. Talk to me about the Warriors, Stephen Curry or anything else, but don't ask me about ... Your first conversation should not be about my disability. And so that's what we fight. That's what I fight. So that's enough. So go ahead.

Mindy Henderson: That's amazing. You are clearly a brilliant advocate and we're lucky to have you. And I just want to add that I think I've always believed that there's a lot of power in our stories, and you're right, our disability is part of us, but it's not all of us. And so I think it's really important for people to understand that. I love the point that you made about not having that be the first conversation that a person has with you because there's so much more to know about you than that. But once that happens, we can talk about it and we can share our experiences. And that's exactly what we're doing here today because there is so much power in our stories. And statistics are great. I shared some statistics, but I think what people are really going to remember is the individual stories that you all share today. So Donna, I want to ask you about living with really a non-apparent disabilities.

Donna Bungard: Absolutely. And just to backtrack a little. Sorry, folks, I'm a 40-something woman with dark hair, red glasses, bright pink shirt, and a small garden of Lego flowers behind me, as well as a monitor that has Indeed's mission of we help people get jobs showing. So sorry about that omission earlier. Yes. So I have described myself as mysteriously neurodivergent. That means that in '88, '89 when I was originally tested, they went, huh, this is a female. There's clearly something going on here, but we really don't have any idea what. I teasingly tell people. They just said she's weird. That was mostly my classmates, but I think it counts. We decided because the ADA was in process, and frankly I would not have been permitted in my school to take college prep courses, we decided to wait until I think it was '91 to get me officially coded. But even then, there was no identification of what's up. It's just she doesn't think in straight lines is basically how I've often summed it up.

So with that mysterious piece and growing up around people who had much more profound disabilities, I never really felt disabled enough to count or to disclose it because, well, I had a barrier, but I know what more profound barriers look like. And there was all this self-doubt and a lot of shame not about the idea of being disabled, but of being an imposter. So I didn't want to show up in a workplace as an imposter because I desperately respect the disability community. And it took a long time for me to realize that early in my career, burning out fantastically over and over in a way that was atypical was not ... Well, maybe I needed something that I wasn't getting. And it took me years of my career to get to the point of believing that my needs were valid because they were non-apparent, because I didn't have a defined, this is your label. Because I didn't have that grounding piece for me to push past the shame of not being fitting in or not understanding. There was one manager I had, brilliant woman. I still to this day could not tell you what her feedback actually meant. I had no idea. And it was just a communication breakdown, and I didn't know how to advocate for my own needs because I didn't feel I had a strong enough definition.

And part of that made it so that other people couldn't help me but also I didn't go for certain things and I didn't take certain risks and I didn't try for certain things because I figured I wasn't worthy of that because I couldn't fit into a mold that was never meant for me and I didn't have the words and the vocabulary and frankly, the self-forgiveness and understanding and empathy and compassion to actually take those steps until nearly 40 years old, at which point I went ... I'm trying to think of a more PC way of saying it. To heck with it. There were lots of other words involved. But I'm going to go after everything I want and I'm going to focus on where my passions are and I'm going to follow my curiosities and let's just see what happens.

And I'm very fortunate. I have a very supportive partner and family and all of these things. It wasn't until I decided to take my own voice and my own power

and say, I don't need to know a label. I have valid needs and I need to work through them before that was something that set me up for success. And for me it was that growing up in a speak that in coming into my own and not relying on some external person giving me a label, which someday I'll probably get one because I think I know and I'm curious if I'm right. But I don't need that label right now. I know that I don't think the same patterns of the other people, and that's actually now my strength because I can multitask like nobody's business. You want to shoot slacks and emails and switch gears and back-to-back calls, bring it on. I decided to harness all the things that were holding me back into something powerful, but it took me almost 20 years into my career before I felt strong enough to do that.

So I think the fact that we're now talking about neurodivergence and we're talking about the fact that processing information differently actually adds value. And we're talking about the idea that diagnostics, like diagnostic recognition of a specific neurodivergent identity is actually a privilege in a lot of places around the world. There's a lot of ... Whether it be a lack of access to them or there's a lack of research that's applicable to other underrepresented groups due to the intersectional identities. All this research is coming out that there's a barrier to these neurodivergent identities and that labeling that it creates all this self-doubt. I think that we're coming through to a point in our lives where, okay, it is common within the autistic community, for example, for somebody to be like, "I can't get there, but I understand this is me and I've come to this understanding." There's understandings within different aspects of the neurodivergent community that says, maybe you can't get to the doctor who's going to say this is you and these are your accommodations, but it doesn't mean you have a less powerful voice.

Mindy Henderson:

It's so good. And what's coming to mind for me in listening to your story is the loneliness that an individual can feel when they don't either feel like they can disclose or talk about their disability, but it's bringing to mind for me that I have a very apparent disability. You can't look at me and miss it. And I worked for 20 years in the high-tech space before doing what I do now, and I went 20 years without seeing another individual in a wheelchair. And it was incredibly lonely at times because I had so much fear about asking for something. Even something as simple as taking my laptop to a conference room for a meeting and having to ask a coworker to bring it along or something. Every single day, six or eight times that came up and I felt squishy about it. And it was an incredibly lonely feeling. It's not the same exact thing as what you're describing, but there there's a loneliness I think, in a lot of these stories and the fact that we can't be ourselves and give our whole selves authentically to our employers, and it does a disservice to us, and frankly, it does a disservice to our employers who aren't getting all of us.

So Stephane, I'm coming for you next. The Valuable 500 works with, of course, more than 500 companies globally to end disability exclusion. And I want to talk in just a few minutes about how exactly you do that. But first, can you talk a little bit about ... I think we've heard a number of things through the stories in the last few minutes, but a little bit about the problems in working with employers that you see are the most prominent amongst employers as it relates to disability inclusion. Some of the biggest stumbling blocks that you think still need to be overcome, particularly in the United States in order to move the needle faster when it comes to inclusion in the workplace.

Stephane Lebloi...:

Being based in the United States, I think it's easier for me to answer the US specific question, but our previous global. We count more than 520 companies from around the world, many in Europe, many in East Asia, the Middle East, Latin America. So we hear about different challenges and some of them are geo specific,, industry specific. It's very interesting every day is drinking from a fire hose in terms of the amount of information and inputs you get. But as it relates to the US, there are some commonalities with global challenges. And I think it begins with, there still exist misconceptions and myths around hiring people with disabilities, the fact that it might be too expensive or that it might be too hard.

The reality is that time and again, the disability community and even businesses now have come up with research and with case studies and things to suggest that no, in fact it's not super difficult to hire people with disabilities, nor is it super expensive to provide reasonable adjustments. Something like 80% of reasonable adjustments cost less than \$500 to implement. That's a drop in the bucket compared to what companies are willing to spend on learning L&D and other opportunities to enhance the experience and skill sets of their employees. So I think that there's a fundamental ... There still exists some of these myths out there. And so there's a big problem in education to go back to what Theo was talking about. The education being the key driver, the key bottle opener, if you will, to prevent the bottlenecks of information and inclusion from happening. So that's one piece.

And actually with that education piece, there's generally the cultural readiness in addition to understanding, to demystifying the practical components of hiring people with disabilities, there also exists the need for both leaders and employee basis to better understand what we're about when we talk about disability. I for example, contrary to most of the people on this panel came into my disability diagnosis later on in life. As a working adult, I have had to come to terms with that and contend with that. And so if I weren't in an environment where people embraced my journey of self-discovery and my journey of understanding who I am and exploring this new identity I may have sunk. And the reality is many employers are simply not equipped to host that

conversation. Many employers are not equipped to support caregiving individuals in the workplace.

You talk about new mothers, you talk about the parents of a child who has a complex medical needs or who has a disability that requires caregiving at home or an aging parent or what have you, these are really complex problems. And to solve that, the first thing that you need as an organization to solve that problem is a cultural awareness and understanding of these things. And then when you talk about better paid leave policies, streamlined and efficient workplace adjustments or accommodations processes. And lastly, making sure that employees feel psychologically safe to explore their identities, disclose, interact with other individuals with disabilities in the workplace. That happens through affinity groups, that happens through creating safe spaces as leaders, as employee bases.

And then lastly, so there's all that infrastructural stuff that companies still need to do a better job of doing. But a big piece ... And Donna and I have talked about this a lot, is messaging. Is external communications. Look, if I'm a brand, say I'm a B2C brand that creates ... I don't know. That sells shampoo hypothetically. If I'm not including people with disabilities in my ads, if I'm not including people with disabilities messaging in the ads I'm providing to job seekers, how can people possibly think that I'm trying to hire them? How can people possibly think that I'm a disability inclusive employer if I'm not saying it or if I'm not loud and proud and saying, "Hey, look, these are our consumers, these are our employees and these are them enjoying our products, or these are them working in our workplaces." If I'm not doing that as an employer, I'm missing the point. So there's no amount of you creating accessible job reqs or working with Indeed in all the wonderful things they're doing to make applying to a job more accessible and inclusive. There's no amount of that that you can do without first properly communicating the fact that you're a disability inclusive employer to the people that matter, the job seekers.

The last thing I'll mention here, and then I'll move on, is there's also a big to do with some external forces that are impacting the success of employers in hiring people with disabilities. It comes down to job readiness training. Like are disability service organizations really providing the job readiness training for the jobs of today and tomorrow, or are they applying training that was relevant like 40 years ago? Having worked at The Arc of the United States I can tell you that there are many organizations in that space that simply are providing training that is irrelevant or is no longer useful for the jobs of today or tomorrow. And the second bit, and this sounds trite, but it's true, transportation. Transportation is a huge issue. And especially for job seekers looking for jobs that are onsite, looking for jobs in remote places, rural counties, rural places in the United States. Transportation is a huge issue for job seekers with disabilities. So how can cities, how can municipalities, how can states work on better schemes to be

able to have job seekers afford to get to work? That's why remote work was such a huge boom during COVID or one of the many reasons. But transportation is still key for everything. So I'm going to stop there because spoken a lot, but there's still plenty of challenges. That's all I'll say. But still great work being done too. I don't want to glance over that.

Mindy Henderson: No. I would love to have you keep talking because this is all such good stuff. I love that you mentioned transportation, all of the things that you mentioned, but I want to pause and give a plug to voting and the fact that we have an election coming up. I think that it's so important for issues like what you're mentioning to get out there and make your wishes known by casting a vote in your country and putting the people in power who are going to make priorities of the things that matter to you. However you vote, get out there and vote. So all of that very well said, Stephane. Does anyone else have anything they want to add to what Stephane had? I want to bounce around a little bit and let this be more of a conversation as well. If anyone else has anything to add.

Donna Bungard: I just am sitting here nodding yes, yes, yes, yes to pretty much everything everyone's been saying. I had love to just absolutely second the idea that you have to build the culture and it has to permeate every aspect of your organization. And what I typically tell any team is please include a wheelchair user, but don't only include one wheelchair user and think that you have a disability inclusive promotion. This is such a hugely diverse audience. And also there's more and more AI generation we're seeing online. You can always tell because it's the person with six fingers that is AI generated six fingers. I'm not suggesting limb differences are bad. But they're usually not in a place that a limb difference would occur. That's one of the huge tells of AI. But in doing so, you're getting a lot of stereotypes from our history produced, and we have to be mindful of that. Our language learning models, there's a lot of organizations out there trying to make them very ethical. There's a lot of great, amazing work happening, but still a lot of the image generators out there are relying on historical of what is in medical books, which is historically white skinned individuals. It's going through what are stereotypes of autism and Asperger's, which were always showing young men, skinny frowning, short hair, just that was it.

They ask about wheelchair users and they're always showing older individuals when as the was explaining, or both of you actually are explaining, this has been a lifelong journey. This is not something that you magically got something when the hair started turning a little lighter. These are whole exciting lives, and there are brands and companies that are making efforts in this space, but there's so much work to do. There's so much under-representation in our media, in our advertising, in our online experiences that we need to really help amplify voices that do the whole spectrum of what the disability experience is because it's beautiful in its difference.

Mindy Henderson: It's so true. And I want to ask Nick a follow-up question about culture in just a second, but to echo what you said about representation. I think there's such a trickle-down effect from popular culture and things like movies and television and advertising has been mentioned. And if you're not seeing people with disabilities included in your line of sight every day, then it stands to reason that no one's ever going to know it. They're never going to understand it. And I give talks to companies sometimes, and I admire people's forthcomingness with me. But one of the questions that I tend to get is, I've never been around a person with a disability and I don't know how to do that. I don't know how to help. I don't know what to do. How to talk to a person. And I think that it's so representative of the problem that we're here talking about today and the lack of understanding and knowledge. Before I worked for the Muscular Dystrophy Association, I admittedly wasn't terribly plugged in myself to the disability community. And I have got to say in the last six years that I have been doing advocacy and working for MDA, some of the coolest people I know are in this community. And it's sad to me that more people don't know them and have them in their daily lives.

Donna Bungard: If I can just jump in, I promise I will give other people more of a turn too. But with that, one thing that did occur to me that most people I guess don't realize is that disability is normal. And I would challenge anybody who says, "I have not worked with a disabled person before." Because I'm sorry, you have. They might not have told you about it.

Mindy Henderson: So true.

Donna Bungard: And the other piece of it is that when we start normalizing it and start bringing these conversations ... And thank you so much for your disclosure in the chat, by the way, that's beautiful. And when we start realizing how normal it is, we'll realize that ... And I feel sad telling the story with Nick on the phone. You see, my sister has profound hearing loss and would wear hearing aids that would feedback. So the little sister might go up behind her and play jingle bells every year with the feedback and be all these awful things. But it wasn't because she had hearing loss, it was because she was my sister and I wanted to annoy her. And that was a very easy way to do it. And I also really honed my reflexes. But the idea that disability isn't ... There are barriers, but the disability isn't the barrier. It's just part of life. And the more we talk about it, the more we see it, the more we normalize it, maybe people are going to recognize that yes, they have worked with people with disabilities. That's not even a question. We're up to 28.7% of the US identifies ... EU is at 27%. Yes, you have. And so maybe people would be able to recognize that and support each other better. And frankly, companies would get better ... Since we're talking about work, would get more too.

Mindy Henderson: So true. Absolutely. Thank you. Thank you, Donna. So Nick, like I mentioned earlier, I've had the opportunity to see firsthand some of the great work you've done around disability inclusion at L'Oreal. L'Oreal is a massive company, a huge, huge company. And I would think that would make achieving goals around diversity and inclusion incredibly challenging. And yet in 2024, L'Oreal has been named one of the top 100 companies to work for in disability inclusion. Do you know how L'Oreal's commitment to disability inclusion came about? And I'd love for you also to talk about some of the things that you've done and implemented there that make it such a safe, inclusive culture to be a part of.

Nick: Yeah. First of all, it's been such a great company to work for as it relates to inclusion. I always say we go back a hundred years to Dr. Schueller, who was the creator of the company in his kitchen, creating synthetic hair color. He knew that he was going to grow his company through the power of people. Now, maybe he didn't understand back then the word diversity or what it really meant because it wasn't in our ... To Donna's point earlier, I think that was a really good point Donna around the words we have now that we maybe didn't even have five or 10 years ago. So I just think that he knew the power of his company was going to grow through the power of people and different points of view. So we've always had that as part of our culture of this company not being so much about products as it is about the people that create those products.

And I think as we've grown in the last 20 years, I've watched us +grow from a company that creates products for people to use to understanding that there's such a big opportunity for us to use and leverage technology to be able to create relevant and resonating experiences for all of our ecosystem. So much so had our CEO actually presented at the Consumer Electronic Show this year. So a beauty company was presenting the Computer Electronics Show. Not some startup tech company or Google or Amazon or IBM> It was us because we are seeing how technology is so much a part of our lives and for people with disabilities, it's become obviously a very much of a part of our lives. So it behooves us to understand each of these dimensions of diversity that all of us represent. And we've been doing the work of diversity, equity and inclusion for I would say a good 20 years now. Intensely for 10 or 15. I've been on the team for about six now. And I've watched even in the last six years, our ERG strategy grow.

So we just had an ERG summit last week and we had 15 ERGs there represented and we had the leaders there. They're creating the strategies for next year. And they're empowered and they're creating intersectional moments. I always say to people that come up to How did you get where you are? Well, first of all, if you look at Dr. Taylor's journey of D&I learning, we're never going to get there. There's never there there because we're always learning about each other.

Everyone has a different lived experience, and we can never know fully about each other. So I think we're always continuing to learn. And I think that as we continue to create the culture of inclusion, it's really all about how do we listen to each other, lean into conversations with each other, learn about each other, learn about communities that we've not tapped into that are largely underrepresented or untapped, and create those support mechanisms, those moments for us to understand better how we could support, enable, create products that are relevant and resonate.

And you might've heard about a hapta device. The hapta device was created as a result of some innovation thinking around from our ERGs. Well, what happens if you have a motor disability and you can't use the products? Someone wrote a brief. That brief went to R&I, R&I developed the concept. Concept got reviewed with the ERGs. There's this whole way to come to market. And now that that product is being beta tested. We showcased it at the Disability In conference this year. And it was really exciting to watch the feedback from our community and give us interesting insights about what we need to do and how we can make it even better. I think the question was how do we start this journey? I think it's been, in our vernacular, it's been in our thread, it's been in our DNA since the founding of this company. Certainly we always want to continue to learn and grow together and create those moments where we learn about maybe lived experiences like this, like we are right now. And I'm hearing my colleagues tell me about their stories, and I'm learning right here and now. Took a few notes already.

So I think it's just continually creating moments where we can continue to learn. Last week, the HR team had an HR conference for three days, and they gave me a spot where I created a disability panel for them to understand different aspects of disability from externally from NGO partners of ours, as well as L'Oreal employees stories that they heard as well. So the HR team heard these stories and they came up afterwards and it was very moving, very powerful. And it's just how do we create those moments so people can feel supported, feel heard, feel seen, feel understood. And there was a conversation earlier around accommodations. I don't even like that word. I think we need to come up with a better word for that in our community. Enablement or empowerment tools. I don't know. We need to come up with something better than accommodations because I think even in the words we use ... Even think about the diagnosis, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The diagnosis itself is already using deficit language. So we need to disrupt deficit narratives. And when we do that, we'll create more safe psychological safety for people. So hopefully that answers your question.

Mindy Henderson: It's so good. And I think that what employers need to do is find ways to make the people part of the fabric of their company just like you said. I think that that's key in all of this.

Nick: If I may, I just wanted to say one thing. Thanks Mindy. It's a major pillar in our D&I strategy. Our D&I strategy is built around SMO, socioeconomic multicultural origins, LGBTQ and gender, aging generation and disability and mental health. So disability and mental health is a major pillar in the DNI strategy for the company. So to your point, when you make it a part of your strategy, it's going to be driven. But you don't want to boil the ocean. There's so much you can do. And that's what I was trying to say earlier. People come up to you, how did you get where you are? There's so many things we could do. You got to pick a lane and go down that lane. Let's not boil the ocean and try to do everything all at once.

Mindy Henderson: It's true. It's true. So Theo, I'm going to switch gears just a little bit and ask you a questions that I think is going to be so important to people who may be listening who live with disabilities. Such a big issue I think, is that individuals who want to go to work want to advance their careers, but one of the very real issues they face has to do with social security income, social security, disability, income, and Medicaid. They're all very connected. And Medicaid in particular provides individuals with things like caregivers that help them in some cases, get out of bed in the morning so they can go to the job or do their work. However, income limits and savings and asset limits remain incredibly low in order to qualify for these benefits.

I know that people who have lost these benefits, and it can cost anywhere from \$30,000 a year and up to pay for caregivers. So you find yourself in these positions where you maybe make too much money to qualify for the benefits, but nowhere near enough income to pay for the things that you need to live your daily life. And so there's a lot to unpack on this one. First of all, what would you say to someone who might be listening who wants to create a plan for themselves, either get their first job or advance in their career, like I said, but they may be worried about losing their benefits?

Theo Braddy: Very good point. We could talk all day on this one. So the first thing I would say, educate yourself. It's so important for people with disabilities seeking employment to educate themselves. And sometimes we think the employer is going to do it, but they are required by some regulations to post and give people resources. And obviously Nick just mentioned, the employer resource groups and creating that, that is all very important. But more than that, educate yourself on your rights when it comes to seeking employment. If you make the mistake of coming off SSI, coming off Medicaid, coming off social security disability insurance, and you have not looked into how that will affect your day-to-day needs such as healthcare and attendant care, doable medical equipment, your prescription ... If you don't know and have looked into that ... One of the things a lot of people don't know, that people with disabilities on a day-to-day basis spend more in regard to expenses. 28% more in regard to everyday expenses than people without disabilities. And so one real reality is that when

you become employed, you still got to carry that. You still got to pay those additional costs for your complex wheelchair. You still got to pay those additional costs for getting up in the morning and getting in bed again with attendant care. And you got to pay for all of those additional things that everyday folks without disabilities don't.

And once you lose your coverage on the Medicaid, SSI and so forth, it becomes very important for you when you get that job to know and weigh those pros and cons. And most people with disabilities do not know that. So you got to talk to you're ... There's place that you can go. Social security can give you information on this, Ticket to Work, can give you information on this. National Council of Independent Living I run can give you information on that. Vocational rehabilitation agencies can give you information on that. Even social security and benefit.gov can give you information on this. And most people really need to go online, talk to experts and find, if I get a job, how much will I lose compared to income? And I know people, as you probably know, people Mindy who will turn down raises based on their fear of losing attendant care and other resources that they need to focus on.

And so we are working on legislation that is going to increase those amounts in regard to asset limits and so forth. But they're not in place right now. So Medicaid eligibility requirements, other things keep people with disabilities locked into poverty. And you get in this limbo. And you got to count every penny, otherwise you're going to lose what is needed for your everyday life. And I know people who want to work because work is so important to one quality of life, but they can't do it because of the fear of losing healthcare. And so the first thing that I can tell anyone is to talk to the experts about what you will gain and what you will lose if you want to go back to work.

There's a option like Medicaid buy in but it's not everywhere. It's not in every state where you can buy into some low-cost medical insurance and so forth to keep your benefits. But it's not in every state. And so again, don't depend on an employer to tell you these things. There's peers out there like myself and other people who've been doing this for a living and navigating what I call a maze of confusion. It's just a maze of confusion. You just got to do so much Sherlock Holmes investigation, inductive reasoning to figure out how to make it in this world. Because people created these oppressive systems that you got to now figure out how to navigate and survive. And so my best thing for you, those who seeking employment, is to contact those entities out there that really can guide you through the decision making. That's very important.

Mindy Henderson: That's really helpful. And you're right, it's so complicated. I spoke to someone the other day whose whole job is helping people navigate the process. And that is all she does all day long is talk to people about how to fill out the paperwork and where to look for information. And they just don't make it easy. But I think

to your point, it varies a lot from state to state, but I think that probably it's not as straightforward as applying for SSI and Medicaid. There are nuances and things that I think a lot of people don't know about that are different paths that you can take to qualify for certain things. So thank you for that, Theo. It's such an issue. Yeah, please.

Theo Braddy: I will add this. Contact your local center for independent living. There is a center for independent living in every part of the country, in every county. And those are individuals who have lived experience and working in all kinds of things, and they can really be your navigator. And so if you need information about that, contact NCIL, ncil.org as your starting point, and we'll get you those right places. Okay.

Mindy Henderson: Wonderful. Thank you. Thank you. I cannot believe how fast this hour and a half y'all has gone by. I'm going to try and sneak in one more question that I would love to hear from a few of you on, and then we'll see if there are any questions in the chat and give a few audience members the chance to get their questions answered. But what I would like to ask is ... Particularly for Donna and Stephane and Nick, if we've got employers listening who are wondering what ... Maybe they don't have that culture created today and they haven't taken steps to wrap disability inclusion in particular into the fold of their businesses, what would you say? I don't know if this is an impossible question to answer. But what are one or two things do you think that companies could consider doing or implementing? Because you've got to start somewhere that could move them in the right direction. Donna, you want to start?

Donna Bungard: I can jump in with a couple of thoughts off the top of my head. The first is to start focusing both on skills first hiring and skills management. Disability community don't start in the workplace. They start with a five-year-old being told, this is all you get. There's a whole lifetime of barriers. So we need to focus less on degrees, which are just proxies, and start focusing on the skills people are bringing. I assume outside of my narrative versions, who knows, but nobody wants me to manage their finances of a corporation. That's just not in my skill set. But I don't talk about that in interviews. I talk about what I bring with me. So if you set up your company to let people talk about what they bring, that's going to be equalizer for a lot of underrepresented groups, especially the disability community.

And also though I'm saying skills management internally because everyone wants a promotion path. Everyone wants to learn and grow. And even if it's not up a line, maybe it's a lateral growth, it's still growth, it's still following curiosity and being engaged and being a part of a professional community. So these opportunities based on skills is really important. And then the other piece of it is ask your ERGs what you need to do. If you don't have one, grab a bunch of people. People have been saying nothing about us without us since the 1960s.

It's important. You need to have people with disabilities help you see what you're missing, but don't expect them unless they are someone who's studied and trying to be the expert, don't expect anybody to be an expert other than on their lived experience. You can't just say, "Hey, Carl, guess what? You're our one disabled person that we know of. Will you tell me what we need to do for our whole company?" No. Give me a break. Nobody wants Donna to tell you exactly everything either. There has to be a chorus. So involve the disability community, focus on skills, and start focusing on what everybody brings with them and stop looking for deficits.

Mindy Henderson: So good. And I may be opening a can of worms here, but when you talk about skills first hiring, I also just want to point out the biases that get injected. Unconscious biases even that get injected into things like job descriptions that are posted on websites when you're looking for talent. So I would also really encourage people to rethink how they're writing job descriptions and look for resources on how to avoid those biases. Stephane, what about you? What's coming to mind?

Stephane Lebloi...: So there are a couple of things. I'm going to build off of what Donna said and go a little bit further down the path to ecosystem, if you will, or downstream, and talk about talent retention, cultivation. Because in addition to up skilling the people that you have, you also want to give them agency. And you want them to be able to feel like they're part of the change. And I think that organizations who do well in disability inclusion and accessibility listen to their people and leaders are consistently open to learning from lived experience if they themselves don't have it. Like we often talk about in inclusive leadership, one of the biggest drivers for excellence there, for disability confidence is purpose. And you get purpose by knowing or by having firsthand experience of what it is you you're working for, you're fighting for.

And if you're not listening to your people, either your consumers, so the stakeholders that you're directly impacting through your business outputs and outcomes, if you're not listening internally to the people who are powering the engine, powering the machine with disabilities, you're missing a trick as a leader. So in order to do that, you have to create agency. You have to create the space to talk to people.

We have this program at The Valuable 500 called a Generation Valuable Program. It pairs somebody who's middle management who has lived experience with a disability, preferably somebody with a disability, with a senior level leader. We're talking C-suite. And actually in our pilot program, we had four or five CEOs participate as mentors of this program. But mentor is a misnomer here because it's a reverse mentorship program. It's actually the mentor is the C-suite leaders who are getting more value from it because they're sitting here and listening to somebody who's internal to the organization

talking about this is what's working, this is what's not. This is how we can work together to create a solution to some of the challenges that we're facing in the business as it relates to our experiences and employees or as consumers. So it's really important to just give agency, provide the space for people to grow into leaders and to help and support to drive the change. And I'll stop there.

Mindy Henderson: Thank you. That was great. Nick, any last thoughts?

Nick: I'll go back to what I said earlier. Let's not boil the ocean. If you're an organization that's just starting the disability journey in the organization, I think my colleagues have already given you some great suggestions. And I would add, maybe align yourself with an organization that could help you. That's in the space. Whether it's in muscular district or it's a Disability In or an NOD or Tourette or anybody that would resonate with your employee population. Maybe there's somebody in your employee population that is connected to one of those organizations or others that can ... Best Buddies is another one. That can help you take that journey and create educational moments for you leaders and managers. You don't need to do it alone. In fact, you should never do it alone.

John Maxwell, the author, and writer always says we grow better when we grow together. The other thing I would say is we've said it before in this group, storytelling. If there's a way for you to create moments of storytelling. We've done it during mental health awareness month. We've done it during different key moments, whether it's Black History Month or disability employment month. We've created these moments where people can share their stories and their lived experiences and watch the momentum that happens when people start to share their stories. One of the thing that I don't think we've talked about is also we know the size of the disability market. It's an \$8 trillion market. One billion people in the world have a disability or are connected to someone who is. So chances are the point that Donna made earlier, there's someone in your team who either has a disability or is caring for someone at home that is either older or younger than them, or both.

We're in this sandwich generation now where some of us are caring for older parents and caring for children that all have disabilities. And some of us may also have disabilities. So there's this network of people that might be right in front of you that you don't even realize that they're caring for people at home, they're caring for their children, they're caring for themselves. And if we can tap into that lived experience, wow, that's a powerful journey and a powerful insights that you would get for your organization by just creating them an opportunity to tell their story. One last thing, really important. You want to make any kind of move I think you need the executive team to be behind it. So getting executive sponsorship as you build your ERGs is really important. So

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every one of our ERGs at L'Oreal has someone who's attached to it that is at the executive level of some sort.

Mindy Henderson: Great. And Theo, did you have something?

Theo Braddy: Yeah. I just want to add this to what he's saying. People with disabilities bring so much to the table. Like I said earlier, they have figured out how to live in a world that was not built or designed for them. And if they can figure that out, they can pretty much meet any challenge you or employees looking for, because that's what employers most likely looking for. Someone creative, someone who can resolve problems in a way. And that's what we was built for. And so I just wanted to add that part to it.

Mindy Henderson: Mic drop moment. I love it. That was really, really good. So we have five minutes left. I've got The Wizard of Oz behind the scenes who's been watching the chat for questions. Rebecca, do we have any questions from the audience? I think we can maybe get to one or two. Okay.

Nick: I know Stephane and I have been answering questions in the chat as they come along.

Mindy Henderson: Oh, perfect.

Nick: But maybe there's somebody that wants to raise their hand.

Mindy Henderson: Or Holly, are you able to unmute Rebecca?

Rebecca: I am. Are you able to hear me?

Mindy Henderson: Yes. We've got a little bit of an echo, but we can hear you.

Rebecca: Okay. Wonderful. Well, first of all, thank you all for your so eloquently shared insights, advice, and experiences. As Nick just mentioned, sharing our stories and so powerful. And a few of the questions that were answered in the chat speak to the power and impact of storytelling to increase inclusivity and psychological safety. So thank you for those who asked questions in the chat that were answered by Nick and the other panelists. Another question that we have on the audience is from somebody currently in the workforce with a disability, aside from formally disclosing disabilities with HR and supervisors, what advice can you give about informally sharing accessibility and communication needs with peers and colleagues who might not be privy to that formal conversation of what is needed for you to simply operate in the workforce?

Mindy Henderson: That's a great question.

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Donna Bungard: It is.

Mindy Henderson: I'm going to repeat it because with the echo, I'm not sure everyone caught it. It's essentially asking for, outside of disclosure in the workforce, how can you broach these access needs to peers and whomever may not be in those more private conversations of official disclosure. And I think that one of the ways ... And I'm really interested to hear what our colleagues here will have to say too. One of the important things to keep in mind is that nobody owes anybody any disclosure, but everybody has needs. And you might need an agenda before a meeting for a neurodivergent diagnosis or because maybe that meeting comes in right at pickup time and you need to be able to take it from the car and you're not going to have any of the visuals there so sending the agenda ahead helps.

Or maybe it's that you're going to ask people to ... Or not even ask, but just say, "I need my camera off on a Zoom call." That can happen for a bunch of emotional or mental health needs. That can happen for a lot of neurodivergent or physical disabilities. That again, can help if you have a three-year-old who keeps running through the backyard with God only knows what. Or even a partner who is going to be home and maybe doesn't want to get caught on camera that day. Whatever the reason, you don't owe them an explanation. You are adding value to that company, and you can ask for your needs to be met regardless. So that's my 10 cents, but I'd love to hear other people's.

Theo Braddy: Yeah, I would just encourage people to meet the challenge. Don't be afraid to let anyone know what your needs are. How can you feel welcome or sense of belonging if you are afraid to ask people for adjustments in your workplace or work hours. Every time you want to make a request that they start talking about financials and how much it's going to cost, how would I feel comfortable in that work site? Because I'm then afraid that everything I say or do is going to jeopardize my belonging there. And so it's important for people to feel a sense of belonging. And what better way to do that than your employer knowing that they will make these modifications and adjustment when you ever bring something to their knowledge.

Mindy Henderson: So good. Well, my friends, that is unfortunately all the time that we have today. If we didn't get to your questions, I apologize. But I really want to thank all of you for joining. And I want to give a massive thank you to the panelists who took the time out of their days to join me for this important conversation.

We're going to pop up a slide that gives all of the URLs for the companies that our panelists work for. And last, it has been an absolute pleasure for the Muscular Dystrophy Association's Quest Media to host this conversation. Today. We've just launched our new career resource hub on Quest Media that you can find at the URL, at the in blue, at the top of that slide, along with tons of articles and podcasts on a huge variety of adaptive lifestyle topics, including

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employment. And I also invite you to hit the little subscribe button on the URL mdaquest.org to get your free subscription to the quarterly Quest Magazine and to our monthly e-newsletter. Thank you again for joining. Happy National Disability Employment Awareness Month. Let's all go and do our part to make the world more equitable and more inclusive for people living with disabilities. And for that matter, for all people. Thank you so much everyone.

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