

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief

Over the past few years, WorkingNation has brought you many stories about expanding access to education and careers for [people with disabilities](#).

Last month at SXSW EDU 2023, WorkingNation's president Jane Oates led a panel on the subject with an amazing group of business leaders – [Kathy Martinez](#) of [Expedia Group](#), [Claudia Gordon](#) of [T-Mobile](#), and [Hiren Shukla](#) of [EY](#).

Here's that conversation.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

My name is Jane Oates. I'm the moderator for today's session, and I am the president of WorkingNation, a non-profit media entity that tells the complicated implicit stories of transitions to and within work. If you don't know us, follow us. We'd love to tell your story as well.

So I'm going to begin this panel. Another full disclosure. The three females on this panel all have a shared history. We were all at the Department of Labor under President Obama. I promise nothing will come of that except I don't want you to try to figure it out if you see us snickering and joking with each other. Our gentleman on the panel is a new acquaintance for me and delighted he's never getting rid of me. I'm going to stalk him for the rest of his and my life. So let me begin by going to them, starting with Kathy. I'm going to ask each of you to introduce yourself, talk a little bit about your work journey, and then a little bit about what you're doing right now.

Kathy Martinez, Expedia Group:

Hi everybody. My name is Kathy Martinez. I will do a self-description, a brief one. I am Latinx. Well, I'm wearing a purple, whatever this is called. I have dark hair going, more salt than pepper these days. I'm blind, so if you're going to wave at me or something, ask Jane to interpret because I won't know what you're, you're saying. I have been a passionate economic justice person for pretty much my whole life. I realized when I was young that as a blind person, things were going to cost more, just in general. And it's true that people with disabilities, our lives tend to be more expensive. And so I was lucky to have parents that believed I could work and really did encourage me to work.

I started off in a lock factory making doorknobs. I realized that wasn't for me in about nine months. And my career has been blessed. I've had a lot of wonderful mentors and I'm hoping I'm giving back as much as I was able to get. I started off by working at a disability nonprofit where I eventually became the executive director. I then went into the Obama administration as an assistant secretary of Labor, and then I went to Wells Fargo Bank for six years. I took a detour and led a disability rights law firm. And currently, I'm celebrating my five-month anniversary at Expedia Group as the vice president of Global Disability Inclusion. And currently my career involves three aspects, physical access, digital access and access to the culture. And we're going great guns. I think it was a great move for me. I'm drinking from a fire hose regarding travel, and I'm happy to answer any questions. Thank you.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Hiren.

Hiren Shukla, EY:

All right, thank you so much. Good morning. My name is Hiren Shukla. Quick visible description. I am a brown male of Indian origin wearing a white shirt and a gray jacket, black hair, courtesy of Just For Men, if you know what I mean by that.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

I got some of that.

Hiren Shukla, EY:

And I am the founder and global leader of EY's Neurodiverse Centers of Excellence. EY is a global consulting firm in 150 countries around the world. And what you can't see about me, the invisible portion is I am a refugee that came to the US escaping genocide raised by four amazing women who I admired my life. And I'm eternally optimistic about the intersection of people, purpose and profits, and we don't have to choose between those. So very excited to be here today.

Claudia Gordon, T-Mobile--Voice of ALS Interpreter:

All right, we're good. All right. Try this again. Good morning. As a part of my visual description, I am deaf. So the voice that you're hearing is that of a sign language interpreter, just to make sure that everyone understands me, making sure the microphone works, and that is a key part of that. So thank you.

So just a quick visual description of who I am. I am a Black woman and I am wearing a pair of gold glasses, magenta pants, off-white or cream-colored shirt. My hair is in braids in a high bun. I'm very thrilled to be here today. Yesterday was quite a heavy day for me personally, knowing and loving Judy for so long. She was an incredible human being and mentor to so many people, including myself through the years. So I was there in DC yesterday. I was able to attend her service and burial and reception, and then I hopped right on a flight to get here, which is why I walked in two minutes before the panel began. So that's really the reason, but it's important to show up. Someone during the service yesterday said that yesterday was a day of sorrow morning, and then today is a day of rededication and action. Therefore, I had to be here. It was a duty, very important for me to be here today.

My career journey, well, first of all, so I'm a Jamaican immigrant and I became deaf when I was eight years old. My family was very impoverished. My mom was a single mom. And so that poverty really was a driver in my desire. Probably changed the word more as a necessity actually, to start working at a very young age. My first job is when I was 15. I was in New York City, still in school at the time, and the fact that a 15-year old at that age was below the required age for working. Therefore, I had to actually go through a special process in order to get approval to actually work, a certificate to permit me to work at the age of 15.

And the places that I worked... Now, because this is EDU, I think it's important to stress, fortunately, I went to a school for the deaf. My school also had a voc rehab track. So we were able to develop relationships there with different state agencies across New York City and also

different private companies that partnered with them to provide job opportunities to our students who were voc.

I was an accessibility or an academic rather track. So I shared that. I just to show the importance of education very early on high school age and on through college, just connecting individuals with jobs. So my first job was really through New York Summer youth programs, and thanks again to my school for making that connection for me. I worked as a filing clerk at the time, I think it was either a social security administration office or the vocational rehab office. So it was one of those. But that was really an incredible learning experience for me. It was boring, but I remember having immigrated to this country and the culture, everything was new, everything was different. There was so much to learn, like zip codes. I'm like, "Oh, okay," state acronyms, all of these different things. So it might seem like a menial job, but as an immigrant, picking up those valuable pieces of information that you wouldn't be taught in class, right? Because it's just assumed.

So during the school year, I took a job at McDonald's, and an interesting story about that. I'll be quick, I promise. So I lived in the South Bronx and my school was in Jackson Heights, Queens, Lexington School for the Deaf is where I went. And naturally, Lexington has relationships between different businesses in the area and Queens. South Bronx McDonald's looked at me and they would never hire me. So I ended up working in Jackson Heights, Queens. It was almost a two-hour train ride for me to get there one way. And they gave me the worst shifts. It was the morning shift, weekends, sometimes I had to leave home at 4:00 AM to get there. And in New York, the trains, it's like, cross your fingers we hope it gets here. You have to give yourself a lot of time. But anyway, those experiences really molded me early on and disciplined me and taught me self-sufficiency. Patience. Really were able to teach me about the struggles that make me appreciated my mom and her sacrifices even more.

Also, my superintendent at the time, Oscar Cohen at the time, he looked at me and he said, because he knew I wanted to go to law school eventually, he's got friends, he's got a wealth of friends. One of them was a law firm partner who was able to reach out to that law firm partner and ask if they could create a position of sorts for me. And I got a job. So I left McDonald's and became a mail room clerk there. And again, during my high school years, this was happening. And my last job before I left for college was with a really amazing organization called New York Hospital Audience Corp. And that provided theater opportunities and theater exposure for people who were living in nursing homes or group home types of environments.

And then fast forwarding to my government career, I had also worked in non-profit, National Association of the Deaf Law and Advocacy Center. I worked in the government, National Council on Disability, Department of Labor, like my colleagues here on stage and Department of Homeland Security. I'm currently a political appointee with the Biden administration on the NCD board, but my full-time job is T-Mobile, hence the magenta pants. I drive disability inclusion and access across the enterprise currently for T-Mobile. I'll talk a little bit more about that later.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Thank you so, so much all of you. And I want to remind the people in the audience, we have both interpreters and we have a microphone if you have questions as we're talking, because the goal of this panel is to get the information to you that's most important to you from the best sources. So I'm not going to wait till the end. As soon as I see someone come to the mic, I will

take your questions because everyone here is about helping you get the information that you need.

So I'm going to start with onboarding or recruitment. I'm starting with, we've heard so many stories about the war for talent. We've heard so many stories about jobs being unfilled for 60, 90, 120 days, and yet the unemployment rate among people with disabilities is three times the rate of their peers.

So I'd like to ask each of you, and if you don't mind, Kathy, I'll start with you. I'd like to ask each of you to give us some suggestions about how employers could better source and recruit talent that is in the disabilities community.

Kathy Martinez, Expedia Group:

Great question, Jane. So I think it's important to know who are the sourcing agencies for people with disabilities. And there are numerous, very good agencies that really vet folks. And for example, Disability:IN, I'm not sure if I should name names, but-

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

I think you should name names.

Kathy Martinez, Expedia Group:

The National Technical Institute of the Deaf, Blind Institute of Technology. And of course, I will let Hiren talk about EY regarding neurodiversity.

For me, I have both been onboarded and head to onboard people with a variety of disabilities. People say, "Well, what's the best training for people with disabilities? What's the best training?" Training is a means to an end. It's not an end. So the best training for people with disabilities is... I mean, regarding people with disabilities is higher people with disabilities. Because then you really get to walk the walk, right? You're not just talking about it. It's not this weird ethereal idea somewhere in the ethernet. So for me, recruitment is knowing where to go, being as welcoming as possible. If you don't know the answers, know where to find them because you've got to meet people where they are. And that includes people who've never dealt with people with disabilities, right? No, it's not going to be perfect. Perfection doesn't exist. But it's progress, right? It's progress that you want.

So I know we all have onboarding stories. My story happens to be with access to information, access to the internet for the most part. And now I'm learning that the Expedia campus is massive. And so having to learn how to get around that. I think when you're in the C-suite, I know companies consider it a big risk. I say there are people qualified to be in the C-suite. I think I never thought I could be in the C-suite, but I'm currently a VP and thinking about how to get other people. I think we want to think about getting folks with disabilities at all levels of a company, not just at entry level positions. And I will pass it on. Can I just pass it on to you to Hiren?

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Yes. I want everybody singing on this one, please.

Kathy Martinez, Expedia Group:

I know. I can go on forever.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Well, each of you could be a speaker in your own right. So thank you for being able to fit all of your great ideas and information and experiences in one short hour.

Hiren Shukla, EY:

Here we go. All right. Well, Kathy, thank you for this. Let me step back for a moment and define a term that I heard eight years ago, which is an invisible realm of disabilities. Neurodiversity, if you've ever heard of this term, is the dimension of cognitive differences in the world. I don't have any personal connection to this yet. Eight years ago at EY, as we're thinking about the future of work and how to innovate, where is innovation going to come from? You ever heard of the term, think out of the box? Well, one of my colleagues introduced me to the dimension of cognitive differences, dyslexia, autism, ADHD, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia.

And while we can't see this necessarily, what we discovered at EY was extremely eye-opening. We are probably talking somewhere in the range of 15 to 22% of the world that has [inaudible 00:16:11], inherent, hardwired cognitive difference. This population is often at high levels, 80% plus unemployment or underemployment.

If you have a job at McDonald's delivering pizzas, but your capability is much higher, you are underemployed. At EY, we saw this as a unique opportunity. Could we tap in to this rich, overlooked population, retain the differences of cognitive variation, because we deliberately want to think differently, create new product, optimize process, think differently?

And as we began to break down what is the problem, why is this population overlooked? Jane, this comes to the question on recruiting and onboarding. And it is no surprise that most companies today have a very traditional interviewing process. We sit across a desk or a screen, and we're supposed to answer random questions, be funny, make eye contact-

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Not if you're blind. [inaudible 00:17:34].

Hiren Shukla, EY:

Not if you're blind. Okay,

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Sorry.

Hiren Shukla, EY:

We're supposed to create relationship and rapport with the interviewer so that they like us and they think that we fit in culturally. We realize the divergent population, population that diverges in social thinking and communication style, does not thrive in a behavioral based environment. And we thought, how accurate are these interviews anyway in predicting performance? Very bad. And so we did something at EY, which should not be surprising. We said, "What if we simulated the work environment, looked at performance, and observed how individuals are

reacting in this environment so that we could ascertain what support they need? And then what do we need to do to provide physical support, executive support, technology support? And if we can provide that, not only will that individual be successful, they'll be highly productive, they'll be engaged."

And at EY over the last eight years, at 93% retention of this amazing workforce that now exists at EY in 19 cities and eight countries around the world. Dare I say this, we have positively infected many other companies along this journey to say, you can create value for your colleagues, your customers, and your communities. And by the way, if company, you are not doing this, you will be judged. And this is not a bad thing. So making those adaptations and changes, to no surprise has universal application and design. Everyone benefits from this. I think unfortunately, it takes a lot of empirical evidence and convincing often to say, this is not about charity and feeling sorry for anybody because there's tremendous capabilities in the world, and if you want to access that talent company, you're going to have to make changes.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Claudia, I love your thoughts on this, please.

Claudia Gordon, T-Mobile--Voice of ALS Interpreter:

Thank you. Yeah, I want to echo what both of my colleagues have already said, and I also want to clarify. Do you want me to respond to recruitment and onboarding together or just recruitment?

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Why don't we start with recruitment?

Claudia Gordon, T-Mobile--Voice of ALS Interpreter:

Okay, sounds good.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Thank you.

Claudia Gordon, T-Mobile--Voice of ALS Interpreter:

So what I can speak to as far as the work that I'm doing at T-Mobile as senior accessibility strategy partner, I'm the strategy lead for accessibility. The strategy that I have employed includes... So we really start within the company. So we have to get our own house in order. And at T-Mobile thus far, we've been working on cross-functional collaboration quite a bit, breaking down those functional silos that have been in place. So just as an example, an employee who, some people on the onboarding team. And then we also have the diversity and military recruitment team. We have the learning and development team. We get them all in the same virtual room so that they can all see what's happening within each other's teams. So that has been very important as a practice for the company to put in place, that cross-functional collaboration. So that's one of the first things that I started doing.

As far as recruitment goes. Also, just want to ensure that your companies, whatever that may be, really hold yourself out as a place where people with disabilities would want to go and work.

That includes how your collateral or your advertisements or your on postings, on websites, how you show up in those spaces. One thing that I did last year that I'm very proud of is increased representation of stock photos that we use at T-Mobile of individuals with disabilities. So last year alone, we had three or four, I want to say, different stock photo shoots, because thus far we just didn't see people who were deaf, with physical disabilities, who are blind in a lot of our actual images or materials. So having that increased use, we're seeing that as an important part of recruitment for individuals with disabilities to feel this is a place I could belong and that the company really does care and value us in a meaningful way.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

On what position?

Claudia Gordon, T-Mobile--Voice of ALS Interpreter:

I know our position descriptions and our position announcements that we post, I have worked quite a bit with our recruitment team just to ensure that the language that we use on those is appropriate. Talking about some requirements, for example, that may involve cognitive requirements or someone can read that can be a put off for some individuals within particular communities. So that is something that we've been doing and are currently doing right now, is working with our legal team as well as other relevant teams to review those position descriptions for any language that might be exclusive. Often, when you face the legal team or when you face people in the recruitment office, they say, "Oh, but legal already approved this." So that's why it's really important to have the champions like Kathy, people like me, all of us here on stage within our organizations to really drive that message home and advocate for change where it needs to happen. Just because something was approved doesn't mean it's right. Sometimes our legal team, with all due respect to those legal teams, sometimes they can be educated, believe it or not, about people's lived experience.

So I get that a lot. "Oh, but legal approved, but legal approved." It's like, okay, well let's take a pause. Let's sit down and have a conversation about what edits we can make. Sometimes it's just a comma with or without reasonable accommodations. And for me, it's like, okay, someone with a disability could say, all right, I could apply for this job if it's a specific requirement, if the PD seems super rigid and then is going to screen out someone because it doesn't say with or without reasonable accommodations for a specific task, those little things do go a long way.

I know also training for our recruiters, it starts with a lot with them. You could have the most qualified person with a disability out there, but if you have a recruiter who has implicit bias, that's not going to work out. You may have the best program, but if the recruiter is working with these people, they really need to understand this population is fully capable of doing the job and that they should be allowed to pursue whatever career aspirations they may have and not have these artificial barriers in place for them and be then denying them these opportunities.

So just to briefly transition to onboarding, some of the things that we've done that I'm so proud of the people on my team I've worked with because they've been amazing partners and I've worked so closely for about a year, a year and a half to cultivate that trust and develop ownership of it. I'm not going in saying, "You need to do this and that." I really want to recognize the work that people are doing and have already done and how it can elevate the work that has already been done and spotlight that and just to make them feel like, yeah, this is important. I want to enhance our work and our programs as far as people with disabilities go.

So our onboarding team has done a few things. For example, they have a welcome package that they get sent in the mail for new hires. Now it includes a braille version of a postcard that they sent to everyone that has braille printed. The pre-boarding, so not even just onboarding, but pre-boarding communication now is going to be including language around whether you need a reasonable accommodation and how to request the reasonable accommodations. So that communication is very important.

And then for orientation, we invite members of our employee resource groups. We have a disability specific ERG who gives a short presentation about onboarding or during onboarding rather. Sometimes employees do disclose, sometimes they don't. Sometimes they're offered a job and they don't mention their disability. But if they can see the value that the company is really applying on disability, to have someone at orientation who's willing to speak about what the company's doing for people with disabilities from the ERG, that sometimes can create that really early on in their career experience, that comfortable feeling of welcome, maybe they can then come forward and ask for their accommodation more comfortably. Managers are being given toolkits now. What if a manager has an employee with a disability? What do they do about accessible parking, reasonable accommodations? So we have these toolkits to give to managers.

Again, I really can't stress enough that cross-functional collaboration has been so key for us. Breaking down those silos is so key working, and that has been working very well for T-Mobile.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Kathy, you wanted to add something?

Kathy Martinez, Expedia Group:

I think it's important. One thing we're doing at Expedia that I think is going to be a big game changer is we're beginning to collect data. I mean, what gets measured gets managed. And so it's not only about bringing people in who have disabilities, but it's also creating a welcoming environment so that people who are already in the workforce are able to identify. So that's one thing.

The other thing is I wanted to stress the importance of employee resource groups or business groups, whatever people are calling them these days. I think it's important. Disability is going to impact everybody at some point in our lives, whether it's or us individually that that becomes disabled or is already disabled or we're close to somebody that does. And I can tell you that in Expedia, caregiving is a big issue that's coming up a lot. Many of us are in the sandwich generation, taking care of kids and older adults, and this is connected to disability. So I think it's something that when Claudia talks about collaboration, all these issues intersect.

The final point I'll make is that this is beyond DEI or IND or whatever. It really is about... I mean, sit on our DEI team, but I also collaborate, and I'm sure Claudia does as well, with our corporate properties group, with our digital properties folks, my remit is both internal around employment, but also external around travelers. How are disabled people traveling these days? And believe me, as we age and live longer, many more people are traveling.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Thank you. I just wanted to point out something that Claudia said, because I consider myself pretty aware, and yet you said something that I was not aware of. In the past few years, we've



seen tremendous diversity in advertising. We've seen more people of color, we've seen mixed race couples, we've seen same sex couples, but you're exactly right, we rarely see people in advertisements that represent the community that we care about in this conversation and in our lives. So thank you for pointing that out. And I just felt that I had to underline it because those here that can influence. Having people with both visible and invisible disabilities included in their advertising, I think will certainly help your recruitment and may make me buy your product rather than someone else's. So I really like that.

There are a couple words that came up that I want to dig in on, but I want to go back to one of our prep calls where one of you said, "accessibility isn't rocket science." Now, I would argue... Yes, I would argue that for many employees who are struggling, it still seems like its rocket science. But let's be positive because Working Nation tries to talk about solutions. Tell me what you've seen either within your own company or in peer companies that really show you that accessibility is being treated differently. Claudia mentioned some things that T-Mobile is doing, but I'd love to hear other ideas that you think are best practices in making accessibility the norm rather than making you feel like the odd one app asking for it.

Hiren Shukla, EY:

Yeah.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Hiren?

Hiren Shukla, EY:

Yeah. I have a thought. and interesting my friend Martin from Texthelp this here today. This is the example I'm going to use. Okay.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

A winner of a recent comp.

Hiren Shukla, EY:

Winner of EY's Entrepreneur of the Year, so.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Congratulations, Martin.

Hiren Shukla, EY:

And the reason I bring this up is that the accommodations process is difficult. It's challenging. It sometimes feels like you have to prove that you need accessibility. What if we get to a point where all the tools you need are available and you just pick up whatever tool you need because it's available and it's there. You don't have to ask anybody.

And as we think about things like read, write, software by Texthelp, we realize that whether it is the dyslexic population or it's individuals where English is a second language, these tools are helpful for all. And I think demystifying and breaking the sometimes stigma around

accessibilities and the accommodations process, this is preventing the inclusion of your own workforce. And frankly, we also know, for example, as Martin has educated me, well, our education systems today and children have access to these tools while they're in the education system, what happens in the transition over to the employment world, if you don't have this available, all of a sudden you've put that individual in a position of risk. And this is the E in diversity, equity and inclusion. So the equity part means giving everyone what they need to be successful, not giving everyone the same things.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Great.

Claudia Gordon, T-Mobile--Voice of ALS Interpreter:

Yeah, like you said, it's really important that we reframe how we are looking at and discussing disability employment. So I worked at Department of Labor previously on section 503 of the Rehab Act regulation, my prior life before private sector life when I was a regulator side. And of course, there was a lot of pushback that we saw a lot of opposition on seven setting up that 7% hiring goal, people with disabilities in that regulation because companies were like, where are we going to find all of these people? Where are we going to find qualified people with disabilities? The list of excuses or fear, I mean, it's legitimate. I guess I'll take back that word excuse. I would rather be a little more positive. So it's really the fear, it's a fear-based type of reaction, all these reasons that they gave. But I think all that in mind, it's important that we reframe the conversation and it be just a normal part of human existence disability. It's here. We're everywhere. We're intersectional. We're in all of these different demographic groups.

One thing that we are doing at T-Mobile, today actually, there's a listening session happening, and we have it every two months, where we call it an accessibility champion listening session. And allies as well conjoin in to the listening session. It started just with us employees with disabilities. And then we took a look at it and realized as a strategist, and from that perspective, I interface with employees regularly through these listening sessions that I began. And I also have my enterprise wide stakeholders that I work with, functional leaders that I meet with bimonthly or monthly, depending on what their area is and how many check-ins we need, where they are in the corporate real estate, digital access, et cetera, learning and development. So I was in the middle of having these conversations, so I thought, okay, let's restructure the listening session.

So now every two months, we decided, or I decided which functional area lead to invite to headline that listening session with employees with disability. So corporate real estate can come give a 15, 20 minute talk on what they're doing to improve the workplace. We just hired an accessible architect expert, and they can just come and give a 20-minute talk, because most of the purpose is to listen to the employees. And so it's amazing seeing these two-way conversations and how that can help drive those touchpoints of change. And employees talk about the lights being too much, or one employee who's neurodiverse on the autism spectrum had noise bothering them from the bathroom that they sat near. It was very distracting during the workday. Having issues of accessible parking. And then learning a development separately came and spoke briefly about what they're doing. There were some issues with having captioning for trainings or not. And having captions, but maybe they weren't usable of being too small.

So that was just an example of some two-way conversations that happened. My point being, this space is complicated and we really just need to start listening and executing based on what we

hear, and we have to be intentional about it. It's not something that will take care of itself passively, as we've all probably learned, when we make this sound so impossible and complicated, I think that it creates that artificial barrier for people to getting things done. So we really have to see this issue as being solvable, number one. So having that mindset and behavior then will change where people can embrace and do the work rather than seeing a problem and thinking it's overwhelming.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Kathy.

Kathy Martinez, Expedia Group:

So a couple of things. Is our is accessibility rocket science? If you guys think about yourselves, those of you who are non-disabled or temporarily able-bodied as some people like to say. You came in here assuming you'd have chairs. You came in here assuming you'd have lights. You came in here assuming you'd have microphones. Those are all accommodations, right? They just happen to be standard operating practice. And so much of what was originally invented for people with disabilities we use today, like texting, like, well, the whole typewriter keyboard. Think about the ramps, when you guys pull your suitcases. Most people don't go up a curb. They take the ramp, which were built for people in wheelchairs.

My point is, and I will call out companies like Apple, every iPhone is accessible. It's amazing what they've done. They didn't add it on, they didn't bolt it on. They baked it in to their product as a universal belief that everybody should have access to the iPhone. Microsoft is also doing incredible stuff at... The various banks throughout the world. I worked at Wells Fargo. All banks right now are doing... People are getting it, getting it, and not just because of the law, but because it's good business. So you can think that that accessibility is rocket science, but just think of how you benefit from things that were designed for people with disabilities as you go through your day.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Well, and I think we should be mindful of thanking people who are making those accommodations day to day. I look at all of you here, disabled or undisable. I mean, the bottom line is when you go to the grocery store, when you're my age, they say, "Do you need help with your bags?" And I'm very careful to say, "Not yet, but thank you very much," because I want them to see accommodations as a part of good customer service. And I think if you leave this session thinking about what's been offered to you that you've said, "No, no, no, I'm fine." Instead say thank you because we want them to continue that and that lead-

Hiren Shukla, EY:

I was just going to add something interesting. If we think about close captioning, if you ever tried to watch Game of Thrones without close captioning, see if you could understand the names of the characters. And so these simple things are so useful to all of us, and yet we forget this is universal design, we're talking, but they're beneficial to all.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

That's right.

Claudia Gordon, T-Mobile--Voice of ALS Interpreter:

Yeah, I'd love to add. Thank you. I just wanted to add one important point that came to mind. So first I wanted to acknowledge, I'm so happy that Judy was able to live to see the transformation that is happening in this space. We have a lot to celebrate, to be honest with you, within my lifetime, I'm not that old, but you see companies like T-Mobile, Expedia, Microsoft, Apple, EY, you see all of these really having dedicated positions like ours, right? And that's a very new thing. I would say within the last two, Kathy, help me, maybe two, three years, it has expanded greatly either in the C-suite roles or senior roles like mine, which are dedicated and focus on disability inclusion and access. It is really great to see. So again, it just goes back to the question of in not being rocket science, I think companies realized they needed people in the organization, not just in private sector education, but every sector needs a champion and a subject matter expert to focus on this.

And it a little bit goes back to my point of being intentional as well, having to make this change happen for this community, you need to be intentional as far as hiring more subject matter experts, often it should be people with disabilities themselves who of course are qualified to do the job. But it starts there. And now you have me, you have Kathy, you have Hiren. We can't work alone. So I don't want it all to be centralized into one person. That is unrealistic.

So right now, just pushing for more subject matter experts, enterprise-wide, having one in learning and development, having someone in recruitment, on that team, someone from the onboarding team who focuses on this and having it decentralized, but having leadership from the top and then having champions placed throughout. I think that will set the tone and that will help alleviate that fear that people have because it's an unknown. That don't let perfect be the enemy of the good, but we have to start somewhere. Some companies are further along in their accessibility maturity. Some are further behind, but they have to just jump in and start.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

We are still as a society intolerant of disability. I mean, we see that most recently when a senator had a stroke and people are saying he should resign. And he was somebody who was able-bodied until he had that stroke, to the best of my knowledge.

But I want to talk about for a second, partnerships in this space. Kathy, you mentioned a couple of people that were great possible partners in the recruitment effort, but I want to talk about partnerships at all levels and what partnerships could be for mindful of the fact that if we say partnerships with colleges, it makes it look like entry level jobs for people who have a four-year degree. I want to expand that conversation to partnerships for people who are moving from mid-level jobs into senior leadership, people who didn't go to college, who have a disability, across the spectrum. Who do you think the partners are that businesses should be looking to? And if for nonprofits that are here with us, who should they be trying to partner with quickly?

Kathy Martinez, Expedia Group:

Well, first of all, disability, in my mind, I mean, belongs to everybody. It's all of our issue. It's not an us-them issue. And I think, let me just talk about the corporate structure for now. I mean, disability cannot be something special because we know what happens to special when budgets

get tight, there has to be tone from the top. So there has to be a leadership commitment and not just a performative commitment, not just hiring somebody as a token and saying, "Okay, we're done. We did it."

In my mind, at Expedia and when I was at Wells, my goal was to have as many experts on disability as possible. Yes, we do need people with disabilities, of course, but I want everybody to be an expert. I want disability to be so woven in that I don't need a job in the next however many years. That's my goal. I think partnerships, besides the people that we mentioned, it's very important to connect with colleges. It's also important to connect with places like regional centers throughout the company, or sorry, throughout the country. And regional centers help people with intellectual and developmental disabilities get work. I think it's important. Every disability type has their companies, and I've mentioned a few, and I think the partnership has to go beyond disability. I mean, we really have to work with our... Oh my God, I can't see this is a problem being in your 60s. But the people-

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

That you're brilliant.

Kathy Martinez, Expedia Group:

No. Yeah, that I'm old. The people that deal with your EAP work because there's a lot of mental health issues happening, especially after-

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

And tell what EAP is, because we all talk in too many acronyms. I forgot what it stands for. What is it? Is the employee assistance program.

Hiren Shukla, EY:

Yeah, employees.

Kathy Martinez, Expedia Group:

Thank you. She busted me. So yeah, so-

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Unintentionally.

Kathy Martinez, Expedia Group:

I think it's important that the employee assistance program understand that disability it's more than a medical issue. It's a social issue. And so that's a big shift. So partnering with disability agencies, with your EAP folks, your leadership around, especially around promotions, how do you promote somebody with a disability who may not have access to all things like, oops, I guess I can say it, Concur horribly inaccessible. But things that you do that you need to do your job, if you're deaf, how do you get sign language interpreters on a regular basis so you can really succeed? I think that those partnerships have to be solidified within the leadership and the C-suite of the company. So I'll stop. Go ahead somebody.

Hiren Shukla, EY:

Yeah, I'll add a couple of pieces. And Claudia made me think about a term when she uses cross collaboration. And Jane, when you mentioned partnerships. At EY in every city, state and country that we've gone to launch neurodiversity models in the U.S., India, Canada, Spain, Poland, Costa Rica, the UK, now Malaysia, Canada. We think about ecosystems because ecosystems are sustainable. They will live long after the persons who are leading those initiatives are long gone and they're scalable. And so we think about where's the government involved at all levels? Where's academia involved? And this is not just the universities, many people don't go to university, they don't complete it. What about them? We think the third one is our NGOs and non-profits in the world and all of the sweat equity they put in to helping these overlooked populations.

And the last one is very important. It's business. And this is why you see Expedia, T-Mobile and EY all sitting up here talking to you, because together we will create the demand that is needed that will increase the efficacy of government programs, vocational rehab, workforce commissions, workforce development. And we need to build that bridge from the education system over to the employment systems. That bridge is a very tenuous place for many individuals because they fall in between them. And so when we've hired 20-year olds and 50 year olds, what happens with the individuals who don't get a job after completing some sort of education? Where are they? Where are they going? What are they doing? And so I think we have a great risk of leaving many people behind if we don't create ecosystems that will take partnerships to the next level.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

And I think we just have to stop for a second again and look at a number. Fewer than 25% of people with a diagnosed disability are able to get a job in this economy. Fewer than 25%. That means 75% are unemployed. Unacceptable. Claudia, I'm sorry, I interrupt.

Claudia Gordon, T-Mobile--Voice of ALS Interpreter:

No, not at all.

So one caveat that I just want to share before I dive in. I just again, want to echo what both of you have already said. I won't repeat those points, but I fully agree. Having that partnership, I think that with companies, they really need to own that outcome and accountability that has to be there with those partnerships, especially in this space where you had already mentioned, there's fear that and the perception that it's complicated, that it's challenging, that it's impossible to do. We don't want to shift those feelings or those expectations to a third party in a partner that we may have to solve this issue in the end. Or the perception of a partnership, it's good on paper, we partner with X, Y, Z organization to make things happen, but what are the outcomes that are generated and what does the data show? A passive partnership is really just going to hurt the community even more. It becomes like busy work.

So I'm a person with a disability. I care about outcomes. And so for example, one partnership last year that was new for T-Mobile is AAPD, American Association for People with Disabilities. They have an amazing internship program. And at T-Mobile, we also have an amazing summer internship program and opportunity. And they mean well, and excuse me, it pays well for that opportunity, but we needed to increase the number of people with disabilities who applied

directly for our internship. Because we own that work within T-Mobile, but until then, we have AAPD and they asked, "Hey, would you consider being a host company for one of their interns?" And they have amazing interns with disabilities each year. If you don't know about the program, I suggest that you check it out on their website.

They screen a very large pool of applicants each year and they pick the top ones, those applicants and those interns then have an opportunity to choose which host company they go to and that they work with for the summer. So we had two folks last summer and one of them ended up getting converted to full-time. And so works now in corporate communications with us. So it's really amazing. He even published blogs externally for the company and he's just been doing so well in that space, in that social media space. So talking about outcomes and metrics on all these things, there are a lot of partners out there, but you have to learn how to leverage them.

Disability:IN has been an incredible partner with us as well. The resources that they provide, and they're consultant who is dedicated to T-Mobile and other companies as well who are considered corporate partners, but you have to know how to leverage and use it. It's there if you just pay passively, but don't use it. But now there's some people, now I love Disability:IN, I'm not promoting it per se, but those people, it's like they got to earn their money. Sometimes there's a challenging issue or there's a timely issue. And I get in touch with them, I say, "Hey, could you review this? What do you think?" I get in touch with them very often because they're there as a resource. So I think you can have those partnerships, but have to know how to leverage and maximize them and make sure that you are clear about what the objectives are for those outcomes. And we're not just doing this for PR or for looks, sorry, but not, sorry.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

I want to just remind you, please take advantage of this opportunity that I'm given so often to be with real experts in this area. Ask your questions. Don't let me do all. ChatGPT is not working. So I always ask your questions.

Kathy Martinez, Expedia Group:

I want to say a couple of things. So yes, I'll tell you that Expedia is in the early stages of its maturity model around disability and people like Microsoft has been incredibly generous, especially around physical access and even things down to where do you buy an accessible coffee pot for the kitchen? And so, one thing that I've noticed is that I know we share information as competitive as Wells Fargo was or and is with Chase and Bank of America and Capital One. We would get together all the accessibility folks and share information about how do you do this well, how do you do that and how do you make Zelle accessible? And so the thing is that when you're develop a network, people share information even if we're technically competitors.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

And so many of us saw during the pandemic that Zoom was not really accessible.

Kathy Martinez, Expedia Group:

But it got better.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

And it got better. Exactly right. It got better.

Hiren, I wanted to wait specifically until the middle of this discussion to ask this question because many people feel like it's an act of charity to hire someone with a disability. And once you hire one, you've done your charitable work. I'd like you, and then I'd like both of our other panelists to chime in. What's the business imperative for hiring diverse talent, particularly talent within the community of disabilities?

Hiren Shukla, EY:

Jane, I love this question because every time I've heard somebody from our disabilities or ERG groups or even HR start talking about people with disabilities, almost the first thing that happens is they open their mouth, they start talking, and you look at the business leaders' faces and they think that we're asking them to do us a favor. They think that we're asking them to say, "Oh, will you take this person? And will you do this?" And so I think there is a opportunity to rebrand the way we talk about this.

And I think in that regard, every opportunity that we lead with amazing companies, funny enough, Wells Fargo is one of the companies we work around neurodiversity with, we help launch their program. Proctor and Gamble. Always said, if there are not outcomes, as Claudia said, if they're not accountable, business driven outcomes that we can capture, document and build along the way, this will all be forgotten in the next six, 12 months. It'll be gone.

So we've also realized, taking this conversation outside of the ability space, outside of HR and saying, business leader, you are looking for talent. You are looking to innovate. You are trying to increase your retention. Oh, by the way, business, you are now accountable for your ESG metrics and that s in the ESG, environmental, social and governance, how are you building social value, leader? And we say, we've now figured out these scalable ways for you to build social value for which you business leader are going to be judged and measured on.

And so I think, Jane, this is the business case driven discussion that says there's a rich talent pool, they just happen to be individuals from the people with disabilities community, but they're available and it's rich. And yes, you'll have to make changes, but you'll get significant, significant results on here.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Ladies, your experience in this space? Claudia.

Claudia Gordon, T-Mobile--Voice of ALS Interpreter:

Are we almost out of time? I want to be cognizant of that.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

[inaudible 00:55:56].

Claudia Gordon, T-Mobile--Voice of ALS Interpreter:

Okay. Okay.



Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Claudia.

Claudia Gordon, T-Mobile--Voice of ALS Interpreter:

Okay. I think he said it all. I think people with disabilities are brilliant, capable, creative. We bring value to the workplace, period. And we enrich that experience of the workplace.

Yeah, I think that we really just need to normalize. It goes back to normalizing. It's just the right thing to do. Disability cuts across every demographic group. And I'm not going to put out data, statistics, dollar amounts, but you can Google and look this up yourselves. Look up the spending power of the disability population here in the U.S. We are up there with other demographic groups, Hispanic, Black, our spending power is pretty much on par. And it's not just us as individuals with disabilities, it's our family members, it's our friends who would more likely patronize a company that puts themselves out there as a disability friendly and inclusive space that practices... In their practices, their products, they're hiring. So it's a value add for companies and impacts the bottom line of the company. It's not charity. So that's what drives a lot of the work that I do in this space. It's business imperative, why we should be focusing on this and normalizing it.

Before I move on, I did just too, want to mention, I'm not talking specifically about any organizations, but T-Mobile also works with the National Organization on Disability, that's another incredible resource. If you look at their website, they have a wealth of information there. We also partner with the university's like Gallaudet University, National Technical Institute for the Deaf. Last year, our chief digital officer at T-Mobile did a video with an interpreter by his side, recruiting specifically from NTID, national Technical Institute for the Deaf, because they have some incredible students who were able to come and intern with T-Mobile. And so those things you can do. I just wanted to add a few more examples for the benefits of everyone.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

Thank you, Kathy, last word.

Kathy Martinez, Expedia Group:

Last word, no pressure, right?

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

No pressure.

Kathy Martinez, Expedia Group:

Well had to convince somebody who was a very conservative Republican once about the value of Section 503.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

And Section 503 is part of?

Kathy Martinez, Expedia Group:

Section 503 is a part of the Rehabilitation Act that really mandates government contractors to strive for a utilization goal of 7%. So Wells Fargo was part of that, and Expedia is not, although we are still we're using that goal as a benchmark. And he wanted to know about the dollar amount. And I said, "Look for A, we can't value people only when they're productive, but if you want to get down to the dollar amount," I said, "Think of it this way. Some of us who could very easily be on benefits, A, get off benefits, and B, pay lots of taxes. So if that doesn't make you happy, I'm not sure what will."

Jane Oates, WorkingNation president:

A way to end. Please join me in thanking and follow these amazing leaders.

That important discussion on expanding access to education and careers for people with disabilities took place at SXSW EDU 2023.

I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation.

Thanks for listening.