

A woman with short brown hair, wearing a yellow shirt and a white hearing aid, is sitting at a wooden desk. She is looking at a laptop and a large monitor displaying code. On the desk, there is a plate of cookies, a mug of coffee, a mouse, and a small potted plant. The background shows a window with curtains and a chair.

Disability Employment Awareness Month

October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month, meaning it's a great time to educate your company on a variety of disabilities and make hiring and retaining people with disabilities part of your diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) strategy.

In this Meeting in a Box, you'll learn about the personal and professional experiences of people with disabilities, whether those are physical disabilities or invisible disabilities, and how to recruit, retain, engage and promote talent with disabilities.

Mental Health:

How To Respectfully Support Employees With Disabilities

As a clinical social worker and a person with a disability, Mark Chaney-Gay's biggest piece of advice to employers is to let employees with disabilities "be the expert of their own experience."

Ahead of National Disability Employment Awareness Month, DiversityInc spoke with Chaney-Gay to learn what advice he had for employers when thinking about their employees with disabilities, from a mental health, accommodation and support perspective.

About Mark

Chaney-Gay grew up in the foster care system and had some good social workers who influenced his career path.

"I've always had a passion for helping people and mental health and so I just kind of fell into the social work space when I started college," he said.

Today, Chaney-Gay works as a clinical social worker in the Los Angeles area and also provides therapy through his private practice, Chaney Therapy. He is very open about his experience living at the intersection of being disabled and being a gay man. He has learned from his lived experiences to be more understanding and empathetic of others.

His experiences have influenced his approach to talking about mental health with others as well.

"Knowing that I live with a disability, that is a label, it is a lived experience, it's taught me personally to be very open to accommodation and finding a path that works for you," he said. "And when I think about that in relation to the work that I do, it taught me to be open and that people are experts in their own experiences and in their own journeys."

No amount of education, certification or lived experience as

a person with a disability will make Chaney-Gay understand or see all of the nuances of a given individual. He believes his patients can help him learn more about his job as a therapist.

"My job is to help support you and identify the strengths and the skills that you already have so that you can do it when I'm gone," he said. "I do want to work myself out of a job when I start working with people. I want to get them to a place where they're doing better and they're feeling like they overcame the things that brought them into therapy or in need of a social worker and that they don't need me anymore."



Mental Stress for People With Disabilities

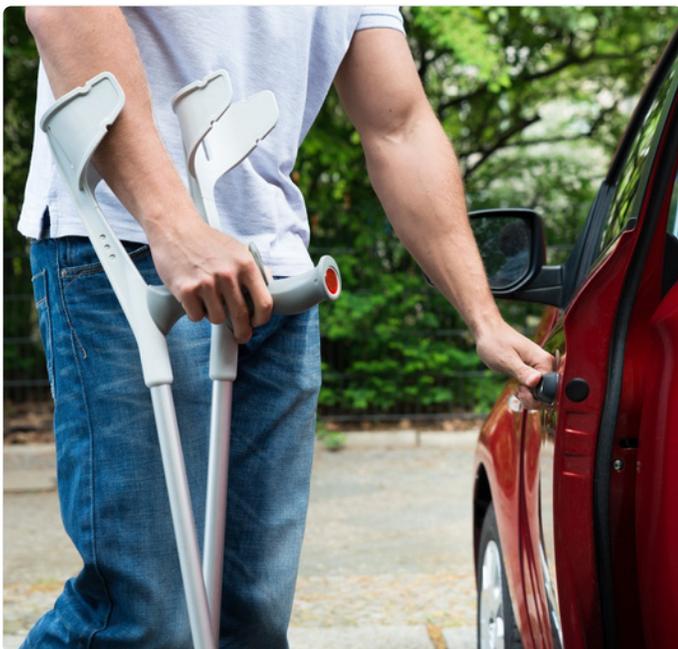
A study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that adults with disabilities are five times more often to experience mental distress than adults without disabilities.

When DiversityInc asked Chaney-Gay about this, he said he couldn't generalize and speak to the mental health of every person with a disability, but could speak from his own experience with mental health as a person with a physical disability.

Living with cerebral palsy, Chaney-Gay said he has experienced depression, anxiety and PTSD, adding that mental health issues could arise because they are occurring on top of a physical disability.

"Having a medical diagnoses increases the prevalence of mental health issues because if you're physically not feeling well, it's really easy for that to correlate to your mental health," he said.

People with physical disabilities can also face problems with inclusion, discrimination and having mobility challenges that impact how they bathe, get dressed in the morning or get to the store to get groceries, all of which can impact mental health.



Let People Be the 'Expert of Their Experience'

While it's important for employers to think about mental health for employees with disabilities and all employees, Chaney-Gay said employers should not ask someone about their disability. Beyond any potential legal issues, employers should use supportive language when talking to an employee who might have a disability. He said examples of supportive language include:

"I want you to know that if there's anything you need, I'm here for you."

"If there's any sort of support you might need as you take on this job, I want you to know we can figure that out together."

Some employers might know an employee has a disability from their job application or find out from the HR department and take the initiative to bring up a person's disability to them and brainstorm solutions with HR on how to accommodate that person. Chaney-Gay said to avoid this as it could put the employee in a defensive place and take away the power of autonomy from the employee.

"If you're an employer and you're working with someone who you think might have a disability, let them be the expert in their experience because every disability is different," he said, adding that one of his favorite quotes is "don't assume someone's ability based on the presence of a disability."

"Don't assume that they can't do a job or that they need support and need accommodations because they may not. They've been living with this disability or this diagnoses their whole life [in many cases] and they may have learned how to manage it in a way that works perfectly for them."

FACTS AND FIGURES

% of People With Disabilities at Companies*



* Based on data collected from the 17 companies that placed on DiversityInc's 2022 People with Disabilities specialty list.

Recruitment of People With Disabilities Across Top 10 Companies for Diversity**



Recruitment of People With Disabilities Across Top 10 Companies for Diversity**

Who is required to learn topics covering disability awareness training programs at Top 10 companies:



Top 10 companies make disability awareness training mandatory for these groups:



**Based on data collected from the Top 10 companies on DiversityInc's 2022 Top 50 Companies for Diversity list.

8 People With Disabilities Making A Difference

People with physical and invisible disabilities don't let their differences hold them back, and many individuals have gone above and beyond to achieve greatness despite their disabilities.

Let's look at eight people with disabilities who have had a significant impact on the world:



Stephen Hawking

One of the most famous scientists in history, Stephen Hawking was a theoretical physicist, cosmologist and author. He lived with ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease. Though the disease caused him to be paralyzed and to use a speech-generating device to communicate, he wasn't held back from making major contributions to science, such as the Big Bang Theory and black hole radiation. He was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1982 and a Companion of Honor in 1989. He received the U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2009.



Sen. Tammy Duckworth

Purple Heart recipient and retired Lieutenant Colonel, Tammy Duckworth has served as a U.S. Senator from Illinois since 2017. While being deployed to Iraq in 2004, she was the victim of a rocket propelled grenade explosion in the cockpit of her helicopter, resulting in the loss of both of her legs and partial use in her right arm. Duckworth has been a trailblazer in numerous ways: She is the first Thai American woman and the first woman with a disability to be elected to Congress and is also the first senator to give birth while in office. She is an advocate for veterans, parents and minorities and uses her platform to protect working families, small businesses and those who served.



Greta Thunberg

Swedish activist Greta Thunberg is known for asking world leaders to take immediate action to offset climate change. Thunberg has an autism spectrum disorder. In an article from when she was named the 2019 Person of the Year, Time magazine said she is "an ordinary teenage girl who, in summoning the courage to speak truth to power, became the icon of a generation."

**Nick Vujicic**

Nick Vujicic was born with tetra-amelia syndrome, a rare disorder that causes babies to be born without limbs. The majority of those born with this syndrome don't make it past infancy, but Vujicic is now 39 years old. An Australian American born to Serbian immigrants, he is now an evangelist and motivational speaker, traveling the world to tell his story. Vujicic is an author, musician and actor, and is married with four children.

**Frida Kahlo**

Frida Kahlo was a Mexican painter, best known for her self-portraits. Through her art, Kahlo explored the dynamics of Mexican society, such as identity, postcolonialism, gender, class and race. She contracted polio when she was a child, making her right leg shorter and thinner than the left. She was also involved in a bus accident when she was a teenager, which caused chronic pain and medical problems throughout her life. She is internationally celebrated as an icon for the feminism and LGBTQ+ movements.

**Stevie Wonder**

A pioneer in his craft, legendary singer-songwriter Stevie Wonder was born blind due to being born six weeks premature, causing blood vessels in his eyes to not reach full formation. Wonder is considered a child prodigy, having signed with his first record label at just 11 years old. He is an influence on musicians across multiple genres, from soul to jazz, funk and rhythm and blues, to name a few, and has recorded dozens of Top 10 hits.

**Richard Branson**

Richard Branson, founder of Virgin Records and Virgin Atlantic, is one of the most influential businessmen in the world. Branson has two neurological differences – dyslexia and ADHD, which caused him to have trouble in school and drop out at age 15. That didn't stop him from founding his first magazine at 16 and leading the way for innovation in the airline industry with Virgin Atlantic, which focuses heavily on customer experience. He's described dyslexia as a "brilliant way of thinking."

**Esther Vergeer**

One of the most highly decorated para-athletes ever, Esther Vergeer held the world No. 1 in women's wheelchair tennis singles from 1999 to 2013 when she retired. When Vergeer was a child, doctors discovered a vascular myelopathy around her spinal cord. After multiple operations, the problem was corrected but she was left paralyzed. She learned how to play multiple sports in a wheelchair during her rehabilitation. Over the course of her career, she won 695 singles matches and lost only 25 — once going undefeated for 10 years.

Employer Toolkit:

Achieving Success and Support for Neurodivergent Employees

While studies have shown and companies have realized the benefits of a neurodiverse workforce, there's still work to be done to prioritize neurodivergence in diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) strategies.

Haley Moss, an attorney, neurodiversity advocate, author, speaker and thought leader, is a first-hand example of a neurodiverse person who has experienced workplaces that weren't necessarily set up for neurodiverse talent.

As a person with autism, Moss has come across employers who view people with autism as a monolith, she shared during a recent webinar titled "Hiring and Supporting Neurodivergent Workers: Strategies for Success," which was hosted by the Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability and Inclusion (EARN)."

After attending law school and getting a job in corporate law practice, Moss said she expected she would be doing research and would eventually go to court and litigate. Instead, she was doing back-room document reviews, data-related research and even running the firm's website.



"It was assumed I would be very good at technology just because of my autism," she said. "And it already set the bar that I was expected to do things outside of my job."

This stereotype is something that's affected Moss's career and is why she encourages employers to have an open mind. It's important to realize each neurodivergent person has their own strengths and weaknesses, interests and passions, just like any other person.

Make Neurodiversity Part of Your DEI Strategy

One of the biggest things that has held Moss back from applying to jobs with certain organizations is their lack of disability or neuroaffinity groups.

"I didn't apply to places that didn't value disability as diversity," she said, adding that many legal firms she came across in her job search did not "include disability whatsoever in their definition of who was marginalized." These firms treated disability and neurodiversity as a footnote, only providing information for who to contact if you need accommodation as a person with a disability.

"That doesn't help me," she said. "I don't feel like I can disclose [having autism]. I don't feel like I can be myself."

How can employers better attract neurodiverse talent? Moss suggested talking about and re-evaluating the job description.

Rebecca Beam, Founder and CEO of Zavikon, a staffing and recruiting agency for neurodiverse talent, found out she was on the autism spectrum as an adult and said her diagnosis helped her understand "why I do the things I do and how I do them."

On the same webinar, Beam said companies should “look within first” to attract neurodiverse talent.

“Look at what types of statements you have on neurodiversity hiring but also look within to educate your teams before you start the process,” she said. “Look at educating around what is neurodiversity and what does it mean. Education is important for your teams.”

Organizational Success Stories

While there’s still work to be done in attracting and retaining neurodiverse talent, some companies have created programs to do just that and are realizing the benefits for their employees and their businesses.

Professional services firm EY is one company that’s seen success with it’s strategies to hire and retain neurodiverse individuals. In 2016, the firm piloted a Neuro-Diverse Center of Excellence in Philadelphia where it developed a unique interview process and worked with academia and non-profit organizations to identify neurodiverse job candidates.

Leslie Patterson, Diversity, Equity and Inclusiveness Leader for EY Americas and US, said the company initially extended offers to four people through the Neuro-Diverse Center of Excellence program.

“The impact those employees had was almost immediate,” she said. “In the first month, they were able to help us improve processes, they were able to help us cut the time for technical training, they learned how to automate processes faster than a typical account professional might have been able to and then they used the downtime to create training to help people learn quickly through automation,” she said.

Today, EY has 300 members in its Neuro-Diverse Center of Excellence across seven countries and 14 locations and the retention rate for neurodivergent employees is 90%.

“Our neurodivergent professionals have really helped to transform our business in a lot of different ways,” Patterson

said. “They help us to innovate, they think outside of the box, they help us to improve our processes and they help us become more efficient.”

EY is also looking outside of its organization and is helping its clients develop their own neurodiverse programs by helping them maybe avoid some of the stumbling blocks it faced in setting up neurodiverse hiring efforts and work environments.

“There are things we’ve learned along the way and they are things we don’t want people to have to slow down by making some of these same mistakes that we made early on. So we’re helping organizations across the globe set up similar neurodiversity teams,” Patterson said.

From business resource groups to co-creating neurodiversity training with a company called Uptimize, IBM is another company that’s attracting and retaining neurodiverse talent.

On the EARN webinar, Diane Delaney, Global Diversity & Inclusion Leader, People with Diverse Abilities at IBM, who recently found out she is neurodivergent, said one of the things her company offers neurodiverse employees is robust accommodations.



Those accommodations include noise-canceling headphones, software and other monetary needs, but some accommodations don't cost anything. For example, a neurodiverse employee might want to sit in a cubicle away from high-traffic areas such as the kitchen or the elevator. They might ask for their boss to write out their work for them rather than mentioning five things while passing in the hallway that would be hard to remember by the time they made it back to their desk.

She said IBM also does not identify certain job roles or departments for its neurodiverse employees to work in because the company realizes every neurodiverse person is unique with a unique set of skills and interests.

IBM also has private Slack channels where neurodiverse employees can talk and share in a space that won't be shared with others within the company. One is for autistic "IBMers" and one is for neurodiverse "IBMers," Delaney said.

"We can talk about these business-related things, accommodations, our managers, our work, but we can also talk about personal situations and things we're experiencing, and it's with a like-group and pretty often someone else has had a similar experience and can share maybe what they did to help you out," she said. "And if not, sometimes we just put, 'I am going to vent or I just need to tell you this but I don't want any advice.'"

Discussion Questions for Employees

What are the barriers to hiring, retaining and promoting people with disabilities?

How can we hold ourselves accountable to ensure people with disabilities are in job roles they want to be in without assuming or stereotyping them for a certain role?

As an organization, how have we changed our opinion, accommodation and treatment of people with disabilities and what more can be done?

As an organization, how can we do a better job of making our employees with disabilities feel comfortable at work without taking away their autonomy?

Are the job descriptions for our current job openings inclusive? Are there ways we could tweak the descriptions or application process to meet the needs of neurodiverse candidates and people with physical disabilities?

Looking at the resource groups and other programs we have for employees with disabilities, is there anything we can do to improve these resources?