



## Episode 22: Creating an Inclusive Work Culture October 12, 2022

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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 together. Thanks for joining. Now, let's get started.

Today's guest is Sarah Bernard. Sarah is the co-founder and chief operating officer at Inclusively, the technology centered inclusion solution and employment platform for job seekers with disabilities, mental health conditions and chronic illnesses. Today, I am talking to Sarah about the work her company is doing and how employers can get on board to create a more inclusive culture.

Welcome, Sarah. I am so excited to have you here today.

Sarah Bernard: Thank you so much for having me.

Mindy Henderson: Well, I'm gonna jump right in. I have about 8,000 questions for you, so I'm gonna jump into the first question. I gave a little intro about you, but would you take a minute just to tell us a little about yourself and what led you to your current career at Inclusively?

Sarah Bernard: Yeah, so my name's Sarah Bernard. I'm the co-founder and COO of Inclusively. I started my career in London doing enterprise sales at a company called Forester Research selling into industry leaders in the technology and marketing space. And I primarily sold into Fortune 500 companies. After doing that to close to a decade, I actually took a few years off to raise my young children. I'm a mom of four young kids. And, at the time, my oldest had been diagnosed with a heart disorder, so I took some time to be with her and navigate the experience of being a new mom and making sure that she especially had the support that she needed.

My co-founder is actually an old friend of mine who I met during my time in London. And she comes from a technology background, had started a mobile payments app for restaurants and bars, which had nothing to do with Inclusively, but as she was selling her company to American Express her cousin became the first licensed facialist in the state of Florida with Down Syndrome and it's her cousin who was really the inspiration for Charlotte wanting to start a company like Inclusively, and as timing would have I happen to be visiting Charlotte after she had her first child, when this was really just an idea in her head. And I was immediately enamored with the idea of getting this off the ground, having myself thrown up with extended family with close ties to the disability community, and now being a mother of a child who really, we spent still much of her earlier years accommodating her and creating an environment every day that was best for her to thrive in.

So I jumped in immediately. My background in enterprise sales was just a natural fit and good complement to Charlotte's background and starting and propping up a company and experience doing that. And within a year of us deciding to work together, we had founding claims with Microsoft, Dell Ernst & Young, JP Morgan and Travelers. We launched Inclusively in the middle of the pandemic, quite a scary time to go live with an employment platform when all hiring was brought to a complete halt. But we made it through and we have an amazing team

that I'm so grateful to learn from and work alongside of in our company's growth.

Mindy Henderson: That's incredible. And so let's talk just a little bit more about Inclusively. For anyone who's listening and may not be familiar with it yet, would you tell us a little about the company and what it is that you do and the different services you provide?

Sarah Bernard: So our vision at Inclusively is to create one front door to employment that's open to all by unlocking the world's hidden talent, or a technology platform that makes it seamless for employers to access and hire candidates who need accommodations at scale. We're free to job seekers and that's job seekers from the disability, mental health, chronic illness, and veteran communities where they can create a profile and search and apply to job that are on our platform. But what makes us different is that job seekers can also self select accommodations that they need for both interviewing and on the job.

What we're doing is we're essentially reversing social norms where in the past candidates with disabilities have been told not to disclose what accommodation needs they have until after they've received a job offer. But we've built this trusted community with over 50,000 active job seekers because the employers on our platform are also transparent about what accommodations they can provide at every job. We're fully funded on the employer side. We work with companies as large as Accenture and Delta [inaudible 00:05:29], companies across all different industries. They take our training and they're committed to inclusion.

And then, finally a third piece of our platform is earlier this year we launched our Advocate portal, which it's platform access for the existing infrastructure of nonprofits, government agencies, charities, universities, the organizations that are supporting job seekers with disabilities already in this country, they can access our jobs for free. We don't compete with their funding. We're really a resource for them to open up a larger network of jobs for the job seekers that they support and hopefully, save them on the tremendous resources that they spend fostering partnerships with employers. And instead, can focus more of that support on directly supporting the job seekers.

Mindy Henderson: That's so great.

So, DEI is a big buzzword right now and a lot of companies are putting a lot of really great intention into creating diversity, equity and inclusion within their companies and their cultures. But the community of individuals with disabilities remains, as you know, one of the most underrepresented groups in our country. Can you talk a little bit about that and share the scope of this issue?

Sarah Bernard: Yeah, so the scope of this issue is huge. There has only been a 1% change in the unemployment landscape for people with disabilities since the ABA was passed. So, not a lot of progress. I think we have a lot of CEOs, or senior executives at large organizations that are pledging that DEI is important. But I'd say that most companies, they're starting to include disability as part of that effort. But one of the issues is that intent to create DEI, it doesn't always translate in the investment to see it through. So budget, we find that budgets of DEI leaders are pretty nominal. And that opportunity to change those really rests in the middle layer of organizations and those higher managers who are making the day to day hiring decision. So, that's where Inclusively can really help. We aren't a pledge or a tool for the DEI leader even really, we're a tool for an everyday hiring manager in any division to be able to at the candidates with disability.

I think the accommodations process is another issue. Currently only 5% of employees self ID that they have a disability across this country. And I think a real reason for that is that the accommodations process currently is led from a legal and compliance perspective. 82% of candidates on Inclusively are requesting them. And companies have a real opportunity to take a more proactive approach to accommodation. And really prop up their employees in a way that makes them the most successful.

And then finally, this is in the news all the time, but I think the third is the contributing factor to the gap in the unemployment and DEI is the ATS algorithms through applicant tracking systems, the internal technology that companies use is just inherently biased. These technologies are trained to weed out candidates with atypical resumes. And a lot of the job seekers on our platform may have what would fall under what would be considered an atypical resume.

Mindy Henderson: Interesting. And am I correct in thinking that I feel like the number that I've heard is something like only 27% or 28% of individuals with

disabilities who are available to work currently hold jobs within our current workforce. Is that about right?

Sarah Bernard: I think that is right. And that also just shows the large opportunity. People with disabilities have so many skills and right now there's this war on talent and you're always seeing about the Great Resignation that companies are grappling with. And this is a hidden talent pool that has traditionally been very hidden from people's pipelines, existing workflows internally, but there's so much opportunity. And the companies I think really need this talent in their organization.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah, totally agree.

So a number of people out there, the Muscular Dystrophy Association and Inclusively included, are working hard to create momentum and really increase the number of opportunities available for employment candidates who happen to be living with disabilities and are recognizing disability as part of creating a truly diverse and inclusive culture within a company.

One of the things that Inclusively puts a lot of time into is working with employers to help educate them about inclusion and hiring individuals with disabilities. Would you talk more about what you can offer to companies, who are looking to create a more inclusive culture where disability is concerned, but maybe you don't know where to start?

Sarah Bernard: Yeah. We always just say start hiring. I think there are some companies that are still worried about having every single employee trained. But the truth is you're already working with people with disabilities at your company and you may not even know it. We have tons of thousands of job seekers that are ready to work today with the skills that companies are really hurting for. And proximity creates empathy. So, if you begin hiring, create an open culture, acknowledge that mistakes will be made, but just do it. That's the change that we hope to see.

There are resources like us that make this process very easy. And, at the end of the day, hiring people with disabilities it's not a charitable endeavor. These are people who have the skills that are ready to be employed. And it's been proven that people with disabilities are far more loyal to their employers. So, the companies that move past hiring

candidates for being a good thing to do, the more ahead that they're going to be in this current war on talent.

Mindy Henderson: I love that answer.

So let's get down to it and let's talk a little bit about the idea of creating a culture of inclusion at your company. And some of the strategies or tactics that employers who may be listening can take to begin to move down that path and create change. What are some of the biggest misconceptions that employers have about hiring individuals with disabilities.

Sarah Bernard: [inaudible 00:12:14] found that it costs a lot when, in fact, 95% of accommodations they cost \$500 or less. So, that's a nominal investment when you think of all the benefits that this untapped pipeline of talent brings to the companies such as the companies that we work with.

Another is that I think that some organizations think, or some people may think that people with disabilities can only do a certain kind of job. And that is just simply not true. And it never ceases to blow me away when I get asked this question. Someone with a disability can do any type of job. It's quite simple. It really just comes down to what skills do you have and what accommodations do you need on the candidate side? And then, on the employer side, it's as an employer, what skills do you need and what accommodations can you make for that role? The disability does not affect that match.

An example of this, when we started Inclusively, we started to see that people were placing neurodiverse candidates into engineering roles. It's a big trend. And I think this is starting to perpetuate this stereotype that people maybe with autism can only do a certain type of job. But the truth is that people with autism, they not only can, but they want to do other types of jobs. And so, for us, it's really important do not pigeonhole people into certain job categories just based off of their disclosed disability.

Mindy Henderson: Absolutely.

So I heard one of your employees talk about accommodations in the workplace. And they used the term success enablers. And I absolutely loved that shift because it can apply to everyone. For all employers

everywhere there are things that we as individuals, regardless of abilities or disabilities, could benefit from that would make our jobs easier to do.

Can you talk about the idea of language, this idea of using the term success enablers instead of accommodations I just thought was brilliant. So can you talk about the language we use as employers and how we can shift toward inclusion just with the vocabulary that we use as an organization?

Sarah Bernard:

Yeah, we talk about language all the time internally and Inclusively. 30% of our team self IDs as having a disability. But we also have some people who join us who don't have a lot of experience. Words matter, but language changes. So, I think creating a culture where people are mindful about language is just as important as it is to create a culture where people feel like they won't get canceled if they happen to use the wrong language.

I found that some people retreat altogether in fear that they may say something wrong. And that's the worst trend that can happen. We need people who are learning and are discussing this. No one's an expert. And the intent behind people's word should always be as important as the words that are actually spoken as well.

But there's so much to be learned. And I struggle with language myself every day and I'm constantly learning. There's something we just put into our Slack channel is this new bot that if you type something in, and it could be somewhat on the line of offensive, it'll automatically serve up recommendations of how to improve that language to say really what you're trying to say. An example of that is you type, that's so crazy. It will say, try these words instead to better identify really, what you're trying to convey.

So, it's really exciting to see as technology improves the way that it can help you teach yourself along the way. And break some of those bad habits that I know I have too.

Mindy Henderson: That's incredible. I love that.

Let's talk about the recruiting process. What are some of the things that employers can do? And I know that Inclusively helps really facilitate

this, but what are some things that just an individual employer can do to make the interview process a more inclusive process, remove bias and really accommodate everyone?

Sarah Bernard: Yeah so, I think it's just being forthcoming with the accommodations that you can make, or as we call them success enablers. We actually pull out on Inclusively's platform the most requested interview accommodations and make it easy for candidates to select those. But then, we also train our clients who are interviewing our candidates on what those accommodations are.

But examples of what can make it more inclusive is no panel interviews close, offering closed captioning if it's a virtual interview, and even offering what application is best if a candidate does require close captioning. The close captioning is very different on Google Meet as it is on Microsoft Teams versus Zoom. And some people may have preferences on which application is the best closed caption service for them.

And then also just the process for requesting interview accommodation. Currently, it's right now do you have a disability and what accommodations do you need? But you can simply change that and say, "We want to make this the most productive interview for you. Could you benefit from any of these accommodations," and just offer them upfront.

Mindy Henderson: It's so true. Three or four years ago I was in the middle of a job hunt and I lived my life from a wheelchair. And I wished because, like you said earlier, it's so hard for a person with a disability to decide on their own when to disclose the disability and those sorts of things. And I wished so many times that when I was setting up the onsite interview with the employer that it would just be standard practice with them to ask if there was anything that could make my visit easier? If there were any accommodations that I needed? I think that that's just a sensitive question to ask anyone who's coming on site.

Sarah Bernard: Yeah, I mean it's just welcoming someone into your home. You ask if they want something to drink? Or, "Can I get you anything?" It's that same mentality. It's just trying to level the playing field right from the very beginning for every person that walks through your company's doors.

Mindy Henderson: Totally.

So once you recruit an individual who may live with some sort of a disability, then the next piece of the equation, of course, is for the employer to really provide a culture for that individual to work in every day that may be just as inclusive as the recruiting process was. So, what sorts of recommendations do you have for employers just to make sure that their day-to-day operations are as inclusive and comfortable for everyone as possible?

Sarah Bernard: People with accommodations, they change as environments change. And the intention for accommodations is really, again, just to make that individual as successful and productive as possible.

Our vision is that accommodations are for everyone. There are so many employees currently at your company that can benefit from the same accommodations that those who have self-disclosed disabilities have requested, or are receiving. And these likely don't cost a thing to your organization, but impact the productivity which can be increased significantly. And this is just the epitome of what is universal design. So, offer these to all. Everyone can benefit.

I always think of right now in the Great Resignation, I saw recently that 70% of those who quit their jobs in what's been dubbed, the Great Resignation regret that decision. And I always think had those companies been forthcoming in offering accommodations at that time when that employee was really dissatisfied with their job, would they have been able to retain that talent? Churn costs companies so much. And I firmly believe that accommodations are a key to retention, not only just for those with disabilities, but for their entire workforce. And, in fact, I think that accommodations really are company's currency of culture right now.

Mindy Henderson: That's so good.

I do a lot of public speaking myself to advocate for inclusion. And it's interesting because I hear from a lot of people that they want to be inclusive, their intentions are good. But that if they've never had an individual with a disability in their life somehow, they're not sure how to act, or how to interact with someone with a disability. What kind of advice do you give to people on that subject?

Sarah Bernard: Yeah, actually, I find it impossible for someone to not know someone with a disability because, as statistics have proven, 1 in 4 people in the US have a disability. It's a huge part of our society.

And as for advice, I think you shouldn't act or interact with anyone differently to someone who has a disability versus someone who doesn't self-disclose as having one. People with disabilities, they have the same desires as everyone. They want equal opportunities and a level playing field. And I think that extends to every aspect of a person's life, whether that's in education, employment, socially or personally. Unfortunately, this world wasn't created with people with disabilities in mind. But with how rapid technology evolved, we need to be so aware of the impact and also the vast opportunity that this creates for us to readjust the world to be more inclusive for all.

Mindy Henderson: That's really good.

So, do you have any final thoughts then, that you would like to leave us with for any employers who may be listening and wanting to create a more inclusive culture within their companies?

Sarah Bernard: Yeah, so whether you're an employer or an advocate organization, we hope to work with you. Or even a job seeker who's looking for a job. We're growing significantly in working with clients. And what's exciting about being a mission driven company is that as we grow, so does our impact.

I mentioned this earlier but, very simply, we have so many job seekers that have the skills that you, as an employer, probably need on your teams and they are ready to work today. And once you're at client of ours, we're with you every step of the way to help you evolve and make changes to be more inclusive in interviewing and within your existing employee base.

Mindy Henderson: Sarah, thank you so much. The information that you've shared, and the advice that you've given is so incredible. And I think I told you a couple of weeks ago when we spoke, I'm such a fan of Inclusively and the work that you guys are doing. I think that it's so important and it's so long overdue to have this kind of intention around really, truly creating inclusive cultures for everyone.

So, I can't thank you enough for being here. I appreciate your time.

Sarah Bernard: Thank you so much. I really appreciate being interviewed for this podcast. And thank you for all the work that you're doing, Mindy, in this space too.

Mindy Henderson: Absolutely. Thanks Sarah.

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