

# Disability Inclusion Summit: Championing the talent of people with disabilities



A series of panels of experts focusing on people with disabilities in the workplace, to mark and celebrate International Day of Persons with Disabilities (IDPD) and #PurpleLightUp

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## Background – The development of a concept, idea and aspiration

While difference is often something we celebrate and cherish, it is also something that gives rise to doubts and reservations. There is often a reluctance to change the *status quo*, mainly because of fear of the unknown. This results in misinformation, misconceptions, and lack of knowledge and can ultimately culminate in conscious or unconscious bias.

The goal of the Summit was to provide a platform to openly express ideas, concerns and doubts in order to facilitate creative solutions.

## Perceptions on Disability Survey

In order to understand the mind-set of both employers and employees, the Perceptions on Disability Survey was conducted prior to the Disability Inclusion Summit (the Summit). The Survey Results are presented as part of this report in the section containing supporting documents.

The [Survey](#) outlined some of the thoughts and concerns of both people with disabilities and potential employers, while also analyzing the degree to which the workplace is diverse and inclusive. However, given the limited pool of responses, it is difficult to draw any concrete conclusions. Nevertheless, some observations can be made.

The Survey highlighted that generally people with disabilities possess the essential attributes that are required in the workplace. While 'Loyalty' is the top characteristic attributed to people with disabilities, it is among the characteristics considered least essential for the general workforce. On the other hand, where 'Adaptability' is seen as the top characteristic expected in all employees, it was least attributed to employees with disabilities. There is also a strong desire to create the perfect environment for both businesses and employees, together with a definite willingness to adapt in order to be inclusive. Hence, adaptability and adjustments of the environment were top concerns when hiring people with disabilities.

While there was a consensus that lack of awareness and potential bias are the main obstacles to employment, there was a tendency to overestimate the degree to which those with disabilities were apprehensive about

their own competence and ability to contribute. In fact, the Survey observed that people with disabilities were far more concerned with issues around disclosure and the perceptions of others.

Furthermore, while people without disabilities were more likely to identify covert factors like discrimination and physical barriers as the primary impediments to hiring people with disabilities, those with disabilities were more concerned with systemic factors such as fear of the unknown, recruitment pipelines, and lack of understanding of job requirements.

With regard to inclusion and the degree to which organizations are perceived to consider the needs of employees with disabilities, the Survey suggests that this is an area where improvements are needed. There is a moderate acceptance as to the degree of diversity and inclusion within an organization, although more can be done to ensure that disability diversity is spread throughout the organisation and at all levels of decision-making.

In general, people with either visible or invisible disabilities are most comfortable disclosing the type of disability they have. However, those with both visible and invisible disabilities seem to show a clear preference for disclosing their invisible disability over their visible disability.

We thank participants for their honest responses and hope that it will assist, first to acknowledge the need for change and then help to facilitate the discussion for change.

## Disability Inclusion Summit 2020: Championing the talent of people with disabilities

Reed Smith is proud to be a disability-confident organization and is determined to raise awareness of the talent people with disabilities bring to the workforce.

Through the Summit, we wanted to highlight the fact that people with disabilities are talented, to provide insights to organizations who employ or wish to employ people with disabilities, and to assess what lessons can be learnt from the Covid-19 pandemic to apply to the future of business. This year has brought a number of hardships affecting many people in different ways from their livelihoods and jobs to their mental health.

We are grateful to our panel of experts for their dedication, useful insights, great ideas and contributions as well as for their valuable time. The recording of the Summit can be accessed [here](#).

Our dedicated Business Inclusion Group, LEADRS (Looking for Excellence and Advancement of Persons with Disabilities at Reed Smith), and the Mental Health Task Force are committed to leading the way in the recruitment, retention and career development of people with disabilities, alongside our firm's Wellness Works initiative, which supports our personnel's mental health and well-being.



**Carolyn Pepper**  
partner, Reed Smith  
co-chair of the LEADRS  
Business Inclusion Group



**Jonathan Radcliffe**  
partner, Reed Smith  
co-chair of the LEADRS  
Business Inclusion Group



**Vaibhav Adlakha**  
associate, Reed Smith

## #PurpleLightUp and International Day of Persons with Disabilities

International Day of Persons with Disabilities, celebrated and marked by #PurpleLightUp, is a global movement designed to draw attention to the economic empowerment of people with disabilities. Purple is recognized as a symbol for people with disabilities, with their spending power often referred to as the 'purple pound'. The annual observance of IDPD aims to promote the rights and well-being of people with disabilities.

The Summit brought our firm and our clients together to initiate conversations that matter and discussions that either help to dispel misconceptions or confirm progressive ideas. The intention was to help facilitate change both within and beyond the legal profession. We believe that strong values and ethics form part of the firm and human brand. Hence, in a world where everything requires a justification or a business case, ours is simple... it was just the **Right Thing to Do**.

“If we remove the letters 'D I S' from our convictions and beliefs, we will not allow a lack of understanding or awareness or unconscious bias to influence our perspective. Only then, is it possible for 'ability' to be realized. This is what we should all strive to achieve, that is, to give everyone an opportunity and platform to thrive as well as recognize the fact that we all make valuable contributions.”

Vaibhav Adlakha, Associate

# The power of inclusion

## Welcome remarks

The Summit began with opening remarks from Vaibhav Adlakha, an associate in the Competition and Financial Regulation Group and a member of our LEADRS business inclusion group, and Victoria Cleland, executive director for banking, payments and innovation at the Bank of England, sponsor of the Bank of England's disAbility Network and a board member of the Business Disability Forum.

*"Recent data shows that approximately 19 percent of working age people are disabled. But, if we dig deeper into this, it's even more eye opening. 80 percent of disability is acquired between the ages of 18 and 64. This really is something that we all need to think about. These are enormous numbers and something that can potentially impact all of us. It's really important that we all do what we can to enhance the lives of staff and people with disabilities."*

**Victoria Cleland**



**Victoria Cleland**  
executive director for banking, payments and innovation at the Bank of England and sponsor of the disAbility network at the Bank of England



**Vaibhav Adlakha**  
associate, Reed Smith

*"The Summit represents our attempt to facilitate change and fulfil a responsibility to showcase, celebrate, and champion the talents of people with disabilities beyond the legal profession. We have recognized the value that this under-represented group of people has added to our organization through their ability to think differently and the qualities that they have gained from experience, endurance, and perseverance. It is our sincere hope that after the Summit, you will share our vision too."*

**Vaibhav Adlakha**

# Panel 1

## Perceptions of disabilities vs. the reality

The panel focused on issues in relation to preconceived perceptions, questions of identity, and disclosure of visible and non-visible disabilities, as well as the unintended consequences of unconscious and conscious bias - not only within society but also within ourselves - and how this influences professional identity.

The theme of this panel was improving communication with each other to gain awareness of what our colleagues with a disability are dealing with, as well as building a culture and environment to enable them to focus on their abilities and on building their career. *"One point employees with disabilities want to convey to others is that they possess the same abilities as their coworkers that don't have a disability"* – Claire Harvey.

It is necessary to address the underlying and well-established societal systemic structures that have led to misconceptions and preconceived notions. One in three people still believe that persons with a disability are less able to participate in society and are not able to perform at the same level or capacity as someone who doesn't have a disability.

The goal is to change the narrative from "how does a person with a disability prove they have the ability?" to "how do we help organizations build systems that have disability and inclusion at their heart?" *"Children often only have special educational needs because the system doesn't account for their needs in the first place. It is the same way with 'reasonable accommodations' because the ways of working have been designed without thinking about disability"*– Claire Harvey.

There is no need for sympathy towards those with a disability, but more need for ally ship. We need to see an individual as a person rather than their label or their disability.

The system needs to change for all communities that face a barrier in society, not just for people with a disability. We must recognize that individuals are complex and multi-faceted. Hence, individuals with disabilities also include women, LGBTQ+ people, people from different races, ethnicities and backgrounds, and so on. We need to have conversations that matter, especially in the workforce, to design a culture premised on equality and acceptability that is agile and willing to value the contribution of everyone. *"My favorite analogy is if a flower doesn't grow, you don't work on the flower, you work on the soil, and we need to think exactly the same about society and our organizations"*– Claire Harvey.

Whether or not to disclose a disability can be a difficult decision to make. This goes back to underlying cultural systemic barriers that people with disabilities face – our work environments do not always allow a person with a disability to open up about the challenges they face. *"I think this just goes to show that we have to start with the culture, and that is changed through people sharing their unique narrative. That takes courage"*– Lily Earle. Businesses should frame the question of disclosure in a way to enable the person to be their best self, creating an environment that allows them to thrive in the workplace. *"We can all improve our organizations to make it easier to be more open and accommodating. Not just to get in the door, but to have an ongoing process of asking and discussing how to make it easy to thrive and to focus on our own abilities"*. – Luke Debevec

### Moderators:



**Daniel Winterfeldt**  
partner, Reed Smith



**Danielle Liebl**  
associate, Reed Smith

### Panelists:



**Lily Earle**  
Talent acquisition manager  
at Kaleidoscope



**Claire Harvey**  
Paralympian and  
founder of Anatta Ltd



**Luke Debevec**  
partner, Reed Smith  
Co-founder of the  
LEADRS Business  
Inclusion Group

## Panel 2

### Employing people with disabilities is good for business

This panel discussed why it is beneficial to hire people with disabilities and focused on how we can actively recruit and ensure diverse candidates are not overlooked or excluded. The panel also discussed what businesses and organizations could do to make the workforce and society more inclusive.

The overall theme addressed on this panel was that there is an extensive amount of untapped talent among this under-represented group of individuals.

The unemployment rate for people with disabilities is high. However, potential employers do not always see the value and potential when deciding whether to hire a person with a disability. Disabled employees are loyal and will often exceed targets, especially if businesses provide reasonable accommodations and the right environment together with the right approach and a positive attitude. *"You bring empathy with you because you have to overcome many challenges as a disabled person every day"* – Jane Burton.

Employing people with disabilities is also the right thing to do. Organizations need to commit to hiring people with disabilities as well as those with other diverse characteristics. There is a strong pipeline of potential candidates that have been overlooked or excluded. Studies have shown that companies who champion the DEI index, a benchmarking tool used to determine an organization's commitment to disability diversity, were among *"the highest performers and outperform their peers in key areas such as net income, economic profit margins, and revenue growth. In seeing this, you can understand that it's not only the right thing to do, it is good for the 'bottom line' and for business as a whole"* – Kevin Hara.

So, why are people with disabilities being overlooked by employers in the workplace? There is still a core issue in our society of assumptions and stereotypes, with the fear that hiring a person with disabilities would be too complex, too difficult, or too expensive. Often, employers are unaware of the opportunity they are missing. Diverse communities face challenges when accessing employment and often have to "prove" themselves in ways that others do not.

We need to address these problems by communicating in the workforce that narratives can be overcome through action. Companies should not fear hiring a person with a disability, but rather the narrative should be *"about building a vibrant, powerful, diverse workforce that we can all be a part of"* – Stuart Pixley.

To hire more people with disabilities, we need to actively recruit and reduce other barriers to access and success. Organizations need to make sure that their recruiting process does not actively filter out a person with a disability. Companies could consider allotting or reserving positions or work experience opportunities specifically for those with disabilities.

*"The Legally Disabled report shares the survey results that only 9 percent of disabled people were getting through legal recruiters to get to the interview stage"* – Jane Burton.

We should look at recruiting with a broad-based approach, including more community-based outreach to ensure people with disabilities do not feel discouraged or drop out of the recruiting process. We need to build a pipeline of individuals with disabilities, perhaps through collective scholarship programs, which make investments in people and potentially fast-track them into certain schools to give access to opportunities that may not have otherwise been available. There should be industry support and lobbying of government to make these investments to help young people with a disability so that they are equipped with the skills needed to get to the next level. *"There is a strong need for investment in social education and cultural infrastructure"* – Srin Madipalli.

We need to present adjustments and accommodations early on in schooling so that people with disabilities do not feel discouraged at a young age. We need to create a community of mentors and allies that can work with educational institutions to help better accommodate students with a disability. This will also help with recruiting.

#### Moderators:



**Carolyn Pepper**  
partner, Reed Smith  
co-chair of the LEADRS  
Business Inclusion Group



**Jonathan Andrews**  
associate, Reed Smith

#### Panelists:



**Stuart Pixley**  
Counsel at Microsoft



**Srin Madipalli**  
Founder, investor,  
product manager  
at Airbnb



**Jane Burton**  
Chair, Lawyers with  
Disabilities Division  
of the Law Society of  
England and Wales



**Kevin Hara**  
associate, Reed Smith  
Co-Founder of the  
LEADRS Business  
Inclusion Group

## Panel 3

### Modern work place and disability in the Covid-19 environment

This panel explored the impact of Covid-19 on people with disabilities, the obstacles people with disabilities come across when trying to find work, and what lessons can be learnt from this year's experiences, when it comes to disabled employees.

People with disabilities generally face many obstacles when trying to find work. They face challenges in the workplace due to lack of accommodations or understanding of their condition. Now, with more people working from home as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, there are additional challenges that some people with a disability may have to contend with, such as inaccessible technologies, social isolation, and lack of support leading to mental health issues. However, for some, working from home has also represented an opportunity to showcase their ability and flourish.

A research project undertaken this year by Professor Deborah Foster and Doctor Natasha Hirst, and co-produced by Cardiff University Business School and The Lawyers with Disabilities Division of the Law Society, which surveyed 108 lawyers in England and Wales, identified that "65 percent of the disabled lawyers working from home found that their experience had been positive, particularly regarding their physical environment." – Professor Deborah Foster. Working from home provided a sense of relief and flexibility to take a break, if necessary, and move around, especially in the case of those dealing with a physical impairment. There were certainly different views depending on the kind of impairment individuals were facing, as well as the kind of experience they were having.

It's important to note, that there is no "one size fits all" when it comes to working from home, and a number of unintended consequences of government guidelines can have a disproportionate impact on people with a disability. For example, "people who are visually impaired can't socially distance and people with hearing impairments say that it is impossible for them to lip read because people are wearing masks" – Professor Deborah Foster. This pandemic has brought about a set of behavioral and public codes that are excluding certain people with disabilities from participating in society.

It is important to think about the future. How do we visualize this world post-Covid-19, and how do we incorporate the positive benefits that have come from remote working for people with disabilities? Employers need to learn from this pandemic. "I think the biggest lesson that an employer should learn is the cost of reasonable accommodations. Employers need to realize that these might not be that expensive" – Vibhu Sharma. There is a need for flexible accommodations with remote working to ensure technologies and communications are accessible for people with disabilities. There also needs to be a choice in the future of how a person wants to work, whether that be from home or in the office.

Covid-19 has opened up the conversation with employers and employees regarding "people's individual needs because you may never have shared in the workplace that you were vulnerable with your disability" – Elizabeth Rimmer. This pandemic has facilitated more choices and greater understanding of what people actually need when it comes to their work and health, especially people facing mental health concerns. Hence, it is important for employers to listen and to provide support and programs where needed

There have been mental health consequences as a result of Covid-19, and the challenge organizations face is finding the positive lessons learned from this experience and applying them to their work environments, especially in the legal sector where lawyers have high rates of stress, anxiety, and depression when compared with the general public. This is due to the mind-set that makes us great lawyers – perfectionism, autonomy, high client expectations, and a 24/7 working culture. Covid-19 has provided an opportunity for law firms to invest in mental health management training to create stronger relationships, trust, and a healthy workplace for lawyers and staff to feel empowered.

Law Care's experience in the legal sector has seen an emphasis on trust within the workplace. In the past, unless an employer could see their employee at their desk, they may not have believed that they were actually working. What Covid-19 has shown is that work can be done effectively from home, and that employees can do their job with the flexibility they are given. "One size doesn't fit all. And actually, trusting and valuing people for what they bring into your organization is so important. And I think Covid had given us that opportunity" – Elizabeth Rimmer.

#### Moderators:



**Richard Ceeney**  
partner, Reed Smith



**Kristen Snyderman**  
Senior human resources manager, Reed Smith

#### Panelists:



**Elizabeth Rimmer**  
CEO at LawCare



**Professor Deborah Foster**  
Cardiff Business School,  
Cardiff University



**Vibhu Sharma**  
Theirworld

## Closing remarks

We closed our Summit with remarks from Tamara Box, managing partner for Europe and the Middle East, and a partner in our Structured Finance team at Reed Smith.

Tamara touched on the importance of having a disability summit in a year that has been difficult and has presented unprecedented challenges for so many people. At the same time, the summit has brought people together and given rise to new trends, such as flexible working, as well as balancing work and personal responsibilities. These will surely have an impact on any post-pandemic environment.

As highlighted during the panel discussions and also by the audience, there is real optimism about the future of disability inclusion. The pandemic has accelerated the importance of having more open and honest conversations that can help us make significant strides both towards valuing our differences and improving Diversity, Inclusion and Equality.

*"I'm hugely optimistic about the future, frankly, because of the vision that's provided by the incredibly talented people with disabilities and our allies who joined us today...we know that disability inclusion still has a long way to go, but with all that we've heard today, I really am optimistic that we are accelerating rapidly toward that destination."*



**Tamara Box**  
partner, Reed Smith  
Managing Partner, Europe  
and the Middle East

## Supporting references and documents

### Perceptions on Disability Survey Results

Support available for employers and employees  
(websites from the UK and the United States)

Businesses do not have to go on this journey alone – support is available.

#### U.S.-based support

- Accenture Disability: <https://www.accenture.com/us-en>
- Job Accommodation Network: <https://askjan.org/>
- National Organization on Disability (NOD): <https://www.nod.org/>
- Bender Consulting Services, Inc.: <https://www.benderconsult.com/>
- Disability:IN: <https://disabilityin.org/>
- Kaleidoscope Group: <https://kgdiversity.com/>

#### UK-based support

- Lawyers with Disabilities Division of the Law Society: <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/topics/lawyers-with-disabilities/>
- LawCare: [www.lifeinthelaw.org.uk](http://www.lifeinthelaw.org.uk)
- Annatta Ltd: <https://www.annatta.org.uk/>
- Legally Disabled: <http://legallydisabled.com/>
- Cardiff business report on barriers for disabled lawyers: [www.legallydisabled.com/research-reports/](http://www.legallydisabled.com/research-reports/)
- Kaleidoscope Group Kg empowering ambitions: <http://www.kaleidoscope.group/>
- InterLaw Diversity Forum ENABLE (dis)Ability Network: <https://www.interlawdiversityforum.org/enable-disability-network>
- My Plus Consulting: <https://www.myplusconsulting.com/>
- Wells Tobias: <https://www.wellstobias.com/>
- Employability: <https://www.employ-ability.org.uk/>
- Aspiring Solicitors: <https://www.aspiringsolicitors.co.uk/>
- Access to Work: <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work>
- RBLI: <https://rbli.co.uk/>
- InterLaw: <https://www.interlawdiversityforum.org/>
- Diverse Matters: <https://www.diverse matters.org/>

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Phone: +44 (0)20 3116 3000

Fax: +44 (0)20 3116 3999

DX 1066 City/DX18 London

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