

EMILY LADAU:

Hello everyone, and welcome to another episode of Disability Inclusion: Required. This month, I am really excited to be talking about National Disability Employment Awareness Month. It is an annual observance, and it really focuses on the skills and the talents and the contributions of disabled people in the workplace. And I could not think of a better guest to have with me today than Luticha Doucette, a disability justice advocate, author, and business owner. And we are going to be chatting about two topics that are central to shifting towards a more inclusive workplace culture, that's disability disclosure, as well as actually advocating for our access needs in the workplace. But before we dive in, I would love to have our lovely guest share a little bit more about herself and tell us what you do.

LUTICHA ANDRÉ DOUCETTE:

Oh, wow. Thank you, first of all, for this opportunity. I think that's always a big question that I always felt awkward to answer. Yeah, I'm the owner of Catalyst Consulting Associates where we believe that disability justice should be the rule and not the exception to social change. And my background is in bioinformatics, which is a really big term for I look at data and patterns and help people to think about data differently. So I like to tell people it's good to see the humanity behind each data point. When we look at these things, there's human beings at each one of those points. I think in my personal life, well, I mean, I fence. I'm a fencer. I fence foil.

I have two wonderful, lovely kitties, black kitties who always keep me laughing every single day. I am an auntie. One of my brothers has two beautiful little boys who I love dearly. And I love to read and write. Obviously, I have my book, *Cultivating An Intersectional Mindset*. And that was my response to how do we do leadership with disability justice embedded in everything we do as leaders. That helped.

EMILY LADAU:

So I have to say, I think you are one of the coolest people and only cooler now that not only are you into data, but also into fencing. I feel like that's just a very fun combination of interesting things. And so we should probably be best friends, but I'll save that for another podcast episode. I wanted to really pick up on the fact that you were talking about data, because we're going to come back to that later in the conversation a little bit because I think that one of the things that tends to be missing in some of these conversations around more accessible and inclusive workplaces is how we actually measure that. And I think that talking about it from a very human standpoint is so essential. I always say that data and storytelling really go together like peanut butter and jelly. Unless, of course, you're allergic to peanuts, then please, by all means, be safe.

But I think that this is going to be a really, really robust conversation today. But I want to back up a little bit first because the theme for National Disability Employment Awareness Month this year, and I'm probably going to shorten that to NDEAM just to speed things along, is advancing access and equity. So that is obviously essential to creating a workplace environment that works for everyone, but it's also a really broad call to action. So before we dig a little bit deeper,

can you tell us what an accessible and equitable workplace actually looks like from your perspective?

LUTICHA ANDRÉ DOUCETTE:

Sure. I'll just say for what Catalyst does is that anyone that I hire gets to come in and use the skillsets that they know that they have in order to complete the job. They don't have to do reasonable accommodations in my business whatsoever because I know different types of disabled people exist. So I really work hard to make sure that everything that we do is as broadly accessible as possible. So even when we release reports, there's a plain language version, there's an audio version, there's the fancy CEO executive version. There is always a visual version, thanks to InkyBrittany for all the work that she does for my business. So I really try to think about the ways in which disabled people show up and put that into the business. So that when I hire you, all you have to do is come with your skills and your lovely self and you're good to go in the business. So that's what I think accessible equitable workplaces actually look like.

EMILY LADAU:

And I think that's a really powerful thing to be able to show up as yourself in the workplace. And I know that it is a privilege to be able to do that for so many people because a lot of workplaces may not yet be fostering that kind of culture. But there is a way to move in that direction so that we are all in workplaces where we can show up as we are with the skills that we have and find ways to make things accessible for us. But I'm really conscious of the fact that everyone who is listening to this podcast at a different point, not only on the journey of learning about disability, but also possibly on the journey of either identifying disabled or disclosing that information to the people around them.

And I know when I show up in a workplace in a physical capacity, people can see that I have a physical disability because I'm a wheelchair user. So part of my disability discloses itself automatically. But now, especially in a more virtual forward world, I often do have to disclose more of my access needs upfront because people can only potentially see me from the head down to the top of my chest. And so that's been a new experience for me in the past few years of disclosing in a different way. And so, I'm wondering what guidance you might give to a person who might be unsure about how to advocate for their own access needs or reasonable accommodations in the workplace?

LUTICHA ANDRÉ DOUCETTE:

Oh, that's huge. I think I found a statistic that said something like 58% of people who disclosed at their job regretted doing so because of the pushback that they got. And so disclosure can be that really tricky thing. And I think the first thing is understanding that employee handbook. And I know that seems to be a departure from what a lot of other people say, but a lot of your rules, guidelines, expectations, et cetera. What the company is actually offering you is going to be in that employee handbook. And so you got to know that front to back, as well as understanding the ADA, how the ADA works when it comes to complaints, et cetera? Because I think a lot of

people are like, there's 1-800, call the ADA, and that's how complaints work. And that's not it. So he's like, "Call the manager." So no, the ADA as far as employment goes under the EEOC, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. I think I got that acronym right.

EMILY LADAU:

You did.

LUTICHA ANDRÉ DOUCETTE:

Before you even start looking for a job, sometimes you can call them and ask these questions, "What do I do? What are the processes?" Understand your rights and responsibilities prior to that job interview. And oftentimes, I think the job interview, ask for your accommodations for that interview and that will give you a good sense of how that company is going to be responsive to you as an employee. It's a test, right? The interview is that relationship building process. It's not just, "Oh, hey, I need a job. You're going to give me a job." That's your opportunity to really ask those probing questions and take advantage of that because that can be a long-term relationship that once you get in and then they sold you a bill of goods. You know how it is in the dating world, "You sold me something else and now we're here and you can't pick up your clothes off the floor." So you really have to document and document and document. I think those are the best ways to protect yourself as a disabled employee.

EMILY LADAU:

And I think it's sometimes a challenge to hear that, especially when you're first thinking about disclosing a disability because it can feel like a big responsibility. But at the same time, I think that there is so much power in opening up about part of who you are, but also remembering that you have a right to do so and that your rights are protected. And that by familiarizing yourself with those policies and procedures, you are really preparing yourself to have a more positive experience, hopefully. That being said, advocating for accommodations is also very much a two-way street. And so, even as we're asking for disabled employees to speak up and to advocate for their needs, employers have to be open to doing their part.

And yes, that's because it's the law, but it's also the right thing to do if you really want to have a thriving workplace. And so the flip side here is I'm wondering what you would say to employers and people who work in human resources who are possibly more concerned with things like cost or undue burden. And then they're not thinking about why it really is so essential to accommodate employees with disabilities and how that actually makes workplaces better for everybody.

LUTICHA ANDRÉ DOUCETTE:

Yeah, I always try to keep it a buck with people. Do you want employees, or you do not want employees? So that's the reality. As a CEO in my business, I need to look at the broadest workforce available possible. And if I'm coming with the bias of not those people because I think their hard work, which is for a lot of non-disabled people, that's an arrogance of ignorance. They

don't know, so they're just going to be like, "You're too much." That is intentionally hurting your business. Also, we call it undue hardship now, which is a thing. But all of that is cheaper than a lawsuit. So if you don't have the time to waste on lawsuits, the thing that you need to do is the equitable thing, right? That's just good for business.

So for HR folk, et cetera, a lot of these accommodations cost less than \$500. So it really isn't that big of a deal. A lot of it should just be part and parcel of your business practice. But also, the ROI, the return on investment on inclusion is quite large for businesses. So I think it's, for every dollar that you spend on inclusion, especially disability inclusion, you get \$2 back in your business. So I feel like the right thing, it's more like a charity model, but moving towards the business model of I want the best workforce available to me in order to get the job done. That is why you got into business in the first place, right? That's why you want to grow your business.

So therefore, in order to do that, your business needs to be structured in such a way to make sure that all employees are showing up as they are ready to go. And that's part of the business contract, the business employee contract. I have jobs, I say that I am a space that is going to be... For you to thrive and give me your skills and talents. And the employee says, "I have the skills and talents." And therefore, we've entered a contractual relationship in that way. So when businesses are not abiding by that explicit contract, you're reneging on that contract and that is not good for business.

EMILY LADAU:

I have heard conversations both about it being the right thing to do, and I've heard the business case and I've never heard the business case put quite like that before. And I really appreciate that perspective because absolutely you are entering into a contract in which both parties have obligations to fulfill. The employee has skills to provide, and the employer has to provide an environment in which the employee can provide those skills. And so I'm really appreciating the perspective that you provide. And also, you're absolutely right about how if we talk about it being the right thing to do, it can get into the territory of the charity model of disability, which is essentially just giving an opportunity to someone with a disability out of a sense of obligation or pity. And disabled people don't need pity, disabled people need opportunities like everyone else because we live in a society where working is essential to our survival.

And I can get into a whole conversation about capitalism, but I'll save that for another day. I mean, the reality is that we have an obligation as a society to ensure that everybody can thrive in the environments that they're in. And that being said, it's also really important to be tracking that progress when it comes to creating more inclusive and accommodating workplaces. And I don't think that we have this conversation enough, but we need to be mindful of what we are actually doing to move in the right direction. And because you have been absolutely wonderful and at the ready with so many data points already. I'm wondering if you could share, as organizations are creating, roadmaps to move ahead toward access and towards equity, like the theme of National Disability Employment Awareness Month says. Are there metrics? Are there ways to measure progress? What would you advise our listeners?

LUTICHA ANDRÉ DOUCETTE:

That's a great thing. I have a lot of toolkits available for businesses to help start that process. I'll say one of the main things is that when I think of employment, this is not just what's called a W-2 employment, this is also your I-9 employment. Who are you contracting with? So we talk about equity and contracting, which is a huge thing. I'm one of the forerunners of talking about equity and contracting from a disability justice perspective. So there's a lot of metrics. Who are you contracting with? What are their accessibility measures? Right now, we're dealing with those online learning platforms that aren't screen reader friendly. Do you have it in your guidelines, accessibility metrics that follow like you must be screen reader compatible, you must have braille and alternative measures for people to access your content.

So really thinking about those metrics from the contracting side. As well as for your W-2, a lot of ways that you track is with the reasonable accommodations. So I just did a talk with... Let me count the As, A-A-A-E-D, triple A, E-D. And really talking about, well, if you know that certain employees, et cetera have been struggling, and then at what point does the reasonable accommodation come into play? And how do you get the reasonable accommodation to come into play earlier? That's a huge data point. And what does that look like from the employee struggling from productivity and employee performance to after they get their reasonable accommodation? Because that hurts your business if employees are not as productive, if they don't have all the things that they need.

Also, looking at what are the common reasonable accommodations that you've gotten in the past? And if there's a whole bunch of them, why don't you just make them standard in your business? So nobody has asked for it because that just seems wild to me. Nobody should have to ask for braille if you know that blind people exist, it should be standard.

EMILY LADAU:

I could not agree more. I think that standardizing a lot of these processes so that they're no longer just accommodations, but their practices across your business is really essential. And also, I think just makes it a better environment for everyone. And I was curious while you were talking, so the AAAED, is that the American Association for Access Equity and Diversity?

LUTICHA ANDRÉ DOUCETTE:

I think that's what they're called. Oh my gosh. There's too many acronyms.

EMILY LADAU:

So many acronyms.

LUTICHA ANDRÉ DOUCETTE:

The ADA coordinators go to their trainings, equity coordinators, your HR professionals go there. So it was a real opportunity to get to the people who are like the process holders, which is also huge. I was just employed by an organization, I won't say who they are, but their processes were so difficult for the hiring phase. And even when I think about processes, which are called

standard operating procedures. If those aren't clear, then you're going to have a whole bunch of communication issues. And that is not an environment that anyone with a disability is going to come in and be successful in. And non-disabled aren't successful in it because it's confusing, it's frustrating, et cetera.

So how do we make our standard operating procedures clear? Not necessarily concise, but not convoluted either. And what does it look like to deliver that? How is your onboarding looking like? Most places don't really onboard. You get one video orientation or one meeting like you're oriented. No, that should be a long-term process for your employees and who is going to be the process holder of that as well. So yeah, that's all in our toolkits that are available on our website.

EMILY LADAU:

I really love that you highlighted this because so much of access and equity comes down to communications. If we're not considering how we're communicating, then there's a good chance that it's an inaccessible and inequitable process for everyone. And I really, really want that to be a key takeaway from this episode. And I also, I'm wondering if we could focus on more of a key takeaway for the philanthropic sector specifically because one thing I always try to tell people and emphasize, as much as I can, is that disability is not a niche issue. That every issue is a disability issue because every issue impacts disabled people. And I will say this over and over and over again until people get it.

So I always like to ask my guests for their call to action specifically toward how we can move toward equity and inclusion specifically in this case for the workplace. But what do you think it is that needs to happen across philanthropy to ensure that we're moving in the right direction towards disability inclusion? And what is it that you would like to leave our listeners with? So this can be either for internal operations, for foundations, and philanthropy serving organizations. It can be ways to support more inclusive workplaces with grantmaking. I'm really interested to hear your thoughts on this.

LUTICHA ANDRÉ DOUCETTE:

I guess my snarky version is, do your dollars make sense?

EMILY LADAU:

I love that.

LUTICHA ANDRÉ DOUCETTE:

Who are you? Again, that's like contracting thing. Who are you giving your dollars to? But as someone who has tried to get so many of these grants from foundations, it is extremely frustrating. I don't know what the bias is against LLCs is within the philanthropy world, but this idea that I need another organization, specifically a nonprofit to help manage my money is insulting. And also, to make it seem as if they can do a better job at managing my money than I

can is doubly insulting, not just as a disabled person who has managed my funds for the vast majority of my life, but also as a CEO who has systems in place to manage their funds.

So what is the need of a fiscal sponsor or a fiscal intermediary? Would I know how to manage my money on my own way? If I can receive funds without a fiscal intermediary in every other aspect of my business? Why do I need it to access philanthropic dollars? That makes no sense to me. And it is a layer of paternalism and ableism that I don't know what the rationale is that still exists in 2023 because from what I see that a lot of these nonprofits don't manage your money better than I can. And then that leads to an extra barrier for, especially as a disabled, Black disabled owned organization, to be able to access funds.

EMILY LADAU:

Your real talk is refreshing, and I think we need much more of that across the sector for sure. So I am grateful to you for not mincing words because that's what we need to hear, honestly. And I'm grateful to you in general for the work that you do to create more inclusive, more equitable, more accessible spaces for everyone. And I really want people to be able to continue to follow your work. So can you let us know where we can find you across social media?

LUTICHA ANDRÉ DOUCETTE:

So actually, closing down my social media because we're going into our strategic planning for end of year. But you could mostly find me on LinkedIn, Luticha Andre Doucette, and I'm pretty active over there. And that's the best way to get in contact me or our website, catalystconsultingassociates.com.

EMILY LADAU:

I love the idea of stepping away from social media to be more focused on strategic planning. And I also going to tell you, I'm a LinkedIn nerd. I find it pretty fun. So I would say that's one of the better social media platforms to go find you on, and I follow you on there. So I know that you are just as real on there as you were here, and that's something that I very much appreciate about you. So thank you so, so much for joining me today.

LUTICHA ANDRÉ DOUCETTE:

Thank you so much for having me. This is great.

EMILY LADAU:

This was awesome. So thank you so much to everyone who tuned into this episode of Disability Inclusion: Required. If you would like to keep your learning journey going, you can check us out at disabilityphilanthropy.org. Until next time, I'm Emily Ladau. Bye.