

# 4 Ways To Stop Talking About Disability Awareness And Start Hiring

[Denise Brodey](#) Contributor

[Leadership Strategy](#) *I write about the role of disabilities in today's workplace.*

It's time to stop talking about disability awareness and start hiring, say disability advocates.

The headlines blazed with good news from the [White House](#) this week touting innovative policy solutions. This year, the U.S. government has helped 44 states adopt new disability employment and provided guidance to thousands of people on accommodations for the workplace. The proclamation also promoted good news about inclusive apprenticeships and new tools to help recruit and retain workers with disabilities.

**But when it comes to career advice about people with disabilities, this is the only statistic that really matters to me right now:** In 2017, 18.7% of people age 16 and older with a disability were employed. That compares with 65.7% of people without a disability, according to the [U.S. Department of Labor](#). As one disability advocate on Twitter candidly wrote, "*If you're only talking about awareness, you are falling behind.*" It's time to start tackling the details of disability employment. Every single person reading this right now can help create an opportunity for someone with a disability to find work. The question isn't if but when you will get started. Here's are four ways to dive in:

- 1. Let Younger Generations Lead By Example.** "One of our most recent surveys shows that people between age 30 and 40—and even more so, people between the age of 18 and 29—are more comfortable working with people with disabilities," says Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, president of [RespectAbility](#), a Washington, D.C.-based nonpartisan, nonprofit fighting stigmas and advancing opportunities for people with disabilities. What's at the root of that mindset change? "Being around more people with disabilities on a day-to-day basis, particularly in school, showed this generation that this a group that is competent, confident and independent," says Mizrahi. Older generations who went to school before the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) and the Individuals With Disabilities Act ([IDEA](#)) did not have the opportunity to have talented students with disabilities in their classrooms. The majority of their lives, people with disabilities have not been a part of their mainstream workforce. Young people who have experience working in groups with people with disabilities are ready to lead.
- 2. Manage Differently.** The need for fast-paced risk-taking, change and creativity demands an open-mindedness and luckily, creative fields tend to attract people who can do just that. They may also happen to have ADHD, dyslexia and other learning and attention issues. Whatever the case, it's likely they excel at their jobs because they like to toss out traditional ideas that are unrelatable to them, create novel solutions and imagine futures no one else can see. Libby DeLana, cofounder and a creative director at [Mechanica](#) in Newburyport, Massachusetts, a next-generation branding firm that solves problems and creates opportunities for marketers, says that working in a creative industry means the leadership team needs to manage talent differently. We often promote taking a risk and building on radical thinking to find a solution for a client.

“We value having all kinds of brains on our team and we've made it part of our company culture,” says DeLana. “For the people that I work with to architect and build a new idea from scratch takes bravery.” So how do you start creating that culture, tomorrow? “Give creative thinkers space and a place to feel safe taking risks,” says DeLana. Another simple tactic she says she practices regularly: “I like to acknowledge bravery up front and say thank you to people for taking those risks.”

3. **Take A Page From Your State’s Playbook.** Even state and federal legislators are putting their heads together to figure out how to change the disability unemployment picture for good. The resources they developed in the past several years are extremely pro-active and well informed. (You can download the report *Work Matters: A Framework for States on Workforce Development for People with Disabilities*, [here](#). According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), it represents a year’s worth of work by a joint task force of state policymakers brought together to develop policy solutions that can build a workforce that is disability inclusive. Policy categories covered in the 2017 report include laying the groundwork, preparing for work, accessing work opportunities, helping people with disabilities to stay at work, entrepreneurship.
  
4. **Acknowledge People’s Ambitions and Abilities.** “Some employers don’t understand that people with disabilities don’t just want to work, they want to train for long-term employment and careers,” says Deb Russell, who helps companies develop recruiting and retention strategies in the Boston area. “They need to hear about the benefits of inclusion,” she says, “and get help using resources and programs that promote employment.” To put it another way, if enough people are invested in careers for people with disabilities, it will no longer be an exception but the rule. Again, the trouble may be where to start. Why not begin by tweaking the job interview? Too few people take the time to learn more about interviewing people with disabilities. One of the simplest traps to fall into is focusing too much on how a particular person would do a specific job, instead of concentrating on their talents. This puts well-qualified candidates at an immediate disadvantage: How can you talk about your long-term career goals when the only thing the person meeting with you seems to notice is that you have a limp or that you sometimes speak more slowly than other people? Make it your responsibility to change the conversation.

For a starter list of do’s and don’ts for interviewing people with disabilities, check out EARN, the Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability and Inclusion. Their interview-readiness tips appear, [here](#). For more tips and resources throughout National Disability Employment Awareness Month and to learn more about this year’s theme, [What Can You Do?](#), follow me on Twitter [@dbrodey](#).