



## **E01: The Impact of the "Great Reshuffle"- With Peter Blanck, Chairman of the Burton Blatt Institute**

### **Voice Over:**

Welcome to Let's Get to Work: Reimagining Disability Inclusive Employment Policy, brought to you by the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University. And now here's your host, Michael Morris.

### **Michael Morris:**

Welcome to our podcast series Let's Get to Work: Reimagining Disability Inclusive Employment Policy. We're excited you're joining us today because we have a special guest, Peter Blanck, university professor and chairman of the Burton Blatt Institute. Peter is leading a group of researchers also from Harvard and Rutgers University, as well as Syracuse in really cutting edge research to rethink, reimagine Disability Inclusive Employment Policy. Peter, thank you for joining us today.

### **Peter Blanck:**

It's a pleasure to be with you, Michael, on this important series. Thank you.

### **Michael Morris:**

Let's start right in with some questions. In September 2020, the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research funded this new center on Disability Inclusive Employment Policy that you are the chair and director of. For our listeners, what does Disability Inclusive Employment Policy mean to you? And why is it

important to employers, people with disabilities, and the economy as a whole?

**Peter Blanck:**

Well, if we take a step back, Michael, to begin with, that fantastic new collaboration, this Disability Employment Policy national center, began in the throes of COVID. It began in an environmental shock that no one could have foreseen frankly at the time when we wrote that proposal. But to go back a little bit in history, your listeners probably know a lot about this, for many years, probably since the birth of the Industrial Age in the United States, first shock perhaps being the concept of the assembly line with Henry Ford, which changed the way we think about work and we do work.

**Peter Blanck:**

America's policy concept of work and basically safety net and healthcare and so forth was a medical model, a medicalized model of the human being. That when he or she became sick or disabled, that person was either not worthy to retain his or her place in the workplace and/or was cured or pitied. But there were attitudes about stigma and isolating individuals who were different, who did not fit into the assembly line culture of Henry Ford. And that persisted for a long time.

**Peter Blanck:**

That persisted well through World War II, through the civil rights movement, and of course, beginning to change conceptually with the adoption of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Rehabilitation Act prior, in the 1980s and 1990s when people with disabilities began to understand disability not just as a medical condition, as well as others, but as a socially created condition or a socially defined category, in many cases.

**Peter Blanck:**

The idea being that many people with disabilities with some sort of work accommodation or supports in daily life could be included as equal members of work and society. And to come back to your question full circle, Disability Inclusive Employment Policy is essentially a recognition and a celebration of that history of diversity,

and that disability itself is an important element of the concept of diversity, just as we are, of course, today focusing on race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and other categories, which in many cases in no way are related to a person's ability to participate in community and in the workforce.

**Michael Morris:**

Peter, that's really a wonderful orientation to why this new center exists. I know your formal educational training is both as a lawyer and a psychologist. Can you share how this combination gives you a unique lens through which to see the employment situation of people with disabilities?

**Peter Blanck:**

Well, that's an excellent question, Michael. Like many of us in this field, we gravitate to certain areas. From my own personal and professional experiences, I began as an experimental social psychologist wanting to understand, among other things, individual attitude development, the ways in which organizational cultures develop, the ways in which people develop stigma and bias towards others on the basis of certain categories.

**Peter Blanck:**

My postdoctoral work at Harvard, among other things, focused on how this sort of bias was conveyed subtly, often in unconscious nonverbal ways, which led me to think about what sort of structural discrimination exists and how is this sometimes conveyed in many ways that are hidden, which led me to thinking about individual rights, disability rights, and other sorts of civil rights, which led me to law school at which I began to bring together for me two of my interests, which was human rights and human functioning and human awareness about categories and attitudes and so forth.

**Peter Blanck:**

After practicing law at a time when the Americans with Disabilities Act was just coming online, a very exciting time, and when organizations were beginning to grapple with understanding disability as a natural part of the human experience that could be accommodated, I began to do some early studies with colleagues, yourself and others, on, how

could good workplaces become more flexible and why shouldn't they be? Why is that necessarily cost prohibitive?

**Peter Blanck:**

As a matter of fact, why shouldn't it be beneficial to employees and consumers and individuals with disabilities themselves? In many ways, coming back to your first question, this new national center, the Disability Inclusive Employment Policy Center, is a culmination of the thinking of those ideas with a stellar group of partners led in collaboration by members of the disability community and focused on real world problems to have impact in meaningful ways to affect policy, both generically and in a disability specific arena.

**Michael Morris:**

Thank you. Peter, I know that you already have talked about a little bit employer culture and practices. An area of particular attention for you is to understand more about how employers within their culture and practices could support in a greater way the hiring and retention of workers with psychiatric disabilities. Can you share a little bit more about your approach to that type of study and what you hope we will learn to impact future public policy?

**Peter Blanck:**

Well, let me start close to the present. Again, an excellent question. COVID, of course, is one of those non-incremental or shocks to the social fabric of society, employment community, which has forced a reevaluation of work as we knew it and know it today. I should say to me, this concept of the so-called future of work that many people are studying is a bit of a misnomer. The future of work is really today and yesterday and the way in which individuals and organization can thrive in a changing environment.

**Peter Blanck:**

Now, our studies on organizational culture and workplace accommodations, among other areas, employee benefits, really at bottom go to that concept of what does it take for individuals from diverse backgrounds who are otherwise qualified to work, but may need different supports in community at work, why is that investment important? And why shouldn't that investment be part of a community

of investments from policy, from organizations, from individuals themselves in the ways in which we can thrive in this new very challenging work-life balance?

**Peter Blanck:**

And part of that, you also embedded in your question a very important concept, you talked about mental health or persons with severe mental illness, part of this shock we just experienced, if I can use that term to focus on the present, has been to create terrific uncertainty in many people's lives. And that uncertainty, of course, is associated with new and different types of stress, different exacerbation of mental health, current mental health issues.

**Peter Blanck:**

And that is why many people, including us at this consortium, this new national consortium, are very much interested in the range, the spectrum of disability, with a particular focus on those hidden and mental health disabilities that are increasingly prominent and, interestingly, may not rise to the level of an ADA disability, but certainly require accommodation and certainly require addressing for employers to maintain a qualified workforce.

**Michael Morris:**

You mentioned the term future of work. It's a buzzword. It's often talked about these days. COVID has put new slants on what does it mean when we talk about the future of work. But for our listeners and with your background, how would you define the future of work? How should we be studying it? And what do you expect will be its impact on people with disabilities?

**Peter Blanck:**

Well, great question. In many ways, I and others believe that COVID really served to accelerate trends that were already in the works with regard to changes in the workplace and in community. For example, the recent growth of e-commerce, the growth of technology, the growth of automation, robotics, artificial intelligence, all were in the works prior to COVID. Interestingly, as we can talk about, it wasn't thought of from a disability perspective. It was thought as of a generic perspective.

**Peter Blanck:**

But just as, you may know, Alexander Graham Bell created the telephone for his wife who had a hearing impairment, much of the learning from the technology accommodations have accrued to the benefit of many others in this offsite work or remote work environment that we are in now. Now, going to kind of the next level down in your question, all of this which we're going to talk about is embedded as well in a new social awareness, a racial reckoning, some might say.

**Peter Blanck:**

A new focus on multiple personal identities, race, gender, age, disability, and not a monolithic view of an individual and the way in which he or she operates in the workplace or in the community. If you think of a very crude model, take employment, we have onsite work still, which is basically at a physical place, and that can be done retail, service, manufacturing, farming, leisure, travel, computer-based, but essentially you need to get there.

**Peter Blanck:**

You need transportation, and you need the motivation for people to stay engaged at the work site in ways that make sense for their work-life balance. As we'll talk about, one of the things that COVID did, many people talk about the Great Resignation, the so-called Great Resignation, others, myself included, are beginning to think of it more as been termed a Great Reshuffling. Because as a matter of fact, many people are now coming back to the workforce, but with very different sort of values and conceptions of what work means.

**Peter Blanck:**

Before COVID, we were moving towards this concept of remote work, which now, of course, is the buzzword of the day. A year before COVID, I was involved with a case involving an ADA case, essentially where a woman, who was recovering from a severe illness, God forbid, asked her employer to telecommute three days a week. The employer was kind of pulling his or her hair out over that thing, how is that going to work and so forth. Lo and behold, that case settled.

**Peter Blanck:**

And a couple months later, everybody was talking about remote work. What is remote work? Well, remote work obviously can be at home. It typically involves technology, but not necessarily. Remote work can be also mobile, gig workers. Contingent workers are part of this new sort of technology post-COVID environment, the delivery of food, the delivery of meals. New issues of reimagining work-life balance, of course, is part of this. It's very much affected by the nature of the job itself.

**Peter Blanck:**

In other words, not all jobs are equal and what may be good to remote work on some types of jobs is not good work for manufacturing or onsite work. Unfortunately, many people with disabilities appear to be in those jobs that require onsite participation and have relatively less opportunity to conduct remote work.

**Michael Morris:**

Let's try to zero in on public policy. As you well know and I think many of our listeners do, public policies span such a wide area from health, labor, tax, so many different arenas. For people with disabilities, how can we go about getting critical actors, government, employers, job seekers with disabilities to change their thinking and work together to reimagine and improve public policy and practices based on what your research and others in this center are working on and producing new research findings?

**Peter Blanck:**

Well, if you start with two basic points, among others, that historically people with disabilities are significantly less likely to participate in a labor force, and the second being we are now in a labor environment where workers are desperately needed, why would any rational society or employer not want to invest in that talent? Disability, again, I'm not referring to it in a monolithic way, it's across the spectrum. It could be physical, mental, sensory, and so forth. Very individualistic.

**Peter Blanck:**

But I think one thing that we've tried to do at our center, and you'll hear about this from my colleagues Doug Kruse, Nicole Maestas and others, is we're really trying to in an interesting and novel way

reimagine in this new environment what a work-life balance means. And that is, what does it mean in terms of an expanded social safety net? You'll hear from my colleagues and others about workplace accommodations, sick leave, supports in the home.

**Peter Blanck:**

What does this reimagined work-like balance mean for social policies that historically have tended to incentivize people not to engage in the workplace? Secondly, what does this reimagined workplace mean in terms of another kind of cluster? Here, the first one was social safety. The second one might be considered social awareness or social responsibility. What does it mean for organizations to pursue diversity, equity, and inclusion programs?

**Peter Blanck:**

What does it mean for an organization to pursue sustainable goals, carbon-free airplanes, and so forth? What does it mean to have an inclusive, flexible culture where work times and the way work is done can be individualized in ways that not just are good for the employee, but maximize outcomes for the employers as well. In other words, the second area might be called a more humanistic, socially responsible approach to work that we are reimagining. A third cluster is, well, what are the long-term consequences of this?

**Peter Blanck:**

What does it mean for an organization to be responsive to these issues in real time? The days are over when organizations don't move quickly enough. We see that every day with regard to an organization just going out of business because it wasn't responsive to a particular trend. How are individuals and organizations going to be resilient in these very dynamic, changing circumstances? For example, given this Great Reshuffling, many women have left the workforce.

**Peter Blanck:**

People with disabilities are looking to be reskilled, retooled, perhaps different sorts of education so they are not just relegated to service industry or jobs that they have to work on site. We're seeing new ideas in this cluster about employee equity, employee power. Just a couple weeks ago, Amazon workers in Staten Island voted their first union.

What does that mean in terms of employee wellness and life balance, which goes, of course, full circle to mental health, issues of purpose, and belonging.

**Peter Blanck:**

And of course, a company's board or government understanding that these are elements of a workforce policy strategy that now have to be included in the discussion.

**Michael Morris:**

You've talked in your response to several questions and one can't ignore, COVID is still with us, still a presence. As you talked about, many millions of people have left the workforce. Many millions of jobs remain unfilled. Do you have any suggestions for our listeners from a policy perspective that could increase employer receptivity and action to recruit higher and support effectively workers with disabilities?

**Peter Blanck:**

Well, that's another great question. Of course, you cannot divorce everything we're talking about from the educational system. If a child is not included as a child with a disability in the educational system and relegated to a special classroom or a separate bus or a non-inclusive environment, then there's never an opportunity to learn what that inclusiveness means and why it's important to self-advocate for that.

**Peter Blanck:**

Many employers increasingly don't have enough of individuals with disabilities who feel they're comfortable to self-disclose their disabilities in the workplace for fear of what the outcomes could be. In fact, that's one of our studies at this Disability Inclusive Employment Policy Center to understand what it takes for an individual to feel a connection and a trust with an organization such that self-disclosure can occur.

**Peter Blanck:**

The question as I understood it begins early and it begins in a way that increases the opportunities for people with disabilities and diverse others to become leaders in the organization. I would challenge you. I

did a study with colleagues, oh, maybe now 15 years ago on the diversity at Fortune 100 companies in terms of disability annual reports and their focus on disability. It was very low.

**Peter Blanck:**

I would challenge most people to tell me two boards of directors of major Fortune 500 companies that have a person with a visible disability on that board. We are now seeing, of course, changes in terms of color, gender, age, and so forth, but that is slow coming still. There is a glass ceiling still that many people of color, many women have faced. I would argue in the disability arena, that ceiling is even lower in some ways than that faced by other groups.

**Michael Morris:**

Let's go back to public policy for a second. If you had a magic wand, if you could change one public policy that is having a significant adverse impact on the support, the inclusion, the retention, the advancement of workers with disabilities in diverse workplaces, cross market sectors, and you could do that because you were in charge, whether the influence with Congress, the president, the executive office, whatever it is, what public policy would you change?

**Peter Blanck:**

Well, there was a famous economist named Walter Oi, who was blind actually and who studied disability, and his economic hypothesis, which of course is the case, was basically that disability costs money in the economic sense. Disability costs. Part of that cost, a foundational piece of that is healthcare. The Obama administration has tried through the ACA and other healthcare endeavors, expansion of Medicaid, to address those issues.

**Peter Blanck:**

But until we, as a society, can come to a consensus that this is not going to put small businesses out of business, that this is going to enhance the labor force, that this is going to be a more humanistic approach to work because of improvements in healthcare supports for all people, we will be grappling with the employment rates of people with disabilities combined with the existing system for the most part, which basically pays people not to work.

**Michael Morris:**

I would feel I've missed an opportunity if I didn't bring a question from your lawyer hat in front of our listeners. As you know and have written so extensively about, ADA has changed life as we know it for millions of people with disabilities. However, there are economists, there are some researchers who continue to cast doubt and, in fact, claim that the ADA actually has depressed the employment opportunities and advancement of people with disabilities. What's your position on that issue?

**Peter Blanck:**

Well, it's a very important and interesting question. In some ways, it's tied to the values and fabric of the American society. Because long before the ADA, the same issues were being raised with regard to race and women in the workplace and so forth. There is a core value in American society, maybe it's just part of the way we're all wired as Americans, that values individualistic, non-governmental interference approaches to the way we work and the way we live.

**Peter Blanck:**

We see that in the United States Supreme Court. They are going to decide a case on affirmative action this term and Justice Thomas is of the view, as he has written, that any law that characterizes individuals in his case on the basis of race is necessarily demeaning to that class. Now, the ADA was a love fest when it was passed, but it was quickly criticized by economists and small businesses, the Chamber of Commerce, and so forth.

**Peter Blanck:**

There were some early studies which suggested, which have not been proven to hold, that the ADA has suppressed the employment rate of people with disabilities. But the fact of the matter is, as one of the main players in the ADA Bobby Silverstein would say, the ADA is just a piece, an important piece, of a much broader and comprehensive disability policy framework. The ADA was never envisioned, although it got spun unfortunately in some ways like that, as an employment act.

**Peter Blanck:**

It's an anti-discrimination law that was meant to allow otherwise qualified individuals to participate. But this sense that somehow in our society, a group, whether it's race, gender, age, disability, is somehow getting a benefit that other people are not getting and that's unfair, is something that permeates the way we think about class and race and functionality in our society. Unfortunately, this goes to, or fortunately, basic conceptions about the role of the state and the federal government in managing the social context and the work context of Americans.

**Peter Blanck:**

And in short, what that means is many people are not positive towards ADA, but those same people would be not positive towards any other sort of social civil rights law you can speak of. Having said that, my favorite movie is It's a Wonderful Life. You've heard me say this before, where George Bailey gets a chance from Clarence Odbody, an angel third class, to get his wings, to see what the world would be like had he not lived. I've written about this. It's actually a social science thought experiment of the world.

**Peter Blanck:**

What would our world, what would America look like without an Americans with Disabilities Act? My view and many others, also based on empirical studies, comparing rates and times and so forth, is coming full circle to the Disability Inclusive Employment Policy network or this national grant we're working on. It would be a lot less inclusive. There would be less equality and opportunity in society and in the employment sector for people with disabilities.

**Peter Blanck:**

Is that an affirmative advantage to people with disabilities? I would say not. Critics would say yes. And that's what this debate at core is really about in my view.

**Michael Morris:**

Let me take you to two last questions. I want us to look ahead. World is constantly changing. COVID is just one of many influences. Probably the largest one of the day is inflation, which certainly affects all of us, whether employees, consumers, et cetera. For our listeners, what

might be the next generation of research questions you're thinking about, and that we need to ask to develop policies and practices to continue to overcome barriers to employment for people with disabilities that offers as well career advancement?

**Peter Blanck:**

Great question. I've alluded to it already. I'm particularly interested, as are my colleagues, at core around all these studies. What is it going to take for people who have been marginalized, in this case, people with disabilities, to thrive, to thrive in community, to thrive in organizations? What does it mean for people to have a connection to their organization and to be valued, to feel belonging? What does it mean for people to have a purpose and choice in what they do and equity, of course, in how the company approaches them?

**Peter Blanck:**

It's not an us versus them, a categorical distinction between you're disabled and you get an accommodation, or you're not and you don't. And woven into this thriving has to be a sense of mental growth and mental health as well, since we all are mental beings, cognitive beings, and we all are experiencing this uncertainty and stress right now. How is this going to affect this new generation, my grandchildren, who are up learning nonverbal signs behind a mask, and others who are learning social isolation rather than social inclusion?

**Peter Blanck:**

How is this going to affect the inclusion of the next generation, the present generation of adults and children with disabilities and other marginalized groups in ways in which they can participate in our democracy? And that's going to take a reimagining of organization. It's going to take a reimagining of the organization's economic and social place in society in a way in which it can still thrive. I would say those... If you ask me, "What are the biggest picture questions? Why are we doing what we're doing?"

**Peter Blanck:**

It's really to understand and begin to approach those sorts of questions. What does it mean to work onsite versus remotely? I don't mean just terms and job functions. What does it mean in terms of

purpose, connection, understanding, equity, and who's going to be relegated to different sectors? How are we going to develop talent and reskilling of workers, workers with disabilities, so they can engage in the gig economy, in e-commerce, and all sorts of new forms of work that we haven't even begun to see yet?

**Peter Blanck:**

And now with a terrible layover of a tragedy of a global scale of the war in Ukraine and, of course, the spillover that's going to have for all sorts of agricultural supply chain, economic issues as well. Those are my big picture thoughts. You will probably ask my colleagues are they optimistic about the future or pessimistic and so forth. I'm a hopeless optimistic.

**Peter Blanck:**

I'm not naive, but I do believe that our better angels are still to be found in this arena and those organizations and governmental policies that foster that will be the ones that survive and thrive as we move forward through these difficult times.

**Michael Morris:**

You're an optimist. You have a belief in just the core value and talent, of course, of people with diverse abilities. As I know you can't predict the future, but as we look ahead, this project, this center is on its first five year term, what might be at the end of those five years from knowledge gained? Where might people with disabilities be from an economic context? Of course, challenges will continue to appear that we haven't yet seen.

**Michael Morris:**

We will overcome some of the challenges that we have today. But from your perspective, as clearly you have shared so much around social psychology today, your interests and expertise as a lawyer, as a non-economist, what is your view of, will there be major economic gains for people with disabilities?

**Peter Blanck:**

You ask hard questions, but that's a good question. I also tend to believe that things are cyclical. If you look back in history as a

psychologist, one of the first things we're taught is that the best predict of future behavior is past behavior. The economists probably agree with that as well. We seem to be in a cycle of action and backlash and action and backlash. But I like to think that the overall slope of the line, even with those waves, is positive.

**Peter Blanck:**

The challenge is to learn from those waves and to figure out if we can raise all boats, without sounding cliché-ish or glib. The circumstances of people with disabilities presently are not as positive as some would convey and not as negative as others would convey, I think. There was some sense before COVID that there was a rise in the employment circumstances of people with disabilities. You hear about that, which was great. But when you look at it in abstract terms, it's a minuscule advance.

**Peter Blanck:**

It's still very slow. And maybe it's going to come down to where we started. When I first spoke about incremental change versus shock change to culture and society, perhaps there'll be a positive shock of the kind I'm not smart enough yet to envision, not a negative shock of the kind we're used to envisioning. Maybe it'll involve technology. Maybe it'll involve robotics.

**Peter Blanck:**

Recognizing human privacy and individuality and security and safety and health, but maybe we're due for a shock of a positive kind that will help elevate the nature of individual value of personhood in society. I continue to believe in that. I do believe that on the present trajectory, there's going to be more needed than incremental growth because that has not proved completely beneficial for the community of people with disabilities if you compare them now almost when the ADA was passed 30 years ago.

**Peter Blanck:**

Cautiously positive. Hoping there'll be some sort of wonder bullet, or bullet is probably a bad use of the term today, a wonder experience that might, in fact, help us to understand how this gridlock can be broken with regard to the employment of people with disabilities.

**Michael Morris:**

Thank you, Peter, for as always your insights, your perspective, your values. It's a tremendous opportunity for all of us with you leading this new center, which will look at in so many different facets Disability Inclusive Employment Policy and help us all rethink and reimagine a world that's more inclusive with more opportunity for economic gain for people with disabilities. Thank you so much for sharing your viewpoints today.

**Peter Blanck:**

My pleasure, and I look forward to listening to your other forthcoming podcast.

**Michael Morris:**

Take care.

**Voice Over:**

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