



E06: Helping Employers Identify Qualified Candidates with Disabilities-With Debra Ruh, CEO, Ruh Global Impact, Executive Chair, Billion Strong

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. I am so pleased to be here with all of you again. This is the podcast series, Let's to Work: Reimagining Disability Inclusive Employment Policy. For too, long working age adults with disabilities and youth with disabilities have remained outside the workforce. Policy makers, employers, people in the disability community, all have been puzzling and trying to solve and pose new solutions. Today, I'm so pleased to bring our guest, Deborah Ruh in front of you. Deborah is a dear friend, a global disability inclusion strategist, she is a futurist, she's an innovator, she's a published author who has really shared insights from her experiences working in and financial industries, but working with employers across market sectors. Deborah I'm so pleased that you're able to share some time with us today.

Debra Ruh:

Thank you, Michael. I am so grateful. You were one of my first mentors in the field, and so I have been enamored with your work for so long, and I love that you focus on the financial part of it because often I see that part of the conversation being ignored all over the world. So I want to thank you, Michael and NDI for everything y'all have done to

try to help us solve some of these major financial issues that are holding back our community. So thanks for having me.

Michael Morris:

All right. Well, let's jump in to some questions, Burton Blatt Institute, which as you know, I've worked with at Syracuse University for quite a number of years. Last year in collaboration with researchers at Rutgers and Harvard Universities were funded for a new center to study disability, inclusive employment policy. What does disability of inclusive employment policy mean to you? And why is it important to employers, to people with disabilities and the economy?

Debra Ruh:

First of all, I think a mistake that we continue to make as society is that we need to look at these issues from the entire geo footprint. So I'm often working with major global brands that are in the United States or maybe in the UK, but they have offices all over the world. They have employees all over the world. So I think first of all, we have to remember that we need to include everyone no matter where they live. I'm blessed to live in the United States as are you Michael, but we need to be looking at these policies across the entire organization and across your entire geo footprint.

Michael Morris:

One of the major barriers many individuals would do disabilities talk about is how the federal disability insurance system discourages employment. Do you have recommendations for policy change that would increase motivation for people with disabilities to want to enter to the workforce, to save, to earn more money, to advance in their career?

Debra Ruh:

To be taxpayers. So I think once again, the way to do it is by putting the right policies in place. And unfortunately the policies that we've put in place in many countries, especially here in the United States, they hold people back. They keep people in poverty and people with disabilities are often as you know better than I do, Michael, they're way below poverty level. We have laws that force people with disabilities to not work, to not make a living, to not be able to really

follow their own purpose. I have a purpose. I wanted to make a difference in the world. Other people do as well. And so I think the mistakes that we've made as we're trying to fix it is we're actually holding people back. I have a daughter with down syndrome. She's not allowed to have more than \$2,000 in the bank.

Debra Ruh:

I was watching this show about people in the Appalachian County in West Virginia, and when we stepped in to help these people and give them support and give them money, it's actually caused them to go lower into poverty and not be able to dig their way out of it. So a lot of these policies and legislations that are being created, they hurt us. They don't help us. So one thing I would say is, please stop making your legislations without including the right part of our community in your conversations.

Debra Ruh:

I'll give you an example. There was a bill that was happening in California and what they wanted to do was they wanted to make sure voice technology was private, okay? We had privacy, the big, bad corporations weren't going to steal our data. But the problem was the legislation that was being suggested would actually have hurt the community of people with disabilities because we couldn't use them and we're using this technology to stay independent.

Debra Ruh:

So what I worry about is that lawmakers are making laws and legislation, and they're hurting our community because they don't know how to truly include us, but we do have people that can help them be successful. We keep creating laws that hurt us and force us to be in poverty, not to mention the caregiver situation is ridiculous. We should all be outraged at what we're paying our caregivers, how we put him on the first line during the pandemic. And we pay him crap.

Debra Ruh:

And why is taking care of people, the lowest paid job? Why is that less important than basketball players or musicians or actresses or actors or anybody else? We're doing the same thing to our teachers and our firefighters. So I think we really need to rethink what it mean to have

an inclusive society? And there's a lot to do, but right now, while we're breaking everything, burning down the world, why don't we rethink a world that would work for everyone, including humans that might also have disabilities? Because if you're human, you have abilities and you have disabilities, but it doesn't mean you're broken, it doesn't mean you don't add value.

Michael Morris:

Let's dive deeper again in talking about the future of work. It's a term used a lot these days.

Debra Ruh:

Yeah.

Michael Morris:

Means different things to different people. What does the future of work, how do you see it changing? And what do you think is the potential impact on people with disabilities in terms of more entering the workforce rather than being kept out?

Debra Ruh:

I agree. And I also want to say, we don't want to just enter the workforce. It's great that the employers are starting to include people with disabilities, but what I see happening over and over and over again is that if you're lucky enough to get a job, they leave you right where you are and you never get promoted. You never get accommodated, really. I had quite a few people about 15 different individual people that were working for major corporations. All of these people had disabilities. They were all younger people. And it was so weird, it was over a four month period. They kept coming to me and saying, "Will you help me with my personal branding because I'm working at this big corporation and they just use me as a token?" We don't want to be token, all right? So back to your question though, I think there's a wonderful opportunity. The future of work.

Debra Ruh:

What is the future of work? Well, the future of work is happening right now. We have The Great Resignation going on right now. Six months ago, there was surveys done and Americans were asked, "Will you be

working for your employer in a year from now?" And 40% of the workforce said, "No, I won't." And the younger generations are saying, "I don't want to work for the bad corporations." If you're bad players, you're doing something that's hurting our planet, our world, you're not being inclusive. You're hurting women, the young people don't want to work for you. So what's happening is this is also a beautiful opportunity for people with disabilities.

Debra Ruh:

We have 500 major multinational corporations that have committed at the world economic forum level to include people with disabilities at the CEO level. Okay, well, what does that mean? And how do we help them do it? How do we help them be accountable?

Debra Ruh:

So I think there's a lot of opportunities with future of work, but I think also, we've created billion-strong.org to focus on identity and pride. And one reason why I created that was because these 500 corporations are saying, "Deborah, we don't know where to find qualified people with disabilities." So we do all need to come with pride, but at the same time, people are afraid to come out and admit they have a disability. What is it? 70 to 80% of our community have invisible disabilities. I'm a person with disabilities and I acquired more disabilities as I've aged. I am an older woman with gray hair and I've got purple streaks it, because I want to be fun and old, but we really need to rethink what it means to include us.

Debra Ruh:

And so right now we have five generations in the workforce. And when you make things accessible for people with disabilities, you improve it also for everybody else. And guess what? Maybe I didn't have a disability when I started working for you, but I acquire one. So do I stay with all my intellectual data or do I leave? Let's make sure all humans can participate and work and understand just because a person has a disability, it is not a disadvantage, it's actually an advantage. Because if I can't use my eyes and I've still figured out how to navigate this inaccessible world, I'm a problem solver, I'm creative and I'm innovative. So come and hire me, but don't just stick me in a position where I can never grow and I can never really contribute. If

they're tokenism, we don't want your tokenism jobs. We want real jobs with real futures. That's what the future work is. Can we include all humans in the future of work so we can all participate?

Michael Morris:

Wonderful insights and perspective. You're an author. You've written several books. The one I really want to focus in on is the book titled, Tapping into Hidden Human Capital: How Leading Global Companies Improve their Bottom Line by Employing Persons with Disabilities.

Debra Ruh:

Yes, that was my second book. And the reason why I wrote it, I wanted to write it from a global perspective because once again, I think sometimes in this beautiful country, the United States, we forget there's anybody outside our borders, but there are, but I also wanted to catch corporations and the book is more written about corporations, but I wanted to catch them doing something positive for our community. And so I reminded them that including people with disabilities, how do we do it? We talk about when you have the goals from your government, we talked about a lot of things, but it was more about understanding. This is not that hard. It's not hard to include our community. Everybody thinks it is, but it's not.

Debra Ruh:

And I remember one time I invited a group of corporations to speak at a down syndrome conference. And they were like, "What happens if they ask if we're hiring?" I said, "Are you hiring?" And they're like, "Well, yeah, we are. We got positions." I said, "Well, you say, yes, we are hiring. Please go and look at our positions." Now our expectations is, you are hiring fairly, you're hiring qualified. You've looked at your job descriptions and they make any sense. They're not the job descriptions created 20 years ago, right? Yeah. Most of them are. So do your job descriptions make any sense? So it's just interesting as we really are rethinking everything, I think we need to focus more on each person and what we bring to the table, and make sure people can be accommodated, people can be promoted, people can be heard, people can do a good job for you, but you can also do a good job for them. And I do not believe that we've done that. We've just complicated everything.

Michael Morris:

You and I have lived through the past 30 years of impact of the Americans with Disabilities Act. I know when the law was passed, so many of us in the disability community thought this will bring major change. People with disabilities in record numbers will become employed. Unfortunately, it hasn't worked out that way. And I wonder from your perspective, what do you think holds employment back? And I know you're close enough to Corporate America. Are we beginning to see changes? Is that wall of ignorance and bias beginning to change?

Debra Ruh:

Well, it is beginning to change, but the change isn't happening fast enough, the employers, especially in the United States do want to do the right thing. And not just in the United States, we see other countries too, but just speaking from the US lens, the employers want to do the right thing. Some of them, because they don't want to be sued, but honestly, it just doesn't it make sense to these corporations to leave us out. They want to include us, but I think we are community, our industries that are supporting people with disabilities, we have caused problems.

Debra Ruh:

For example, there are vendors that say, "All you have to do is put this overlay on your website and you're magically accessible, but you're not, you actually leave out all the people that are blind using screen readers." But the National Federation of the Blind has come out and said, "That's ridiculous." But I think we're hurting ourselves by the open fighting that we do. And I think also the blind fight with the deaf and the people with the mobility it's always about the wheelchairs. Those service animals." And so I believe the art industry, our accessibility and disability inclusion industry have complicated and really confused the employers.

Debra Ruh:

One thing I said in the book that you were mentioning was, qualified people with disabilities. And so I said it over and over and over again, because I tend to be a nag. And, my editor said, "Deborah, all you need to do is say that one time." And I said, "No, I actually have to say it over and over again, because other people are not saying that." Other

people come into our employers and they say, "You need to hire people with disabilities. You're really bad that you haven't done it." But the reality is, many of us will not identify. So have we so missed the mark with the ADA or are more people with disabilities actually employed, but we don't tell. And we don't disclose.

Debra Ruh:

And I also want to say, Americans, we should be proud of our ADA. We should be so proud of it because even though we haven't gotten everything that we hope to get out of it, we have changed the world because of it. Because of our Americans with Disability Act, we have the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was modeled after that, because of our Section 508, it's part of the Rehab Act of 1973, the world responded. So we should be proud.

Debra Ruh:

We have had a lot more change, Michael. Yes, it has been discouraging, but I think more people with disabilities are actually working, but also, I believe that we hoped with the ADA, we would make sure people with more severe disabilities were included. I think we've done a horrible job at that. I remember one time talking to a major government contractor and they said, "Deborah, you're not suggesting your daughter with Down Syndrome should come work for us and build missiles." And I said, "Why would I suggest that, that would be ridiculous." "Now, is my daughter qualified to work somewhere in your big organization?" "Yeah." But my daughter has Down Syndrome and she's worked in cafeterias and restaurants and things like that.

Debra Ruh:

So to see something like that insults us all, but unfortunately, we have people going all the time to these employers and saying, "You need to do the right thing and include people with disabilities." Okay. But what does that mean? So we need to talk, we need to use business language, we need to use government language. You have to use the right language with the right people and you have to make sure the right people are involved in these conversations. And it's hit and miss for the corporations are very discouraged by what they get from our community and our industries.

Michael Morris:

Well, let me pick up on that point. Yes there is some competition, divisiveness within the disability community, but everyone, I think, whether you're employers face now with millions of job openings or you're the government, or you're a job seeker with a disability, as you've talked about, we all need to work together. What can we do to bring people closer together, all really seeking the same goals? For the employer, it's productivity, it's the bottom line, profit. For individuals with disabilities, they want to be productive. They want their talents used. How do we try to meld a different kind of thinking and viewpoint that brings government, the business community and people with disabilities more aligned together?

Debra Ruh:

Well, I think first of all, we stop in fighting and whenever we have progress, for example, The Valuable 500, I believe there's over 90 of those 500 that are US based. Well, 500 CEOs have committed to include us, but what does that mean? And how do we make sure that we give them policies that will actually not hurt us in the future? It's same thing with the legislation. But I think we have to be more deliberate about working together, helping each other with the billion-strong.org. I have root global impact, which is a for-profit social enterprise. We are a consulting firm, but Billion Strong has been created for us all to come together, share what we're doing. Because speaking from the corporations, I don't hear that as much from governments or others, but they just don't know where to find us.

Debra Ruh:

When we say we're experts, they don't exactly know what that means. And so they don't know who to believe. So there's a lot of buyer beware happening right now in our market. So what could our community do to come together, to offer them solutions that they would be successful with and everybody else could benefit from. This is the time to come together and figure it out together. Because if we don't do this, we're going to miss this opportunity. And the 500 corporations are going to say, "Oh God, we tried, but they just can't get out of their own way." So I think we should work together more. I think we should have shows like this, Michael, where you're talking about these issues, but we have to come up with solutions together.

Michael Morris:

I'm going to take us back to policy for a second. If you had magic powers and maybe you do and you could wave a wand and there was one policy you wanted to change that stands as a barrier to people with disabilities who really do want to work.

Debra Ruh:

Right.

Michael Morris:

Do want careers, do want to earn more money, be a part of the economy. Can you think? And I know we did talk about social security. That's got some major problems. You got to prove you can't work to be able to have benefits. What stands out to you?

Debra Ruh:

You know what? There's so many problems, but I would say the biggest problem that worries me is, if you are a person with disability that needs a caregiver, like several of my team members do, they require around the clock support, which is no big deal. But if they make over a certain amount of money, those services are taken away and they have to pay for them out of pocket. And what's happened is, the United States Government is a very big buyer. So they get discounted prices. As an individual, you're going to pay at least double. So we see people with more severe disabilities having to pay a hundred to \$200,000 a year for their caregivers, just so they can work. So I think first, what we need to do is, we need to change the policies of what it means to work and to be able to work.

Debra Ruh:

And it's like, "Why are you discouraging me from working?" And we're spending so much money on disability here in the United States, but it doesn't always make it to the individuals in the community. So I think we've got to figure out this caregiving situation, because that's stopping a lot of very talented people from being able to enter the market or they're working for nothing. I think of Dr. LaMondre Pough, who's the CEO of Billion Strong. I just can't believe what he's had to walk through. It's horrible. I don't know how we move forward, truly with our community, if we really want everyone to be included that

wants to be included. If we don't fix these broken policies that prevent us from coming in, the employers don't have magic wands that can solve these problems.

Michael Morris:

But think about big corporations and you've talked to so many of them at the highest level. What do you think is the research question that they really would like more evidence, more answers too that would improve their state of mind, their thinking and their behavior that yes, I want an inclusive workforce. And I just want to be sure that you can answer this question. Is it still the question of, "Those accommodations they're too costly." Or is it a question of, "I don't know where to find the people." As you said. What do you think it is?

Debra Ruh:

That's the biggest one right now, is that they do not know where to find us now. I don't know if some of y'all will remember. Time is fuzzy to me these days, but a couple of years ago, I think during one of the heights of the Black Lives Matter, the CEO of Wells Fargo, unfortunately made a comment that the reason why they were not promoting people that were Black was because he couldn't find the talent. Well, yeah. Society about killed him for that because that was not true. But unfortunately, that is true of our community. And so he said to me all the time, "Deborah, we don't know where to find you if you won't identify."

Debra Ruh:

So there's some interesting things happening in the background. LinkedIn is playing with some stuff. Could we say that we had lived experiences, but only the recruiters could. So we're trying to figure out how we could solve that problem. But the reality is at some point we're going to all have to come out, enough of us and be willing to admit that we have invisible disabilities and that we're stronger together. And so where the employers are really struggling though, is there're so many in parts.

Debra Ruh:

So I always say, "Start with a roadmap." And there's multiple roadmaps that you could go for. But we also see corporations getting, like you

said, confused about accommodations called adjustments in the UK, but it's still the same thing. They are confused about that, but they're figuring out better, because they're good at processes. They're more concerned about, we don't know where to find you. We don't know where to find qualified people with disabilities. That's their number one issue. And they're really scared about it.

Debra Ruh:

They can put policies in place, but they don't think that they can be successful if they can't find us. And so what's happening is most of the employees that they talk about are people like me that don't look like we have a disability because I'm neurodiverse. And they've been including neurodiverse people in their employment for a long time. They just had not been accommodating us. So it's all about identity because we've got to come out ... I hope that we can come out with pride.

Michael Morris:

Last question for you. And that is again, you don't have a crystal ball, but looking ahead over the next five years, do you have a sense of optimism about the economic gains, the employment advancement to be made by people with disabilities and let's leave it in the US. Let's focus on the US.

Debra Ruh:

Okay. All right. And I'll say yes, I'm very, very optimistic, partially because of the system we have in the United States with our legal system, we have the carrot and the stick approach. I'm optimistic because of efforts like The Valuable 500, but I'm also optimistic because of the United Nations sustainable development goals. And the 17th goal is, will everybody work together? Duh, will you form partnerships? But of those 17, first of all, I would say all of them affect us, but 11 of those 17 really impact including people with disabilities in a more way. I think you're going to see a lot of barriers removed in the next five years. I really honestly believe that, but I think we have to do it backwards.

Debra Ruh:

What I've seen is, often, we're invited late to the conversations if it all. But what I want is the gigantic efforts that are being made all over the world, I want our community heavily engaged in those conversations. For example, I'm sorry, but a smart city, is not smart. I don't care if you call it smart city or not if it's not inclusive, if it's not sustainable and if it's not accessible to all of the citizens. And so I think the opportunity that I'm seeing, which I'm really excited about, we're being pulled into. We've had like seven major billion dollar projects come to us about smart communities, smart cities, because they're starting to understand once again, if you're not including everybody, including the aging people like me, that it's going to fail.

Debra Ruh:

And so that's why I'm really, really optimistic because, if we can be in the middle of those conversations, we're not going to be left out. I was asked to be an ambassador for a big group that is supporting NGOs, which are nonprofits that are trying to make a difference. And so they put out this beautiful website and portal and app, they were showcasing it for this really large group of leaders. And I looked at it, it was beautiful, wonderful. Wow. And then they asked if anybody had questions. I always have question.

Debra Ruh:

So I ask, what do you think my question was, Michael? "Is this accessible?" "Well, we didn't have the money. It was too much trouble. We're going to do it later. We didn't know how to do it." And so what I said to all of these leaders was, "Good. As usual, my community, the community of people with disabilities don't get included. We're an afterthought, later we'll include you." And this is UN stuff. So it's interesting. The comments that came back to me later, but I did resign as the ambassador for that organization. Because if you don't include us, I'm not in.

Debra Ruh:

So I think we all have to be more braver about that as well. But also Michael, I do want to say, I understand that we're asking people with disabilities to identify, people will disenfranchise you. They will exclude you. They will. And so what we have to do is, we have to protect each other. So I just want to admit that it is dangerous

sometimes to admit that you have a disability. But enough of us got to keep saying the same thing, "We're going to be included, include us. I'm proud to be who I am." I'm proud to be a woman that is ... I have a daughter with disabilities? My husband who sadly just passed away, had a traumatic brain injury when he was 11 years old and died of dementia because of that traumatic brain injury. I myself have a disability. So is my whole family broken or am I just a family like everybody else?

Michael Morris:

Deborah, thank you as always. Thank you for your optimism, thank you for your insights. Always fun and enjoyable to share questions and a conversation with you. I think you've given our audience a lot to think about. Lots of things that if you're an employer can think about changes. If you're a person with a disability, think about changes in your own life and perspective. Thank you again and just appreciate the time with you.

Debra Ruh:

Yeah. Thank you, Michael.

Voice Over:

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