

NY Times Interview with Ben Casselman: For disabled Americans, employment is soaring

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Ben Casselman: My name is Ben Casselman. I'm an economics reporter here at the New York times. The U. S. job market is still recovering from the shock of the corona virus pandemic. But for one group, employment rates of soared far higher than before covid. In November, Americans who reported having a disability were employed at the highest level on record - 22 percent. That's partly about the strong job market, which is giving opportunities to people who are often left on the economy sidelines. It's also partly the result of the pandemic forcing companies to adopt remote work on mass. Remote work is not a solution for all disabled people. For many of them, it's a game changer. And hi everyone. Welcome to our twitter space. So we're here today to talk about the job market for on a recent new York times twitter space. I spoke with 2 experts: Nora Genster director of the employment transformation collective at the Northwest Center in Seattle, and Mason Ameri professor at the Rutgers business school, who focuses on workers with disabilities. What you're about to hear is our discussion about the changes that will lead to the increase in employment for disabled adults and what it means for the future work and the workplace more generally.

Ben Casselman: Mason, maybe to go to you first here, how do things look different now than maybe they did and in, say, 2019?

Mason Ameri: You know, during the pandemic, we all realized that many of us could work remotely. And that realization was disproportionately positive for people with disabilities. So, the acceptance, we now have a remote work has really helped boost this group's employment. And it's been a total game changer. People with disabilities who are qualified to do a job now have better access to employment. And the through line here is that remote work creates flexibility. Whether you have a mobility challenge, are neurodiverse, live with chronic pain, have an auto immune disorder, etc. If you're remote, you can work more comfortably and productively from home.

Ben Casselman: Yeah, I want to stay on that. I'm sure for some of our listeners here it's, it's pretty obvious but, but for others, it may not be especially those without a 1st hand experience of this. Nora, what are the advantages of remote work for people with disabilities? Particular recognizing it's, it's not the case for every disabled person.

Nora Genster: I think this is sort of a theme that I've really been bringing up with employers lately, is that you could have your employees spending their time trying to navigate in inaccessible workplace. Or you could have your employees doing their job, you know, I've been disabled my whole life and there are jobs in which I've been spending 30 percent of my time trying to navigate a workplace. And I had nothing to do with my qualifications as in data analysts, for example. Instead, I was spending my time trying to find an accessible bathroom or trying to dim the lights in my office because the concussion related situation. They could have had me doing my job. But I wasn't, and that is certainly an experience that a lot of folks have to deal with and can be mitigated by the ability to have control of your environment.

Ben Casselman: I've heard some concern from some people in the disability community that we don't want to create a world in which we just sort of shove, disabled people off into remote work that we need to make sure that if people want to be able to come to the office that they can and we're making appropriate accommodations at all. You know, we, we know some of us prefer to work from home, so I always prefer to work in the office and that both of those options need to be on the table. And I'm wondering if that's a concern you here in terms of sort of pushing folks off to the side.

Nora Genster: Absolutely, it's a concern. This is about equitable access and equity relates to choice. If it's about equitable access, then we need to have equitable access to all the different spaces in which business is taking place. Certainly not an excuse to ignore these other really tangible barriers to, to accessibility and participation. Whether that's at work at a theater, at a conference.

Ben Casselman: For many workers though there is no choice. A disproportionate share of disabled workers or in jobs where remote work is uncommon or impossible. Like retail, I asked Mason whether the benefits of remote work we're going to reach those workers.

Mason Ameri: That's an excellent question. It's not surprising to say that telework isn't feasible for every type of job. For example, many service and blue-collar jobs have to be formed in person. These occupations were especially hard hit during the pandemic and these sectors of which people with disabilities are disproportionately employed. But during tight labor markets, especially in a moment that we're in employers, typically lower barriers hiring. The question is how tight labor markets influence the opportunity for telework for people with disabilities. And what we've discovered was that while the potential for remote work is limited by occupational structure, things are improving. Meaning, even within these blue color and service occupations, there's been an increase trend toward telework that people with disabilities are taking advantage of. These jobs aren't necessarily all telework friendly, but there are a number of tasks within these jobs that can and are being done at home. So, I suppose you can say that employers are rethinking how these tasks that can be done at home will be done at home, to protect the status quo on flexibility, and to remain competitive in this tight labor market.

Ben Casselman: Yeah, I actually want to bring in a listener here, John, who I think has some of his own experiences to share here or possibly a question John, if you're there and feel free to jump in.

John: Yes. I'm also disabled. I work from home. One of the bigger barriers that still exist is the lack of a robust work incentive program for people with disabilities to be able to keep things like Medicaid easily. If you put me in a position to choose between my job and Medicaid. I have to keep Medicaid, that's nonnegotiable. And that just creates a situation, where for me, I'm not allowed to have more than \$2000.00 in my bank account. And sometimes I get paid on the last day of the month and then a few hours or social security checks my bank account, And there's more than \$2000.00. So that's an area where there is still massive barriers that have to be worked on.

Ben Casselman: Thank you John. I, I really appreciate that. Mason and Nora, either one of you does either one of you want to jump in here quickly on that, that as a, as an issue and the challenges that it poses?

Nora Genster: When we talk about, you know, disability policy at a really high level this sort of issue has to be taken into consideration. Disability in the workplace is not only an HR issue. It is, you know, an issue at the highest levels because yeah, when we talk about choosing between a job and Medicare Medicaid, that's an impossible choice to make. And the more our employers can invest in its own

health care can support its own employees in accessing and affording really, really good health insurance. I think that that is a part of this conversation that is often lacking.

Ben Casselman: We're coming down to the end of our time here, but I did want to look ahead a little bit and, and you know, lots of talk about the possibility of a recession next year. We know from history that recessions tend to, to hit people with barriers to employment of all kinds, certainly including disability, especially hard. What, what do you see as the risk of what happens if we enter a recession? And is there any reason for, for optimism that some of these gains will stick around?

Mason Ameri: There is a likelihood that we would, you know, we would see a regression of much of the results that have been favorable. But at the same time, I'd like to think that remote work has been a, an eye opener for, for everyone. There are tools out there that helped us protect our performance, that we're productivity, our relationships. And I think that to argue that we're going to undo all the progress that we've made to date, amid the pandemic, and the name of work that would be would be untenable.

Nora Genster: A workplace, in which disabled people can do their best work as a workplace where everyone can do their best work. This is a trend in so many sectors. The tools and accommodations and adaptations that have been brought forth from the ingenuity and really tireless work of the world of disability are adopted at large. And as we do look to, you know, an unsteady economic landscape, this is a really unique and powerful lever that employers can be using. And many, frankly, don't

Ben Casselman: My take away from this conversation, is that the pandemic is reshaped the workplace. In some ways are helpful for disabled workers, but the still a long way to go. Americans with disabilities are still far less likely to work than people without disabilities. And covid itself has left millions of people dealing with new disabilities. Meaning companies are going to need to find new ways to recruit these workers and to help them succeed. Thank you for listening to this live event. You can find out about other live conversations hosted by the New York Times by following us via @NYTimesevents. I'm Ben Casselman with the New York Times have a great day.