



Episode 17: Disability and Telework: An Encouraging and Concerning Trend

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." This series is about talking to experts, as we will today, about rethinking how we change practices and policy that increase the participation of working-age adults with disabilities in diverse, inclusive places of employment. I'm so pleased today to have with us Mason Ameri, who is an associate professor at the Rutgers Business School in the Department of Management and Global Business. His research has focused on disability employment and has developed evidence-based solutions to improve the inclusion of people with disabilities in organizations, society, and certainly within the workplace. He has also been featured on a TED Talk. He's been covered by The New York Times. He's an award-winning researcher, and we're just excited to have him with us today. Mason, welcome to our podcast series.

Mason Ameri:

Thank you, Michael, this is a great opportunity. I'm happy to have this discussion with you.

Michael Morris:

Mason is a part of the team for the Disability Inclusive Employment Policy Research and

Training Center. He's also a part of the Rutgers Employer Practices Research and Training Center. Both are funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research. I want to start off with just a very general question about how did you get where you are? We're talking about employment, we're talking about career advancement. What influences in your life led you to this career choice and your work at Rutgers?

Mason Ameri:

Yeah, that's a great question. Talk about exploring origins. The short answer is my mother. She's a hired special education teacher from Newark Public Schools. And her work in providing students with disabilities instructional support, had a really deep impression on me. I always wondered whether the self advocacy skills that she taught in primary education, and perhaps assuming these students ascended to higher education positively influenced their employment outcomes. And it wasn't until I began working at a university level, where I met with Douglas Kruse and Lisa Schur, that I learned about how complex employment decisions really are.. This is really where my journey began, I left my job at the National Labor Relations Board. And I haven't looked back since.

Michael Morris:

We're certainly appreciative of having you as a colleague and the kind of research you've been doing with Lisa and Doug at Rutgers. Let's talk about one of the studies you did several years ago. I think it was back in 2017, you designed a very interesting study to try to understand better discrimination and prejudice in the hiring process that adversely impacts job candidates with disabilities. I would love for you to share with our listeners, the very interesting design that was put together and start there. And then talk about what did you learn and what was the impact of that study?

Mason Ameri:

Yeah, so actually, like I said, I left the Labor Board in 2011, because of this very project. So in 2011, Doug, Lisa, Mira Adya, formerly from BBI, and I submitted job applications from well-qualified, falsified or hypothetical quote-unquote, applicants, with and without disabilities in response to over 6000 accounting positions across the US. We manipulated spinal cord injury and Autism Spectrum Disorder, or at the time Asperger's syndrome in the cover letters, and we framed them as strengths. Arguably, these disabilities shouldn't limit productivity and accounting. But here's the short version: for months, literally months, we audited, firm after firm, through these applications, and it was a wild

experience. We had this systematic way of sourcing job ads on Indeed.com, verifying employers so that we made sure they weren't tagged twice. I checked 12 burner phones that I bought from AT&T -- it was so embarrassing. And Michael, I tell you I went to AT&T at this local mall in my old hometown. And I was like, "I need 12 burner phones." They thought I was doing something extremely suspicious. But I was trying to make the argument that "no, I'm doing something for social good." In any event that alongside the 12 Gmail accounts were checked on daily. And we have this elaborate coding scheme to measure callback rates good and bad. But ultimately, we discovered that these job applicants with disabilities were less likely to attract employer interest in comparison to their nondisabled counterparts. And this was especially true for the experienced applicants with disabilities, which suggests that work experience might not actually remove the labor market disadvantages associated with disability.

But also, what we found was that the disability gap was concentrated among smaller firms that aren't covered by the ADA. And this suggested two things, lawful discrimination by smaller businesses and a positive effect of the ADA on larger firms that are governed by the law. But the short is this study, accomplished something that lab experiments and survey designs couldn't. We captured authentic responses from employers without all that social desirability bias, muddying waters muddying results, and that's the beauty of field experimentation, but it took, incontrovertibly, it took a lot of work. Now, as far as like looking into the future, I'm just like, wondering, of all the things that we've done from a field experimentation perspective, what has actually worked and what hasn't, because there have been several trial-and-errors along the way.

Michael Morris:

I wonder with 2017, it was a different point in time, I think about where we are now, where there is a different set of circumstances in terms of labor, supply and demand. And I wonder, would there be a different result? Where again, depending on job categories, would employers who really need to find more skilled workers and more talent, would there be a different result? I know, it's hypothetical, no way of knowing. But what are your thoughts? Do you think that might be true?

Mason Ameri:

There's always the chance, as I was saying before, this was one successful large scale field study. After this, we had pretty much done follow ups, and we perform to literally identical audit studies that examined other occupations with other disability types. One of those

projects included my dissertation, where over 12,000 employers were sampled, again, across the states, same research design, but in different occupation. And it didn't produce meaningful results, meaning there was no evidence of discrimination for the null effects. Um, so I guess in that case, you could argue that in say, data entry positions or software developer positions that were sampled in this case, we didn't find evidence of discrimination. Now, in a more recent project, we looked into intersectionality more closely by manipulating disability, gender and veteran status through field, lab, and qualitative research designs. And this work is currently under review. Fingers crossed. But ultimately, what we found is that veteran status helps level set the playing field in a way. And it's not because of the thank you for your service model, or patriotism, or whatever. It's really because of the discipline, that one demonstrates through that category, we can look at disability as a unitary variable, or we can consider it from an intersectional perspective. And with that perspective in mind, things get a lot more complex outcomes can be really, I'd say, beneficial for people with disabilities, assuming that they're veterans in this case. Again, this is just a snapshot, this is just a hypothetical scenario. But in other instances, it could also be unfavorable the outcomes, assuming you have other traits that create a double bind, or double discrimination.

Michael Morris:

You mean such as race or gender? .

Mason Ameri:

Correct. That's right.

Michael Morris:

Right. Fascinating. Okay. I do remember that study, and it got tremendous coverage by the media. It really, I think, hit a note that really provided a very unique perspective on this, despite the years since the passage of the ADA. This tracking sense of bias and discrimination in a very unique way. Let's go to another of the areas that you've been studying with others at Rutgers and that's telework by people with disabilities at different points in time, prior to and after the onset of COVID. It seems that there are some obvious advantages to remote work for individuals with disabilities. Can you share with our audience what those might be. And then also, clearly, there are some disadvantages, and maybe you can identify those as well.

Mason Ameri:

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 of 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. So yeah, the ability to get work via this 10 second commute is to their advantage. And the real line here, just as far as this advantage is concerned, is that remote work creates flexibility. If you are remote, you may be able to work more comfortably and more productively from home. But on the flip side, there are disadvantages, to your point, right, there are cons to remote work for people with disabilities, for example, the cost of equipment like high speed internet, or if you look at it from an interpersonal perspective, separation from coworkers, and with that a lack of social engagement, these can be pain points, even though we'd like to believe that those water cooler chats, those casual conversations are trivial. They actually influence relationships and opportunities. So when we think about these types of opportunities, I think one of the biggest challenges of working remotely is career advancement, not being visible, or as involved in decision making, can hinder career growth, potentially.

Michael Morris:

So from your studies of telework, you looked at different periods of time prior to COVID where workers with disabilities were more likely to be working from home.

Mason Ameri:

So up through 2019, more people with disabilities engaged in telework or remote work, then people without disabilities. And then this pattern changed in 2020, where more people without disabilities work from home, because of the pandemic, compared to people with disabilities. Basically, workers with disabilities were left behind in this rapid growth of remote work or telework. But still people with disabilities saw a jump. It just wasn't as dramatic as it was for people without disabilities. And I think that the, the thing that kind of accounts for this difference is the occupational distribution.

Michael Morris:

Can you talk a little bit more about how this plays out across occupational lines, and are there people with certain types of disabilities who benefited the most?

Mason Ameri:

Yeah, these are great questions. People who worked in white collar jobs had a higher likelihood of telework before the pandemic, and as you might imagine, larger increases once the pandemic broke out, compared to people in say, blue collar jobs or service positions. And it's in these blue collar jobs or service positions where people with disabilities are concentrated. Now, as far as the disability types that benefited the most from telework, people with say, cognitive, mental health disabilities, or individuals with mobility disabilities, were especially likely to engage in telework, amid the pandemic. And this makes sense because there are aspects to telework, like less stress, and a reduced commute, that are important to say, these groups. When you look at it, though, from the unemployment rates, state by state, we found that tight labor markets actually favored people with disabilities in securing telework positions or telework jobs. And this was especially the case for people with, say vision impairments and people who have difficulty with self-care at home. So it looks as though during tight labor markets especially there's an increased willingness among employers to hire remote workers, and people with disabilities are helping meet this demand.

Michael Morris:

So we're in an interesting period now, in that there are certainly many employers who are really asking their employees to come back to work or are retracing, rethinking, "is, is this really helping our productivity?" questioning the amount of time workers are spending at home. And so we're in this middle period of the restructuring of work? I think we certainly hit a point where this was a clear trend, but it's not so clear now. And what will be the impact on people with disabilities who clearly, were enjoying the understanding that maybe wasn't there before? As a reasonable accommodation, there was a lot of challenges by employers. But that changed, but now we're in this middle phase or so. What's your thinking about that?

Mason Ameri:

What's frustrating is that remote work, and remote work options are something that people with disabilities have been advocating for, as you know, for a time. And often, to your point, Corporate America was saying it's too complicated, and that people will lose productivity. But then suddenly, everyone was sent to home from whatever nook or cranny they could carve out, they were working, hammering away at their keyboards,

whether in their kitchens or makeshift offices, and Heaven and Earth got moved to make remote work.

This shift to widespread remote work effectively leveled the playing field for people with disabilities. People with mobility issues, for example, have the same chance to work as their non disabled peers without having to face their usual hardships. And so your question is, will it all last? Lately, more and more employers have been calling workers back to the office. The question is whether these pandemic inspired gains for people with disabilities will actually stick, and we need to look to history, we need to refer to history for answers. I helped write or helped co-author a book on remote work. And in doing this deep dive, I learned that remote work is not this novel concept. We've had this option for a time, even before the pandemic, there was this mantra back in the day in the early 2000s of "so long as you're productive, who cares where you work from, or for how long. This was something that companies exercising this remote work model proudly preached. And guess what, just like today, quality of life transformed for the better, and productivity improved by a massive margin. Right. And then suddenly, economic conditions changed, hard times hit, companies suffered due to whatever market issues and executives became concerned about their survival. So in a panic, they put the kibosh, they axed remote work entirely. Some companies ultimately decided to reverse course, with this kind of all-hands-on-deck mentality. And that meant having employees in the office as much as possible to collaborate and connect on ways to improve their businesses. Now, whether or not remote work was actually the problem, this was the chosen solution. And if you look to where we are, currently, that solution is being exercised more and more. So the predominant impression back then was that remote work was a challenge. And I think it was driven by fear, fear that was driven by uncertainty, because for most bosses, for most executives, if you can't see your employees, the grand assumption is that they're not working. So the takeaway from history is that it wouldn't be shocking to see employers do the same thing again, if we encounter another economic downturn. And if that's true, the benefits conferred to people with disabilities via remote work could be at risk. So there is a good reason to be cautious. But really, and if we think about this more sensibly, there are going to be extremes on either side, to meet the demand, the kind of labor demand, in this case, the labor expectations that individual companies or subgroups of industries are going to say, either no remote work isn't for us, right? Or that the 9 to 5 kind of anachronistic model in the office simply isn't the way forward. So there's going to be this pendulum swing. But it looks like we're centering on something that's more and more

hybrid work. I think this is something that you were alluding to before as far as like finding that middle ground, this compromise, per se. And it seems to be the most feasible option. But doing that well is still a book that's being written, right. It requires more internal consistency within companies within whole industries. It's still very much a work-in-progress.

Michael Morris:

You've almost laid out a new set of research questions that we truly don't understand enough, I believe at this point, the hybrid model seems as you mentioned, to be that middle ground. But has there been really any evidence-based studies that evaluate and contrast the impact of each approach?? Really, I guess we're talking about three, three different approaches or work structure: hybrid, all in the office and then of course, working completely from home? Is that the next generation of research with particular attention to evaluate the impact on workers with disabilities in different types of jobs and industries?

Mason Ameri:

Yeah. The next chapter of research specific to remote work should be about what types of reasonable accommodations are most effective in improving the productivity of people with disabilities in these types of virtual environments, these remote work environments, is it assistive tech? Is it modified equipment? Is it adaptive work schedules, flex time, frequent breaks, etc, maybe even restructuring jobs where non-essential tasks are done remotely? I think as a complement to this, an area that we probably should be looking into. And I imagine between our teams at Syracuse and Rutgers will be, will be on this right quick. But something that I've been personally wanting to look into is the implications of remote work as a reasonable accommodation under the ADA. Whether it's studying the number and types of requests that employers receive, and approve, for remote work as a reasonable accommodation, or reviewing legal cases and regulatory guidance to identify any trends or patterns and how courts and government agencies have approached this issue, or both, there's really a chance for us to develop guidelines for employers on how to best respond to such requests for remote work as a reasonable accommodation in a way that complies with the ADA and supports the needs of workers with disabilities.

Michael Morris:

Do we know at this point, whether the worker with or without disability working remotely,

may be sacrificing opportunity for career advancement, out of sight out of mind to supervisors, the individuals who are going to make those decisions. It could impact salary levels, too. Do we know enough about that at this point?

Mason Ameri:

Not that I know of – no, not that I know of. Just as far as the implications of being remote. But it is something that many disability experts, whether these are individuals, practitioners in HR, advocates, researchers, that have been cautioning in saying that fine, remote work is a great option, right? It can be used as an accommodation. But we don't want this to be the only de facto solution, right in protecting a person with disabilities productivity and performance and being part of an organization because technically, you're very much detached. Now, unless there's an improved approach amongst employers to help incorporate remote workers so that they're not sidelined and they're not necessarily of the community, then this is something that is clearly a work in progress. It's just something that we need to consider actively in the name of preventative maintenance, we've created this new frontier of work. Now we've got to make sure we grease the wheels constantly and actively protect the status quo. But also creating policy in this interactive process between employees with disabilities and employers on what the work is, what am I actually doing? How do we measure where this conversation of whether on remote or on site becomes moot?

Michael Morris:

And the whole notion of where can we go with policy, that, as you said, protect workers who are working remotely, I think is a ripe area for much further exploration.

Mason Ameri:

Absolutely.

Michael Morris:

You're also involved in another study, which as I understand it involves jobs, ads, company messages to understand more about the impact of receptiveness of job applicants with disabilities to work for companies that are being much more intentional about increasing the diversity of their workforce, and particularly increasing the involvement of individuals, job seekers, with disabilities. Can you tell us a little bit more about how that research project is framed out? And what's your hypothesis? What are you trying to prove?

Mason Ameri:

Yeah, so this project is currently under peer review. But I'm glad to share the objective and the results, I think it's safe to say that over the past few years, companies have been increasingly attending to their DEI statements in public facing documents, including job advertisements in this case, but we don't really know how various decisions about the type of language that's used or where this language is placed within a job ad are perceived by marginalized populations, including people with disabilities. So this study explored various options for DEI statements within job ads, to look into whether these choices have a measurable impact on potential job seekers living with disabilities. So methodologically, my co-author Terri Kurtzberg, and I created false job ads and very DEI language, for example, legal traditional language versus heartfelt language, and placed this language at the top or at the bottom of the job advertisement. And then we included whether the company offered the opportunity to indicate a need for accommodations even before the interview versus not. And just as far as our results are concerned, we found that heartfelt statements and upfront placement inspired more positive reactions from participants, with trust playing a very kind of mediating role in these positive relationships. But here's the thing, participants also expressed skepticism in that, regardless of the language that's used, bias would still exist in the reality of the job. So job candidates with disabilities are indifferent to how a company frames its DEI position. But statements without direct evidence, such as testimonials, companies, statistics on exactly that, disability employment, it raises doubt about whether the actions would stay true to the words--walking the talk, per se. So that's essentially this project as a whole. Now, there, there are other ways that we're looking into, but it's still very much like a work in progress, and something that really hasn't been unpacked too much.

Michael Morris:

Yeah, to me, it's a fascinating arena to, to explore further. . They're proliferating to such a great degree, but how does that play out in terms of the actual practice at multiple levels in terms of what happens with the job applicant?

Mason Ameri:

That's exactly right, just having done a scan of the Fortune 500. If you look at their proxy statements, if you look at their 10-K statements, if you look at their annual reports, DEI rhetoric is everywhere, literally everywhere. But is this just people or companies jumping on the bandwagon? Or is there something more going on? Where we have direct

evidence, objective evidence that speaks to how open companies are on disability access, disability inclusion, disability employment?

Mason Ameri:

Yeah, and it sounds like you when further review the results of your study, you actually provide a new blueprint for companies to separate itself from that overwhelming, just set of statements to ways that actually takes the statements to a new level.

Mason Ameri:

We need the facts.

Michael Morris:

Yes,, wonderful. As you look ahead over the next several years, you probably have almost a long list of employment related policies and practices that sort of the next agenda, the next generation of research that merit additional study beyond those the several that you've discussed today. Is there a way to give us a glimpse into the future what's down the road for Mason and your wonderful colleagues at Rutgers?

Mason Ameri:

Right now, we have a few projects teed up. What's currently on my radar, personally, is an interview study that I'm currently in the middle of, that qualitatively explores people with disabilities, and the culture clash they might experience as they transition from higher education to employment. Over the past year, I've been meeting with one universities, Career Services and Disability Services units, to appreciate how they coach students with disabilities to become better self-advocates upon entering the job market. And then I've been comparing more recently, these policies, with insights from students and alumni with disabilities, to capture the reality of their career planning, and employment experiences, and what needs to happen at the university level to improve transition support. If anything, I don't quite have results just yet. It's still very much like I'm at the unpacking phase, identifying themes and things of that nature. But this is a great opportunity for us to learn more about why the disability employment gap has persisted for so long, particularly in these DEI-friendly times. If we're not properly or adequately equipping students with disabilities who are earning amazing degrees in STEM or otherwise, we are basically having them fly the coop, ill equipped in self advocating and communicating their needs for accommodations to again protect their productivity protected performance. So this is a great opportunity just as far as this qualitative study is

concerned, to set the stage and understand where are the gaps, even at the higher education level in equipping or training students to exercise their voice to self-advocate all things considered in protecting their employment rights ultimately. So yeah, results on that coming soon. And hopefully, we can have a follow up.

Michael Morris:

Okay, any others that you can share?

Mason Ameri:

We more recently have gotten into robotics, and yeah, robotics and how this helps improve productivity constraints. But we were more curious about employer impressions. And this is currently again, a work in progress. But there is a project that Doug, Lisa, myself, Terry, Hazel and Johnson have gotten involved with NCSU, in basically playing with this exposit that they've created--these engineers, Rockstar engineers, and the optics and the impression it makes it has on decision makers like employers, even though you know that this thing controls for limitations, they're still a concern of it's a bit clunky. It's a bit intimidating, how much is this going to cost me and things of that nature. So we're looking at how we can make this more marketable, and certainly more user friendly, because, of course, it's still kind of crude proof of concept, design, it's in its kind of initial beta phases. But as this thing kind of evolves, as it scales, what we're hoping to do is create a field experiment where we go out there with an actor or actors with the suit on without the suit on people with disabilities, in seeing how employers respond when they asked for job applications, whether there's job opportunities and whether they can apply on site and measuring the callback rates subsequently. So these are the kinds of two kinds of for most projects that I have on my radar, one qualitative, one kind of way more involved, way more intense, and a bit of an homage to the 2018 paper as you referenced. But yeah, there's just so much, there's just so much research happening all at once, to be honest with you. But these are the ones that I'm personally actively involved in.

Michael Morris:

That's great. That last one really takes you into the future in terms of a different approach to how technology people accept it, don't accept it. But it's interesting. There's then a common thread, though, you're really looking at the early stages of what happens to job candidates, I guess more so then issues around retention and career advancement later stages in the life cycle. And you continue to try to take different bites of the apple of understanding more of both the job seeker with disabilities perceptions, as well as the

employer perceptions on their interactions at the earliest stage, which again, very significant in terms of reasonable accommodations, when should that discussion begin? What and how does it impact both key stakeholders here? Fascinating. I think we're about at the end of time, is there anything further you'd like to share about your work or putting in perspective any further about where we may be headed in terms of continuing to improve employment participation by people with disabilities?

Mason Ameri:

I guess one thing to take note of is that hybrid work model that we had discussed earlier on just to cap things off, the big question that I think is looming in the minds of disability researchers who are studying this space in particular, is how it'll affect how it's going to actually influence people with disabilities. This is where organizations have to incorporate disability inclusion in their hybrid work policies, and in their virtual operations in general. And it's still very much kind of a squishy territory. It's so extremely ambiguous, this playbook that companies are practicing, and it's clearly not a one size fits all solution. So the future is becoming more and more hybrid, and I am very excited to be looking into that space with Doug, Lisa, you, Peter, the entire gang, because clearly this is the new wave and we are eager to sink our teeth into it.

Michael Morris:

Yeah, totally agree. I don't think it's a passing fad. It represents that middle ground and much to be learned that hopefully have the opportunity to do further studies that will get to the heart of those issues. Mason, thank you for your insights. Thank you for the research that you're doing. And appreciate you as a colleague, and thank you for being with us today on "Let's Get to Work: Reimagining Disability Inclusive Employment Policy and Practice." Thanks so much.

Mason Ameri:

Thanks so much.

Voice Over:

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