



VOICE VALUE

By Robin Springer

COVID Increased Disability, but It Also Showed How to Make Society More Accessible

The number of people with disabilities has grown, and so will the need for accommodations

The Center for American Progress estimates that COVID-19 likely left 1.2 million people with disabilities, just through 2021.

Of the approximately 10 million people who registered for the CDC's V-Safe, a post-vaccine health checker, more than 25 percent (2.5 million) had an event that required them to miss school or work and/or prevented normal activities. Add to that the Government Accountability Office's estimate that long COVID has potentially affected up to 23 million Americans, and you can see what we're up against.

This potentially astronomical rise in the number of people with disabilities is changing the societal landscape.

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What are the ramifications, for people with disabilities and the general population? How are businesses going to shift their practices and policies to attract employees and customers with disabilities? And how can we as an industry spearhead creative solutions to accommodate the many millions more people who now need additional tools to be independent and successful?

While many employers pre-pandemic said that working from home could not be done, suddenly it had to be done. And businesses found a way to do it. This was kind of a slap in the face to people with disabilities who had often been denied such accommodations for years, but it was also a big win.

"There are more people with disabilities working now than before COVID because employers are now giving employees the ability to work from home and to have more control of their schedules," says Cozen O'Connor attorney Michele Ballard Miller. Miller believes that with the tight job market, most employers understand they need to be more flexible if they want to recruit the best talent.

"People with disabilities are more isolated now [than pre-pandemic]," says Dina Garcia, a disability rights advocate who has cerebral palsy. Garcia remarks that even though 85 to 90 percent of society is back to "normal," most of the people with disabilities she knows are still at home because of fear of integrating back into society.

Thus, the balance of remote work and social isolation bubbles to the forefront. Many people with disabilities like working from home—they've been asking for it for years—but because they're now almost exclusively at home, they also feel left out because interaction with co-workers is limited.

When you're not in the office and can't go to in-person happy hours or conferences with co-workers, many networking opportunities are lost, making it more difficult to be considered for projects and promotions.

How can businesses ensure that people who telework don't get left behind?

It's a real challenge. Garcia tells of an employee who has been working at home for two years. The employee doesn't know much about the employees working on-site, and they know even less about her; some of them don't even know her name.

With the increase in the number of people with disabilities, employers are going to have to become open to and creative about providing accommodations. The Job Accommodation Network (askjan.org) can be a valuable resource to help employers and employees with this exploration.

"In many ways, digital platforms are great for people with disabilities—the phone, PC, tablet, that's where the services and interactions are," says Claudia Center, Disabled Rights Education and Defense Fund's legal director. At the same time, though, we need to build access into these digital platforms. Center gives the example of a large healthcare system which, months into the pandemic, still had not gotten American Sign Language (ASL) and captions working properly in its telehealth portal.

The accommodations businesses made during the pandemic to keep society open—telework, special shopping hours for people with disabilities, curbside pickup, outdoor dining—were more than just a convenience; for people with disabilities, they were and remain a crucial accessibility feature.

The increase in the number of people with disabilities requires an open attitude and creative collaboration to accommodations at work, at school, and around and about town. Where will you start? [✉](#)

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