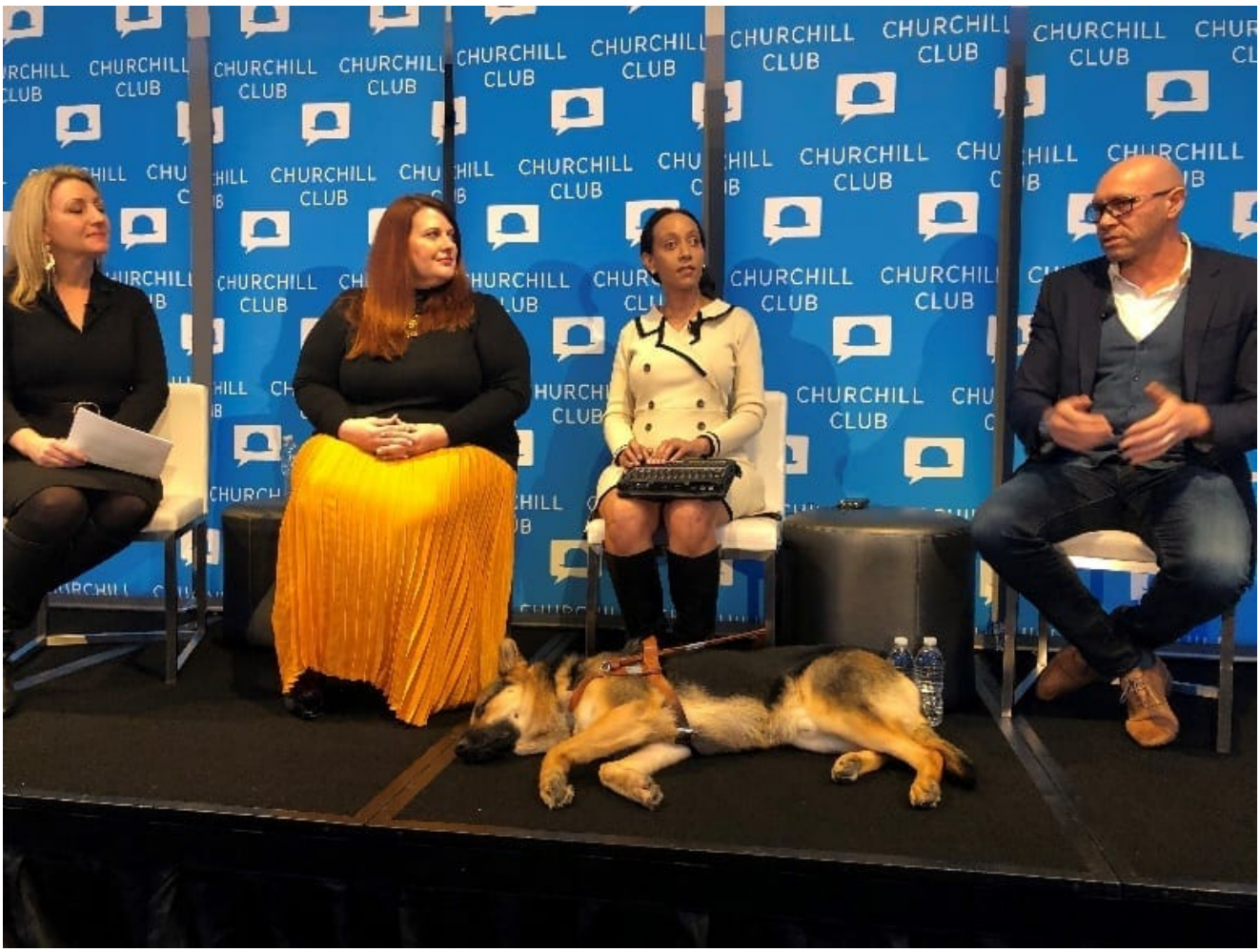
Mobilizing the Disability Workforce

25 March 2020



Diversity and inclusion has become a measure of performance on virtually every corporate agenda. But while many organizations actively work toward creating a diverse and inclusive workforce, one community is frequently left out: those with disabilities.

Earlier this year, I had the pleasure of speaking at a Churchill Club event to delve into the reasons why this is the case, and to help recommend actionable efforts to challenge the status quo. I was joined by Haben Girma, disability rights lawyer, author, the first deafblind graduate of Harvard Law School and Lenovo's Accessibility and Inclusion Advisor; and Crosby Cromwell, co-founder of social impact firm Flexability; as well as moderator Melissa Engelstad**,** Accenture West Regional Lead of Inclusion & Diversity.



Melissa Engelstad, Crosby Cromwell, Haben Girma and Paul Walsh (from left to right)

Haben shared that over a billion people worldwide experience some form of disability. Yet, despite its size, this community is vastly under-represented. Melissa added a few important statistics from a recent Accenture study: there are more than 15 million people of working age with disabilities in the U.S., but an overwhelming majority of these individuals – over 10 million – aren't employed. That's a huge amount of skill and talent that our businesses are overlooking.With so much untapped potential, it raises the question: Why aren't more people with disabilities hired? Haben explained the biggest barrier for hiring people with disabilities is the unspoken – but all-too-frequent – assumption that people with disabilities are less competent.

To Crosby, this issue lies mostly with hiring managers. "They are your front line," she explains. Most are likely unaware of the biases they bring to the process. "A critical part is training your hiring managers to understand disability and take away the fear of it, to have comfortability with it, to know how to talk about accommodations and self-identification," she notes.Beyond the hiring process, there remain additional hurdles within today's workplace. Haben's experience showcases this. As she explained, some of these are unintended consequences of technology. She gave us this example: "For most of my life, I've been able to use elevators. You walk in, read the Braille label, hit the button, exit on your floor. A few years ago, I encountered an elevator that was all touch screens. It was not accessible to me." By not including the

disabled community in thinking about “user experience,” the technologists had left them behind and created one more obstacle in their daily lives. Haben summed it up: “Something I used to be able to do independently was taken away by technology.”

We all recognize that there is too much friction within the systems we design. But how many of us have identified the glitches from the perspective of someone with a disability? For many, touch screens on elevators are a welcome and efficient tool. But without realizing it, we’ve just stopped someone like Haben from being able to leave her hotel room without calling for assistance.

We need to include people with disabilities from the start—when we begin to design new systems and solutions—not as an afterthought or, worse yet, not at all. As we bring more technologies into our offices, we need to ask*, Is this accessible for all?*Creating a truly inclusive workplace – where all employees feel welcome, safe and inspired – can be the most challenging hurdle to overcome. Culture goes to the heart of the company as a whole and changing a company’s culture—pushing it into new directions that ultimately become a natural part of how its people operate—has to start at the top.

Haben observed that if we had a culture where accessibility was part of the DNA of an organization, the result would be more inclusive technology and services and more job opportunities for talented people to contribute. Essentially, it would allow us to finally, “reduce the inequality that still exists for the disabled – even 30 years after the [passage of the] Americans with Disabilities Act.”You don’t have to be the CEO to be the catalyst for real change.

First, speak to the people you want to serve. You can’t tailor your resources until you know what is needed. It has to be an end-to-end process with diverse voices included. This can involve speaking to your employees, your customers or third-party experts who can provide different perspectives that challenge the way you think.

Next, help ensure that inclusion becomes ingrained in your organization’s culture. Look internally and see what you’re doing right and – be honest with yourself – where you can do better. From your company’s values and business goals to hiring processes to product R&D, including the needs and wants of the disabled community should be front-of-mind. You can also support the current employees with disabilities through dedicated programs like employee resource groups (ERGs) and mandatory anti-bias training to foster inclusion. Small steps add up to big changes in taking disability inclusion from an “afterthought” to “part of every process.”

Consider joining organizations, networks or coalitions that champion the cause. An example of this is the Valuable 500 commitment that our Chairman and CEO Yang Yuanqing recently signed. By supporting this global movement, he has put disability inclusion on Lenovo’s business leadership agenda.

Finally, partner with someone who can keep you accountable. Whether it’s a consultant or an internal role, find an expert who can help you establish best practices and processes. At

Lenovo, we are fortunate to have Haben serving as our Diversity and Inclusion Ambassador. She helps us think about everything that we're doing from a new, more inclusive perspective. As a company, Lenovo is undergoing an "intelligent transformation," becoming an end-to-end, customer-centric company. Haban makes sure that people with disabilities are represented at every point along the way.

And it's not just because we want to "do the right thing." We want those customers. We want that talent. We want to be leaps and bounds ahead of our competition and this is one way we're making that happen.

Crosby said it best during our discussion: "Employ and empower." We're all in this together. By employing people with disabilities, we're expanding the range of people who come to the table with different ideas, unique lifestyles and diverse perspectives on the world. This is where true innovation begins.



Video: Watch the video on YouTube
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6j8ig2q5AA