

Podcast

Creating a Diverse Workplace: Invisible Diversity and the Tech Industry

By Kimberly M. Bennett

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Meet the Authors



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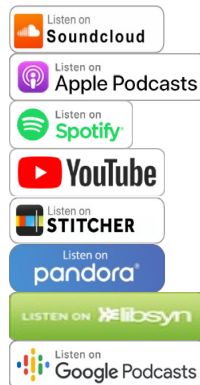
Technology

Details

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The technology industry has often paved the way for DEI initiatives. However, one type of diversity has often been neglected—by all types of organizations including tech—and extends beyond visible traits such as race, ethnicity, or gender.

Jackson Lewis P.C. · Creating a Diverse Workplace: Invisible Diversity and the Tech Industry



Transcript

Alitia Faccone:

Welcome to Jackson Lewis' podcast, We get work. Focused solely on workplace issues, it is our job to help employers develop proactive strategies, strong policies, and business oriented solutions to cultivate an engaged, stable and inclusive workforce. Our podcast identifies issues that influence and impact the workplace, and its continuing evolution, and helps answer the question on every employer's mind, "How will my business be impacted?"

Our host today are Kimberly Bennett, an associate in the Pittsburgh office of Jackson Lewis, and Jennifer Pannill, head of Recruitment and employer branding for Covestro LLC. Kimberly provides immigration services for companies seeking increased global mobility for their employees, including assistance with non-immigrant and immigrant visa petitions. Working with Fortune 500 companies and startup businesses in technology, finance, manufacturing, fashion, and healthcare, Kimberly understands the importance of a nuanced industry approach to immigration legal counseling. Jennifer has 18 years of experience recruiting in diverse industries, including manufacturing, retail, and chemicals. She's responsible for providing the strategic direction of the talent acquisition function at Covestro LLC, which includes oversight of experienced hiring, early talent programs, contingent labor and employer branding. She acts as a strategic advisor

to business on the talent acquisition landscape and analyzes trends, metrics, and business needs to develop proactive recruitment and talent pipelining strategies.

Kimberly and Jennifer, the question on everyone's mind today is, how should companies and tech and other sectors approach building a more inclusive culture for differently abled employees, and how does that impact my business?

Kimberly Bennett:

So thanks so much for joining us, Jennifer. I'm really excited to talk to you about all the work that you've been doing with Covestro, specifically your work in the diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts for employees with disabilities. And I know that you and I have talked about this, but the word disabilities might not be the most inclusive even descriptor, so maybe we'll call them hidden differences today. So what prompted you to want to focus on increasing inclusion for employees with hidden differences?

Jennifer Pannill:

Kimberly, thank you so much for inviting me to chat with you today and to talk about some of the efforts that we've done at Covestro. I am part of our disability focused employee resource group, or ERG, known as CARE. And CARE stands for Covestro Accessibility Resource Effort. The original mission was mainly focused on accessibility for employees and contractors, and the perception among employees was that it was just an ERG for employees who had disabilities.

As I became more active in CARE and took on a leadership role, I identified that an opportunity existed to enhance the mission, and to make it more inclusive. We expanded the mission to explicitly state that the ERG was for employees with disabilities, both visible and non-apparent, for employees who were caregivers of an elderly parent or a child with a disability or special need, and for allies. We even recently decided to specifically call out neurodiversity. Even though we felt that it was implied by saying non-apparent disabilities, we wanted to make sure that we explicitly called out neurodiversity so that employees would know that we were talking about things like autism spectrum disorder, and ADHD. We really wanted all employees to be able to see themselves in our mission.

We also felt like it was important to ensure that our mission focused on employees abilities. So to your point about hidden differences or differently abled, I don't love the term "disability", because that prefix, distribution, means not. So it sounds like you're not able, that you don't have an ability, but everyone has a unique ability. So we felt like we wanted to make sure that our focus was on employees' abilities, while also highlighting the unique talents and abilities that people with disabilities possess.

Kimberly Bennett:

Definitely. I know in the neurodivergent advocacy community, there's a lot of talk about how different neurodivergencies can have certain traits that are really positive traits, actually, and can be really helpful in the workplace in different ways, even if it may be considered a disability that you have, you actually have superhuman strengths in certain areas.

So I would imagine that sort of expanding the definition of who can be in the ERG also expanded the membership in the group, so I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the history of the ERG and what you've been seeing in terms of participation since your efforts in this area.

Jennifer Pannill:

So first of all, I will say that any employee resource group is open to all employees, but we felt like it was important to specifically call out various groups so that more employees could see themselves in our mission. So we were intentional about calling out allies, we were intentional about calling out caregivers, we were intentional about saying both visible and non-apparent disabilities. We felt like that was important.

I originally became affiliated with CARE through my role in talent acquisition. I had decided that I wanted the TA team to attend a career fair for people with disabilities. I approached the CARE ERG, not as a member, but again, just as part of the talent acquisition team to see if they would be willing to join us at that career fair. And after asking the lead of the ERG if he would come, he said that he wasn't available, but he offered up his co-lead to attend. I was familiar with who the co-lead was. I work with her very closely, and we have a great relationship. But like me, she also sits in a support function. And I really wanted somebody who was in our business. We're a chemicals company, so I wanted someone who was an engineer or a scientist that could really go to a career fair and authentically talk about the types of roles that we have. And when I asked him if there were any members like that, he said that they were the only two members. And I just remember being so shocked that there were only two members of the ERG. And it actually made me really sad too, because I felt like, if people knew there was a need, that they would step up and help, and maybe they just didn't know.

So at that point, I decided that I wanted to become part of the CARE ERG and help with gaining more members. And so that's how I originally became part of the CARE ERG. So we've moved from about two members in the beginning to nearly 20 members today.

Kimberly Bennett:

Wow. So can you elaborate a little bit on why you felt that it was important and beneficial for the company to give its employees a safe space to discuss hidden differences or being a caregiver to somebody that is facing a health issue? Can you talk a little bit about what your goals were and the importance of that?

Jennifer Pannill:

I would say that the benefit of an ERG in general is to give a safe space to talk. And it's also a powerful tool in helping to build empathy. I think the more that you talk to people and get to know them, you find out that you have more similarities than differences, and that really helps to stop stigmas and break down stereotypes.

I also think it takes a lot of energy to be someone who you aren't, and to not be yourself. So having that safe space to bring your full authentic self to the group, and to bring your full authentic self to work, makes happier employees that want

to stay with your organization. And I also believe that there's power in community, and as you get to know people who face the same things as you face, you feel like you're not alone.

Kimberly Bennett:

And can you talk a little bit about, from a recruiting perspective, how being able to talk about Covestro's commitment in this area, how that may have helped to attract talent, to be able to show potential employees what the company's values are and its commitments are?

Jennifer Pannill:

When you think about what job seekers are looking for, they're looking to work at companies that share the same values and ideals that they have. And one of those things is diversity, equity, and inclusion. Candidates want to work at a company that values that, they want to work at a company that they know has a culture of belonging, a place where they will feel comfortable to bring their authentic self to work, contribute, and succeed.

Kimberly Bennett:

And what steps did the company take to achieve this goal of the values and the commitment that you're talking about?

Jennifer Pannill:

One of the things that our ERG has done is created programming of interest for our employees. Twice, we have done a campaign called Why I Care, and this was an opportunity for employees who have a disability, or are a caregiver or an ally, to share their why, and to share why they care about disability inclusion. It was a really powerful campaign just to bring attention and to educate employees, and help them to see that they weren't alone if they were someone who was in that situation. We've also tailored some programming around various disability focused holidays. So in honor of Deaf Awareness Month, we did sign language classes. In honor of Veterans Day, we collaborated with our veterans focused ERG, and did a conversation around the intersection of disability and veteran status.

We also have done some programming around mental health awareness, keeping in mind that mental health issues are a non-apparent disability. This is one that really resonated with our employees, I think particularly because of the pandemic, because who among us during those pandemic times didn't have feelings of depression, anxiety, isolation, and things like that? So the programming that we did around mental health awareness was well attended. We did a number of lunch-and-learns around mental health, developing a toolbox for stress and anxiety, not just for yourself but for your kids. That was something that really resonated with people. We had conversations around mental health, wellness, and resiliency. We even offered yoga classes to our employees as a way to reduce stress. We have also offered a lot of programming for caregivers, and sharing their experience. So we've had employees who are caregivers of children with cerebral palsy, with spinal cord injuries, sharing their experience. We've also had employees share their personal experience. So we've had a cancer survivor share their

personal experience. We did some programming in honor of Deaf Awareness month in September, and we had someone share their experience being deaf. So we actually had two people share their experiences about being deaf. We had one person who shared their experience via an interpreter, we had another person who shared their experience being deaf, but they have cochlear implants.

So I would say, to achieve our goal, it's really been the education of our employees, sharing experiences, and also getting involved. So we have done some volunteer opportunities with disability focused charities. We've done disability Mentoring Day where we have allowed students with disabilities to come, to job shadow, to do lab tours, and to get to know Covestro and potential job opportunities that may exist for them, whether it be at Covestro or another company. So, I would say that the main way that we've gone about achieving our goal is the programming that we've put in place for our employees, and the education that we've done.

Kimberly Bennett:

Wow. That all sounds really great, and I definitely can imagine that the mental health programming that you did was very well attended. I know that that's a conversation people are having in workplaces all over the country, so that's really amazing.

Jennifer Pannill:

And people often don't necessarily think of that as a disability. That's not something that comes to mind. I think that when you think about disability, there's a visual that comes into your head. But it shouldn't, because disability isn't necessarily something you can see, it could be something that you can't.

Kimberly Bennett:

You talked earlier about stigma, and I think that the programming that you've developed really goes to help eliminate a little bit of that stigma. Because almost everybody knows someone who's either a caregiver, or someone in their family, or a friend, that may be impacted by one of these either visible or non-visible disabilities. And I think including caregivers is really something that people don't think about often. And I think that's really unique about the programming that you've put together.

Jennifer Pannill:

Most people will have a disability or know someone who does in their lifetime. And I think as you think about that, maybe someone is in the fortunate position of not having a disability personally, but you're just within a degree or two of separation from someone that who does.

Kimberly Bennett:

Exactly. So how have you seen the steps that the company has taken? How have you seen it change the culture?

Jennifer Pannill:

I think that it's changed our culture in that interest and participation in our ERG has increased. It's made people more willing to share. So during some of those lunch-and-learns and other events that we've had, more people are willing to raise their hand and say that they have ADHD, or that they know someone who has autism spectrum disorder or another disability. So people are more willing to share their personal experiences. I think it's also helped to create a culture of empathy. The more that you learn about other people, and what their experience and what their journey has been, the more empathy that you build from things like that.

Kimberly Bennett:

And I know we talked a little earlier about how some of these so-called disabilities may actually mean that some people are better at some things than others, or that they have a unique way of doing things because of... Let's say somebody with ADHD, they may be able to see a work problem in a different way than somebody who doesn't have it. And I can imagine that that culture of empathy and that culture of understanding can actually help managers to say, "Well, this person is really good at this thing, and I know that they're really good at this thing because they shared in one of these meetings, or in this programming, that this is an area that they really excel in." So I can imagine that it makes the work environment a little bit more productive for everybody, because you can lean into your strengths and everybody knows, because you've created this culture of talking about it.

Jennifer Pannill:

I think of it this way. All of us have strengths and opportunities. We all have strengths that are in our balcony, and things that are in our basement. People with disabilities are no different than you and I. We're no different from each other. And so when you think of it that way and you focus on what someone's ability is, there's so much power in that.

Kimberly Bennett:

Yeah, definitely. So I know that Covestro participated in the Disability Equality Index, and I wanted to talk to you a little bit about what that experience was like, what's some lessons that you may have taken from participating. So let's start with the decision to participate in the Disability Equality Index in the first place. How did the organization feel about participating in the benchmarking tool?

Jennifer Pannill:

So the idea of participating in the Disability Equality Index was driven by the CARE ERG. We felt as though it was an opportunity to see where our strengths were, and what opportunities existed for us. We're in the fortunate position that our Chairman and President, Haakan Jonsson, our head of HR, Katherine McEvelly, and our head of DEI, Adrienne Woodard, were incredibly supportive of the CARE ERG and us participating in the Disability Equality Index. I think that there was probably a little bit of trepidation in the idea that, what if we didn't rank? So what if we took the DEI and we didn't rank? But we didn't let that stop us from moving ahead.

Kimberly Bennett:

And did you rank?

Jennifer Pannill:

We did. So the first year that we did it, we ended up ranking in 80 out of a 100, which makes you a best place to work for disability inclusion. Our second year, we ranked a 90 out of 100. So we were even able to see some improvements year over year from participating, and the lessons that we learned from participating.

Kimberly Bennett:

Wow, congratulations.

Jennifer Pannill:

Thank you.

Kimberly Bennett:

So what were some of those lessons that you learned from participating?

Jennifer Pannill:

So first of all, I would say it's a journey. If you decide to take the DEI, and you don't rank the first year, that's okay. Determine what success looks like for you and it may not be ranking at first. It may, for a different company, be something like creating ERGs or diversity councils. It may be starting to go to disability focused career fairs, and things of that nature. What was interesting for us was just to see what questions were asked in the various areas of the DEI, whether it was your recruiting, and hiring, and employment practices, your accommodation practices, your supplier diversity programs, accessibility in your organization, the existence of ERGs and diversity councils, and things like that.

So really just being able to see what the questions were and what was considered best in class was important for us. It gave us a map and a starting point to help our ERG move forward and truly make an impact at our company.

Kimberly Bennett:

So what are some things that you took away from participating that, if there's somebody listening to this podcast episode that thinks, "I might want to ask my organization to participate," what are some lessons that you've learned? Like you talked about the questions that appeared on the survey, and knowing what to expect. What are some advice that you might be able to give to employers that may want to participate for the first time?

Jennifer Pannill:

If a company is considering participating in the DEI, I would say just to do it. The DEI gives you a lot of insight into where to start, what is considered best in class. You may be pleasantly surprised that some of the things that you're already doing are best practices, but it also gives you insight into other things that you could potentially be doing to make you a stronger company, to make you an employer of choice, and to support the employees that you have at your company.

Kimberly Bennett:

And how important is it that companies align their DEI initiatives, including for those with less visible diverse traits, with their values?

Jennifer Pannill:

I think of DEI not as an initiative or a program. I think of it as a business imperative, or a business strategy in and of itself. I think the statistics speak for themselves. The more diverse the group, the more innovative the group, and that includes people with disabilities. It can also be a competitive advantage for your company.

Kimberly Bennett:

And if you could say one thing that you think employers should take away from Covestro's efforts to become a more inclusive company, what would that be?

Jennifer Pannill:

Our employees are the ones who have been building the programming that the CARE ERG has delivered. And something that I think that employers can take away from Covestro's efforts to become a more inclusive company is involving your employees. Building culture isn't just an HR initiative, it's everyone's job to build culture. And I'm a firm believer in, we each should be building the culture of the company that we want to work at.

Kimberly Bennett:

Yeah, I think that's a great takeaway to have because, after all, we all do work at the companies that we work at. We are the employees. We are the ones that make up the company. So you're totally right, it has to start with us.

Well, thank you so much, Jennifer. It sounds like you have done so much, not only advocating for the people either in the ERG or the people that are allies to the ERG, but just generally, and it sounds like you've done a wonderful job of setting up some really cool programming for employees. I mean, the sign language lessons, that sounds really just such a neat way of including employees who may be deaf or know someone who's deaf. All of those things just sounded so interesting, and I'm sure that employees benefited a lot from that programming.

Jennifer Pannill:

Yeah, the CARE ERG aims to bring a voice to the challenges that people with disabilities and their caregivers face in the workplace, so it really has been a lot of fun to put together programming to do just that, and to educate employees, and to reduce stigma, and really to promote inclusion and allyship.

Kimberly Bennett:

Well, thank you so much for sharing your experience in doing all of this, for sharing your advice, especially with the Disability Equality Index. Like you mentioned, even Covestro was a little apprehensive about participating, and I'm

positive that the lessons that you shared today will be helpful to employers moving forward, especially if they would like to participate as well. So thank you so, so much, this was really great to hear all of the things that you were doing, and thank you.

Jennifer Pannill:

Thank you for having me.

Alitia Faccone:

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