**Disability in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

By Guest Blogger on Jul 26, 2021 THIS BLOG POST WAS WRITTEN BY REGION 8 ADVISOR Leah Lobato.

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July marks the 31st anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and 30th anniversary of the creation of the ADA National Network. In all those years, many people have worked tirelessly to push forward access and opportunity for individuals with disabilities. As Diversity, Equality & Inclusion (DE&I) become a part of discussion in our communities and in our places of business, the ADA continues to provide us the backbone and structure to be sure that disability is a piece of the DE&I conversations.

Topics such as company cultures, methods of practice for serving customers, and maybe even marketing to bring in new business are currently swirling in the DE&I space. Through 2020 there was an amazing cultural shift to be more aware of diversity and the impact of diverse characteristics on our life experiences. Crucial conversations centered on businesses and their need to look at their policies, practices, and culture to expand DE&I. Unfortunately, there continues a gap in the conversation. The intersectionality of disability in diversity is often not included in the DE&I discussions. I have worked in the field of disability and employment since 2003, 18 years. In those 18 years, the first invitation I received to participate in a panel discussion on diversity was in 2020. Disability has always been a component of diversity, yet the efforts to include disability in the DE&I landscape have continued to fall short.

Coined 30 years ago by Kimberlé Crenshaw, lawyer and civil rights advocate, the term intersectionality was used to describe how discrimination against different facets of a person’s identity can overlap and affect their lives. Her work focused on gender and race. The term intersectionality has broadened to include any protected characteristic, disability being one of those characteristics. As a community, we are beginning to be more cognizant of the various crossing characteristics and the fact that they do not exist separately. The concept of looking at the whole person and all their individual characteristics helps us better understand how the various characteristics potentially magnify marginalization and discrimination.

The theme for October 2021 National Disability Employment Awareness Month, NDEAM, is “America’s Recovery: Powered by Inclusion.” The theme for NDEAM further amplifies the point that disability inclusion as we move forward and through the COVID-19 pandemic is of utmost importance. As individuals with disabilities, advocates, disability professionals and others celebrate the 31st anniversary of the ADA and its rightful recognition as civil rights legislation, we need to work together to continue to put a spotlight on disability as a piece of DE&I that cannot be left behind. Disability crosses all other protected characteristics; it is a defining intersectional piece of humanity.

Any person, of any race, religion, sexual orientation, etc. can be a person with a disability. Disability can be the place where we build coalitions and partnerships between and with other diverse and marginalized communities. Disability can be the conjoining link, that incredible intersectional piece where communities can align for access and opportunity. As we share best practices on disability inclusion, we have the unique opportunity to unify and drive forward positive inclusion using the ADA and the work of those that came before us.