

Recognizing Strengths: Removing the “Dis” from Disability in the Workplace

By Mary Ellen Clasgens, Disability Services Advisor

At Rochester Works, where I serve as a Disability Services Advisor, I have the privilege of helping individuals navigate the often stressful and intimidating conversations about disability rights in the workplace. Many workers, unsure of their legal protections under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), experience anxiety around disclosing a disability to their employer. It's my role to ensure they feel informed and empowered about their rights—and, just as importantly, their potential. Our team works to educate and strategize how to approach their unique situation with their employer.

Our team at Rochester Works is dedicated to shifting the narrative around disability. We aim to remove the “dis” from “disability,” empowering our clients to see their unique abilities and recognize the strengths they bring to the table.

What does the research say?

Research underscores the tremendous value that employees with disabilities bring to the workforce. A 2023 report by Accenture reveals that companies that foster inclusive employment practices—specifically those that support individuals with disabilities—don't just “do the right thing”; they thrive. These companies outperformed their peers in several key metrics: higher revenue, double the net income, and expanded profit margins. Why? Because employees with disabilities offer creativity, resilience, problem-solving abilities, and an adaptability that is essential for business success in today's fast-changing world.

Back in 2014, Jenny Lay-Flurrie was honored by the Obama Administration as a White House Champion of Change. Jenny began to lose her hearing at age 5 and it continued to decline as she reached adulthood. She decided not to allow her hearing loss to prevent her from finding professional success. Today, she is a Senior Director at Microsoft that leads the “Trusted Experience Team” that allows for individuals with special needs to access Microsoft products through their Disability Answer Desk. This answer desk provides personalized support to around 4000 customers a month.

Jenny has a message to anyone with a (dis) ability: “My disability motivates me to strive for a higher bar—a new level of independence and empowerment.” Well said Jenny.

Join Us in Championing Inclusion

At Rochester Works, we are committed to continuing the conversation around disability in the workplace and breaking down barriers to success. We invite you to participate in an upcoming Disability & Disclosure workshop (held monthly) where you'll learn about

Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act, reasonable accommodations, and ways to approach the topic of disability with an employer. Together, we can shift the focus from disability to ability—where your strength is truly recognized. Visit www.rochesterworks.org to sign up for workshops.

Sources:

“Disability is my Strength” Jenny Lay Flurrie, Whitehouse.gov, 2014

“Companies that Lead in Disability Inclusion Outperform Peers” Accenture, 2023.