

# Invisible Disabilities: Break Down The Barriers



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Diversity & Inclusion

*I write on the intersection of disability and public services.*

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Many people think the word “disability” means people who require a wheelchair or walker. In reality, however, there is much more to disability than meets the eye.

Over 42 million Americans have a severe disability, and 96% of them are unseen. Examples of invisible debilitating physical and mental conditions include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury, affective disorders, diabetes, cancer, lupus, Crohn’s disease and fibromyalgia. These types of conditions demand a new way of approaching disability, one in which we don’t stick to a definition based solely on the use of assistive equipment or someone’s external appearance.

Of course, there are multiple reasons it would be beneficial for people to broaden their understanding of disability. Acknowledging the presence and validity of invisible disabilities is a key component of this awareness effort. In addition to enduring life-altering symptoms, many people with invisible disabilities deal with critical judgments and discrimination due to a lack of understanding. Without being able to see an indicator, like a wheelchair or crutches, people can dismiss the effects of a medical condition. A misunderstanding of a person’s biological, mental or physiological limitations can seriously strain relationships.

It's a personal experience that someone like Sherri Connell would know. She's a former model, dancer, and singer who suffers every day from the chronic pain and complexities of Lyme disease, multiple sclerosis, traumatic brain injury and chemical injury. Fortunately, her husband, Wayne, is extremely supportive – he founded the Invisible Disabilities® Association (IDA) and helps Sherri and IDA raise awareness of invisible disabilities through IDA's National Disability ID initiative, the Invisible No More® Show video podcast and online at InvisibleDisabilities.org.

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Sherri is now turning a tragedy into triumph, but lost her entire early career to her illnesses. And she isn't alone by any means. In February, the Institute on Disability released its annual Report on People with Disabilities. It included information on employment, income, health insurance coverage, transportation and education for individuals with and without disabilities, and it shows significant differences in employment and income level. The unemployment rate for individuals with disabilities is nearly double the national average.

Thankfully, employers can play a big part in making real change happen. For example, many job accommodations are no or low cost, and many workers want to maintain their relationships with their employers following a work-disrupting medical condition. Research shows the longer that ill former workers are out of the workforce, the harder it is for them to go back, so making this transition as soon as possible leaves them with the best possible chance of success.

Employers can take the lead by affirming for their current work force that a disruptive health issue doesn't necessarily have to mean the end of a connection to their employer. Businesses are taking innovative steps to ensure that good, talented individuals keep ties during the course of a disability, such as a cancer diagnosis and treatment, so they are eventually able to return.

It's important for business leaders to convey the value of every individual worker. Communication and information helps reduce the amount of harassment, discrimination and other difficulties that people with disabilities encounter on the job. Managers and human resources professionals can provide support, assistance and education. They can reduce stigma and demonstrate fairness through hiring.

Additionally, it would be helpful for HR and hiring professionals, as well as business management, to undergo more training about receiving accommodation requests, and responding and adapting to incorporate job accommodations that improve workforce inclusion.

The future world of a more widely diverse and disability-integrated workforce won't be accomplished in a day. But with enough focused effort and awareness, we can begin to help expand the dimensions of our vastly talented workforce to bring in more individuals with more varied perspectives and value.

With a combination of education, understanding and new behavior, we can broaden our views on disability, help employers learn the tools they need to break down the barriers, and expand opportunity within the workforce so that everyone can equally contribute and benefit.

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**Paula Morgan**

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Paula Morgan has more than 18 years of public and private experience helping people successfully navigate Social Security Administration (SSA) disability programs. She is a Return to Work Case Manager for Allsup Employment Services (AES), a national, SSA-authorized Employment Network (EN). Morgan works with former workers with disabilities to help them navigate the SSA's Ticket to Work (TTW) program. She focuses on education and early intervention of Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) applicants as they move through the insurance program and identifies opportunities for returning to work should their condition improve. In addition, she guides individuals through the compliance and complexities of the TTW program, helping them overcoming barriers common to those with disabilities. **Read Less**

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