>> Dumebi Egbuna: Okay, good morning everyone! Welcome to "Disability Awareness: How to Plan Accessible ERG Events." My name is Dumebi Egbuna and I am the Co-Founder and CMO of Chezie. If you're not familiar with our platform, we are a management platform for ERG. So we help you track all things ERGs. So membership, budget, events, engagement, all to give you time back to focus on the things that are driving employee retention and driving employee satisfaction. We are here with RespectAbility and their team to talk through how to make your ERG events - hybrid and in person and virtual - all more accessible so that all can join. So I'm going to pass it over to Jake Stimell and he's going to do the introduction for RespectAbility, and then we're going to kick it off.

>> Jake Stimell: Hi, I'm Jake Stimell. I am the Disability Training and Speakers Bureau Associate at RespectAbility. RespectAbility is a national non-profit that works to fight stigmas and advance opportunities so people with disabilities can fully participate in all aspects of society. I'm really excited for this event. I was connected to Chezie at an earlier event this year -- an earlier ERG event that really sparked my interest. And then I have been forming a relationship with Dumebi through that. I would like to introduce our two speakers. So the first one is Ila Eckhoff, who serves as the Secretary of RespectAbility's Board and is also a high level executive at Blackrock. And Nick Sophinos, who was the vice president of the LGBTQ ERG at S&P global, and now works at Strategus. So Nick you may take it away with the presentation!

>> Nick Sophinos: Can everyone hear me all right? Hopefully?

>> Jake Stimell: You're good, Nick.

>> Nick Sophinos: All right, cool. Just wanted to make sure before we get through 20 minutes of this. Yeah, so Jake did a pretty great job of introducing us, so I'll blow through this really quickly. I'm a queer -- professional disability advocate. My pronouns are they/them/theirs. Ila Eckhoff, who you will hear from a little later, is also a corporate disability advocate. So what is a disability? Disabilities can be temporary and permanent, invisible and -- non-visible and visible, can be acquired from birth or acquired later. It is very important to always remember that disabilities can be visible and non-visible. I know a lot of us who have placards for your car almost always have a horror story of using your placard to park somewhere and someone's saying, "oh, well you're clearly not disabled, because you're not missing a limb." There are many many different types of disabilities and not all of us look one way or another, and there's plenty of reasons why someone might need certain help with a lot of different things. In fact one in four adults has a disability in the U.S., pre-pandemic. With things like long COVID there's -- that number is actually probably going to increase. I am very curious to see the new studies around it just because that has some significant effects on a lot of people that are ongoing. So the importance of lived experience: organizations are at their best when they welcome, respect, and include people of all backgrounds. I think as a lot of people who are invested in ERGs, you all know this. We see it on certain TV commercials or media campaigns all the time where someone sent out what they thought was a really funny joke for their campaign, and all of a sudden, there's a huge amount of backlash on Twitter or social media in general, because it just doesn't come off the right way to a lot of different groups, whether that's, like, certain ethnic backgrounds or all of -- any type of disability or LGBTQ status, like, sometimes those jokes just don't fly well, and if you had someone in the room who said "oh wait, I have personal experience with that. That doesn't sound how you think it sounds. It sounds pretty offensive." Having someone in the room is super important when it comes to that. Anyone can join the disability community anytime. It's one of the few communities that people tend to join throughout their life just because you don't have to be born with a disability to acquire one. Becoming an ally now can make adapting to having a disability easier in the future. I know for myself in the last couple years, I really needed to get a cane to help with my walking on my really bad days, because I have fibromyalgia and a couple different onboard disabilities as well. And trying to find a cane for someone who is over six foot is surprisingly difficult. If you don't know anyone who has already needed a cane, they don't tend to make them very well for people above six foot. A lot of them stop at around 36 inches and mine needed to be taller, so I had to find a custom one. It's not a fun experience, but I had a lot of good friends to help me with that. People with disabilities are diverse and part of many different communities. So especially as ERG leads, like, you should always be considering whether or not your events are attendable for people with disabilities. I know I was at a conference just this last week, and we had a bunch of people from the Middle East as well as all over the states. And I had a lot of trouble finding food that was accessible for me, just because I have a lot of dietary issues that go along with my disabilities, and a lot of the foods were pretty mixed, so there were nuts in a lot of different things, or there was a lot of alcohol at the event, which a lot of people there did not drink. And so it was very interesting because a couple of them, I just couldn't eat at. So all of us really know people with disabilities, or have seen them in major media. A lot of the sharks on Shark Tank have dyslexia. Greta Thunberg has Asperger's. Whoopi Goldberg also has dyslexia, I believe. So we've all seen people with disabilities, whether or not we know that about them it isn't always the case, but it's good to know that they're out there. Whenever you're thinking about ERG events especially, you should consider reaffirming your commitment to disability and inclusion. I know a lot of us, especially when we're actively involved in planning ERG events, when we're actively involved in participating in a lot of these communities, we think, "oh, well, I'm doing a lot of this work so I'm sure people know it. People are aware of how -- much I can be a safe space for a lot of those groups and a lot of those people and I'm happy to learn and happy to keep moving forward." But sometimes just making that statement, especially in the workplace, can really help a lot of people, especially those who are newer to the company who may not have seen the previous appeals, may not have seen the work you've done until this point. It's always good to keep pushing that forward. Make sure all of your ERG leads and sponsors understand the needs of people with disabilities. I know especially at S&P, some of our groups were less aware just because they didn't have many people with disabilities in their group. And so that can cause a lot of issues where people think they've made this really inclusive event, and then, like, certain members of our group couldn't attend because there wasn't an interpreter, or there wasn't somebody providing captions. Make sure you're investing in learning and development around disability. I know it can be really easy to overlook sometimes, and we're all fighting for more money with our ERGs, but that's a huge one, because all of your ERG communities can have disabled people within them. It's also a very good topic to hit on for intersectionality. Ensuring accessibility in all events -- so I mentioned this a little bit. Make sure you have an interpreter, make sure you have someone providing closed captioning. It can help a ton especially with the advent of a lot of these automated captions. I'm not sure how many of you have tried to use them, but they are getting better. They're still pretty bad. If you've ever turned the captions on on your TV and tried to pay attention that way instead of listening, there's many many times where they're just outright wrong or they'll miss entire sentences. It's one of my biggest pet peeves is trying to read through something and then missing half the conversation because the captions are just not that great. And especially with the amount of virtual events and now in-person events, this is super important, because those of us who are having a little more trouble getting out to events these days, or everything is now virtual, it's so much easier to provide captioning for someone for when everyone's virtual. And so it's -- much more of an easy win right now. For in-person events, always always always walk through the event space. I can't tell you how many times I've showed up to an event location to find out that it's in an old building and they only have stairs, or their ramp is way too steep and doesn't actually work for people who need wheelchairs or any of the above. So it's very good to check that stuff out, because there's nothing worse than showing up to an event and having them say, "oh, well, we do have an elevator, but it's the service elevator in this back alley that you have to access." And it's pretty sketchy to get to and just wildly uncomfortable to show up to a black tie event and have to leave your friends to go hang out in the service elevator so that you can get up to the event, and then have to find someone later to take you back to the service elevator to leave the event. And it really gives a high level of distaste for that event, whether or not it was an intended or not -- issue or not. And I know, like, with my dietary issues, I can't eat at a lot of events, and so I usually eat before. But a lot of times, the other people I'm sitting at the table with will say, "well wait, like, did you let them know about the dietary issues? Did they try to cover it at all?" And the other people at my table will feel bad for me. I don't mind it too much. I've had dietary restrictions for a very long time, but I think a lot of other people faced with seeing somebody not be able to eat an event tend to feel a little more poorly about that event, and it's just one of those things where, especially if you're getting it catered and you can just have make something pretty simple, making sure that's done well and done right will make everyone else at that event see that and care a lot more about how that's going. Requesting -- accommodations at events -- so make it easy and comfortable for people to make these requests. For every registration form that I make, I always include "do you need any accommodations to fully participate in this event?" And then I provide an email and phone number of some person -- not a group text, not a large just corporate email, like, contact so and so dot com. Because that can be something that is very frustrating -- is if you're emailing this large group of people, you can't even see how many emails it goes out to if it -- if they don't respond within a week, like, do I need to email again? Do I keep trying when this doesn't immediately get picked up? I know it can be very easy to make that a group because you want multiple people to be able to answer it, but as -- like, if I'm telling you about these certain accommodations I need, I'm usually revealing some level of medical information. I'm usually revealing some level of personal information about myself that I don't necessarily want to go to a wide list of people. So it's -- really best practices to have that be a single person, and then check in on them, just because it's much easier, it's nicer to deal with, and it feels a lot more personal. So your website/presentation accessibility -- Explain pictures in live presentations. The picture on the right is people looking at a computer and smiling. It's definitely one of those things that is hard to get into the practice of, but if you can remember to do it, it's very helpful. It helps people who have trouble seeing things or are blind. Screen readers and alt text, forms and buttons are all things that are really pretty easy to make sure you've implemented in your website if you think about it ahead of time. Screen readers use alt text a lot, and -- er, sorry. Images have alt text to describe them a lot of times in online presentation. Screen readers, usually if you highlight certain text on a page, they will read for you. I know just a couple weeks ago I highlighted -- I tried to highlight on a website, and they had actually locked it so that you couldn't, like, copy and paste from the website. But because of that, I couldn't highlight anything, and so I -- as somebody who sometimes uses the screen reader, I couldn't actually read their website at all without just kind of upping the text, struggling through it, and that's just an awful experience. I ended up just not finishing the article and moved on with my life, because it's awful. And I'm sure I'm not the only person who's run into that website and been like why is this designed this way? Especially on the internet, like, if somebody wants to copy what you wrote, it's not that hard to put it on the other side of the screen and copy it for a lot of people. Captions on videos -- if you're able to put captions or subtitles, always always always try to do that. Auto captions, like I said earlier, are not great. If they're your only option, they're preferred to nothing, for sure. They're a huge step up from nothing, but it's -- if you can afford to have something captioned, if you can afford to have someone type all of that out, it's so worth it. It helps a lot and makes the experience significantly better for the people who need it. I'm now going to pass it over to Ila to tell her personal story and talk about her ERG work. So go ahead and take it away, Ila.

>> Ila Eckhoff: Thanks Nick. I apologize if you can't see me. My name's Ila Eckhoff. I'm a Managing Director at Blackrock, which is an asset management firm that's global around the world. I am also one of the founders of Blackrock's disability network, which we call, actually, the Ability at Blackrock network, because I was pretty tired of talking about all the things that people with disabilities can't do, and really want to focus on what people with disabilities can do. And a lot of my advocacy work, outside even of my Blackrock efforts, is really around employment for people with disabilities. So one of the things I want to talk to you about today is how you can tie your disability efforts -- or, you know, there's a lot of discussion around disability equity and inclusion, and there's a lot of focus around race, gender, sexual orientation, etcetera. Disability really doesn't get the level of attention that I think it should, and really needs to be in that top number. And we shouldn't be talking about diversity equity and inclusion as if it's a bilateral conversation. So to Nick's earlier point about -- you can either be born with a disability -- so I have cerebral palsy and walk with two canes, and have had a number of surgeries over the course of my life. But I'm still a Managing Director of one of the, you know, biggest financial firms on the globe, right? So you can be successful, but you need to be driven. You know, as a child my dad told me, "congratulations. Because you have CP, you need to be better, smarter, faster, etcetera." So -- you know, and he said "look, the sooner you sort of accept that and move forward, the better off you're going to be," right? So I was very focused at Blackrock around extending not only what we do from a disability standpoint, but I am also an ally and a member of all of the other networks that Blackrock has. So we have a women's network, a vets network, a LGBTQ network, all different sort of flavors of employee networks which are run by employees, managed by employees -- although we get some financial support from the firm, at, you know, at the end of the day, these are things that enable people to really stay connected to your organization. And look: regardless of what industry you're in -- so we manage money, and our purpose in life is to create better financial outcomes for people -- but regardless of the industry that you work in, right, it doesn't really matter. You can -- you can tie your DEI work and your disability work to the fact that, in the end, diverse teams make better decisions. And it's been proven that they're 35 percent or better in terms of profitability, right? And the more you can engage your, you know, employees, your staff, whoever your clients are to your firm, when you talk about client service, right? To Nick's earlier point, again, one in four people in the United States have a disability. Many -- the majority of those are not even visible. Mine you can't miss, but most people with disabilities are really invisible. And if you really want to be successful as a firm, as an organization, not only for your employees, but whatever business that you're in, including disability will only make you better. There are a billion people around the globe with a disability and that's over a trillion dollars in buying power. And to include those people is only going to make you better. And the more we can remove stigma and put -- with the rest of their lives, the better everything gets for everybody. [audio issues] The more people with disabilities that are enabled to be employed and have choices, have options, whether that's -- whether they want to have family, kids, houses, toys, lots of things, right? Being employed gives them options, gives them independence, and the right to choose. And we all as human beings should have the right to choose and do the things that we want to do. Assuming we can all get all those that are able and want to work to be able to do that, that creates a larger economic pie and puts everybody in a much better position. I don't know if -- just to give you a couple of numbers, right, there are over a billion people around the globe with disabilities. They need to be included in everything that goes on. Right? And there's a phrase now around disability, right, nothing about us without us. So that means you need to see people in the organization at all levels with a disability, whether it's visible or invisible, and they're willing to be open and talk about it, right? We're trying to be much more vocal, that's why we're here today and doing these types of events, as people with disabilities talking about we can do everything everybody else can do. We all have things that we're good at and not good at, right? So when I interviewed years back at an accounting firm, and I said, "look, there is one thing I'm not gonna be able to do. If you're gonna need me to ride a bicycle, we're gonna have a problem. But short of riding a bicycle, there's very little I can't do."

>> Nick Sophinos: Definitely. Thank you so much for that, Ila, and just to drive home that point, I know -- I believe -- Jake, correct me if I'm wrong, but the average number that companies spend to make their workplace more accessible for an employee that needs accommodations is around just $500?

>> Jake Stimell: The average cost -- the average cost for an accommodation is about 500, correct, and it's a -- one-time cost usually.

>> Nick Sophinos: Yeah. So hiring people with disabilities who even need accommodations, it's not a huge step, it's not unwieldy, it's definitely something that can easily be accomplished. So if you would like to continue your disability inclusion journey, there are a bunch of links within this presentation. You can also email Jake. He is excellent at providing help and information, and that is his email right there. This will be recorded, so if you want to send this around to anyone else as well, you can do that. And then RespectAbility also has an equity and access webinar series that you can go to. If you go to this link, there's a bunch of different videos. This is the names of a few of them so feel free to check that out. And then I believe we're going to swap over to a Q&A, so thank you all for your time, and we'll start answering some questions.

>> Dumebi Egbuna: Awesome. Thank you so much Jake and Nick and Ila for this presentation, that was extremely helpful. For those of you who don't know, we're about to transition into a Q&A. Feel free to drop questions into the chat. I do have a few already from Madison. She says "I was wondering if one has to walk through the event venue as well as the event space when planning in-person events."

>> Nick Sophinos: I definitely recommend, if you have time, to walk through the entire space that you'll be using, especially if you can bring one of the people who needs accommodations or somebody who knows a decent amount about the community. Because depending on who's going, certain things will be necessary that might not normally. I know that event I was talking about last week had a very, like, thick fluffy carpet on a lot of things that made walking a little bit difficult for me, because it's just, like, so much give under your foot, and it just makes it a lot harder. But some people might need, like, solid wood or some people might need something a little softer, just kind of depends.

>> Dumebi Egbuna: Next question. What are the business benefits of disability inclusion and ensuring accessibility across ERGs?

>> Ila Eckhoff: I'll jump in for now. Look, diverse teams make better decisions. And when we talk about diversity, at least in Blackrock's business, we want to have diversity across a multitude of dimensions. So whether that's race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic differences, when you talk about diversity, depending -- and we operate globally so we want to hire local, we want to have people in all the places that we operate. We want to ensure that we're being as diverse as we can under the circumstances. I mean, different different types of roles are gonna -- are gonna attract different types of people, and you know, sometimes you just need to hire. But the more diverse teams have been proven to be 35 percent more profitable. So hiring people with disability is not a nice to have. It's a good business decision. If your business is going to work better, if you're going to be able to think about and look at things through a slightly different lens and create better outcomes, both for your employees and the clients that you serve. I don't -- I hope that -- I don't know if that answers the question, but hopefully, and if not, please send us a note and -- and we'll see what we can do.

>> Nick Sophinos: [chuckles] I think that was great. I know I harp on it all the time because I work in advertising, but having different people in the room to see if something comes off a certain way to different groups is also very very useful. And there's people of every single minority group who are significantly educated and very hard workers. And making sure that your space is a space where people of any and all types can show up and help out, you're going to get the best of the best, instead of just filtering down to a small subgroup of people.

>> Dumebi Egbuna: Yeah, thank you both. A question from Jaronda. "We have a group specific for neurodiversity, but wondering about your thoughts about having a broader erg for disability, versus keep it in a specific disability group."

>> Nick Sophinos: I think that really depends on kind of your ERG setup. Like, if you have a bunch of those smaller groups where things are pretty specific, I think that makes a lot of sense. But if there's people within your company that want a larger group then yeah, that's certainly a doable thing. It -- honestly, I'd probably just ask them and say, hey, let's send out even, like, a corporate-wide email and say hey, we're running a quick survey to say we have this group. Do you all want a separate group for this? Do you want that to be just this group, or what works best for us as a company? Because that's really kind of up to all of them. A lot of ERGs are set up so differently at different companies, and I think it's super interesting to see all of that, but there's no one right answer usually. [crosstalk]

>> Ila Eckhoff: Yeah, and not only do additional or separate ERGs, but we also have one that we call "Mosaic" that on a monthly and I think quarterly basis brings together leads of all the different networks so that we can exchange ideas and -- you know, see if we need to adjust anything across the larger organization.

>> Dumebi Egbuna: Yeah. I would also say there's a question on what ERG means. It's Employee Resource Groups. But I would say Employee Resource Groups are supposed to be employee-led, so if you see that there are employees outside of neurodivergent employees who would like to have a group for them, I would say give them the opportunity to have that space. Another question in the chat from Wanda. "If you have attendees that speak many different languages, what is the best way to accommodate them?"

>> Nick Sophinos: I think that comes down, again, to, like, those employees. I know -- I tend to -- I only know English, so most of the people I worked with in other countries would speak English with me. Was that necessarily the best for them? Not always. And there were certainly some communication troubles that we had along the way. But I think we all understood that English was their second language, and they were already 10 steps ahead of where I was, because I couldn't understand their language at all. So they were willing to give me a grain of salt, and I was more than happy to meet with them on any level I could, because I was already asking them to know my language instead of learning theirs.

>> Dumebi Egbuna: Thank you. Question from Courtney: as a fully remote workforce, any advice on how to make sure employees are receiving the accommodations they need? Even advice on best practices for communication would be helpful.

>> Nick Sophinos: Yeah, I think as part of your hiring process, you should really ask if people need any sort of accommodations. And make sure that it is a -- a well-stated question, as well as saying, like, hey, here's some of the accommodations we've given to people in the past, possibly, just so that they know that it's not, like, a gotcha question. Because I know sometimes when I'm starting at a new company, I don't necessarily want to be like, here's a list of, like, 10 things that I need, because I'm going to be a super problematic person to work with and ask for a ton of stuff. But that kind of helps set things off on the right foot. You let them know that, A, they have a space to tell you, B, you've done this in the past and helped out. And then going forward from there, providing some resource that they can reach out to, some direct person who may handle this fairly frequently is always a good step, whether that's on your internal, like, HR documents, or the hub page on your internal website. There's tons of different spaces where you can put that, and I usually recommend making it as accessible and easy to see as possible, because not everyone sits and looks around on the employee hub page.

>> Dumebi Egbuna: Yeah, I'd agree with that and even making it part of the onboarding process, and just having it up front maybe during the onboarding, like, the new hire presentation, making sure that people know that accommodations are available and being very upfront with that. Another question: what are some low-hanging fruits regarding accessibility and disability inclusion in ERGs?

>> Nick Sophinos: I think for me, the easiest low-hanging fruit is usually, like, quicker events that aren't super difficult to throw together. So I tend to do, like, book clubs, because it's an easy way to get a group of people to talk about something and kind of discuss and it's not high pressure. If everyone loves the book, sometimes you can reach out to the author, and depending on how large they are, the author might come by and speak, even if it's online. And that can be a really easy way. I know a lot of us are busy, so we'll tend to focus on a chapter or two and not the entire book, because that can be a little bit difficult. But for the most part, I think the easiest thing is reach out to your groups and see what they want to do, because you'd be surprised how many people already have an idea of a few different events that they -- they want to see, they just don't necessarily want to put in all the work to set it up. But they'll be more than happy to attend that type of event if you get it rolling.

>> Dumebi Egbuna: Question in the chat from Laura. Beyond ensuring closed captioning is available, are there other measures ERGs leads can ensure in place for virtual events to make them as accessible as possible?

>> Nick Sophinos: I think that really comes back to the making sure you ask at every event invitation "what accommodations do you need?" Because depending on the disability, like, a lot of people need completely different things. I know I mentioned it a little earlier with flooring, but same thing with chairs or captions or all of that. It's not a one size fits all. There's no -- "hey, I added this, now everyone can attend to my event without issue." So if you can ask people and make sure that -- excuse me, sorry, I've been a little sick this week. Yeah, if you could answer -- go for it.

>> Ila Eckhoff: While Nick's choking, I'll jump in for a second. Look, people with disability are very diverse, so to Nick's point, ask the question, right? Is there anything that you need that would make this event easier for you to attend, anything we should be thinking about? I mean, I've actually been to disability events that have no chairs, because the assumption was that everybody that was coming was in a wheelchair. But for those of us that are not in a wheelchair, there were no chairs to sit on. I had to have somebody go get me one. [laughs] Right? So just ask, I think, is the best approach when you send out the [invitation].

>> Dumebi Egbuna: Yeah, and I'd also say, like, for events, you typically have registration links, so if you can do a -- an open form of, like what accessibility requests you have, just making sure you have it up front so then you can address them during the actual event. A question from Madison: for closed -- "for closed captioning, does that also apply to social media as online events are live streamed?"

>> Nick Sophinos: I think it really applies to anything. As long as you can get captioning going, like, it's definitely best case, because at the end of the day, like, you're just making your videos more accessible. I know it could be really hard when you're doing, like, a streaming takeover, but it's worth putting in the extra effort if you want people to be able to see your content.

>> Jake Stimell: I was just gonna add to that one. A lot of stuff on Facebook and other social media are -- they rely on the AI -- live AI automatic captioning, and as we've mentioned before, the -- the live captioning with an actual captioner is much -- is much better than the -- than the live -- than the automatic captioning, so that's -- that's what I would add to that one.

>> Dumebi Egbuna: Question from Jaronda: "when you are planning to send employees to an event that you haven't planned yourself, what are questions we should ask to determine how accessible the event is?" So I guess when you're going to a third party event, how can you ensure that they are taking into account accessibility needs?

>> Nick Sophinos: I think it can definitely be really hard. I know I mentioned I went to an external event last week, and part of it is, I think a lot of us who have certain capability needs tend to already know what we need to look for, and what areas people might fall short in. So we plan around it a little bit. But same thing -- if they're -- hopefully they've listed someone they can contact, if not ,whoever you got the tickets through, usually you can call and ask them and say hey, "we have employees that are interested in attending but we really want to make sure that you're covering certain bases. Like, what's the best way for us to contact this event and make sure that it's all right?" And a lot of people will then go out of their way to make things work for you, but it can definitely be a little hard, especially if you're trying to send a bunch of different employees who all need different accommodations. And it shouldn't be hard. It should be pretty easy if they thought about it ahead of time, and sometimes people just don't. But the more people get into the practice of being comfortable asking for those things and saying, hey, I really wish you'd put some email we could have contacted, the more people are going to go out of their way to do it.

>> Dumebi Egbuna: Thanks Nick. A question from Wanda. "I want to find a way to explain to others easily how to give simple instructions on how to tell the potential attendees of a virtual event how to have their computer or cell phone to accommodate them. Do you have info on your website?"

>> Jake Stimell: I don't think that either of our panelists -- feel comfortable answering this question, so I can -- I can just type an answer, if that -- if that works.

>> Dumebi Egbuna: Okay. Another question: what role does accessibility in ERGs play in recruiting and retention?

>> Nick Sophinos: I think it plays a huge role in both recruiting and retention. Just like a lot of different diversity movements do, I know whenever I go to apply at a company, I always check their social media, anything they posted, to make sure that there's people of color, to make sure that there's people of differing abilities, because if you're -- I go to your website and your company's profile picture is all white men, and then I go to your Twitter and it's all white men, then I know you're not thinking about diversity. You are not at a spot where I want the company that I work for to be at, and I will not be working there, because I know that I need a certain level to feel comfortable, and to know that there's a diversity of opinions at that place, and that you're not looking for just people to say yes and agree with your decisions, because you all think the same. Obviously, no group is a monolith, but I think this day and age it's pretty easy to know that you should have some level of diversity in your marketing. And so if you're not at that level yet, there's a lot more levels I'd like you to get to before we really have a serious talk about my employment. And I think that goes for retention too. If I'm constantly going to meetings and feeling like I'm the diversity token, I'm eventually going to get very tired of being that. It just gets old. I'm happy to answer a lot of questions, clearly I speak on the subject, but even that, like, there's days I wake up and I'm like I don't really want to describe fibro for the 10th time today. Some days it gets a little old. So not having to do that at the workplace constantly is certainly a plus.

>> Ila Eckhoff: Yeah I'll just make one additional comment. That is, in light of everything that's happened in the last two or three years with COVID, retention's really important. The great resignation has really gone across all different industries, and I think employee networks do a lot to demonstrate that the firm, whatever it is, whatever industry you're in, supports different viewpoints and wants to create the kind of environment that people feel connected to, regardless of the business and the company. In the end, people work for people. And ultimately you will retain staff when people's views, opinions, and thoughts are not only heard, but respected. So the more you can create that environment, and I think employee networks are a huge asset and, you know, depending on the size of a firm, you're going to have any number of them, and you may do things across. But it's just been -- certainly, you know, I've been at the same firm now for 22 years, and we started out with just a, you know, a -- our women's network, I think, was probably the first or is the oldest. We now have about 15 or so across the organization. And as an ally, I belong to, I think, all of them, and if not, the vast majority of them.

>> Dumebi Egbuna: Yeah and I think just to seal off that point, people are no longer just working for companies where they get the best benefits or the best salary, right? They want to feel included, they want to feel like they belong, they want to feel like their -- their values align with their company values. And I think that's where meeting accessibility needs comes in, that's where creating ERGs and having, like, networks of like-minded people comes in. So we need to start thinking more about culture as opposed to, like, what monetarily can we offer people. And then the last question that we have in the chat is "how can employees be allies to people with disabilities? What role does allyship play in ERGs, and how can allyship lead to psychological safety?"

>> Nick Sophinos: Well that's a big one. I know my biggest thing for allies is find ways to educate yourself on the subjects. It can be very easy to ask people if you are good friends with them about certain resources, but also go out of your way and look for resources on your own. I understand that I am well versed in the subject, but there's definitely some times where it's really nice to run into someone and say, hey, I read, like, this book this book and this book. And you're like, oh, that's really interesting, let's talk about that, instead of hey I really want to, like, know something about the disability community, can you give me some books? While they're both decent messages and I'm glad you're going out of your way to try, doing that -- that footwork and actually going and finding the books on your own, because there's thousands of websites. If you -- if you Google, like, top tier disability books or disability 101, like, you can learn a lot of stuff. There's a website for just about everything now, including big book lists. And so doing that work on the front end is just very nice. You can do it for LGBTQ stuff, like, there's huge books on all of that -- you can go out of your way and start listening to podcasts that involve people with disabilities. And make sure that you're somewhat informed so that you don't -- aren't always asking the same person, like, a bunch of these questions that maybe they answer fairly often throughout the day. Definitely if you're good friends with them, keep asking. Go -- go for it. If you're friends with them, like, it's definitely a normal thing to ask, but if they're acquaintances, if they're random co-workers, sometimes just, like, do the footwork first of making sure stuff like that, and that you're practicing actually maintaining education on the subject, can be life-changing for people in the community -- in any community, really, because it -- there's nothing worse than answering a bunch of questions from people who are saying they're going to go read something and then you answer those questions, give them a bunch of resources, and they don't go read any of it. And you're like, okay, so the level of trying here was not super high. I think everyone's interested in learning stuff, and finding the time to do it can be pretty difficult, especially in this day and age, but going out of your way to learn stuff, really really means the world to a lot of people.

>> Dumebi Egbuna: Okay, and I lied. There's another question. So Nick, you mentioned needing a customized cane. Can you comment on how costly it may be to have a disability?

>> Nick Sophinos: Could be very costly. I know, especially if you use a wheelchair, like, trying to fly places is not -- not the easiest. Airlines especially are notorious for breaking wheelchairs all the time. All the time. And trying to get one of those, even if it's 100 percent covered through insurance because you're super lucky and have the best insurance plan ever, is still a very long process in which you don't necessarily have mobility for that whole time. I know my canes -- like, for a nice cane it's a decent chunk of money, like, over a hundred dollars. And if that breaks, if I didn't have another backup, like, that could be a couple weeks where I'm not able to get around very far, not able to do a lot of stuff that I really like to do. And tons of people need a bunch of different resources, so it can be very frustrating, because a lot of these are devices to help you get through the day and help you do tasks that most people take for granted. I know a couple weeks ago I was having difficulty walking in general and, like, if you've ever tried to get around your apartment, or condo house without walking at all when you're used to it, it's pretty difficult, especially if you don't have a device that helps you not walk. So that can be really taxing to suddenly lose a lot of ability that you're used to. And so being aware of it, making sure that your company is providing insurance that is not awful is super helpful. I know there's been times where I've switched companies and my medications have gone from like ten dollars for all ten of them to, like, fifty dollars for two, and that's frustrating, and it makes me not want to work at those places, because all of a sudden I'm like, well hey, I'm making more money, but now I'm losing it all in the back end, because every time I go fill a prescription I'm paying 10 times as much, and that -- that sort of stuff gets old real fast.

>> Dumebi Egbuna: Thank you Nick and thank you Ila and Jake and the whole RespectAbility organization for this powerful presentation and Q&A. If you want to follow up with anyone, they -- their contact information is listed on respectability.org, so feel free to reach out to them if you want to continue the conversation. And then if you're looking to talk through your employee resource groups and how you can take them from intent to impact, please reach out to me at Dumebi -- d-u-m-e-b-i at Chezie.co. I'm happy to have a conversation. We are finished about eight minutes early. Thank you all so much for joining, and enjoy the rest of your Tuesday!