



Episode #: 03 Title: Compliance Versus Innovation

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Date: May 04, 2016

Guest Company: Ruh Global Communications

Hello. This is Debra Ruh and you're listening to my podcast, Human Potential at Work. Today's topic is compliance; compliance in regards to including people with disabilities in your workforce.

When I'm looking at this topic of making sure that we're including people with disabilities, qualified employees with disabilities, qualified candidates with disabilities in the workforce, the compliance topic always comes up. And in the United States, that makes sense because we have lots of legislation and we have a tremendous amount of litigation happening on these topics. Of course, we have to think about compliance from other countries as well, because there's a lot of laws and a lot of countries have actually signed and ratified the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

However, I think that we need to look at this topic bigger than compliance. Certainly, compliance is very important. As corporations, we need to be compliant with all of the laws and that's why we have our risk officers, our chief risk officers, our compliance officers, our quality assurance people, our general councils. So it is a very important part of the topic, but it's not the only part of the conversation.

I travel around the world and I work with corporations to create a strategy to framework disability inclusion and make sure that the service and products that they're offering are fully accessible and they've considered are -- their building's accessible. So looking at this from the built environment as well as I C T accessibility and looking at, how do you really blend all of this into the processes? I find that the corporations that are being more successful are the ones that are not only looking at this from the compliance angle.

They're also looking at this from the innovative level. There's some really interesting innovations happening. There's one company, a very large engineering company in France that has created a partnership with a university that teaches people to be engineers. They have a program in place where they're mentoring, providing internships and supporting engineers with disabilities, so that by the time those engineers graduate, it's a logical step for them to come and work for this corporation. So to me, that's very innovative. That's really tapping into, what does the company need? How can we really be innovative and partner and really make sure that we're resolving multiple issues and solving our own employment issues at the same time?

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I also see a lot of innovation coming from some of our developing countries. There's been some really, really interesting things coming from Egypt, for example, where they put programs in place to train people that were blind to do software testing and to do I T jobs, computing-type jobs. And when they created these programs, they did not really include employment outcomes because oftentimes it's sort of scary to do that. But they actually had great employment outcomes. They trained 110 people and they wound up getting 70 percent of them jobs in that field.

We're seeing some very, really cool innovations happening. We're seeing really cool innovations happening with very large software companies and technology companies that are actually actively seeking employees or, I should maybe say, technologists with autism. We're finding that technologists with autism are brilliant programmers, are very strong at math and science and very good in quality assurance and quality control in the testing parts of the organization. So I think continuing to tap into the innovation of this topic, as opposed to only the compliance, is a real opportunity for corporations, both national corporations and multinational corporations as well.

So some of the things that we're seeing and some of the really cool technologies, like the Internet of things and wearables and robotics and 3-D printing, are opening up really interesting employment opportunities for people with disabilities and people without disabilities. I think they have the power to definitely make sure that we're being innovative in ways that we hadn't thought about being innovative in the past.

Some of things we're seeing now with the driverless cars. Maybe the driverless cars are going to solve some of the transportation issues that people with disabilities have had in certain parts of the community of people with disabilities, getting reliable transportation to work. So I think there's a lot to be really hopeful about, but I also think that if you're a corporation that really wants to include people with disabilities in your workforce or retain the workers that already work for you that might acquire disabilities, thinking about this once again from an innovation perspective as opposed to only a compliance perspective, is good for your brand and your reputation.

So I challenge you to really think about the ways that you can tap into these workers and really tap into the innovation they bring to the workforce.

I'll give you another example. There was a large accounting firm that I was working with and they had an accountant that was deaf. And they were -- in the team meetings that they had every week, this accountant was actually at a disadvantage because they didn't really want to bring in a sign language interpreter because of the confidentiality and all that, even though there's ways around that. But they found a technological solution to that. And so they were able to -- this technology, really inexpensive technology, was able to record everything that was happening in the meeting in real time. And not only was this really advantageous to the employee that was deaf, it wound up being advantageous to everybody in the group. And across the board, that one group, their productivity went up significantly compared to other teams that did not have this technology or this very talented accountant that was deaf.

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So I mean, there's -- I have story after story of things like this. But I think, once again, tapping into human potential and not just looking at this as something I have to do so I don't get in trouble. That's where the real value lies for the corporations and about truly including people with disabilities in your workforce.

To me, the only disability is not being able to see human potential.