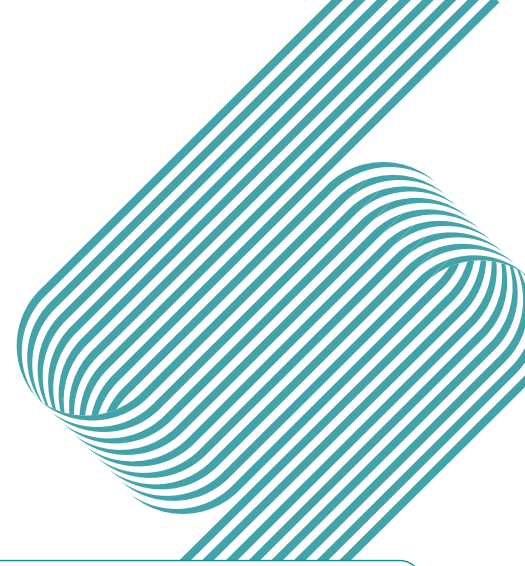


ACCESSIBILITY IN THE WORKPLACE

TOPIC OVERVIEW

Brandy Duhon, DVM (she, her)



AWARENESS

What is accessibility?

Accessibility is the design of products, devices, services, curriculums, vehicles, or environments so that they can be used by people of all abilities.

UNDERSTANDING

Key take-home messages.

- 1 **The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities. Learn what is required by law to provide accessibility in your workplace.**
- 2 **Universal design aims to create environments, services, and systems that are useful to people with diverse abilities. Most of us benefit from universal design every day.**
- 3 **If someone does something differently from you, it does not mean that they are doing it the wrong way. Be open to alternative methods if the outcome is the same.**

TRANSFORMATION

Specific actions you can take to generate positive DEI change with your team, workplace, clients, and community.

- 1 Use this quick reference to help you assess and fix the most common accessibility issues in your workplace.
<https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/blog/accessibility-in-the-workplace-a-practical-guide/>
- 2 Plan an audit of your website to improve accessibility features.
<https://www.ada.gov/resources/web-guidance/>
- 3 Agree to commit to using positive and supportive language in the workplace by avoiding words that present a disability in a negative way or as a means to insult someone. Use this disability language guide for helpful examples of do's and don'ts:
https://disability.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj26391/files/media/file/disability-language-guide-stanford_1.pdf
- 4 Embrace universal design! Brainstorm with a friend or colleague new ways to do things that work better for and benefit everyone.

TOPIC ESSAY

Accessibility in the Workplace

My road became bumpy in 1995 when I was diagnosed with bacterial meningitis. My bout of meningitis left me without hands and severe damage to my legs. Imagine, 13 years old, the doctor comes in and says, “The hands come off tomorrow.” Those five words changed my entire life. Although I tried to deny it, I knew my road ahead would be difficult. High school was tough, doing something as simple as holding a pencil and writing. College was hard, physically and mentally, trying to navigate campus. Veterinary school was a challenge to say the least: How was I going to perform surgery? Some of the things I remember the most are being teased in high school, doubted in college, and told it was impossible in veterinary school.

Fortunately, in my experience, I was able to adjust and get by with few accommodations. One that stands out for me is when I had my university change the type of door handle to my classroom so I could easily open the door. Unfortunately, that is not the case for everyone. It is estimated that 22.8% of all working adults are in need of accommodations. Of that 22.8%, 47%–58% lack the appropriate accommodations needed to either support or commence work (Maestas, 2019). It is not only support that is needed for those with challenges but also acceptance. Below I will talk about a couple of experiences and how I think they can help us approach those with physical disabilities.

While at my sister’s, my nephew, AJ, proceeded to tell me that while in his medical vocabulary class, he was asked by his teacher if anyone knew a surgeon. He raised his hand, waited until he was called on and said, “I know a surgeon, my aunt,” and he also said, “By the way, she doesn’t have any hands.” The first statement out of the teacher’s mouth was, “That’s impossible.” AJ said, “It’s not impossible, my aunt doesn’t have hands and she’s a surgeon.” He explained to the teacher that I’m a veterinarian, that I lost both of my hands, and I perform surgery. His teacher explained to him that if he was telling the truth, he would like to have a Zoom call with me and his class. I told AJ I would do it and to have his teacher find a time that worked for the class. We settled on a date and made it happen. When receiving the call, I was totally expecting to see a classroom full of kids ages 14–16 and a bunch of curious faces. What I saw was his teacher, the main one who was curious about everything. He asked me some easy questions about veterinary medicine and how I did things. After questions, he asked if I would be interested in doing this Zoom call every year with his class to expose them to someone with a disability and show them that being a surgeon without hands is actually possible.

While at a conference, I was introduced to a student with a physical disability. She had one typical hand and one that was physically deformed. She explained to me that she needed help. When attempting to perform certain tasks within her school curriculum, she was informed that she failed because she did not use the same technique that was taught. That one statement, “You failed,” had crushed this student and took away all

“It is not only support that is needed for those with challenges but also acceptance.”

her confidence and drive to pursue a career that would be challenging for anyone. She didn't deserve that; she didn't deserve to be discouraged by someone who had never been in her shoes. She was defeated because someone thought it was impossible. They didn't even try to accommodate her or ask her what would work better for her; they just told her that it was impossible. So, her question to me was, "Can you help show me how to do things in a way that's acceptable, like everyone else does it?" I agreed, but I told her that our approach might differ from what's commonly considered the norm for hand usage, and that was okay as long as we did the task without breaking sterility, had minimal to no tissue damage, and arrived at the same outcome as individuals often thought of as having standard hand function. I let her know that I knew she could do this. I had no doubt in my mind because I had done it without hands. I told her that I would love to come back to assist her with surgery, catheter placement, restraint, whatever she needed. My goal was not only to return to assist her but to also show her clinicians that it actually is possible. It is important to teach people to think outside the box; this benefits everyone in the workplace.

I'm sure you are asking how this ties into AJ's story: It ties in because AJ's teacher automatically thought that it was impossible. At 16 years old, children are very impressionable, and that one remark, "That's impossible," set those students up to think negatively, or just differently about those with disabilities. That's why it is so difficult for those with challenges to be accepted and persevere in this world. We are all taught that if someone or something is "different," they can't accomplish the same thing as others.

If we start showing younger generations and exposing them to diversity, maybe people who have disabilities won't have such a hard time being accepted. When it comes to proving themselves or their methods, being accepted wouldn't be such an uphill climb. Just because someone doesn't do something the way you do it doesn't mean it can't be done: Obviously, I'm proof that that's not true!

I'm not going to lie; growing up I would get discouraged and feel sorry for myself because I constantly had to prove myself because of my disability. What I didn't realize is that everyone must prove themselves on a daily basis, not just me. That's just a part of life, so it definitely didn't make me special. How I chose to prove myself is what made me special. ■

References

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Brandy Duhon, DVM

Dr. Duhon embraces her role as a teacher, mentor, and role model for students with and without disabilities. As a child, she was diagnosed with meningitis, resulting in having both her hands and a portion of her foot amputated. Yet, with tenacity and drive, Dr. Duhon pursued her dream career in veterinary medicine. She received her BS from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette in 2005 and her DVM from the LSU SVM in 2013. Since graduating LSU, Dr. Duhon has shared her story with hundreds of future veterinarians to empower them to find their own path in veterinary medicine. In addition to her passions of mentorship and supporting veterinary students, Dr. Duhon's clinical interests include general practice, shelter medicine, disaster response, and high-quality, high-volume spay/neuter. In her role with Heartland Veterinary Partners, Dr. Duhon helps match students with externships and jobs within general practices throughout the Midwest, South, and Southeast U.S. that provide excellent mentorship and opportunities for unique career growth.

RESOURCES

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