



Shops Tout D&I, but Many Overlook Disabilities

By Ben Miller June 8, 2021

Editor's Note: Many fund companies have trumpeted their efforts to hire people of different races and ethnicities. However, one prong of diversity that's often forgotten is disability. Today's story examines some of the issues that companies need to address before they hire people with disabilities. The second part will look at how fund companies address those concerns.

Many fund firms have championed their initiatives to hire individuals in underrepresented groups. But messaging around diversity rarely targets individuals with disabilities.

Hiring disabled staffers often requires firms to develop certain accommodations or flexible work arrangements. And frequent litigation under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Family and Medical Leave Act has incentivized firms to make sure they get it right.

For example, this spring a former **SS&C** business analyst sued the firm for violating the FMLA, ADA and other civil rights laws when the firm fired her while she was taking medical leave. A doctor requested that the employee be granted two weeks of medical leave for every six months, according to the April 5 complaint. The firm allegedly stated that she was fired because they could not accommodate that request.

Other firms like **TIAA**, **Pimco** and **BNY Mellon** have also been sued for allegedly discriminating against disabled employees.

Many times, the alleged discrimination goes beyond leaves of absence, says Kristina Launey, partner at law firm **Seyfarth's** labor and employment practice.

"An employer needs to engage in an interactive process with an employee to figure out what an employee might need to come back to work," she says.

For example, Kevin Mullen, a legally blind distribution professional at **MFS**, says he has faced a myriad of challenges since he started working at MFS 18 years ago. He's faced obstacles including reading paper memos and navigating business travel in addition to the challenges he overcame to study and ultimately pass his CFA certification exam.

However, his Boston-based employer has provided him with the resources he needs to do his job, he says.

When he joined MFS in 2003, he used a “very large, clunky, probably 65-pound machine” to read paper and other documents, he says. That device was a Telesensory Aladdin, then a common tool used by low-vision individuals to magnify media on screen.

He still uses the machine to read certain documents, but he’s since added other devices that help with his work. He also uses ZoomText, a newer magnifying software that helps low-vision users read digital documents, websites and emails.

“The shift to paperless has made my life a little bit easier,” he adds.

Now, he uses a computer with a 30-inch monitor, he notes.

“I blow the font up to roughly 16x, which equates to 125-point font if you’re using a regular Word doc, and the downfall is you can only see about 1/16 of the screen at a time,” he adds.

MFS has a group of IT specialists who test software and hardware for accessibility, using the same ZoomText software that Mullen relies upon to assure an upgrade or new technology can integrate seamlessly.

However, the abrupt transition to a work-from-home structure at the start of the pandemic changed everything, Mullen says.

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Mullen was concerned that the shift to remote work would further isolate him from the accommodations and social connections he had forged during his years in the office. Plus, when working from home, he had to use a laptop for the first time, not his desktop with the giant monitor, he adds. Given his in-office accommodations, Mullen initially assumed he would be unable to work from home.

However, Mullen’s supervisor, Jenine Garrelick, a senior managing director at MFS who oversees internal sales and business development, was able to help Mullen transition to the remote work setting by providing on-call technology professionals who could address his hardware and software needs at home.

“It’s really important for a supervisor to just listen and explore, because there’s so much technology out there,” she says. “Kevin really educated me on everything.”

Asawari Ghude, a VP at **JPMorgan** who is hard of hearing, had a similar experience educating her employer about the types of tools that could make her job easier. She has also shared her perspective with the firm’s resource groups on disability inclusion. Ghude

is a member of the New York-based firm's Asset and Wealth Management Technology Diversity Council and its Deaf and Hard of Hearing Working Group.

Ghude has overseen document services technology for JPMorgan's asset management division since 2016. However, she did not declare her disability to her employer until October 2020.

"To be honest, when I joined the firm, I didn't really talk about my disability," she says. "I thought I might be sidelined if I said that I can't really hear."

Instead, she relied on her hearing aids, she says.

"It was up to me to empower myself and find out what are the tools that I can have," she says. However, once Ghude decided to openly declare her disability status at work, she was able to tap into a support system that was already in place, she adds.

For example, she learned that JPMorgan offers deaf employees access to its in-house captioning service. Through that offering, employees can request a dedicated professional captioner who can help them navigate virtual meetings or transcribe town hall presentations on demand.

"Any meeting that you join, if you have a documented need, they will transcribe it for you," Ghude says.

For Ghude, this kind of accommodation from her employer was not a given. She previously worked as a consultant for several years, with stints as a temporary employee of Bank of America and Goldman Sachs, she notes. And in those roles, she was not given any such support.

Despite the stigma and gray areas that surround disability status, medical leave and workplace accommodations, some industry workers are hopeful that the industry is becoming more welcoming to a wider range of workers.

"I'm not sure many people would encourage [disabled] people to enter our industry, and I think that would be a shame," MFS's Garrelick says. "[A disability] shouldn't be something that limits anyone."

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