Enabling Success: Enhancing Accessibility in Professional Societies and Programs for Disabled Individuals

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We are told as career scientists that engagement in our professional societies, holding leadership roles, winning awards, and receiving honors is a pathway to being regarded as a subject matter expert in our field. In addition to a robust record of publications and funding, engagement in our professional societies is a pathway to external recognition that can boost our careers, our confidence in ourselves as research professionals, and create a community around us that makes contributing to our field a worthwhile endeavor.

Missing out on these opportunities in graduate school and as an early career professional can be detrimental to our ability to find jobs and grow as scientists. Additionally, these consequences can be compounded by the absence of quality mentorship and have subsequent impacts to mental health and our quality of life. For those that don't engage in career and professional development at levels that lead to early and mid-career honors, awards, and recognition – their experiences of job satisfaction and overall wellbeing in the workplace may be at risk.

Current efforts towards diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) are geared toward workforce development of populations underrepresented in STEM. Headway has been made in training and retention of those historically underserved in the STEM workforce. However, despite a focus on accessibility, these efforts often miss members of the disability community – especially women and those individuals Assigned Female at Birth (AFAB). Additionally, disabled individuals are often left out of DEIA conversations, and requests for accessibility often focus on bare minimum accommodations from our institutions and management.

Yet, disabilities among employees and colleagues are more common than we think[1]. While physical and mobility related disabilities are often those most visible in our society, a person may have a visible or invisible disability, chronic illness, or other condition. And, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, in which some of the workforce has been chronically impacted by the disease, incidents of disability via "long-term COVID" have likely touched a number of our coworkers.

For disabled and chronically ill individuals, "extracurriculars" – or pursuit of activities that are additional or adjacent to job success beyond our position descriptions – can sometimes feel out of reach. As individuals with invisible disabilities that impact social and behavioral cognition, career advancement activities and additional professional development opportunities, including professional recognition and pursuing honors and awards – can feel less important than the daily management of our disabilities, performing regular job duties, caring for our families, and caring for ourselves. For us, reasons we may have had to lessen engagement in our professional

lives have been compounded by the time, energy, and resources it takes to manage our disabilities.

Greater challenges also exist in traditionally expected functions of STEM careers. Activities such as networking, attending conferences and society meetings, traveling, long hours, attending discussions, and volunteering time on boards and in leadership positions often feel inaccessible. At times, the time and energy required to manage our disabilities can feel insurmountable, particularly when responsibilities to ourselves, our families, and our careers are compounding by demanding environments in which non-disabled folks may have more resources at their disposal.

During the pandemic, workplaces and professional societies showed disabled people that environments could be more accessible and inclusive. Suddenly, we were able to attend conferences online, access slide decks, and have important conversations from our home. Inherently, professional spaces became more inclusive for many folks, not just the disabled community. However, following the pandemic, many of these accommodations went away. Virtual meeting fatigue may have prompted senior researchers and leaders to do away altogether with these accessible forms of communication. And, with in-person work returning to normal – accommodations that had enhanced our job performance and feelings of belonging and wellbeing at work – i.e., closed captioning, visual aids, and limits to costly travel – may have disappeared in the end.

The costs related to managing a disability in the workplace are different for all folks, and not all disabilities affect the ways that we engage with our careers. However, in the creation of accessible spaces for employees – we must always ask: for whom? For those serving on our society or employer's DEIA committees, in employee groups, and serving the communities, it would behoove us to acknowledge that issues with consideration for the disabled community are critical to inclusion and employee retention. Barriers to becoming subject matter experts in our fields should not be compounded by the lack of access to spaces with which our non-disabled colleagues do not struggle.

Instead, we encourage leadership of all organizations and institutions to fully engage with disabled individuals to understand some of the ways in which accommodations may fall short, and how we can overcome the issue of accessibility and its impacts on employee achievement and career trajectories. Here, leadership should set an expectation of accessibility across organizations, seeking to understand the unique challenges of each disabled person within the community, and championing accessibility for all.

Additional Tips for Improving Accessibility for Individuals with Disabilities

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- Account for the disability community – both visible and invisible – when planning for diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies

- Engage with the disabled community, listen, and champion suggested changes to your organization based on feedback.
- Revisit your stance on online vs in-person engagement and meetings; Plan events that allow for online options to engage and encourage leadership to champion these new ways to engage.
- Provide visual and auditory aids for individuals attending conferences and meetings and promote accessible presentation styles – consider providing printout of slides, ASL interpreter for keynotes, and briefs/summaries for talks.
- Provide safe spaces at conferences or meetings for individuals to care for themselves in a private space during these events.
- Attend to those in need of mentorship and pathways to engaging in professional societies, and defining pathways to awards, society fellows, and other honors.

[1] Center for Disease Control and Prevention. "Disability Impacts All of Us" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023) https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html (accessed Jun 24, 2023).