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**Reimagining “Reasonable”: Workplace Accommodations
Among People with Disabilities in the COVID-19 Era**

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many workplaces have adopted accommodations that people with disabilities have long requested but often been denied, such as the ability to work from home. The social model of disability and a culture of ableism help explain which accommodation requests were denied or fulfilled prior to the emergence of COVID-19. However, the pandemic opens a window of opportunity to better understand accommodations and the workplace, and the impact of COVID-19 on the future of reasonable accommodations. By centering the voices of people with disabilities through twenty-one interviews with members of ADA 25 Advancing Leadership, I show how the COVID-19 pandemic has made visible the strong culture of ableism and the use of the medical model of disability prior to and during the pandemic, while creating possibilities of what a more accessible workplace could look like. Specifically, I demonstrate that among people with disabilities, there is hope that this progress will not be lost, particularly now that many companies have been forced to change and reimagine the workplace. In other words, there is now evidence that certain accommodations are possible, and this can be used to advocate for a more accessible world; while this brings hope, there is also much doubt and uncertainty. It is of critical importance that the Americans with Disabilities Act, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, courts, and employers clearly recognize accommodations such as working from home and flexible work schedules as reasonable accommodations since the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the feasibility of these accommodations. We must also reimagine “reasonable”; these work arrangements must not be allowed only when people without disabilities are involved.

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Introduction

People with disabilities¹ have long been requesting accommodations in the workplace, including but not limited to working from home, flexible work schedules, assistive technologies, and physical changes to the workplace (Baker et al. 2006; Balser 2007; Harlan and Robert 1998; Ludgate 1997; Sullenger 2006). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) sets up a framework for reviewing whether an accommodation request is a reasonable accommodation; although vague, it means employers must alter the way work is structured to allow persons with disabilities to perform the job as long as the accommodation request does not present undue hardship to the employer—which can be interpreted in many different ways (Harlan and Robert 1998; Ludgate 1997; Sullenger 2006). Due to the sweeping nature of the ADA, there is considerable variability in which accommodations are approved and which are not. Many people with disabilities thus do not receive the accommodations that would remove barriers of employment and job performance (Schur et al. 2014; Konrad et al. 2013; Harlan and Robert 1998).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that many of the workplace accommodations people with disabilities had long requested (and often been denied) are now commonplace, including working from home and flexible work schedules (Ebuenyi et al. 2020; Goggin and Ellis 2020; Schur et al. 2020). This leads to the interesting question of why so many people with disabilities were denied these accommodations pre-pandemic. While the literature explores the social model of disability and a culture of

¹ There is discussion in the disability community regarding which language is better to use: person-first language (i.e. people with disabilities) versus identity-first language (i.e. disabled people). While I recognize that there are arguments in favor of and against both, and that people have individual preferences, I choose to use person-first language throughout this paper as this is the language that the organization I draw the interviewees from uses.

ableism—in which people with disabilities are discriminated against and thought of as inferior to people without disabilities—in understanding what accommodations are fulfilled prior to the pandemic (Davis 1995; Harlan and Robert 1998; Kelman and Stough 2015), the COVID-19 pandemic opens up an essential window of opportunity to better understand accommodations and the workplace, and the impact of the pandemic on the future of reasonable accommodations. Questions remain about whether these interim accommodations provided will persist or vanish after the pandemic. While some have suggested that via a social empathy model, these accommodations could be sustained (Ebuenyi et al. 2020), others have suggested that a return to “normalcy”—stemming from an ableist point of view—would stray away from these accommodations that have expanded access for the disability community (Goggin and Ellis 2020). These theories can be valuable in thinking about the future; however, the voices of people with disabilities need to be centered and further expanded upon to gather a full picture of the future, and how to ensure access and equity in the workplace.

In this study, I bring in the voices of people with disabilities to address these gaps and questions. Through twenty-one interviews with people with disabilities who are members of a Chicago-based non-profit called ADA 25 Advancing Leadership, I learn about three core areas: people’s experiences with accommodations before and during the pandemic, their feelings about the currently widespread provision of accommodations that many people with disabilities were previously denied, and their beliefs about their workplace's future regarding accommodations. I find that accommodations are much more accepted when they are provided to everyone and are thus universal, and that companies make decisions based on how they think they will be impacted financially.

Additionally, a common sentiment is that people with disabilities are upset that it took a pandemic to get the accommodations they have been asking for, but are hopeful that progress has finally been made. There is doubt and hope—and, mostly, uncertainty—among people with disabilities regarding the future of accommodations.

In this paper, by considering the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on accommodations for people with disabilities, I maintain that there is much room for growth, both within and beyond a pandemic context. Ultimately, I argue that the Americans with Disabilities Act, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, courts, and employers must clearly recognize accommodations such as working from home and flexible work schedules as reasonable accommodations, since COVID-19 has demonstrated the feasibility of these accommodations. The term “reasonable” must also be reimagined to include the perspective of the employee. This must then be supported with guidance from the state, reviews and revisions of hiring and accommodations processes, and professional advancement and job coaching and mentoring. As Rosella, an interviewee, points out, a new foundation needs to be built within companies to create a new culture:

What we're trying to do right now is put new siding on a condemned house. The entire house just needs to be torn down and rebuilt from the foundation up. Putting that new siding on the house just makes it look pretty, but it's still condemned, it's still falling down. So, if you don't address the foundation, if you don't address the rotted wood, your house is not going to stand, and that's where we are right now.

I aim for this research to represent the first steps towards building a stronger foundation.

The Americans with Disabilities Act

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990 and its main goal was to advocate for and ensure civil rights for Americans with disabilities. The act was

ambitious and covers a large range of topics: transportation, employment, schools, and all public and private places open to the public (Mayerson 1992). The idea of the ADA is built from legislation stemming from the Civil Rights Movement: to provide equality and opportunities to all individuals with disabilities by eliminating discrimination based on disability. Many parts of the ADA are intentionally vague. For example, its definition of a person with a disability is not precise in a medical sense (i.e., restricted to specific medical diagnoses); two different interpretations of the definition could classify a person as having a disability or not. This breadth of the definition in the ADA seems to be intentional in order to not confine its applications to a narrow group of people. Additionally, a reasonable accommodation is never clearly defined; rather, a few examples of what might be considered a reasonable accommodation are provided. I explore these terms in greater detail in the following paragraphs. The ambiguity of the ADA allows for ongoing interpretation and potentially more options and accommodations, but it is also challenging to understand the specifics of the ADA. This makes enacting and implementing measures in the ADA challenging as it is unclear what accommodations or disabilities are covered (Stuhlbarg 1991; Vassel 1994). Moreover, the ADA covers a large range of topics which may complicate implementation; there are five Titles in the Act: Employment, State and Local Government, Public Accommodations, Telecommunications, and Miscellaneous Provisions (“What is the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)?” 2020). Below, I take a deeper look into the Title on Employment.

Prior to the ADA, Section 504 of the 1973 Rehab Act was the primary regulatory measure regarding discrimination against people with disabilities; this Act, however, only

applied to programs receiving federal assistance (“The Rehabilitation Act of 1973” 2020).² The ADA’s provisions surrounding employment stem from the Rehab Act but are more broadly applied to public and private employers (Ludgate 1997). The overarching goal of both the Rehab Act and ADA provisions in relation to employment is as specified in the ADA: “No covered entity shall discriminate against a qualified individual on the basis of disability in regard to job application procedures, the hiring, advancement, or discharge of employees, employee compensation, job training, and other terms, conditions, and privileges of employment” (“42 U.S. Code § 12112. Discrimination.” 2008). A “qualified individual” refers to “an individual who, with or without reasonable accommodation, can perform the essential functions of the employment position that such individual holds or desires” (“12111” 2008). Essential functions are determined by the employer—i.e., if a job description were used for advertising the job, that would be used to identify essential functions.

Another key term in the above description is “reasonable accommodation.” This is where the vagueness of the ADA comes in; the term “reasonable accommodation” is not clearly defined. Rather, the ADA provides a list of what a reasonable accommodation “may include” (“12111” 2008)—note the term “may” does not guarantee that these are reasonable accommodations in all circumstances. Some potential “reasonable accommodations” according to the ADA include: “job restructuring, part-time or modified work schedules, reassignment to a vacant position, acquisition or modification of equipment or devices, appropriate adjustment or modifications of examinations,

² Other measures that regulated discrimination against people with disabilities prior to the ADA include the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Architectural Barriers Act, and various state and local laws.

training materials or policies, the provision of qualified readers or interpreters, and other similar accommodations for individuals with disabilities” (“12111” 2008).

This provision leaves much room for the accommodations that are listed to be denied, as well as other accommodations to never be considered if they are not similar to the ones listed. So, while this framework exists, it does not guarantee that accommodations that qualified employees request—even those considered reasonable in some cases—will be provided. Instead, there is another clause in the ADA that says if an employer faces “undue hardship” due to the accommodation request, then that accommodation does not have to be made (“42 U.S. Code § 12112.Discrimination.” 2008). Generally, “undue hardship” refers to “an action requiring significant difficulty or expense” and can more specifically depend upon the cost or nature of an accommodation, the financial situation of the employer, the impact the accommodation would have on the workplace operations, and the size and structure of the company (“12111” 2008). The ambiguity of the “reasonable accommodation” clause combined with the exception based on “undue hardship” means that the Employment Title of the ADA is decided variably on a case-by-case basis.

It is also important to note that the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA) tried to remove some of the uncertainty of the ADA. One of the major changes that the ADAAA brought about was a shift in the way that disability was interpreted. The ADAAA aimed to broaden the definition of disability; this changes the ways court cases are handled: “the primary object of attention in cases brought under the ADA should be whether entities covered under the ADA have complied with their obligations, and to convey that the question of whether an individual's impairment is a

disability under the ADA should not demand extensive analysis” (“29 CFR Appendix to Part 1630” 2008). This means that, in theory, employers should be held more accountable in providing accommodations rather than focusing on the technicalities of whether a person has a disability. Of course, such accountability is only possible if people with disabilities request necessary accommodations in the first place.

Workplace Accommodations

It is often the case that people with disabilities never request necessary accommodations because of uncertainty of the process or fear of repercussions and pushback. Harlan and Robert (1998) interviewed people with disabilities to better understand their experiences in the workplace and what caused employers to resist accommodations. In the state that Harlan and Robert did their research, there was a formal accommodations request process where employees make a written request to their supervisor, and then the supervisor can approve it or refer it to the Affirmative Action Officer, and if denied, the employee is to be notified of the discrimination complaint procedure as well as the State Compliance Review Board where appeals can be made (1998)³. While there was this formal process, most direct supervisors and employees were not actually familiar with this process; this means employees must navigate requesting an accommodation on their own, and they often meet resistance from the organization (Harlan and Robert 1998). Harlan and Robert found that the ADA's vagueness—discussed above—results in employers not wanting to identify disability in a

³ Many states do not have a formal accommodations process. Rather, it is recommended that employers use an “interactive process” as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) suggests. It is important to note, however, that this “interactive process” is not required under the ADA and that employers have a lot of freedom to determine how to deal with accommodations requests (“Interactive Process”).

broad or flexible way, thus putting the onus on employees to go out of their way to prove their disability (1998). Many employees were then discouraged from requesting accommodations. If employees did request accommodations, they often faced pushback from supervisors not wanting to take their disability seriously—rather many supervisors felt that people with disabilities were trying to come up with an excuse (Harlan and Robert 1998). This creates a culture of fear: disability is seen negatively and thus individuals may choose not to request necessary accommodations in order to avoid potential retaliation, such as being fired. When people with disabilities do not request or are denied accommodations, they instead compensate for their lack of accommodation by taking on extra hours or going to work while in pain or while sick (Harlan and Robert 1998). Thus, resistance to these accommodations puts extra pressure on people with disabilities to make up for an environment that is not built for them.

Harlan and Robert further found in their study that 68% of people with disabilities requested accommodations, and of those who did, 31% were denied their requests (1998). Similarly, Balser investigates requests for four specific accommodations: physical alteration of building/equipment, flexible scheduling of work hours, buying/installing assistive technology, and working at home (2007). She uses logistic regression to test whether certain characteristics of employees and employers determine whether or not accommodations are approved. In this study, 51% of respondents who received an accommodation received a physical alteration of building or equipment, 43% received flexible scheduling, 37% received assistive technology, and 18% received working from home (Balser 2007). Harlan and Robert looked at these types of accommodations to see which ones were granted at a higher rate; they found that accommodations which seemed

inexpensive, simple, and were one-time accommodations were granted with much greater ease—these typically included physical changes to the environment such as furniture, parking, or adaptive equipment (1998). However, social work environment changes, such as flexible work schedules, changes in job functions, and working from home, were much less likely to be accommodated; in fact, these types of accommodations made up 39% of the requests in this study, but 61% of the requests that were denied (Harlan and Robert 1998). Balser also found that full-time, permanent (FTP) employees were more likely to receive physical alterations of the building or equipment but were actually less likely to receive schedule flexibility (2007). On a related note, Harlan and Robert found that employees with a higher job salary grade (and thus likely more experience) were more likely to be granted their accommodations request, although they did not break it down by type of request (1998). Balser also looked at sector and found that employees in non-profits were less likely to receive physical accommodations, probably due to a lack of material resources (2007). In the public sector, Balser found higher numbers of physical alterations, but a negative effect on working at home. She further found that this difference could be tied to unions as more public sector employees are part of unions, which have more rigid and traditional definitions of work and thus are not accommodating to working at home (2007).

Research on telework (or working from home) as a reasonable accommodation prior to the COVID-19 pandemic indicates that there was much stigma and many barriers regarding working from home, especially in the late 1990's and early 2000's (Baker et al. 2006; Ludgate 1997; Sullenger 2006; West and Anderson 2005; Kaplan et al. 2006). A harsh case from 1995 that both Ludgate (1997) and Sullenger (2006) reference is *Vande*

Zande v. Wisconsin Department of Administration; here, the ruling was that working from home would only be considered a reasonable accommodation in *very extraordinary cases*. Other cases in different courts, however, have had different interpretations; some do say that telework could be considered a reasonable accommodation under certain circumstances (Ludgate 1997; Sullenger 2006). It is more common for courts to use a fact-specific approach and determine a verdict based on the particular case at hand; however, a persistent belief that physical presence is a core part of traditional work environments is difficult to overcome (Ludgate 1997; Sullenger 2006). Even when remote work is feasible, this accommodation may not be granted due to “undue hardship.” In fact, prior to the ADAAA, courts sided with employers 74.4% of the time and after the ADAAA, 45.9% of the time, most often because of “undue hardship” (Befort 2013).

As Ludgate discusses, the undue hardship argument comes from two main areas: assuming the cost of the accommodation outweighs the benefits or underestimating the feasibility of working from home (1997). Studies have shown, however, that workers may actually be more productive when working from home, costs may go down or are relatively inexpensive, and communication with others in the workplace is feasible due to modern technology (Job Accommodation Network 1994; Blanck 1996; Berkeley Planning Associates 1982; Solovieva 2011; West and Anderson 2005). Telework provides numerous other benefits such as increasing the range of jobs people with disabilities can obtain, removing challenges related to transportation and physical workplace environments, and flexibility in balancing work with the needs of one’s disability (Baker et al. 2006). On the other side, studies have noted concerns with

telework related to social isolation, lack of direct supervision, stigma, concerns surrounding promotion and assignment on key projects, and security (Baker et al. 2006; Sullenger 2006; West and Anderson 2005; Anderson et al. 2001). While the benefits and challenges of remote work were formerly experienced by a small portion of the working population, the pandemic has brought them into sharper relief for multitudes of employers and employees.

COVID-19

COVID-19 has had a drastic impact on the workplace; from telework to increased flexibility, trends from prior to the pandemic have accelerated. A Pew Research Study has shown that while prior to the pandemic, 20% of people worked from home either all or most of the time, now around 71% of people are teleworking all or most of the time (Parker et al. 2020). Workers with disabilities are more likely to be working from home than workers without disabilities (Schur et al. 2020). What may be more surprising is that more than half of people said they would continue to telework after COVID-19 if given the choice (Parker et al. 2020). This may, in part, be due to the increased flexibility of the workplace as a result of COVID-19. Flexibility can take place in many forms, from flexible work schedules to changing job roles to adapting the ways one works (i.e., increased reliance on technology). Around half of employees who did not previously telework but now do during COVID-19 said they have more flexibility now (Parker et al. 2020) and another study shows that 82% of employers say they will have increased flexible working after the pandemic (Mason et al. 2020). This flexibility is essential for teleworkers, especially during COVID-19 where most kids are home from school and caretaking responsibilities may be increased. For people who do telework most or all of

the time, they found it easier to balance work and family responsibilities during COVID-19 than before the pandemic compared to people not teleworking as often or ever (Parker et al. 2020). COVID-19 has thus impacted the workplace in many ways and changes have been made for most employees. The changes that employers have been forced to make to accommodate employees dealing with health concerns, children at home, and a new work environment with heavy reliance on technology have challenged unquestioned assumptions about workplaces. For instance, why employees with disabilities were often denied these very accommodations prior to the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on people with disabilities in multiple ways. First, people with disabilities may not have access to the care they had before the pandemic. With increased stress on the healthcare system, worries of contracting COVID-19 themselves, and social distancing requirements, people with disabilities do not have access to the same services they relied on pre-pandemic and are unable to access the care needed to manage their disabilities (“Disability Considerations During the COVID-19 Outbreak” 2020). This effect can particularly be seen regarding people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDDs). Prior to the pandemic, people with IDD often relied on in-person care; due to the pandemic and distancing guidelines, many people have been denied access to these caregivers and community service providers (Constantino et al. 2020). Moreover, people with IDD who often live in congregate care settings are disproportionately affected in terms of the death rate of COVID-19; multiple studies have found that the death rate among these individuals is two to three times greater than the death rate for people without IDD or for people not living in congregate care facilities (Landes et al. 2020; Makary 2020; Turk et

al. 2020). Building on this, people with IDD were also disproportionately isolated pre-pandemic compared to the general population and to people with other disabilities, and this isolation has only increased during the pandemic. While some people are able to mitigate this isolation using virtual technologies, this is not always a substitute for people with IDD, thus resulting in negative consequences (Constantino et al. 2020). COVID-19 has thus created many new barriers for people with disabilities, especially in relation to accessing the care they need.

However, COVID-19 has also shed light on the experiences of people with disabilities, which people without disabilities may be able to learn from. Additionally, it has enabled accommodations that people with disabilities have been requesting for years to become commonplace. For example, many people with disabilities face isolation and exclusion because of their disability; with COVID-19, almost everyone is facing this isolation—at least to a higher degree than before—and many feel “different” because of a COVID-19 diagnosis or have continued to experience symptoms of long-term COVID-19 (Ebuenyi et al. 2020; “COVID-19: Long-Term Effects” 2021). Additionally, information regarding COVID-19 is not always readily available, or it can be difficult to know what is true and reliable; people with disabilities often face this lack of information due to it not being available in accessible formats (Ebuenyi et al. 2020). Thus, some of the experiences of COVID-19 have allowed people without disabilities to better understand a portion of what people with disabilities face on a regular basis; whether or not they realize this connection determines how we move forward and either make the world more or less accessible. Lastly, when COVID-19 emerged, working from home became commonplace, even though many workplaces had previously resisted providing it to

people with disabilities (Ebuenyi et al. 2020; Goggin and Ellis 2020, Schur et al. 2020). The ease with which such widespread accommodations were adopted indicates that it is organizations' understandings of disability, rather than the feasibility of workplace changes, that precluded the use of such accommodations.

Models of Disability

People with disabilities interact with the world in a variety of ways, and there is much discussion in the literature about which model best characterizes these interactions (e.g., Parsons 1951; Olkin 1999; Thomas and Woods 2003; Carlson 2010; Creamer 2009; Kanter 2014; Rioux and Heath 2012; Degener 2016; Finkelstein 1981; Oliver 1990; Oliver 2013; Oliver 1981). The medical model of disability was a common model throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s; some still promote it today (e.g., Forness and Kavale 2001), and it is used widely in practice in the medical profession (Bricher 2000; Thomas and Woods 2003). The medical model understands disability to be a defect of the body that should be cured or rehabilitated (Parsons 1951; Olkin 1999); under this model, disability is a negative trait. With medical advancements, the focus is on medically changing people with disabilities so that they are no longer considered disabled (Thomas and Woods 2003; Carlson 2010; Creamer 2009). Searching for cures and assigning diagnosis are key components of this model. Solely focusing on ridding a person of their disability is thus a major shortcoming of this model. Further, there is not always a cure available or accessible; as such, focusing on a cure comes from an ableist point of view where disability is viewed as inherently bad and in which the person would be better off if they were to not have that disability. This creates a culture in which people with disabilities are ridiculed and discriminated against—they are treated as objects to be

changed, rehabilitated, or institutionalized. Thus, there has been a shift among disability scholars away from the medical model towards the social model of disability.

The social model of disability views the environment as the disabler; in other words, people are disabled by society and the barriers it creates for them (Finkelstein 1981; Oliver 1990; Oliver 2013). The social model of disability grew out of the disability rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in the UK (Retief and Letšosa 2018). The Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), an organization in the UK, claimed the following in their manifesto, which eventually became known as the social definition of disability: “it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society” (UPIAS 1976). Several theorists took up this idea, most prominently Mike Oliver. Oliver, a disability activist and Britain’s first professor of disability studies (“Mike Oliver Obituary” 2019), coined the term “the social model of disability” (Oliver 1983). Oliver explains: “This new paradigm involved nothing more or less fundamental than a switch away from focusing on the physical limitations of particular individuals to the way the physical and social environments impose limitations upon certain groups or categories of people” (1983). Thus, the social model understands the built environment as not being conducive to people with disabilities, and that it is the environment that should be changed and fixed, not people.⁴

⁴ The social model of disability can be viewed alongside the human rights model of disability, which looks to ensure human rights are not denied to people with disabilities because of their condition; they should be seen as humans in the sense that non-disabled people are, and thus be granted the same human rights, which should then be protected in legal and policy documents (Kanter 2014; Rioux and Heath 2012; Degener 2016).

The social model of disability also makes a key distinction between impairment and disability. UPAIS defines impairment as “lacking part of or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body,” while defining disability as: “the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities” (UPIAS 1976). This distinction indicates that disability is created by society and need not be a problem if society were to change the environment, whereas an impairment is related to the medical condition of a person. While a person’s impairment may be blindness, this will only affect the person’s social status and participation if the environment is not accessible. By providing screen-readers or image descriptions to someone who is blind, the environment is changed to remove the barriers a person with a disability may face—instead, they are able to fully participate with adaptations such as these. Accommodations can make it so that if one is, for example, emailing someone experiencing blindness, there will be no impact on participation or status of the receiver of the email.

More recently, the social model of disability has been expanded upon to be more inclusive and to better inform policies and activism. In their original definition, UPAIS emphasized physical disabilities and impairments, thus leaving out intellectual or mental disabilities, among others. Thus, UPIAS has adapted their definitions to use the word “impairment” instead of the term “physical impairment” (Goodley 2001; Retief and Letšosa 2018). Since the social model of disability takes the burden of the disability away from the individual and puts it mostly on society, there is much room for disability activists to advocate and create policies to construct a more accessible environment.

Particularly, this model is used to advocate for changes in society such as reasonable accommodations at work, structural improvements, and access to information in accessible formats, as well as reimagining attitudes towards people with disabilities (Campbell and Oliver 1996; Kattari et al. 2017). The idea that the environment can be adapted is crucial in bringing about changes for people with disabilities.

The social model of disability does not come without criticisms, however. One such critique is that this model ignores or minimizes pain and impairments (Shakespeare 2013; Price 2015). The social model of disability is built up from the notion that if the environment was free of barriers, there would be no challenges or pain for people with disabilities, which is unrealistic because the body is still impaired. Critics suggest that this then minimizes the limitations that can be tied directly to impairment—and the pain that can come from them. Another critique related to this is that there is such a sharp distinction between impairment and disability under the social model of disability. However, in reality, “it is the interaction of individual bodies and social environments which produces disability” (Shakespeare 2013). An example is that videos with only audio and no captions are only a barrier when someone is hard of hearing or deaf. Thus, while the social model of disability does have its shortcomings, it can still inform how accommodations in the workplace are thought about.

The medical model and social model of disability are key models in understanding workplace accommodations. An organization operating under a medical model of disability might encourage workers to seek treatment or not hire workers with disabilities at all (since they may view these workers as incapable given their disability and the job requirements). In contrast, an organization working under the social model of

disability might understand the restrictions that the built and social environments have created for people with disabilities and thus be willing to adjust their workplace to make it more accessible. Thus, one would expect to see more accommodations being made by an organization that operates under the social model of disability. To understand how these models of disability are used today, the ADA constitutes necessary context. The ADA itself was intended to eliminate discrimination based on disability in all facets of life; moreover, it was a way to advocate for social inclusion of people with disabilities through policy (Scotch 2000). Thus, the ADA can be seen as part of the shift towards a social model of disability—it sought to change the environment to make it more accessible for people with disabilities. Because of the lens that the ADA operates under, the conceptual idea of who has a disability is broad since it relies on the environment being the disabler. The definition of disability in the ADA not only includes people who have an impairment, but also those who are *perceived* as having an impairment (“ADA Amendments Act of 2008” 2008). Additionally, in relation to employment, while reasonable accommodations are mandated, what these accommodations are varies on a case-by-case basis. This is where the medical model of disability comes in: while the ADA advocates for a social model of disability, decisions about reasonable accommodations are made at the company and judicial level where a medical model may still underly operations and decisions (Burgdorf 1997). As Scotch puts it:

If the marginalization of people with disabilities is the result of social processes that are embedded in our culture, then it is not surprising that governmental and legal institutions as well have employed a traditional medical model of disability based on incapacity that focuses on the limitations of plaintiffs with disabilities in their application of the ADA. (2000)

It is thus apparent that while the ADA utilizes the social model of disability, the medical model of disability—upon which much of the culture surrounding disability is built—may prevail in many settings. The implications of this in the workplace include employees with disabilities being denied reasonable accommodations—or changes in the environment—that would remove barriers.

Data and Methods

Interviewees and Interviews

In this research, the data comes from twenty-one interviews with members of an organization called ADA 25 Advancing Leadership. Advancing Leadership is a non-profit that works to get people with disabilities into leadership positions in the Chicago region, as people with disabilities are underrepresented in positions of power and influence. Advancing Leadership has 170 members who all self-identify as having a disability. Someone can become a member of Advancing Leadership in one of two ways: via the Leadership Institute or the Members Network. The Leadership Institute is a year-long program for a group of twenty emerging leaders with disabilities (known as Fellows). Through the Leadership Institute, Fellows receive training on disability identity and civic engagement, are connected to civic leadership opportunities, and then gain access to the Members Network upon completion. The Members Network thus consists of people who have completed the Leadership Institute, as well as more experienced leaders who join the Members Network directly. The Members Network provides opportunities to be connected with other leaders with disabilities, access to exclusive events and speaking opportunities, as well as connections to civic engagement and leadership. Both programs have a competitive application process. Thus, my data

concerns leaders among people with disabilities. This group is likely more vocal and action-oriented than many; while they may not be representative of all people with disabilities, their knowledge of accommodations processes and workplace functions were a benefit for my research. While I did not collect socioeconomic information in this paper, most Advancing Leadership Members are working professionals and often salaried employees. The members I interview, then, are different from hourly, low-wage workers in terms of accommodation access, which is important to keep in mind throughout this research. Advancing Leadership consists of members who are diverse in the following ways: they identify as having a wide-range of disabilities (visible, invisible, and acquired disabilities), they come from many different workplace sectors (non-profit, public, corporate, etc.), and are diverse in terms of gender and racial identity: 57% of members identify as women, 42% as men, and 1% as other, and 63% identify as White, 19% as Black, 10% as Hispanic, 7% as Asian, 3% as two or more races, and 2% identified as “other” or opted to not disclose.⁵

I conducted interviews over a period of two months with twenty-one members of Advancing Leadership. All members were invited to participate in an interview via an invitation on LinkedIn through a private group consisting of all Advancing Leadership Members and Fellows. Additionally, I reached out to members via private messaging on LinkedIn to encourage participation. Twenty-one members completed 30-minute to one-hour semi-structured interviews via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Accessibility was a key concern for me, so when reaching out to members, I noted that any accommodation they may need (captioning, translators, a different platform, etc.) would be provided. When

⁵ These percentages do not add up to 100% because of some members choosing two or more categories.

conducting the interviews, I tried to make it a conversation in order to learn about members’ experiences. The interviews first constructed a picture of what the interviewees workplace experiences were, and then dove more specifically into their workplace experiences as a person with a disability. I inquired about the process for requesting reasonable accommodations and their experiences with this process (or lack of process). Further, I asked about these experiences in relation to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic to see if there were changes to policies, what types of accommodations they were requesting, what types of accommodations were being granted, etc. I also found it important to ask how they felt accommodations would change at their workplace after the COVID-19 pandemic.

A full list of participants, including their demographics and workplace characteristics, can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics

| <u>Pseudonym</u> | <u>Workplace type</u> | <u>Workplace size</u> | <u>Gender</u> | <u>Race/Ethnicity</u> | <u>Disability</u> |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Aidan | Private | Large | Man | White | Opt to not Disclose |
| Bethany | Non-profit | Large | Woman | White | Bipolar Disorder |
| Carmen | Private & Non-profit | Large & Small | Woman | White | Physical |
| Cora | Private | Large | Woman | White | Physical & ADHD |
| Dennis | Non-profit | Large | Man | White | Chronic Pain/Illness |
| Hester | Private | Large | Man | Asian | Physical |
| Ivan | Private | Large | Man | White | Autism |
| Julia | Private | Large | Woman | White | Physical |
| Kai | Non-profit & Private (two jobs) | Small | Non-binary | White | Neurodivergent |
| Leo | Private | Medium | Man | White | Physical |
| Louisa | Private | Medium | Woman | White | Mental Health |

| | | | | | |
|---------|-------------|--------|-------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Lucia | Non-profit | Small | Woman | White, Black, and Latina | Physical |
| Monique | Non-profit | Large | Woman | Black | Blind/Low Vision & Mental Health |
| Nick | Public | Large | Man | Black | Physical |
| Odell | Private | Large | Man | Asian | Deaf |
| Raul | Independent | Medium | Man | White | Physical |
| Rosella | Private | Large | Woman | Black | Mental Health & Chronic Pain/Illness |
| Ruth | Private | Large | Woman | White | Deaf |
| Shane | Non-profit | Medium | Man | White | Blind/Low Vision |
| Shelby | Non-profit | Small | Woman | Latina | Mental Health |
| Silvia | Private | Medium | Woman | Black | Mental Health |

It is also important to note that every participant works in a position that at some point during the pandemic was virtual, indicating that most of my interviewees are involved in office-based work. However, three of my interviewees had more nuanced experiences. Kai works two jobs, one of which is as a personal care provider, a job that is done in person, and the other at a non-profit, a job that is done remotely. Ivan had two jobs prior to COVID-19 but quit his service-based job when COVID-19 hit. Thus, he has experience with service-based jobs, but is ultimately now working remotely in his other job. Finally, Silvia works in an architecture firm where most of the work is done remotely, although there are occasional field visits requiring in-person presence. The interviews allowed me to learn about the experiences of people with disabilities in the workplace and to be able to ask more in-depth questions about those experiences. The voices of people with disabilities are often left out, and thus I wanted to prioritize their voices to answer my research questions and provide a platform to understand the pandemic's impact on the workplace through their perspective.

Data Analysis

After each interview, I wrote a synthesis report of the key points I learned from the interview. As I proceeded to interview members, I adjusted the questions that I asked in interviews as I learned new things from the interviewees themselves—they are the ones who have lived these experiences, and thus by interviewing them, I learned in which direction it was most helpful to take the questions. As a researcher, I used abductive analysis by bringing with me what I knew about the field and looking for anomalies or differences from the existing theory (Timmermans and Tavory 2012); this then allowed me to adjust my questions to explore those differences. Particularly, I wanted to explore the differences that COVID-19 brought about, and how those differences may inform the future. I recorded the interviews, used closed-captioning technology to produce rough transcripts, and then hand-coded these transcriptions, paying particular attention to both common themes and areas of difference across my respondents. While hand-coding, I pulled out key findings and identified themes across the interviews that then guided my findings. Codes emerged as I went through my data, allowing me to choose the themes that were most relevant and interesting. The key themes that were discussed prior to, during, and after the pandemic were accommodations for everyone, the guiding role of economic motives in firm's decisions, and ideas surrounding disability rights awareness and accommodations. To protect the identities of the people I interviewed, a pseudonym is used for each individual, as well as any companies or other people they may mention.

Researcher Positionality

As an intern since summer 2020 at Advancing Leadership, I have previously interacted with some of the members I interviewed. When interviewing these members, I

made it clear that the research I was doing was for school and not part of my internship with Advancing Leadership. I did not make any assumptions based on the previous work I had done with them, and I started at the same position as I did with other interviewees. I also made it clear that the information they shared would stay confidential and would not affect any future work I might be doing with them, or their relationship with ADA 25 Advancing Leadership.

I became interested in the disability rights field at a young age as I watched one of my best friends from elementary school experience her disability. She transitioned from being able to walk, to having to use a walker, to utilizing a powerchair full-time. As her disability advanced, I saw the many increasing challenges that she was forced to face. Initially I noticed the physical challenges such as maneuvering in tight spaces or the lack of ramps. I then was exposed to the social challenges such as bullying or intense stares and whispers. Because of our close friendship, I could see how the obstacles she faced greatly affected her everyday life, and in turn that was very frustrating to me. I wanted her to have the same opportunities as someone without a disability and to not be looked down upon because of her disability. I thus became involved with advocating for these changes via programs such as Special Olympics. In college, I continued this work through two internships, one at Mounted Eagles Therapeutic Horsemanship—a non-profit that does work with individuals with disabilities—and the other with Advancing Leadership. These experiences have made me even more aware of the challenges people with disabilities face on a much deeper scale, and as a result, this impacts the way I have constructed my research. I also am a co-founder of an organization called Open Access which aims to create an easily accessible, online platform that brings together resources

for people with disabilities, as well as produces advocacy workshops and serves as an advocacy platform as we realize many of the issues people with disabilities face are at a structural level. Thus, I bring this strong advocacy lens with me.

Findings and Analysis

COVID-19 has brought about many changes in the disability rights and reasonable accommodations world, with a few large concepts remaining dominant throughout. My findings underscore how ableism—in which people with disabilities are discriminated against and are not provided with the support they need—drives the notion that people with disabilities should not have “special treatment.” Thus, I find that when accommodations are provided, they tend to be made for everybody. This theme holds prior to and during the pandemic and will likely persist after the pandemic. Companies' profit-maximizing motivations also contribute to a culture in which accommodations are viewed disparagingly. From before COVID-19, to during the pandemic, and after, many changes surrounding disability rights awareness and accommodations have come about and will continue to change; while this may be for the better, there is frustration that it took a catastrophe such as a pandemic to reach this point.

Pre-COVID-19

According to my interviewees, prior to COVID-19, there were some changes in reasonable accommodations, but they were extremely slow. People often struggled to get the accommodations they needed unless they were provided to everyone; if they did get an individual accommodation, it was seen as a perk rather than as something needed to function. Sometimes accommodations were denied because of worries surrounding costs or wanting to micromanage employees. Additionally, traditional ideas of “the workplace”

made certain accommodations nearly impossible to get. Finally, invisible disabilities and employers' subscription to a medical model of disability added additional layers to the challenges facing people who needed accommodations.

Accommodations for All

A key finding in my research is that while accommodations are essential for people with disabilities, accommodations are often seen as a perk rather than as a necessity by people without disabilities. Because of the framing of an accommodation as a perk, people with disabilities face pushback when they try to make an accommodation request; others fear asking for these accommodations in the first place. For example, Ivan, who worked in the service industry greeting customers and stocking shelves prior to the pandemic, expresses how he was not able to get an accommodation because it would have been viewed as unfair to others:

I wasn't really able to get extra breaks because I tire out really easily. Sometimes you just need to step away for a minute and like, get a drink of water. My supervisors weren't all that accommodating with giving extra breaks because I think the idea was that they felt that they have to follow the same thing for everyone, but for my case it's different because I have a medical condition.

While Ivan needed an accommodation, he felt that this accommodation was one that his supervisors would feel they needed to give to everyone, even if they did not identify as having a disability. Thus, because the supervisors did not want to give “special treatment” to Ivan, he had to deal with the repercussions of this, even with his medical condition. While Ivan did not receive an accommodation because it could not be provided to everyone, Julie *did* receive a necessary accommodation, but only because it was provided to everyone. As she explained, “I could always work from home because the company allows that flexibility for everybody.” Thus, many companies treated

accommodations with a one-size-fits-all approach, either providing them or denying them to all employees with no consideration for disability. This puts employees with disabilities in a double-bind as they must identify themselves as “different” in order to be provided an accommodation, but this difference is then viewed in a negative light.

When accommodations were individualized—rather than being offered to everyone, as at Julie's company—they were similarly seen as perks. Shelby expressed that a standing desk—an accommodation she needed—was viewed as a reward based on achievement or tenure with the organization, and thus it was impossible for her to receive this accommodation. She describes an example of this:

The finance department basically got standing desks and it was because they had extra money left over in a budget and they were like “oh, we have some extra money left over” and then everybody got a standing desk and so the view of it was, it was a perk. It was a perk because like, “we saved some money, let's give everyone a gift and the gift is standing desks.”

Shelby further expresses how accommodations were viewed as a perk, and the challenging process of getting an accommodation:

That mentality kind of bled through the entire organization where it was like: “this is not a necessity, you don't need this, unless you can prove that you need it—and if you prove that you need it, you need like a bunch of documents, you need a note from a doctor, you need x, y, and z, and you need to really prove that this like, tiny like, couple hundred dollars is really needed.”

Certain companies are more willing to provide accommodations for everyone. For example, Shelby worked at a firm that shifted from falling under the umbrella of a philanthropic institution to that of a non-profit. The non-profit management saw accessibility as a key to their workers' success. Shelby described the difference in mentality by sharing a quote from her new boss during one of their first meetings as a new non-profit:

I strongly believe that employees work best and employees are the most efficient and effective and are the best employees they can be when they have the things that they need to do their job. If this is a thing you need to do your job, then just buy it and then send me the receipt and then, you know, we can figure it out.

This difference in how a simple accommodation request was handled shows that the policies and environment of a workplace can make a significant difference in what accommodations are granted and how people with disabilities navigate the workplace.

Similarly, Hester replied to my question about whether accommodations were available to everyone with: “yeah, absolutely. I mean if you need a sit-stand [desk], they'll send that over.” Cora likewise added: “We started work from home full-time March 12th of last year and work from home wasn't unusual before that, [people] work from home a few times a week.” Both Hester and Cora work at technology companies. The tech sector is relatively new compared to many other sectors, and thus introducing different ways to work may be more feasible in this sector. The tech sector is also more apt to working with the technology needed for remote work, and the culture altogether may be different, particularly among programmers. Cora explains this in talking about why certain accommodations were not available for many people with disabilities prior to the pandemic:

It comes down to trusting your employees. It's like, if someone let you be flexible in your job and your job is something that you can do literally any time—like if you're an office worker or whatever—the time when you do your job doesn't matter. It's this idea of how work is as a culture from older companies and that's why sectors that are newer like technology are much more flexible because their idea of work is different.

Cora's focus on working from home was made feasible because it was allowed for everybody. With the support of all or most employees, particularly given the new and changing nature of the technology sector, working from home was not of concern even

before the pandemic, particularly for positions similar to Cora's in coding and software. This flexibility gave people the opportunity to work in the environment that was best for them. Thus, certain features of firms—such as what sector they work in, or whether they fall under private or non-profit governance—shape how they respond to employees' needs for accommodations. Through a look at how accommodations can often be viewed as a perk or “special treatment” when not provided to everyone, to seeing the easy nature of certain accommodations when they are provided to everyone, we see how accommodations are treated differently based on the nature of their availability in specific workplace cultures.

Capitalism over Humanity

In addition to employment sector, organizational governance, and universal availability of the accommodation, financial tradeoffs drive companies' and individuals' decisions related to accommodations. First, interviewees express how economic decisions interact with accommodations prior to the pandemic. For Silvia, a previous company she worked at—a disability non-profit—struggled to fulfill accommodations:

A majority of those accommodations were just never fulfilled. There were a lot of poor excuses of why they couldn't get the equipment, or a lot of people resorted to bringing in their own equipment to get the job done and it was especially frustrating because I also worked with people who did the finances there and so there was money that was allocated for the requests and was never tapped into really. And if accommodations did come up, it was always like “how can we do this on secondhand, used, cheap,” which wouldn't always address the problem that the person would have.

This organization had some structural obstacles that blocked them from fulfilling requests for accommodations. Beyond those obstacles, when requests were granted, the organization sometimes failed to provide adequate accommodations. The organization was so focused on trying to save money, they did not think about the quality of the

materials they were providing, nor about granting these requests in a fast manner. Silvia later mentioned the high turnover of employees in this organization, which can likely be attributed to this problem. Even in an organization focused on disability, the focus when considering accommodations was financial, rather than focusing on the needs of their employees.

Change and risk are other cost concerns that can prevent organizations from granting accommodations and being more flexible. Cora articulates how even before the pandemic, change was slow due to economic reasons:

Well it's because when you make decisions based on value and money, and that makes it so that change is very incremental because it can't cost that much, and sure, you can make changes, but if you're not willing to invest in something that's not going to pay off right away, there's no way to do it until you're forced to do it be like “oh okay” which originally would have been “oh, we might lose money if we let everyone work from home.”

Cora describes here the thought process of companies. The risk of trying something new and the uncertainty of how that will affect profits is alarming for companies from a financial perspective. It is not likely that companies will face these risks unless they have no other choice, or evidence suggests that the risks will pay off. As described by multiple interviewees, companies take a risk-averse, fear-based stance when providing people with disabilities the accommodations they need, and thus financial tradeoffs will be the driving force for decisions rather than accessibility.

Underscoring profit-maximizing and cost-minimizing efforts is a need for control over workers and a symptom of late capitalism. Accommodations such as working from home challenge the ability of supervisors to directly control workers. For Silvia who worked under a director she characterized as “very micro-managing, incredibly micro-managing, and to the point that even for programs to move an inch, it has to be directly

looked at by her,” working from home presented a risk to this level of control. Silvia describes how control can be a priority for some leaders, and thus any thought of giving it away is absurd. Silvia adds that when deciding whether to allow these accommodations, “some employers like micromanaging and like to be able to closely control, so I think it’s just going to be a talk about greed and like, just being realistic.” Thus, Silvia viewed efforts to control workers in the physical workplace as tied to “greed,” which highlights the fiscal aspect of employers' concerns regarding the provision of accommodations. Concerns such as these provide an example of reasonable accommodations that do not cause “undue hardship” to the employer, indicating that the employer will have to focus more on the accommodation itself and why it may not be considered “reasonable” if they want to resist providing the accommodation.

Disability Rights Awareness and Accommodations

Certain accommodations face considerable pushback because of traditional ideas of “work.” Before modern communications technology, much work could not be done remotely and thus going into a workplace was the norm. According to interviewees, while technology has evolved with new capabilities, certain mindsets have not. Dennis voiced this idea in his interview: “I think there are some people that just kind of like, do things a certain way because that's how we've always done it, and some people have an easier time letting go of that than others.” Dennis further provides an example of this with one of the employees he was working with who was working remotely. Working remotely was going quite well for the employee, but then the manager decided to shake things up:

Working from home was ideal for them because they could take care of their personal needs much more easily than when they're at work, not having to deal

with going out and being on transportation and jostling and the things that kind of come along with that, and then their manager was like “well I want you to come in like, you know, a couple days a week” but it wasn't clear that there was a reason. There wasn't anything they were going to be doing in person that they couldn't do from home. It was kind of more like they [the manager] just seemed like they wanted to do it.

From the description and example provided by Dennis, we see that certain accommodations such as working from home can be more difficult to obtain because of traditional ideas about work. Even when there is no specific reason for someone to come into work, some employers insist on it. Tradition also carries through into people's perceptions of people with disabilities and how they think about reasonable accommodations. In response to a question about other employee's responses to her disability and accommodations, Julia said: “people are still hesitant, and I find that it's like, anecdotally, of the older generation and I feel like maybe it's because it used to be like a taboo subject in corporate America.” We see here that Julia describes people who are older as more hesitant to change, shaped by their previous experiences. This may show up in various ways such as still having stigma against people with disabilities and not providing them with necessary accommodations, especially accommodations that do not fit with traditional ideas of work. This reinforces previous findings in which tradition prevails and prevents people with disabilities from receiving certain accommodations (Ludgate 1997; Sullenger 2006).

Stigma surrounding people with invisible disabilities is highly prevalent and also shows up in the difficulty of receiving accommodations that are more social (i.e., flexible work schedules) instead of physical (i.e., making a restroom accessible). Kai, who has a neurodivergent disability, expresses both of these ideas:

It's hard sometimes because since our disability is invisible, people think that it's just like a character problem, you know, or like something that you can just change through behavior and so like, you can look at somebody in a wheelchair and be like, “yeah you need to get into the building” you know, and so access is a little clearer. But with invisible disabilities, it can be harder because there's a lot of stigma and misunderstanding and it's not really viewed as access.

For Kai, having an invisible disability has made things more challenging for a few reasons. First, many people do not recognize invisible disabilities in the same way they do visible disabilities. According to Kai, while visible disabilities face stigmas too, in the workplace it is seen as easier to actually recognize and accommodate visible disabilities. With an invisible disability, however, Kai has found that people think they can just change their disability and that it is a matter of personal will. Thus, when people do not acknowledge a disability, receiving accommodations is much more difficult, if not impossible. This relates back to the medical model of disability in which rather than accommodating the individual, people want to change the disability itself and not the environment. Even at places described as being accommodating to individuals with disabilities, there is often still a stigma surrounding certain disabilities; Leo described that “while my company, I feel, has an overall respectful culture of disability...the typical or common stigmas associated with mental health challenges and maybe processing what I call non-evident, typically called invisible disabilities, there might be [a stigma].” This suggests that people with invisible disabilities face a unique set of obstacles to accommodations. Even when a company is progressive in disability rights, the stigmas surrounding invisible disabilities persist.

Another way that firms demonstrate ignorance of the needs of disabled workers is through requiring excessive documentation of disability status—a hallmark of the

medical model of disability perspective. Take, for example, Dennis's workplace which requires excessive documentation in order to receive accommodations:

It's a little over-medicalized. So right now, the way it works is there's two different forms. There's one form that the individual fills out kind of explaining their disability and what accommodations they think might be helpful for them to get their job done and then there's a second form that's more of a medical related form and they have to have one part filled out by their treating physician and basically, it's a little bit too open [not specific questions that get at the needed accommodation or job function] ... And then after they get this filled out and signed off by their personal physician, then they have to go to employee health services and a physician there has to fill it out and approve it.

As we can see from Dennis's experience, some companies require substantial documentation of one's disabilities, sometimes even requiring proof from two different physicians. The accommodations process is thus drawn out and takes a long time, not to mention the time it takes for the employee to get both forms filled out and having to visit two different doctors. According to around two-thirds of interviewees, their employers place a strong emphasis on the medical evidence needed to prove that a specific accommodation is needed rather than understanding and trusting the needs of an employee and the accommodations they request. Rosella describes her unfortunate experience: "So I got my doctor's note and did all the things. It took me *months* to get the lighter laptop." For Rosella, the process of requesting accommodations was not easy; whether it be obtaining a doctor's note or filling out the other documentation, the process was filled with paperwork. Even when this was completed, Rosella's company—like many other participants' companies—took multiple months to actually provide a decision on the accommodation.

In other workplaces, there is no medical documentation needed in the accommodations request process, but rather a shared understanding as described by

Shane:

I think our culture is kind of shared across the staff to be flexible and kind of embrace the individual differences that we all have as people and to work with that and collaborate and cooperate and, you know, it's kind of a “whatever you need” kind of thing... we don't need to even know the explanation, or the explanation doesn't matter, but if you need something, let us you know and you can have this.

We see a very different culture at Shane’s workplace compared to Dennis’s workplace. Here, Shane’s workplace appears to be accepting of all disabilities and accommodations, and if a person with a disability needs an accommodation, it will be supported. Kai has had a similar experience at their two current workplaces, one in which they are a personal care assistant for someone with a disability and the other which is at a non-profit:

“I’m lucky to work in two positions that are very knowledgeable and up to date with disability stuff...In both of those positions, I’m able to be myself and my relationship with the people who have employed me is one where I can just be frank and upfront about my needs and my limitations. So, if something isn't working for me or I need something, I am lucky enough to be able to just be like, “hey I need this” or “this isn't working for me” and then the person will be like “oh, okay” and then they are people who want to accommodate me and others like me. So I’m lucky enough to never have had to go through getting documentation and all of that which just sounds harrowing to me.

Similar to Shane’s workplace, Kai’s workplaces have been very open in understanding the needs of their employees. The lack of documentation needed and trust in the employee-employer relationship is similar to that of a social model of disability approach. Thus, we see that companies' awareness of, and perspectives about, disability and accommodations differed widely prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and shaped the ways accommodations were provided—or not provided.

During COVID-19

During COVID-19, a rapid change in the workplace occurred: all participants I interviewed switched to working remotely at some point during the pandemic, and many had more flexible schedules; these changes also affected workplace culture and specific job functions. Through these changes, motives for companies remain similar. Specifically, we see that certain types of accommodations that were previously difficult to receive are now commonplace because they are provided to everyone. We also see a capitalistic argument being made for working from home, whether it be saving money on rent or increased productivity. While people with disabilities are glad that certain accommodations are now available, they are upset that it took something as catastrophic as a pandemic to reach this point. Along with this, there now seems to be more awareness of and engagement surrounding disability justice, particularly in relation to invisible disabilities.

Accommodations for All

The idea of accommodations being more acceptable when they are provided to everybody persists into pandemic times; we see this on an extreme scale where previously challenging-to-acquire accommodations have become widespread during the COVID-19 pandemic. Monique's reaction to this change in accommodations when they were suddenly needed for everyone is quite insightful:

Only now you [employers] figured this out!?! Like, it's been decades for a lot of folks who are disabled and chronically ill who've been asking for these accommodations and told there was no way, it could not happen, there is nothing that could be done, it's just not possible, and in the space of a year—less than a year—we've seen that it's always been possible, that all it took was the right people, the most powerful people, the people with privileges to be able to need these things and then they're suddenly available... it's very clear that disabled workers are not seen as important enough, vital enough, needed enough to have

these accommodations be made the standard when it's clear that it didn't take that much to make them available in the first place.

Monique points out what is essential here: that it took “the right people” to need certain “accommodations” for those accommodations to be seen as acceptable. With the pandemic, these changes may not be seen as accommodations and this may impact whether or not they are provided. While prior to the pandemic people with disabilities asked for accommodations such as working from home and flexible work schedules, they were too often denied those accommodations. But suddenly when the most privileged people needed them, it was possible, and changes were made to accommodate them. It was not that the need was not there before, and it was not that the accommodations could not be provided due to lack of money or undue hardship; rather, it was that these accommodations were only needed by a certain group of people, so excuses were made to not provide them. This reinforces earlier findings regarding the excuses companies make to not accommodate people with disabilities when the accommodations were possible all along (Job Accommodation Network 1994; Blanck 1996; Berkeley Planning Associates 1982; Solovieva 2011; West and Anderson 2005).

Rosella reiterates the myths surrounding accommodations prior to COVID-19 and the “newfound” possibility of working from home: “[people with disabilities] have constantly been told ‘it's not possible’, ‘it's too expensive’, ‘it's too much of a whatever’, and then, you know, of course the pandemic happened and *voila*, everybody's working from home and it's like, ‘why can't you put that same energy into people with disabilities?’” Rosella points out the key excuses that employers came up with prior to COVID-19 and draws attention to how quickly those excuses were dismantled when abruptly everyone needed to work from home. The willingness of companies to provide

accommodations only when provided to everyone is underscored by the change in accommodations and the workplace because of the pandemic.

In addition to working from home, the availability of flexible work schedules for everyone became highlighted during the pandemic, as Carmen pointed out:

And now what's really good with us working from home is that the bosses are much more lenient, like if we have to run out—like especially if somebody has to go and drive their kids, or like me, I have to go to a quick doctor's appointment right here in the city—that's fine, and then I can just work a little later, you know, and that's what has been a good thing for the whole COVID thing.

Here, Carmen identifies that anybody in office-based jobs that are now remote can more easily have flexibility whether it be to go to the doctor or to pick up or drop off their kids. Essentially, whenever someone needed flexibility for any reason, it was provided. What is striking is that prior to the pandemic, people with disabilities who would have benefitted from this flexibility were denied it. When the people who needed flexibility changed, however, we also saw a change in policy regarding flexible work schedules and now see this available to nearly everyone. Cora brings up a new point surrounding the previous stigma that she faced at her workplace and how that has shifted with COVID-19 because of the changes in the workplace everyone is facing. Prior to COVID-19 if she missed work, had to take a few hours off, or was in the bathroom for a long period of time to deal with certain aspects of her disability, people would question where Cora was and view it in a negative light. But COVID-19 has changed that: “Now, the cool thing with COVID and stuff, like, if I feel bad, I can just take a quick nap and then get right back up and go again as long as I don't have something to go on. I've kind of looked back on this whole past year and like, I haven't had to justify my actions as much as I did previously in work.” Cora thus identifies the nature of work during COVID-19 as being

much more flexible, and it is notable that this shift occurred not solely for her and other people with disabilities, but rather for everyone. Whether it is picking your kids up as Carmen mentioned above, or taking a nap to help with exhaustion, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided considerable adaptability in the workplace which has been beneficial for everyone in jobs that allow for this adaptability. Thus, during the pandemic, the earlier finding that accommodations are often provided under a one-size-fits-all model holds; the change is that many more accommodations—such as working from home and flexible schedules—are provided to all now, as compared to before the pandemic.

Capitalism over Humanity

While prior to the pandemic money was cited as a concern for why employers did not provide certain accommodations, the coin has flipped during the pandemic. The interviewees explained that their companies are seeing economic benefits from the accommodations they previously thought of as costly, such as working from home or providing flexible work schedules. Lucia explains a few of the economic benefits her organization is seeing:

From a practical standpoint, I mean even just like in my day-to-day of what my job was pre-pandemic and now in the pandemic, the cost of my work is less because I'm not traveling all over the city and the state making in-person connections and meetings. And the time, the efficiency, has also gone up because I'm not losing time in that kind of travel and the back and forth. For our organization, we released our office space indefinitely because it's saving us money.

Thus, Lucia identifies a few key areas where her organization, like many, can save money. Specifically, a reduction in travel not only cuts the direct cost of travel, but also saves time and energy that can then be used in other places to be more efficient and

productive. Moreover, there is less of a need for office space, so companies are able to either release their office spaces, reduce the size of their office space, and/or cut down on the costs of utilities such as electricity.

Interviewees also noted the increase in productivity of employees and how companies have benefitted from this. Hester elaborates on this in relation to his company:

In a way, as far as the business world is concerned, COVID is like, one of the best things that happened to them because their people are much more productive, you know, since COVID started. The team that I support has hit their sales goal every month except for maybe one month... They've consistently exceeded their goal every month which basically shows me that people are extremely productive and, you know, there's not the stress of going into work and coming home and you're tired when you come home and like switching off and on kind of thing.

Hester shows how switching to remote work has impacted his company through an increase in productivity stemming from not being as stressed and not having to travel into work. Multiple other interviewees pointed out that there was less stress because of less time spent in transit, the ability to be more flexible, and being in their home environment as a result of remote work. Hester's company like many others might not have been willing to experiment with working from home because of uncertainty about how it would affect productivity; this prior uncertainty and the newfound clarity is elaborated upon by Carmen: "I do think that the flexibility has taught people a lot about yes, we can still be productive and we're gonna get the job done no matter what, and we're not gonna slough off or take like a three-hour nap or something during the day." The pandemic has thus opened opportunities to learn about what leads to productivity and employees' behavior. A common theme in this data, then, is that employees with disabilities identify their companies' priorities to be making money and increasing productivity. Whenever interviewees talked about companies and companies' interests, it was always about how

they could be more efficient and cut costs—a key effect of late capitalism. It was never about companies making the changes in order to improve the employee experience or to increase accessibility, matching research about companies' motivations prior to COVID-19 (Ludgate 1997).

Disability Rights Awareness and Accommodations

The pandemic caused a lot of mixed emotions for interviewees regarding the changes in reasonable accommodations and disability rights. A staggering nineteen out of twenty-one participants expressed the sentiment that while they are glad to see the widespread acceptance of accommodations such as working at home and flexible work schedules, they are angry that it took a pandemic to reach this point. As Monica noted: “What really upsets me is that it took like the most catastrophic of catastrophic situations in this country and globally for people to understand disability justice.” Cora agreed, stating that “It’s infuriating, at the same time it’s like, ‘well thank god we’re there now, it only took a damn pandemic.’” Shane and Shelby, respectively, echoed these sentiments: “That makes me feel good but somewhat apprehensive because if the culture ever moves back to the workplace, then that’s no guarantee that the culture is going to be more accessible.”; “I’m kind of hesitant yet hopeful, so a real rollercoaster of emotion.” These interviewees are thankful that society has become a more accessible place; however, they are also skeptical and upset that it had to take something as catastrophic as a pandemic to reach this point. They suggest that these accommodations were all possible before and that there was no will of leadership to make it happen previously; instead, it took the COVID-19 pandemic to force companies to adapt to the current environment—something that people with disabilities have been doing for decades. This then breeds uncertainty

surrounding what the future may look like as interviewees all hope for increased accessibility, but know that things could easily go back to how they were prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Louisa sums up these mixed feelings neatly: “I get, like, kind of annoyed when I first hear about the concept, but then as long as it has a sustainable change and that it's going to be no big deal for a long time, then that's a really good thing.” The complex feelings Louisa expresses show the impact of the pandemic. Not only does she express the irritation of these accommodations only becoming available because of the pandemic and not when people with disabilities truly needed them, but she also talks about how this can be an amazing thing moving forward. The condition for her to happy about this, however, is that this change is sustainable and that these accommodations are carried into the future.

Working from home and flexible work schedules are not the only adjustments that have been helpful for people with disabilities during the pandemic. Ruth is part of the Deaf community and explains how moving everything online has been beneficial for her:

For me personally, it's much easier to request accommodation virtually than it is in person, so I use that example of them, you know, stopping by my desk “oh Ruth, we're having a meeting on Coca-Cola, come in, pop in for a minute,” but I can't, you know. Whereas working from home, everybody is forced to schedule a meeting, so you're never unscheduled, there's always a meeting, I can prepare, I can get accommodations in place before, you know, so for me it's great.

Ruth has thus benefitted from the greater use of technology and the virtual nature of work that has resulted from COVID-19. While prior to COVID-19 getting an interpreter for every meeting took preparation and time (thus not allowing her to pop into unscheduled meetings), the pandemic has allowed her to attend any meeting thanks to both meetings being pre-scheduled and to technology that provides live captioning.

While people with disabilities may experience some positive outcomes as a result of the pandemic, the pandemic itself has not been positive and has resulted in countless negative outcomes. The negative aspects of COVID-19 that participants brought up did not relate to accommodations, though. Instead, they identified issues such as those in the medical field or problems created as a result of wearing masks. This means that people with disabilities are not able to get the care that they need, and people with disabilities then have to make many changes in their lives to avoid any risk that may put them in a hospital without access to care. As Rosella puts it: “not being able to go to the hospital in a crisis can mean death.” This grave statement shows the core challenge that people with disabilities are facing during the pandemic. While the workplace environment may be improved for many people with disabilities, the results of how people with disabilities are viewed in the medical field not only have a negative impact on the way people with disabilities must live, but it can result in a death sentence if something goes wrong, reaffirming previous research regarding the disproportionate effect of COVID-19 on people with disabilities (“Disability Considerations During the COVID-19 Outbreak” 2020). Even something that may seem simple—masks—can cause many issues: Dennis described how masks are difficult for employees with hearing loss and Silvia explained how people who are totally blind cannot avoid people who are not wearing masks, thus putting them at risk for COVID-19. Overall, then, I find that interviewees have mixed feelings on the impact of the pandemic on people with disabilities. It has brought to light many of the issues surrounding disability, and even made changes in reasonable accommodations, but it has also cost many lives and a loss in quality of living with uncertainty that anything will change for the better moving forward.

A final point to highlight surrounding disability awareness in the workplace is the increase in recognition of invisible disabilities. Aidan describes how COVID-19 has brought about this increased awareness:

There is something that I have seen come out of COVID-19 and that is putting a very fine point around employee mental and emotional well-being. We all have been learning to work in a community while being physically apart and balancing the pandemic, along with the work demands and the life demands, and we've always had people who carry issues around mental and emotional well-being, but these types of demands have greatly expanded.

Here it is evident that the pandemic has created an environment that calls attention to people's mental and emotional well-being. Because of the isolation of the pandemic and the many lifestyle and economic changes it has created, people are being affected to a greater degree surrounding their mental and emotional health. The COVID-19 pandemic, then, has caused more and more people to be affected by mental and emotional health problems, thus bringing more awareness to the issue. Julia adds that because of the nature of the pandemic, it has caused people to open up about their invisible disability: "I think that people [with invisible disabilities] sometimes are hesitant to self-identify in a way, and with COVID and a lot of those people being at higher risk for different reasons, I think it's eye-opening to others that like so many people are a part of the disability community." Here it is evident that the pandemic has put certain people at greater risk of catching COVID-19 and exacerbated mental health problems, thus more and more people either must or are choosing to identify as having an invisible disability. This increased awareness then lets others know they are not alone, and in turn reduces the stigma of disability. As a result, more changes can be made to address the difficulties surrounding invisible disabilities, particularly in relation to reasonable accommodations. We are also seeing an increase in people joining the disability community as a direct result of being

diagnosed with COVID-19, as Monique describes: “Unfortunately with the pandemic, with COVID itself, we're going to have a whole slew of folks who are now disabled from this, and so it will become a bigger issue because there will be more disabled people from this. I don't think any of that is good, but I think that it means that the awareness has been increased.” Once again, we see that the sheer growth in numbers of the disability community because of the pandemic is thought to bring about increased awareness about disabilities. As disabilities affect more and more people, the idea is that there will be a larger group of people to fight for disability justice and accommodations in the workplace, and that people will have to take notice, thus hopefully changing the way disability is thought about, even though this is a result of something so terrible as a global pandemic.

Post-COVID-19

What will happen regarding reasonable accommodations post-COVID 19 is quite uncertain. Interviewees predict a few things: if accommodations such as working from home and flexible work schedules are available for people with disabilities, they will be available for everybody else as well; an economic argument will once again be the reasoning for the course of action that most companies take; and that as a result of COVID-19, we will move into a more accessible world. They argue that once people have experienced an increase in access, we will not go backwards, even though change moving forward may be slow and incremental.

Accommodations for All

In thinking about accommodations post-pandemic, a lot of participants suggested that things like working from home will be more commonplace and available for

everyone, or at least current workers who were provided the option at the onset of the pandemic. As Nick points out: “I think you're going to see a lot more folks move towards allowing people to telework more,” and when asked if this would be for both people with and without disabilities or as a more specific accommodation he said: “I think for both.” Hester reaffirmed Nick’s predictions in saying “I think to 90% of the office-based employees, this is permanent, this is the normal.” Thus, we see that there is a strong inclination that employees will at least have the option to, if not be required to, work from home after the pandemic. This shift in the workplace environment will be applied to everyone, making it more feasible than if a company decided to bring everyone back to the physical workplace and only allowed people with disabilities to telecommute. Kai describes the type of people they see being allowed to telework: “Yeah, I mean, I bet you some companies will continue to do work from home stuff, but I bet you it's all going to be for typical people, like it's the people who are already working there [at the company] and who have already established themselves.” Kai particularly brings this up in thinking about getting more people with disabilities into the workplace. As so many people with disabilities have been excluded from the traditional workplace, Kai’s hopes are that the workplace would allow for new types of people to enter the workforce; however, as Kai expresses, they doubt that this will happen and predict that working from home will be reserved for people in leadership, those who have made their marks on the company, or who have been there for some time. So, while work from home may continue, there is a worry that it will not be utilized as an accommodation, but rather as a type of perk for certain people.

In regard to the employers themselves, some employers are taking the initiative to understand what type of workplace *all* employees would like moving forward, as evidenced at Julia’s workplace: “Our company has sent out a survey asking what we like, what we would prefer in the future, and I do think a hybrid [model] won the vote.” From Julia’s description, it is evident that the company cares about making adaptations that will apply to everyone. Why people prefer a hybrid model will be discussed in more detail below. A hybrid model with flexibility is more likely to be accepted with the support of everyone and not when it is only needed by people with disabilities.

This notion of accommodations being more accepted when given to everyone is common across all phases of the pandemic. When asked about working from home and flexible work schedules becoming commonplace during the pandemic when they were not previously, and if they will persist into the future, Silvia responded:

I feel like it's not surprising. We live in a society where, if it shows that a majority of people will be able to partake in what the accommodation is, then it's going to be better accepted and better adopted, you know. I keep going back to the ADA, but I feel like the ADA is a perfect example of that. The ADA requires things like curb cuts and, you know, best practices of revolving doors and automatic doors and these greatly help those with disabilities get from point A to point B but it also helps those who have a stroller, you know, those who have too much in their hands and they're trying to get inside a building. The public greatly benefits from the contributions that help those with disabilities and I think because of that, people are okay whenever there needs to be a change that benefits them.

Here, Silvia identifies just a few of the many examples where structural changes made to make the environment more accessible for people with disabilities had positive effects for everyone else too—also known as the principle of universal design or the “curb cut effect.”⁶ These then garner more public support as people have their own interests in

⁶ The “curb cut effect” is a phenomenon where policies that target the most vulnerable, such as people with disabilities and people of color, have broader social benefits (Blackwell 2017).

mind. Thus, with the pandemic, since people have now seen some of the benefits of working from home, there is more support around telecommuting in the future. Bethany brings up one of these specific benefits for everyone that is a result of working from home: “Something I've been hearing across the board is like, it's not just good for people with disabilities who could have used this accommodation long before the pandemic, it's also good for people who don't need these accommodations; it can be beneficial and less of a strain with transportation.” Not having to commute is a huge benefit for Bethany who would have over an hour drive to get to work if she had to go into the workplace. Cora emphasizes this as well: “everyone is a little bit better when they don't commute.” This benefit rings true for many people as not having to drive long distances or deal with public transport can not only save time, but also money. Another benefit discussed earlier by Carmen is flexibility; she pointed out how bosses were more lenient and allowed people to pick up their kids or go to doctor’s appointments when they needed to. She provided multiple examples of flexibility and how it can benefit everyone since we all have things that might be necessary to do during the typical workday. While imagining a post-pandemic world, there will likely be more support for working from home at least occasionally because this change in the workplace benefits not only people who asked for this accommodation long before, but nearly everyone.

Capitalism over Humanity

Another theme that has stayed consistent before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic is companies' prioritization of economic concerns. Companies may have found that allowing (or requiring) employees to work from home helped their bottom line, although others may want more research to be done. As Shane describes: “Organizations

do what's most expedient usually, you know, depending on the organization. But I would say the majority of organizations don't value their [employees'] humanity or they look at their people as a resource rather than a talent, so you know, there's just no saying what the organization might do.” Here, we see that Shane identifies most companies as doing the most “expedient” thing. There is a lack of concern for the employees and doing what is best for them in Shane’s view, which then creates doubt in what the future of workplace accommodations will look like. Other interviewees, like Silvia, pointed to companies depending on reports to make their decisions: “Once more reports come out with really good statistics of productivity, of employees' mental health—what that's been looking like from the working from home—I think once we get a better idea of overall how that looks then that will be the best supportive argument for companies to start thinking of making this permanent.” Thus, Silvia identifies that once more information is available, companies can be better informed and make their decisions based on these reports, and again absolve any risk. Silvia differs from other participants here in saying that companies will look at reports of employee mental health, rather than solely at reports of productivity and profits; whether companies utilize reports on mental health is a different question. Later, Silvia hints that money will be the priority, and not so much the mental health:

Where I'm working now, we own a whole floor of the building that we're renting out and there's only been about four or five people in the office since March, and each day they're losing a lot of money on electricity, on water, like on everything just paying for that. So, I would think too that if more employers saw the cost-benefit of letting employees work from home, that's going to be the real thing because I feel like the money leads everything and your employees are still able to get the job done and if you can save money in the process, then I think most employers will probably jump on that a bit. But some employers, on the other hand, like micromanaging and like to be able to closely control, so I think it's just going to be a toss-up.

Silvia thus describes a few ways companies could or are saving money during the pandemic, which could lead to a continuation of working from home post-pandemic. Moreover, Silvia puts the emphasis on companies making decisions based on money. Since this is what companies tend to prioritize, Silvia believes that employers will be on board with working from home once they learn of the cost-benefit of doing so. She points to saving on rent, electricity, and water as potential cost savers for companies. Julia also brings in the benefits of increased productivity: “[companies] might need less office space, which is less cost, so I think there's a lot of business needs too that could keep a flexible schedule for people without accommodations, and there's been starts on research regarding productivity and how it's typically gone up from people working from home, which companies will definitely like.” Thus, Julia points to similar benefits as Silvia such as less money spent on rent, but also discusses productivity and how reports are showing an increase in productivity from working from home. This is consistent with the prior research that shows that working from home may result in more productivity and fewer costs (Job Accommodation Network 1994; Blanck 1996; Berkeley Planning Associates 1982; Solovieva 2011; West and Anderson 2005). She explains how this will likely be a motivating factor for companies, reaffirming the idea that employers prioritize their financial situation over employees’ access and well-being, and if employees’ requests happen to align with their financial decisions, then it becomes a happy coincidence.

A final point that may also contribute to companies’ decisions on providing accommodations such as working from home moving forward is their access to a wider network of employees, as discussed by Louisa: “they can tap into like the network or the talent pool of people all over the country and they're hiring talent where they couldn't

access talent in previous years, so they're excited about that.” Again, we see an employee say that companies will love an aspect of working from home because of its capitalistic implications. This aspect of hiring from a larger talent pool would mean access to more competitive applicants and talent, which can then improve the economic situation of the company. Thus, we see that a key motivating factor in what the workplace will look like after COVID-19 is likely to be how companies are financially impacted by changes to the workplace. So far, the benefits of working from home look promising for companies; this factor may drive their decisions, rather than the needs of their employees and the benefits they may gain from working from home.

Disability Rights Awareness and Accommodations

If there is one thing to take away regarding the future of disability rights and accommodations, it is that there is a lot of uncertainty. A first key point that participants identified regarding disability rights awareness post-pandemic is that disability is often the last aspect thought about in terms of diversity. Raul uses a metaphor to describe this:

I believe diversity inclusion has gone across the daisy of diversity. A daisy has a lot of petals—LGBTQ, African-Americans, women, Asian-Americans, Hispanic-Americans—that has really been pushed to the forefront. But still, right now, I do not believe that we [disability] are on it, even though we've moved a bit, we still aren't part of the daisy. So even though we've moved forward a little bit, I still do not believe it is enough.

Thus, Raul identifies that while disability may be slowly inching forward and gaining ground in recognition as part of the diversity conversation, it is not a priority in most cases. Rather the focus has been on demographics such as race, gender, and sexuality.

Rosella brings this idea into the current context:

Disability is always the footnote. People think if they have women and they have Black people that they're diverse and that's not what that means. And now, you know, they'll throw some rainbow stuff on something in June and think that

means something... I think that is typical for human beings, particularly Americans, to say that we want things to change, but when it really comes down to putting in the work and making the sacrifices, people only want things to change until they have to change something and then it was like “well no, I don't want that change.”

Rosella thus reemphasizes that disability is often left out or thought about at the very end, so not much change happens at a structural level. She also describes the current context in which diversity is not about sustained and systemic change, but rather is a performative act. This has real implications for post-pandemic times because it suggests that real change is unlikely, and that the improvements we have seen may be in jeopardy post-COVID-19. Monique, a Black woman, points out that she thinks the disability justice movement may be slowly gaining ground because “there are many intersections of groups who are really pulling these issues together.” With an intersectional approach that brings together marginalized groups, Monique believes that change can happen when everyone works together.

Participants have mixed feelings about what the future of accommodations and disability rights will look like after the pandemic, stemming from this uncertainty of how seriously disability will be taken, and how other goals may be prioritized. A few participants had a very pessimistic outlook. Kai says: “Post-pandemic, everything's gonna go back. I don't think—and, you know, this is maybe a bit cynical—but I don't think it's going to get easier to ask for accommodations.” Thus, Kai expresses that a return to a less accessible world is very plausible. Kai later speaks about how there are no incentives to hire a person who needs accommodations. This informs their opinion on their prediction about accommodations not being easier to ask for in a post-pandemic society. Companies do not have an incentive to hire people with disabilities, and thus if there is another

applicant who does not need accommodations, it is an easier sell to hire them. For Kai, there has not been any structural or cultural changes surrounding disability, and thus they have a negative outlook on the future. Rosella also adds to the view that there has not been any real change, which will lead to a reversion back to pre-pandemic times: “People really want to get back to their quote-unquote ‘normal;’ that makes them feel comfortable because right now people are not comfortable and they people want to go back to being comfortable.” Thus, Rosella brings in the idea of a return to what things were previously like, indicating that the improved accessibility that the pandemic has brought about in certain areas will all be lost. This echoes previous research in which one concern for a post-pandemic era was a return to normalcy (Goggin and Ellis 2020).

A larger group of interviewees took on the view that, at the very least, we will not go backwards in terms of accessibility. Odell defines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on accessibility quite simply: “I would say it is a positive impact because it is *something* rather than nothing at all.” Thus, Odell views the pandemic as at least advancing disability rights incrementally, rather than there being no change, and this is overall a positive thing that will not be taken away. Kevin furthers this idea and suggests a metaphor to think about this: “I think it's been more positive than negative for people with disabilities. I just don't see us going backwards. The bottom line is, I think, when people experience increased accessibility, increased inclusion, it becomes an expectation—which is good. I would be shocked if you went backwards, you know, you can't put toothpaste back in the tube.” Here Kevin suggests that going back to pre-COVID-19 times in terms of accessibility is just not possible. He reasons that because of the pandemic, people have experienced increased accessibility that they have loved. This

then means that they will fight to keep these workplace accommodations, which can subsequently be backed up with evidence from the pandemic, which means at the very least, we will not go backwards in terms of accessibility. A final point that Monique brings up is the advocacy and activism that will be needed to sustain these changes:

We're not going to go back to what was. We've seen what is possible, we see what you [businesses] have done and where this is going to be policy, this is going to be the standard from now on. We're not going to roll back just because now it's not convenient for you. So I think that there will be some change, but I think that the importance of advocacy and activism among disabled people is gonna be more needed than ever and so there's gonna be, you know, a lot of room and space and need for disabled activists to continue pushing for accountability in all of these spaces.

Monique furthers the idea that people with disabilities will not allow businesses to be less accessible now that we have seen the possibility of increased access. She argues that this will not just be automatic, however. Rather, there needs to be a lot of advocacy and activism to continue pushing for this access as well as accountability.

A different group of interviewees were more optimistic that the COVID-19 pandemic will lead to further change after COVID-19. As Bethany discusses: "I think we've all benefited from the work from home and the flexible work schedules, and I think that's really helped the disability movement and we have more to sort of put our teeth into going forward and say: 'hey, you let us do this before, we can do this again.'" Here, Bethany points out how the pandemic has given people with disabilities an edge in the workplace. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that increased access is possible, and that before it was simply a lack of will in wanting to provide this access at work. We can then see how moving forward, people with disabilities will demand not only the same level of access, but more and more access as there are now fewer arguments against providing accommodations and accessibility thanks to COVID-19. Monique also

expresses this idea while adding that the intersection of various identities has created a clearer path for change:

I really do think that there's going to be a change from this and a lasting change—a change that can be seen from generation to generation. It will be a similar change that I as a Black woman can see from the civil rights movement and see like—hey, that wasn't that long ago if you look at the numbers. I think that it'll happen like that for disability justice in this moment too. I think it's because there are just so many intersections of groups who are really pulling these issues together. Coalition building is a real passion of mine and to understand where so many different groups really come together on issues and seeing that happen and seeing the activists and organizers and organizations go “okay, this is where we're all trying to get to, let's try to get to it together.” I think there's more explicit talk and work in those spaces and that really has happened from this moment.

First, Monique describes that she expects change to be lasting and even compares it to the civil rights movement. Then she adds how this moment in time specifically has been the catalyst for change; with a larger focus on intersectionality given events such as Black Lives Matter protests combined with a global pandemic, there has been an avenue to create change in accessibility. Thus, she believes that this intersectional work can continue, creating more benefits into a post-pandemic world. This wide range of beliefs about a post-COVID-19 era among participants shows the uncertainty that lies ahead for accessibility, disability rights, and ultimately, disability justice.

Policy Recommendations

It is of critical importance that the COVID-19 pandemic be used to learn about best practices regarding the workplace, particularly for people with disabilities, both within and beyond a pandemic context. To ensure that the benefits and advancements regarding workplace accessibility evident in my findings are maintained, actions must be taken at the national, state, and company level.

National-Level Recommendations

At a national level, the ADA along with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) guidelines should be revised to be clearer about working from home and flexible work schedules as reasonable accommodations, while reimagining “reasonable.” Prior to the pandemic, the vagueness of the ADA combined with the traditional conception of work meant that the accommodations of working from home and/or flexible work schedules were often denied. The COVID-19 pandemic experience should thus be used as a lesson in understanding the benefits and drawbacks of telework and flexibility. Employers have clearly learned that working from home and flexible work schedules are not impossible for many positions and that adaptations to this new type of work environment can be made accessible to everyone. Thus, if someone with a disability needs one of these accommodations, it should be granted if the company was able to effectively provide it to everyone during the pandemic. This is why the ADA should be amended in a way that explicitly recognizes working from home and flexible work schedules as reasonable accommodations in all cases, except for in jobs that demand a physical presence or shift schedules such as service jobs. In any job that was able to effectively switch to a remote workplace and/or had flexible schedules during COVID-19, however, it is necessary that the ADA clearly states that these workplaces must continue to find these as reasonable accommodations. It is clear that companies that thought they could not adapt, or that certain functions of the job had to be in person were wrong and that there were other reasons—rooted in a culture of ableism and late capitalism—actually holding them back from allowing these accommodations. There are no excuses now, and as such, the ADA needs to protect these accommodations to the

fullest extent possible. Further, the argument of undue hardship or cost is no longer acceptable as a wall to hide behind for not providing these. We must not fall into the trap of considering working from home and flexible work schedules feasible only when people without disabilities are involved too; instead, we must ensure these options as accommodations for people with disabilities.

The ADA was amended in 2008 to make the definition of disability clearer, but also broader, thus changing the interpretation of who is protected under the ADA (“ADA Amendments Act of 2008” 2008). This was intended to make it easier for more people with disabilities to seek protection under the ADA. Given that the ADA has been amended previously, particularly in relation to the interpretation of a definition in the Act, it is feasible that the same can be done for the interpretation of a reasonable accommodation. The term reasonable has historically been used to give the employer control in thinking about financial drain or hardship on the employer. However, I recommend that we reimagine “reasonable.” This involves understanding the term “reasonable” from the requestors point of view. So, rather than use the term “reasonable” to determine hardship for the employers, the reimagination of “reasonable” must understand the needs of the employee and how an accommodation plays into this. An amendment to the ADA can solidify that not only are accommodations such as working from home and flexible work schedules considered reasonable, but that so many other accommodations are truly reasonable and should be provided to employees. This will open new opportunities for people with disabilities who have previously been unemployed or faced difficulties as a result of not being able to receive the accommodations they need. Considering the economic fallout of the COVID-19

pandemic, this amendment to the ADA must be a priority to expand employment access and opportunity for people with disabilities.

Additionally, the EEOC needs to change its guidelines about post-COVID-19 workplace accommodations to guarantee the same accommodations to people with disabilities as during the pandemic. The EEOC is the agency responsible for enforcing federal laws relating to the prohibition of discrimination against employees based on characteristics such as race, gender, disability, etc. The EEOC has always had regulatory guidelines surrounding reasonable accommodations in the workplace, and the new guidelines have changed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the new guidelines generally would view remote work as a reasonable accommodation post-COVID-19, it is not guaranteed. In response to a question regarding employees with disabilities working from home post-pandemic if the employee had previously requested working from home but been denied it because of performance concerns of working remotely, the EEOC guidelines say: “As with all accommodation requests, the employee and the employer should engage in a flexible, cooperative interactive process going forward if this issue does arise” (“What You Should Know About COVID-19” 2020). The key word here is *should*. There is no guarantee of working from home as an accommodation even if during the pandemic it was proven to work well. The current EEOC guidance clearly aims to benefit and protect employers—not employees with disabilities who are requesting accommodations to do their job well. This is similar to the guidance from prior to the pandemic in which telework was sometimes considered a reasonable accommodation, but not often. In fact, it was found that in court rulings on telework as a reasonable accommodation, employers won 70% of the time (Iafolla 2019). Given this favoritism to

employers, it is essential that—now that we have seen the possibilities of teleworking and advancements in teleworking resources—the EEOC update its guidelines to ensure working from home for people with disabilities after the pandemic if they should need it.

More specifically, I recommend that the EEOC guidelines clearly state that “undue hardship” will not be a successful argument for any employer if there is evidence that they were able to telework effectively during COVID-19 without the loss of essential job function. Without making this update, the EEOC is indicating that it is okay for employers to only make changes when they are needed for everyone, and thus allowing for discrimination on the basis of disability in the workplace post-COVID-19. This recommendation takes into account universal design principles, which means that it makes the environment the most accessible for all people (Burgstahler 2009). Instead of people with disabilities having to fight for working from home or flexible work schedules in the courts, the default policy should be that working from home and flexible work schedules are available if anyone needs them. This ensures the most access for everyone. This default should only be fought against in extreme cases in which, while a company may have been virtual for some part of the pandemic, there ultimately was an essential part of the job that could not be performed remotely. The onus, however, will be switched from the employee to the employer to prove the challenges they are facing. Thus, the EEOC must update its guidelines to make this clear and eliminate the undue hardship argument that has no basis given what we have learned from the pandemic, except in very rare circumstances, in which case the employer can prove this instead of placing the burden on the employee.

State-Level Recommendations

On a state level, effective implementation of these federal regulations will be needed. A key issue in policy is the actual implementation of the policy. Thus, while regulations and guidance may change on a federal level, states need to lead the way in ensuring these guidelines are enforced. Aside from pushing out federal guidelines, I have two key suggestions for states: to serve as role models for best practices regarding disability rights and to require transparency on disability representation in board diversity.

States must protect the rights of people with disabilities and ensure that accessibility is considered in all employment settings; states can guide the way by modeling best practices in state institutions and putting together guides for companies to follow regarding accommodating individuals with disabilities, particularly taking what was learned during COVID-19 and using it to improve accessibility. The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) has developed an initiative called State as Model Employer (SAME) policies. This framework provides an overview of how states can best serve as leaders in disability inclusion and encourage others to do the same (“State as Model Employer Policies” 2017). According to a National Governors Association (NGA) report, “businesses have told states that they are more likely to hire people with disabilities if state government is doing it successfully” (“A Better Bottom Line” 2013). This indicates that states need to step up and lead the way to not only increase disability representation in the workplace, but to also address the problems seen throughout this study such as recognizing and supporting invisible disabilities or ensuring reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities while making the process easier

and more accepting. Five broad categories have been identified, in which some states have already taken action regarding SAME policies:

- Task Force, Advisory Group and Agency Collaboration Policies
- Targeted Hiring Efforts in State Human Resources Management
- Encouraging Inclusive Workplaces
- Data Collection, Evaluation, Accountability and Oversight
- Education and Workforce Development (“State as Model Employer Policies” 2017)

I recommend that every state identify policies under each of these categories that they can implement to improve their accessibility such as creating a task force on disability, developing fast track policies through the hiring process and/or affirmative action, providing reasonable accommodations, conducting surveys to get feedback, and providing mentors and professional support. Once the state does this and can show its impacts, this will encourage other companies to adopt these policies as well. Another benefit of states enacting these policies is that they can learn best practices as well as what does not work. Additionally, I recommend that states put together guides for companies regarding the best steps and actions to take and what to avoid in regard to these different categories. The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken up many workplace policies and environments, so I also suggest that states analyze the impact of the ongoing pandemic and understand how the pandemic affected accessibility in the workplace. States can then put together specific guides on what was learned during the pandemic and how certain improvements regarding accessibility can be carried into non-pandemic times. Thus, as states analyze and change their own best practices surrounding accessibility, they can serve as model employers to other companies within their states.

States should also require transparency from corporations regarding the disability makeup of their boards. Recently, Illinois adopted a policy requiring publicly listed corporations to report information on diversity; however, these reports only include demographics such as race, ethnicity, and gender, but not disability (“Illinois-Headquartered Publicly Listed Corporations” 2019). As many of the people I interviewed mentioned, disability is often the last aspect people think about in regard to diversity. Additionally, many of those interviewed noted the importance of leadership buy-in when implementing accommodations, such as telework and flexible hours, in the workplace. Thus, I suggest that every state first adopts a policy regarding transparency about board diversity, as this is an easy step to increase public knowledge and hopefully incentivize companies to think strategically about their workplace diversity. I then recommend that any reporting on diversity involve disability. Third, these state policies should include requirements for companies to report their practices and policies for promoting diversity, as well as supporting diverse employees. This adds an additional layer to the policy to require companies to think about their practices and consider how they could improve. These recommendations follow not only from my findings, but many studies also show how diversity is correlated with better outcomes. More diverse companies outperform less diverse ones (“Diversity Wins, How Inclusion Matters” 2020; “Why It Pays to Invest in Gender Diversity” 2016; “The Bottom Line: Corporate Performance” 2011), foster innovation (Bernile et al. 2017), and retain employees (Krentz 2019). Thus, I find it crucial that states take the initiative to, at the very least, require companies to be transparent about diversity, including disability, and to report about how they are thinking about diversity in the workplace. There are many positive effects of diversity, and as

companies become more transparent about and engage more with disability, the more representation will increase, which will have positive effects not only for people with disabilities, but also for companies and society alike.

Company-Level Recommendations

The area that will have the largest impact on individuals with disabilities is at the company level. Companies need to think about how they can change the environment to be accessible for people with disabilities and encourage an inclusive environment. Here, I identify four key recommendations: 1) review what worked and what did not during the COVID-19 pandemic and create a plan moving forward with employee input; 2) change and adapt workplace policies, especially regarding reasonable accommodations by engaging employees with lived experience of disability; 3) train all employees on disability justice and disability rights to begin to change workplace culture; and 4) provide employees with disabilities tailored opportunities for professional advancement and leadership coaching.

Post-COVID-19, and even now during COVID-19, employers need to review what practices worked best for them and which did not work in order to determine a plan moving forward. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way most workplaces function, and instead of going back to “normal,” it is essential to consider how the workplace can change and improve, especially for people with disabilities. Throughout my interviews, people shared many ways in which the pandemic has improved accessibility such as working from home being better for managing their disability, or having every meeting scheduled and online benefitting someone who is deaf. But there are also negative consequences, such as perceptual barriers and a loss of human

interaction. It is thus important for employers to engage everyone at their workplace to ask themselves what would have improved their experiences with working from home and to note what did work and what did not work. Each workplace can then put together a list of best practices pertaining to working from home or flexible workplaces that can then be easily implemented as a reasonable accommodation when somebody requests it.

Companies should also change and adapt their policies to be as accessible as possible. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to broader awareness surrounding the disability community, and as more people experience disabilities due to COVID-19 or recognizing mental health disabilities, it is even more crucial for companies to adapt and create fundamental changes in their policies and culture to be more accessible. People with disabilities should be involved in these processes and changes to ensure greater access. While I believe all policies should be reviewed, there are a few that I will address here that follow from my findings. First, companies need to extensively review their reasonable accommodations request process. Companies should use the social model of disability in designing these processes rather than the medical model of disability. This looks like companies trusting their employees to request accommodations that will be beneficial to both the employee and the company. Thus, making the process as interactive and supportive as possible should be the focus of companies, rather than focusing on the medical reasoning behind why they need a certain accommodation. As evidenced throughout my interviews, there was an emphasis on proving that the employee had a disability and that they truly needed the accommodation. This manifested in people with disabilities having to take time off work to get documentation from a doctor, sometimes even from multiple doctors, even when the disability and the necessary

accommodation(s) were obvious. People with disabilities should not need to go through this extensive of a process to be able to receive accommodations. Companies should also review every aspect of the hiring process and make accessibility a priority in order to increase the representation of people with disabilities in the workforce. This includes looking at HR guidelines, ensuring job announcements are accessible, taking action to post job openings on disability-oriented job boards and/or attending disability-focused job fairs, reviewing interview processes to ensure accessibility and accommodations, and website and event accessibility. Throughout my interviews, I found that people with disabilities had limited options of where to even apply for jobs because of accessibility issues in the hiring process or toxic work environments not open to people with disabilities. Thus, companies must make accessibility a priority in the hiring process, and once people with disabilities are hired, companies must provide support and resources to ensure quality experiences for people with disabilities.

In order to begin to change the internal culture of ableism at work, companies need to immediately implement training on disability inclusion, disability rights, and disability justice. While many companies do diversity training, disability—again—is often left out. Thus, disability needs to be made a key aspect of these trainings. Creating an inclusive environment involves informing employees about disability and removing biases people may have, and indeed my interviews revealed that stigma surrounding disability and accommodations is common. A study by Bezrukova et al. highlights a few key pieces of information on diversity training programs: these programs are more effective when the training is sustained for longer periods of time; change is greater when training is accompanied with other diversity-related initiatives; and training is better

when both awareness and skills are developed (2016). Thus, when training on disability, I recommend that the training is consistent and not a one-off event. Additionally, training on disability must be accompanied by other policies and initiatives, such as some of those mentioned in my previous recommendations such as adapting HR processes and reviewing all company policies and practices. Finally, training should focus on awareness of biases (with an emphasis on the stigma surrounding invisible disabilities) and actionable steps for employees to create a more accessible and inclusive environment. The effectiveness of training and other disability initiatives was supported by several interviewees with workplaces who created what was described as an inclusive environment through such trainings and initiatives.

A final suggestion for companies is that they provide tailored opportunities for professional advancement, leadership coaching, and mentoring to people with disabilities. People with disabilities face unique challenges, and thus, once at an organization, companies must provide support to the person with a disability beyond workplace accommodations. People with disabilities often face barriers to accessing professional advancement opportunities and leadership coaching or mentorship (Jones 1997), and it is thus necessary to provide specialized opportunities for people with disabilities to advance in their careers. Leadership coaching and/or mentoring can look very different dependent upon the individual's needs. Taking time to understand what it is that an employee needs is essential to ensuring better outcomes among employees with disabilities. Generally, mentorship and job coaching provide opportunities for individuals with disabilities to be supported once at an organization; this helps to prevent tokenization in which people with disabilities are hired but not valued once at the company. The need for companies to

provide these tailored opportunities and leadership coaching stems from the way that companies often prioritize money over people, as shown throughout my findings. Companies thus need to take a step back and ask how they can truly support their employees, especially those who are often left behind in the leadership pipeline. This will result in benefits for all involved, as employees gain skills and advice, which then benefits the employer as the employee can contribute better to the company when they have more professional support. I particularly recommend leadership coaching here as it helps to develop stronger leaders with a toolkit of skills. Considering people with disabilities are underrepresented in leadership positions—in one study, there was reluctance from 90% of business leaders in hiring people with disabilities for leadership positions (“Diversity and Disability” 2019)—leaders with disabilities need support and training to increase the amount of people with disabilities in leadership positions. Studies also show that employees who feel that their employer is invested in their professional success are more likely to stay at said company for longer (“Will They Stay or Will They Go” 2019; “Workplace Learning Report” 2021). This reduces turnover and increases retention, creating a financial incentive for employers to invest in their employees. Thus, ensuring that people with disabilities have specialized opportunities for professional advancement and leadership coaching and mentorship creates a more inclusive and productive environment.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research shows how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced reasonable accommodations in the workplace among people with disabilities. The catastrophic nature of the pandemic has brought about many changes in accommodations and

disability rights, although the motivating factors in companies' decisions have likely stayed the same. While researchers have previously used the social and medical models of disability, along with a culture of ableism, to describe the nature of reasonable accommodations in the workplace (Baker et al. 2006; Ludgate 1997; Sullenger 2006; West and Anderson 2005; Kaplan et al. 2006), there is little research connecting these models to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through twenty-one semi-structured interviews with people with disabilities, I learned about workplace experiences and reasonable accommodations prior to and during COVID-19, as well as what people believe the future may look like in terms of disability rights.

Consistent across all phases of the pandemic, I find that accommodations in the workplace are much easier to obtain when they are provided universally—undermining the very nature of accommodations. These types of reasonable accommodations garner support from everybody because they benefit everybody, unlike accommodations that are specific to an individual, which are seen as “perks” and are stigmatizing. The COVID-19 pandemic highlights this, as accommodations such as working from home and flexible work schedules became commonplace even though they had previously been routinely denied. Another consistent finding across the COVID-19 pandemic is the motivating factors of companies. Rather than making the environment accessible for people with disabilities as the social model of disability suggests (Finkelstein 1981; Oliver 1990; Oliver 2013), I demonstrate that companies are driven by how they will be financially impacted in making decisions surrounding accommodations. Prior to the pandemic, this resulted in accommodations often being denied because of cost concerns. Additionally, when employers aim to have complete control in managing employees and minimizing

risk, people with disabilities are negatively affected by not receiving helpful—and oftentimes necessary—accommodations while the employer maintains their power. The pandemic has allowed some flexibility and increased access insofar that companies enjoy the benefits of working from home and flexible work schedules since less money is spent on rent and utilities, and there is increased productivity and access to a larger talent pool. So, while most companies still do not adopt the social model of disability and operate from an ableist and capitalistic point of view, there have been improvements in accessibility because of emergency rules during the pandemic, as well as companies' financial incentives. All of this breeds uncertainty for the future, however. The data shows that the traditional idea of the workplace and views about invisible disabilities have been shaken up due to COVID-19. Because of the pandemic, a large majority of people shifted to working from home and awareness surrounding mental health and other invisible disabilities increased, thus resulting in heightened awareness of disability and improved accessibility. But what this means for the future is unknown. This research suggests that accessibility could improve, decrease, or stay the same in a post-pandemic world, all depending on evidence of productivity and costs that companies experience, whether or not the accommodations will be available to everyone, and if there is activism and advocacy surrounding increased accessibility.

Given the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, future research should seek to understand what actions companies take after the pandemic and what motives guided their decisions. There should also be research on reasonable accommodations in the workplace across the COVID-19 pandemic similar to this, but from the companies' point of view. I am limited in understanding companies' motives through employees, so

learning from companies directly could be beneficial, although I would advise caution in that employers will have incentives to misrepresent their actual decisions surrounding accessibility. There is also room for research to understand the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on people with disabilities who are unemployed and people working in the service industry or in jobs that cannot be performed remotely. While my research involved a couple of people with disabilities who were looking for jobs at some point during the pandemic or had a service job, this was not the focus of my research and should be explored in more depth. There are many questions about whether having a disability has made it more challenging to find a job during COVID-19, or if it has opened up new opportunities to people who need to work from home, of course also taking into consideration the impact that COVID-19 has had on unemployment more broadly. Additionally, further research should be conducted on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people with disabilities who are members of unions and are protected by collective bargaining agreements. There are many avenues for this research to continue because of the current, developing nature and relevance of COVID-19, and the implications it has for the future.

Changes need to be made at the national, state, and company level in order to ensure increased accessibility in the workplace. On a national level, EEOC guidelines and the ADA should be revised and amended to ensure employees receive the accommodations they need. From the pandemic, we have learned that accommodations such as working from home and flexible work schedules no longer provide “undue hardship” to companies, and this needs to be protected at a federal level. The term “reasonable” also needs to be redefined to include the employees’ point of view. States

need to help push out these federal guidelines to be sure they are implemented, as well as serve as model employers in hiring people with disabilities and showing best practices regarding reasonable accommodations and taking on a social model of disability. States can also require companies to be transparent about their disability representation in positions of leadership such as on their boards. The company level is the most crucial element in having a lasting impact. I suggest that companies follow these four recommendations: 1) review what worked and what did not during the COVID-19 pandemic and create a plan moving forward with employee input; 2) change and adapt workplace policies, especially regarding reasonable accommodations, by engaging employees with lived experience of disability; 3) train all employees on disability justice and disability rights to begin to change workplace culture; and 4) provide employees with disabilities tailored opportunities for professional advancement and leadership coaching.

Amid doubt, hope, and uncertainty in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, these systemic and cultural policy recommendations at the federal, state, and company level are a starting point to move towards disability justice and a more accessible world. Action needs to be taken immediately as we should learn lessons from the pandemic and not let it pass by and go back to “normal.” Instead, steps need to be taken in order to improve the workplace and open up opportunities for people with disabilities. Not taking these steps furthers the injustices and challenges that people with disabilities face within the workplace and reinforces the culture of ableism that is already so present in society. As with the “curb cut effect”, these actions will provide benefits for everyone, but are absolutely necessary to increase access and equity among the disability community first

and foremost. By reimagining “reasonable,” an important step towards equity in the workplace and dismantling ableism can be achieved.

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