

## Episode 274: Building a Culture of Inclusion with Jonathan Kaufman



**Intro: [00:00:00.96]** Welcome to the Workology Podcast, a podcast for the disruptive workplace leader. Join host Jessica Miller-Merrell, founder of Workology.com, as she sits down and gets to the bottom of trends, tools, and case studies for the business leader, H.R. and recruiting professional who is tired of the status quo. Now, here's Jessica with this episode of Workology.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:00:26.43]** This episode of the Workology podcast is sponsored by ACE the HR Exam and Upskill H.R. This is part of our Future of Work series powered by PEAT, the Partnership on Employment and Accessible Technology. In honor of the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act last year, we're investigating what the next 30 years will look like for people with disabilities at work and the potential of technologies to make workplaces more inclusive and accessible. Today, I'm joined by Jonathan Kaufman. He's an executive coach with Jay Kaufman Coaching. As a speaker, coach, writer and consultant, Jonathan is a former policy advisor to the White House on diversity and disability. He's an engaging professional speaker, an anthropologist, psychotherapist, executive coach, and policy architect. Jonathan, welcome to the Workology podcast.

**Jonathan Kaufman: [00:01:16.02]** Thank you for having me.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:01:18.54]** Well, my background is also in anthropology. I feel like you have a really diverse background. So talk to us a little bit more about that and tell us, please, how did you get involved in the inclusive and accessibility areas?

**Jonathan Kaufman: [00:01:31.92]** I think I got involved with the sort of inclusion space and specifically the disability space at birth. You know, being born with a right hemiparesis, a form of cerebral palsy, sort of put me front and center into life with a disability and what that meant. And for me, it became much more than just day-to-day living. I became really interested in it as a vocation, as a profession. And I didn't know, well, what route am I going to take? And I sort of said to myself, OK, so maybe I'll become an academic. I grew up in a, you know, sort of with a father who is an academic as well and said, OK, maybe this is the route. But one of the things I sort of learned from him is he's both a scholar and a practitioner. He's both a professor and a practicing physician. And that was sort of the route I took.

**Jonathan Kaufman: [00:02:29.04]** I said, so if I could both practice and be in sort of two realms at once, be the scholar-practitioner, I can look at this from a broad canvas and really begin to understand what is the

disability experience, and particularly as we sort of go into the 21st century, how is it changing? How is it evolving? So that was sort of a circuitous route. But and there wasn't at the time that I was sort of going through academia. There wasn't a traditional disability studies route. I mean, it sort of came of age when I was in school. But I also realized that's not exactly where I wanted to be. I love the fact that one there was the sort of scholarly aspect of it, but two, there was the ability to sort of be in the weeds, if you will. Whether it be from a policy angle, whether it be from the idea of work. And so everything that I began to look at and the way that I sort of framed my life experience was always through a lens of application application application. And I think that's really where it began.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:03:48.26] I love that and I thank you for coming on the podcast and being open and willing to talk about this because how to build a culture of inclusion, I think a lot of HR people are unsure and there's a lot of questions and there's a lot of things that aren't being discussed that might hold people back from moving forward and creating that inclusive workplace. We tend to think about disability. We tend to think of in terms of personhood, an agency. How do you think we should be approaching that for the 21st century?

Jonathan Kaufman: [00:04:23.51] In terms of my own work and I can only speak for myself and sort of the writing I've done. You know, I have a regular column in Forbes called Mindset Matters, which is really about this notion of how we redefine and reimagine disability for the 21st century, particularly, obviously, it's Forbes, so it's always within the context of work. But this is something that has taken me even further and saying, you know, there is something that I define as what I call the modern disability narrative and well, the civil rights leaders of the disability rights movement from the 70s, 80s and even into sort of the 90s, if you look at it even just here in the United States and you look at it abroad, sort of focused on identity and personhood, I said, so what's the next thing? Where do we go from here? Because that in itself is foundational and it's seminal and it's needed and it will continue to be needed again and again is to sort of we go through this. But I thought that, you know, from a business perspective, we have to look at disability somewhat differently. Yes, there is the need for a pool of human capital and the need for hiring. All of that's very true and remains to such. But there is an element when we can say, what is it about the modern disability narrative and the story and the lived experience? And to me, it is a lived experience and it's a language of innovation. And then we can learn from that lived experience of disability. What is the intersection in terms of and particularly as a as a valuable pool of human capital? But how do we integrate design components in the context of work as we're sort of moving from a centralized workforce into a decentralized workforce?

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:06:24.17] Ok, so getting back to that modern disability narrative, thank you for giving us some clarification. I think it's just important for us to kind of take a step back and now we're heading in. As HR leaders, how do you think that we can use this as a leadership framework? How can we lead and help our leaders lead and thinking about this modern disability narrative that you've been talking about?

Jonathan Kaufman: [00:06:49.28] Yeah, I sort of based this modern disability narrative on this notion of what I call sort of language of triumvir and archetype. And the archetype sort of starts with adaptation, resilience, and patience. The lived experience through the arc of any lived experience of disability, it touches upon

those three archetypal models. And I use those archetypal models as really important. So any leader, regardless of where they are, needs to think about how do I deal with adaptation? How do I deal with resilience? And a sense of the third one is patience. So using that framework, that sort of continual in the arc of their business and how does it play out? Because if you can have a model to return to again and again, then it can be enormously useful. And somebody including myself who has, sort of goes through the lived experience of living with a disability every day, draws upon those themes time and time again. It's now worth leadership to think about what can we learn from this experience in terms of quality of life, in terms of work-life balance, in terms of thinking about developing new products and services, and other aspects of what the future of work will look like.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:08:30.89] One of the things that we talked about when we were you and I were on the prep call and you mentioned the stat was that two-thirds of MIT engineering students are on the autism spectrum. With this stat in mind, how should employers approach this reality? Because that's a, that's a large percentage of engineering students and future employees are going to be entering the workforce.

Jonathan Kaufman: [00:08:55.70] Correct. And a lot of that, again, that's that in itself was anecdotal. I'm again, confirmation is really important, I must say that. But what I have known from that is that when you look at schools like Caltech, Carnegie Mellon and other engineering programs and STEM programs, what you're finding is the number of people along the spectrum is growing exponentially and getting significantly higher. So, one, it is important to think about, particularly in sort of STEM companies or tech companies in general, that the footprint, that this rather the fingerprints of persons with disabilities are all over the technology we use every day.

Jonathan Kaufman: [00:09:43.46] So it is important that whether you're in talent management or whether you're an H.R. executive to say, OK, we have to rethink how we integrate this community into our ,into our company, and into our culture and how do we optimize the working environment to best utilize their skill set? That, to me, is critical.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:10:14.29] And I want listeners to think beyond tech, like, yes, MIT, engineering students, but this is this is everywhere. The numbers are growing.

Jonathan Kaufman: [00:10:23.83] Yeah, everywhere. I just sort of used that as the foundation. And the truth of the matter is, you're absolutely correct, is that this is evolving in real-time. And what's going to be fascinating, I think when we get beyond covid and, you know, we obviously with the vaccines, there is an endpoint here. We do see it. But the silver lining right now of this atrocious time is that we are now at a moment where proof of concept, of being able to work in a sort of decentralized format and companies are evolving, because they have to in order to survive, whether big, small, whatever size they have to evolve. So they have to think about, OK, what is the best way that we can have a greater value proposition? Where can we find a sort of in terms of looking at human capital and where do we find a place where we can be competitive? So being able to think outside the box, this is this is a moment, and I think that for persons with disabilities, this is an enormous moment. And HR executives should say, OK, well, first of all, where do we

begin? And my philosophy is always begin, OK, begin and where if you have any RG group or BRG group, begin there and sort of look at the talent there, look at the issues that they are discussing and begin to engage, that is that is the first step. And then rethinking how you approach your, particularly sort of H.R. professionals, their relationship with employees in general. What is the relationship look like? How is the culture of the organization and say, does this optimize our employee pool best? And if it doesn't, how do we recalibrate so that we can do better?

**Break: [00:12:33.64]** Let's take a reset. This is Jessica Miller-Merrell, and you were listening to the Workology podcast. Today we are talking with Jonathan Kaufman about building a culture of inclusion. This podcast is sponsored by Upskill HR and ACE the HR Exam. It is also part of our Future of Work series with PEAT. They're the Partnership on Employment and Accessible Technology.

**Break: [00:12:56.02]** The Workology Podcast Future of Work series is supported by PEAT. The Partnership on Employment and Accessible Technology. PEAT's initiative is to foster collaboration and action around accessible technology in the workplace. PEAT is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, ODEP. Learn more about PEAT at [PEATWorks.org](https://PEATWorks.org), that's [PEATWorks.org](https://PEATWorks.org).

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:13:25.44]** You mentioned a little bit earlier that with so many people post covid, they're going to be working in this hybrid environment, which is remote and in person. I think it's great for recruiting because now we can recruit anywhere. But is that a positive for people with disabilities or I mean, what are some of the positives?

**Jonathan Kaufman: [00:13:47.91]** I think you mentioned is that you can recruit anywhere and the ability to shape one's work environment, you know. And again, it's going to sort of it's always questionable about what the job is. And again, that's always contingent and about what the job is. But in terms of sort of recruiting and if you're taking sort of Fortune 500, Fortune 1000 companies, the ability to recruit anywhere and to figure out, OK, well, we have new ways of doing our work, new ways of doing the job, you can potentially do the job in the comfort of your own home. It's a game-changer. It's a game-changer because it's a catalyst for new opportunities, new ways of engaging employees that may have been off the radar that suddenly saying, OK, we are truly creating an inclusive environment. You know, look, there are other questions that are involved here, which is, you know, about broadband access and so on and so forth, but the ability to have access to communities in which that was not possible, this just opens the door.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:15:03.96]** I love that we're able to recruit from anywhere. I think that the ability to to, the model of that's being proven, of being able to work remotely is fantastic. We just need to keep evangelizing, which is what this podcast interview is all about, is that we need to think about the technologies needed so that everybody inclusively, everyone can be able to do their best work, whether they're in-person or remote.

**Jonathan Kaufman: [00:15:30.00]** Exactly, exactly. And that's something that is critically important. But I also think the other thing which is just as important is to present that. You know, I think one of the key things for HR professionals is not just about the recruiting process, but actually marketing. And how do you, in a sense, as you talked about sort of becoming being an evangelist, but but the process of perception, how do you entice people to say this isn't an environment I want to work in? We are creating an inclusive environment. We are creating an environment that allows for all of this and, you know, sort of the marketing and advertising, quote, I'm going to put that in sort of quote. But what attracts people? How are H.R. professionals becoming the organization's ambassador? Because that's essentially one part of the recruiting process that I think is really important. And how do you cultivate that ambassadorship? That model and that mindset of your role is changing. I mean, it's evolving. And how do you look at that now that you're meeting people from all walks, all nooks and crannies of the world, in essence, not just locally?

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:17:09.49]** So what does that look like for those who are listening, being an ambassador, and creating a culture of inclusion when everybody is in the nooks and crannies of the world? What do you what do H.R. people, what should they be doing?

**Jonathan Kaufman: [00:17:25.48]** I'm not you know, I would never profess for them to say, OK, you have to go out and become an anthropologist. That's not what I've ever professed. But it's a matter of sort of broadening one's horizon to say, you know what, we are going to have people from all walks, all sorts of cultures, all walks of life. They will be doing their jobs at all parts of the day. If it's a global company, what does that look like? And there are different types of ways in which people live and becoming accustomed to that.

**Jonathan Kaufman: [00:18:02.38]** That being said is when they become an ambassador, if you will, they have to represent not only the company but the culture of the company. And what does that mean and what does that entail? So as they go out into the world trying to recruit. What is the mission of the organization? How does the company perceive? The employment process and their employees, I mean, it is in many ways that ambassadorship, what are you trying to project? What values, what ethos are you trying to project to attract potential employees?

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:18:49.55]** One question I had for you is I'm thinking about the beauty of the internet and working remotely. It's fantastic because we can we can, as you said, the nooks and crannies of the world. We can meet and connect with people all over. But I also, as someone who has worked remotely for a long period of time, I recognize the risk of isolation. And so do you think that people with disabilities are in danger of being marginalized even further because of that isolation with working remotely?

**Jonathan Kaufman: [00:19:23.33]** I think there is a potential, but that also for any company that's sort of listening, what is the antidote? And part of the the antidote is to sort of create social networks within the organization. You know, I'm not, you know, sort of because it is important to connect with other people. We are social creatures. We're social animals by nature that that's who human beings are. And that has that will never change, regardless of the tools that we use to work, whether it's virtual or in person. So the question becomes how, and this is where ERG groups certainly play an enormous role because what is it, what are

ways that communities can connect to one another using the platforms they have and using social networks that examine, slack happens to be one that sort of comes to mind, you know, so there are platforms that exist. And how do you use current platforms that exist? Because you don't have to reinvent the wheel to create a social environment beyond the work environment and in some ways recreate a sort of digital water cooler, if you will, and a digital lunchroom where people can congregate and talk and just, you know, communicate doesn't have to be about, you know, everyday work things. It can be about life or just small chit-chat. It's exceedingly important to give people that sort of broad or rather that ability to do that in a broad way.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:21:09.04] I agree, I mean, I feel like that's what's missing sometimes, that now that we're all remote is that we don't have that conversation in the kitchen or in the halls on the way to a meeting where we're building those relationships and the rapport with people.

Jonathan Kaufman: [00:21:25.54] Yeah, so. So you have to find a way. OK, so what's the substitution? We understand we can't sort of meet with each other just in the lunchroom or you can't meet with each other sort of by the watercooler or whatever it may be. That spontaneity is not there, but there is spontaneity if you use the platforms and it's just relearn it. And this is another way in which as an ambassador, you can say, OK, well, we provide this, this and this. And you can meet people from your team, which the team may be all over the world, for that matter. Here is a way in. And, you know, you can create social events. I actually. I mean, it's interesting, you know, I see this in my psychotherapy practice and I see this in my coaching practice, that many people who work remotely are creating events for their team. I have one client now who is creating a scavenger hunt, a virtual scavenger hunt for her team. And her team is New York, Chicago, Ohio. So they're all spread across, California. They're all spread across the country. But what she's done is using the platforms that exist is creating fun events so that they're not socially isolated. It's a way of connecting.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:22:47.76] Jonathan, thank you so much for taking the time to chat with us today. I wanted to ask you where people can go to learn more about you and the work that you do. Where's the best place for that?

Jonathan Kaufman: [00:22:58.26] I think, you know, they can go to Twitter and see me @JKaufmanConsult or they can go to [www.JKaufmanConsulting.com](http://www.JKaufmanConsulting.com). Those are sort of two places where they can sort of see what my work is about and who I am.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:23:14.47] Awesome will also make sure to link to your LinkedIn and then to the Mindset Matters, your series over on Forbes too, so they can check out more of the conversations and the things that you're talking about as it relates to inclusion, people with disabilities in the world of work.

Jonathan Kaufman: [00:23:33.96] Thank you. I appreciate it.

**Closing: [00:23:36.41] Personal and professional development is essential for successful H.R. leaders. Join Upskill H.R. to access life training community and over 100 on-demand courses for that dynamic leader. H.R. recert credits available. Visit UpskillHR.com for more.**

**Closing: [00:23:52.28] I really appreciate Jonathan's insights on this special podcast episode. Inclusion can be built into our work culture as part of hiring, onboarding, training, and employee development, but it needs to be intentional. Disability also isn't just part of the diversity conversation. It is the essence of diversity. What makes the disability experience unique is that it runs across race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation. It offers great potential for innovation and innovative thinking, and people with disabilities with this knowledge and lived experience are also an untapped talent pool. Thank you for being a part of the Workology podcast. A special thank you to our sponsors ACE The HR Exam and Upskill HR and our series partner for this podcast episode, PEAT. A special thank you to all of you in supporting the Workology Podcast.**