



Best Practices for Accessibility from Those Who Live It

Cultural Competence



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[Lori G. Cohen](#)

Vice Chair and Co-Chair, Global Litigation

Lori G. Cohen lost her voice one day. She woke up, unable to speak. She reached out to experts and doctors to figure out what happened. Gradually, she understood: This was a permanent loss.



[**James A. Merklinger**](#)

Chief Advisor

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Jim Merklinger's challenge didn't unfold as quickly. It took him seven years to be diagnosed with Tourette Syndrome, a condition of the nervous system that causes involuntary twitches, movements, or sounds. He lost his first job due to his condition, which plunged him into a brief period where he felt sorry for himself. But he persevered and was presented another job opportunity with better pay due to his resilience.

Cohen turned to AI to regain her voice. After research, and a period of trial and error, her friend created an AI voice that sounded similar to her voice. She also uses her phone's text to speech app to communicate. She is grateful she can use technology to make her voice heard at work.

The courts and judges have been welcoming, non-judgmental, and patient with Cohen. She continues to adapt to learn what's best for her and her team. She likes to call her AI voice "Lola." While she says it's not ideal; she can figure it out for now. She has not used "Lola" in front of a jury but will be able to given her positive experiences so far and support.

Cohen and Merklinger spoke about the challenges they have faced and how they have adapted in a webinar hosted by ACC on April 16, 2024. They also touched on the best ways to support DEI in all its forms. Excerpts from the webinar are reproduced here.

What should people do to support DEI?

Merklinger:

- Measure what you have.
- Ask yourself: What barriers do people with disabilities have to entry?
- What does the board and leadership look like? (Look for diversity in the organization's leadership.)

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- What are you doing to identify candidates with disabilities? (Look for those groups.)
 - Identify what you have and see where the gaps are. (What is the overall culture? Where are the people located within the company?)

What is something you personally do to support DEI?

Cohen:

- To support DEI, Cohen now pays more attention to what others are saying about marginalized groups.

How do you encourage junior people with disabilities to find their place?

Merklinger:

- Depends on the personality and relationship. Be transparent, open, and don't be afraid to ask questions.

Cohen:

- Agrees that being transparent is important. She thinks having programs/webinars and spreading the word about how advocating for DEI can help others.

Concluding remarks

Cohen:

- Always think about the broader population. Keep fighting and never give up. Be your own advocate.

Merklinger:

- As you're doing business, having people with different perspectives really makes a difference. DEI makes your company more successful.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28JztEFH_zo

Watch the full conversation here.

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