

JOANNA ([00:05](#)):

Hello, and welcome to another episode in our podcast series. I'm your host Joanna Breitstein. In honor of the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act in the U.S., we are joined today by a special guest, Don Watson. Don is vice president of global workplace and enterprise services and is a recognized leader in building and creating places where all people can work. This year, Disability: IN, a nonprofit network made up of more than 170 corporations, recognized Don's work, and the work of so many others, by naming us company of the year. Thank you, Don, for joining us. Now let's dive in. Don, why is inclusion so important to you?

DON WATSON ([00:50](#)):

You know, at the end of the day, disability does not have any geographical, ethnic, gender or other boundaries. It is something that everyone can, and probably will be, impacted with at some point in their lives, either personally or through family and friends. And that's why it's important that we as Merck come together and really focus in on how we can create an inclusive environment for all.

JOANNA ([01:14](#)):

Can you describe the progress we have seen since the Americans with Disabilities Act went into law and where we still need to see progress?

DON WATSON ([01:23](#)):

So access has definitely gotten better for people with disabilities, but the employment rate is still very low. Nationally, it hovers around 36% to 38% compared to those without a disability being employed at a rate of 77%. In addition, invisible disabilities, like chronic illness and mental health issues, still do encounter discrimination and judgment. And, you know, one of the things that I think the pandemic has really shown is that work that was previously thought to have to be just at an office or something like that, is now being shown that it can be done remotely, which creates a great opportunity for someone with a disability who in most cases already have the skills and competencies needed to work in a digital environment. We also know that people living with a disability are very resilient, and companies are learning that resilient organizations are better able to respond and pivot quickly to adapt to change.

JOANNA ([02:21](#)):

Don, can you educate us on what universal design principles are and how our company lives up to those standards?

DON WATSON ([02:29](#)):

Now, Merck we've evolved our built environment to be really inclusive of those universal design principles. So universal design... it's a process that really enables and empowers a diverse population by really looking to improve performance, health, wellness, safety, and social participation in the work area. There are principles that guide it and those principles are: the space needs to be diverse, flexible, intuitive, perceptive, provide minimal hazard, take low effort to try and occupy and use. And it also must be appropriate for the task and the things that you're trying to do. One of the things that we're really starting to look at is more touchless technology in our facilities. Typically when you come into a Merck facility, there is a button that you can push that'll open the door for handicap access. We've changed that to a hand sensor that you will just wave in front of, and it will open the door. It actually makes it accessible for everybody while also providing, you know, a level of comfort, when people think about COVID-19 and you think about the high-touch areas where you do have an increased potential for transmission.

JOANNA ([03:48](#)):

Thank you, Don for your time and making our company a great place to work for all people.

DON WATSON ([03:54](#)):

Thanks. Thank you for the time and for the opportunity to have this discussion. I really appreciate it. And thank you for listening.