



Disability and Changes in the Workplace

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INTRODUCTION

The aftermath of the acute phase of the pandemic has brought two important disability-related trends to the workplace. First, cognitive difficulties, debilitating fatigue, and other challenging conditions have become increasingly prevalent as long-term consequences of infection with COVID-19. Partly as a result, the number of adults reporting disabilities has surged in recent years. From February 2020 to August 2023, the number of adults with disabilities rose 3.1 million, or 10% (Table 1 and Figure 1). By comparison, the number of adults with no disability rose by only 2% over the same stretch.

This upward spike breaks a long-term trend. From 2009 to 2019, the number of adults with disabilities grew at only 1% per year, roughly the same pace as the number of people without disabilities.¹ These figures are based on the monthly Current Population Survey (the same survey used to track the unemployment rate) which tracks disability by asking respondents whether they have one of six conditions, including “serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions.”²

The second and more empowering trend: The combination of advancing technology and pandemic-related pressures have made it easier for Americans with disabilities to find working situations that are a good match to their needs. The rapid adaptation of businesses to “work from home” during the pandemic allowed workers with disabilities to operate from a more congenial or accommodating environment, including being able to take breaks when necessary and not have to struggle with commuting and mobility issues.³ At the same time, advancing technology has also lowered the barriers for Americans to access forms of independent, flexible work, like gig-economy delivery and ride-sharing platforms, that can be better suited to workers with unpredictable challenges such as those related to fatigue, chronic pain, or mental health issues.

These two trends together have produced a startling shift in the workforce: Between the beginning of the pandemic in February 2020 and the latest data in August 2023, the number of employed Americans with disabilities soared by 33% or 1.9 million (Table 1 and Figure 2). By comparison, the number of employed Americans without disabilities rose by only 1%, or 1.5 million (these figures include self-employed). In other words, workers with disabilities account for 57% of the increase in employment since the beginning of the pandemic. That’s compared to less than 5% of overall employment.

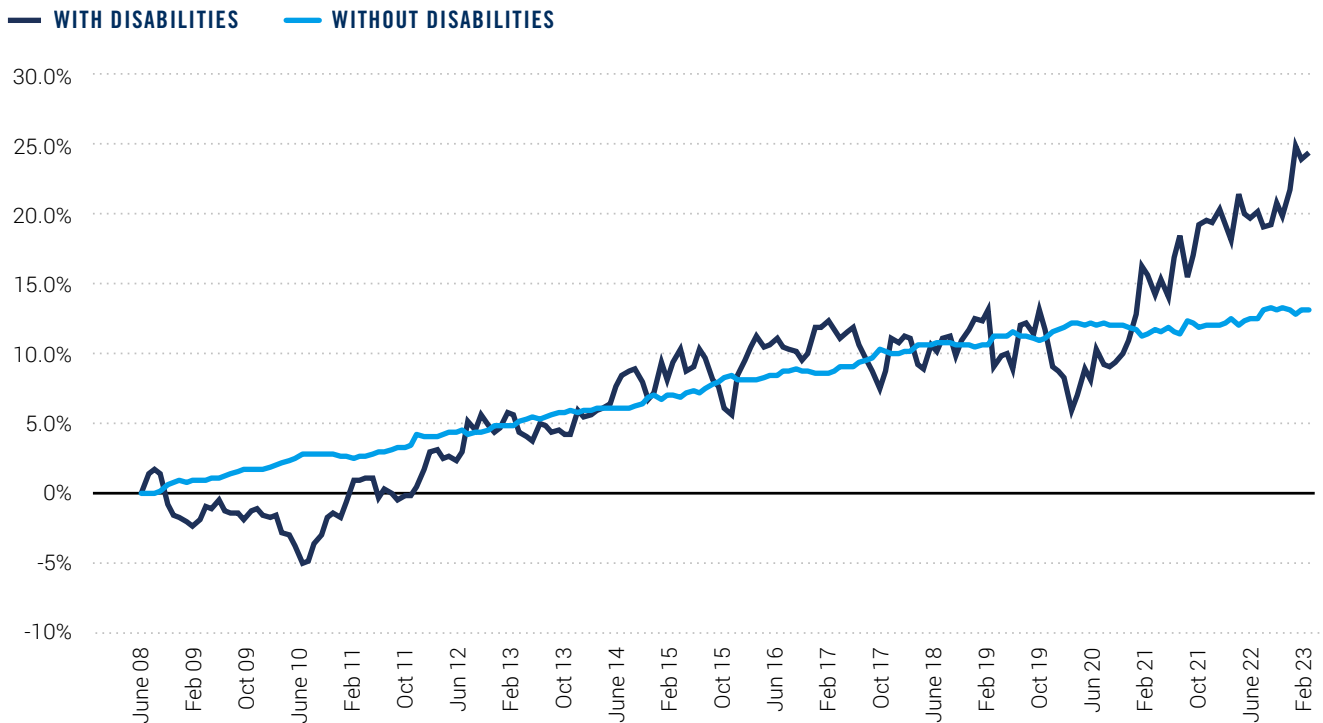
These results highlight the central role of Americans with disabilities in the post-pandemic workforce. Debates over key workplace issues, such as the pressure to shift from “working from home” back to “working at the office,” and attempts to regulate flexible platform work, must be seen through the lens of how they affect Americans with disabilities. As employers and policymakers debate the shape of the post-pandemic workplace, they should preserve the changes to the workplace that made it more hospitable to people with disabilities.

TABLE 1: HOW WORKERS WITH DISABILITIES ARE DRIVING THE RECOVERY

		CHANGE, FEBRUARY 2020-AUGUST 2023, THOUSANDS	CHANGE, FEBRUARY 2020-AUGUST 2023, PERCENT
POPULATION	with disabilities	3,087	10.0%
	without disabilities	4,497	2.0%
EMPLOYMENT	with disabilities	1,931	32.6%
	without disabilities	1,478	1.0%
EMPLOYMENT 16-64	with disabilities	1,814	38.4%
	without disabilities	1,608	1.1%
EMPLOYMENT 65+	with disabilities	118	9.8%
	without disabilities	-130	-1.3%

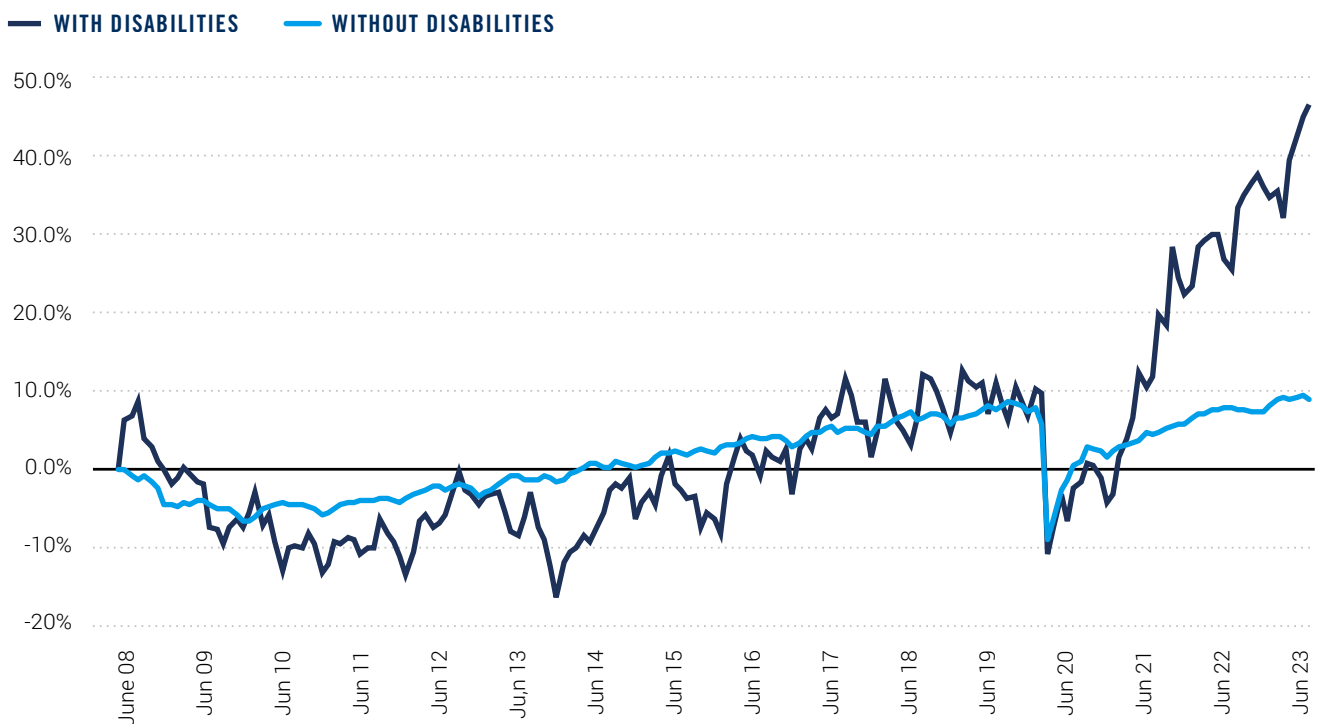
Data: CPS

FIGURE 1. ADULT POPULATION WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES (PERCENTAGE CHANGE SINCE JUNE 2008)



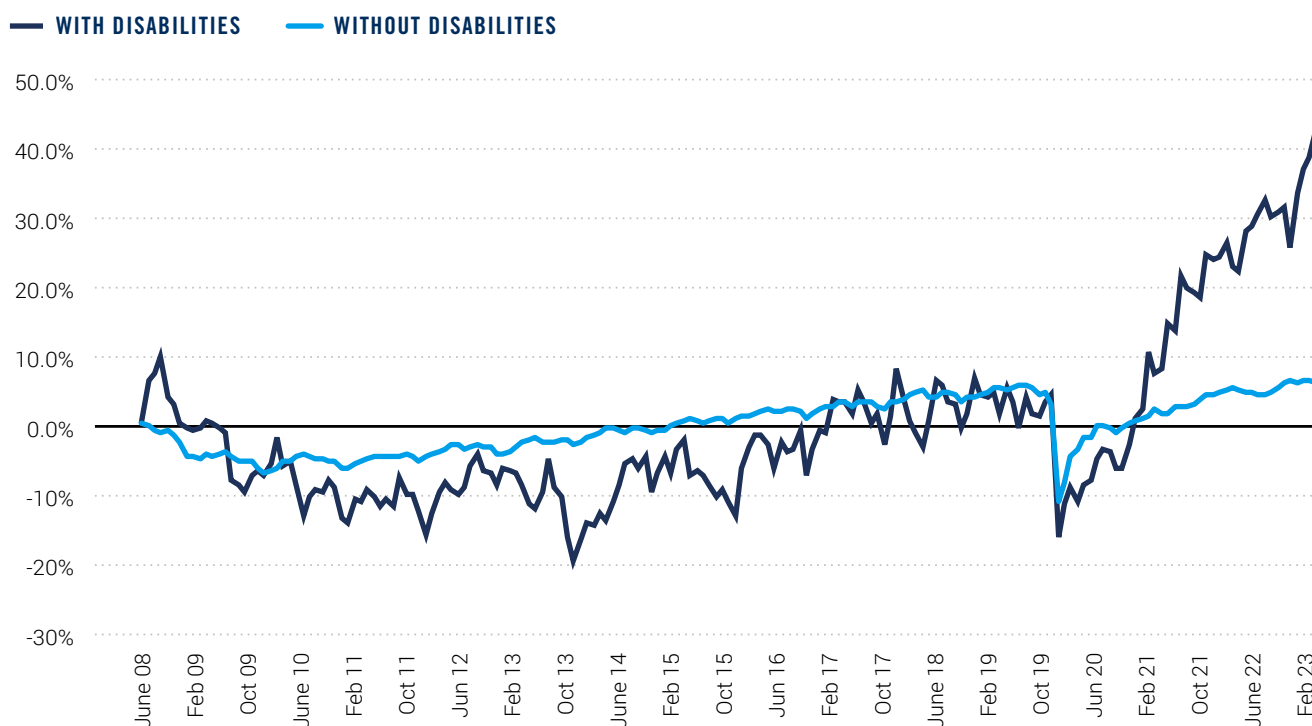
Data: CPS

FIGURE 2. EMPLOYED WORKERS (16+) WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES, PERCENTAGE CHANGE SINCE JUNE 2008 (INCLUDES SELF-EMPLOYED)



Data: CPS

FIGURE 3. EMPLOYED WORKERS (AGED 16-64), WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES, PERCENTAGE CHANGE SINCE JUNE 2008 (INCLUDES SELF-EMPLOYED)



Data: CPS

THE RISE OF POST-PANDEMIC DISABILITY

This section considers the rise in the number of Americans who are reporting a disability since the beginning of the pandemic. First, note that there was virtually no upward trend in Americans with disabilities as a share of all adults in the decade before the pandemic. In June 2008, the first month that the Current Population Survey used a new methodology to identify disabilities, the share of adults reporting a disability was 11.7%. By February 2020, that figure had risen only slightly, to 11.9%.

But after falling somewhat in the early days of the pandemic (perhaps because of sampling problems), the disabled share of the adult population soared to 12.7% as of August 2023. That represents about 2 million more people with disabilities above the pre-pandemic long-term trend.

The likeliest explanation for this rise is the impact of the pandemic. There's still no generally accepted definition of "Long COVID," but it's clear that a significant proportion of people infected with the virus develop long-lasting symptoms such as "brain fog" and fatigue that impact the ability to work.⁴ The Census Household Pulse Survey report that 3.6 million adults have long-term COVID symptoms that reduce their ability to carry out day-to-day activities by "a lot."⁵ While studies into long COVID continue, even if these symptoms affect only a small percentage of those who contract COVID, that would still be an enormous number of Americans suffering from new, long-term disabilities that impact the ability to work.

Another piece of evidence comes from the American Community Survey, which tracks

the six broad categories of disabilities used by government statisticians. Table 2 compares 2016, 2019, and 2022. The biggest change from 2019 to 2022 was in the number of people reporting “cognitive difficulty,” which rose by more than 1.3 million. That lines up well with some common symptoms of long COVID.

It's important to note that long COVID is not the only possible reason for the rise. Applications for Social Security disability benefits often rise after a recession, suggesting a link between labor market weakness and identifying a disability. It could also be that society is more willing to diagnose and recognize neurodivergent individuals with autism, ADHD, and the like. Nevertheless, the timing of the disability surge is suggestive.

TABLE 2: COGNITIVE DIFFICULTIES RISE IN THE WORKING-AGE POPULATION (THOUSANDS, AGES 18-64)

	2016	2019	2022	CHANGE 2016 - 2019	CHANGE 2019 - 2022
Total with disabilities	20761	20274	22007	-487	1733
Cognitive disability	8932	9085	10398	154	1313
Ambulatory difficulty	10097	9246	8853	-851	-393
Independent living difficulty	7413	7399	7864	-13	465
Vision difficulty	3929	3756	4237	-173	481
Hearing difficulty	4005	3867	4009	-139	143
Self-care difficulty	3653	3464	3353	-189	-111

Data: ACS

THE RISE IN EMPLOYED AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES

The number of Americans with disabilities has risen: How have they fared in the labor market? The usual headline measure of labor market outcomes is the unemployment rate — that is, the percentage of people who are looking for work who are unable to find a job.

But the unemployment rate for workers with disabilities doesn't tell you how well the workplace is matched to the needs of people with disabilities. That's why it's important to look at the employment-population ratio to understand the changing nature of the labor market challenges faced by Americans with disabilities. As the name suggests, the

employment-population ratio measures the share of a specific population who are working.

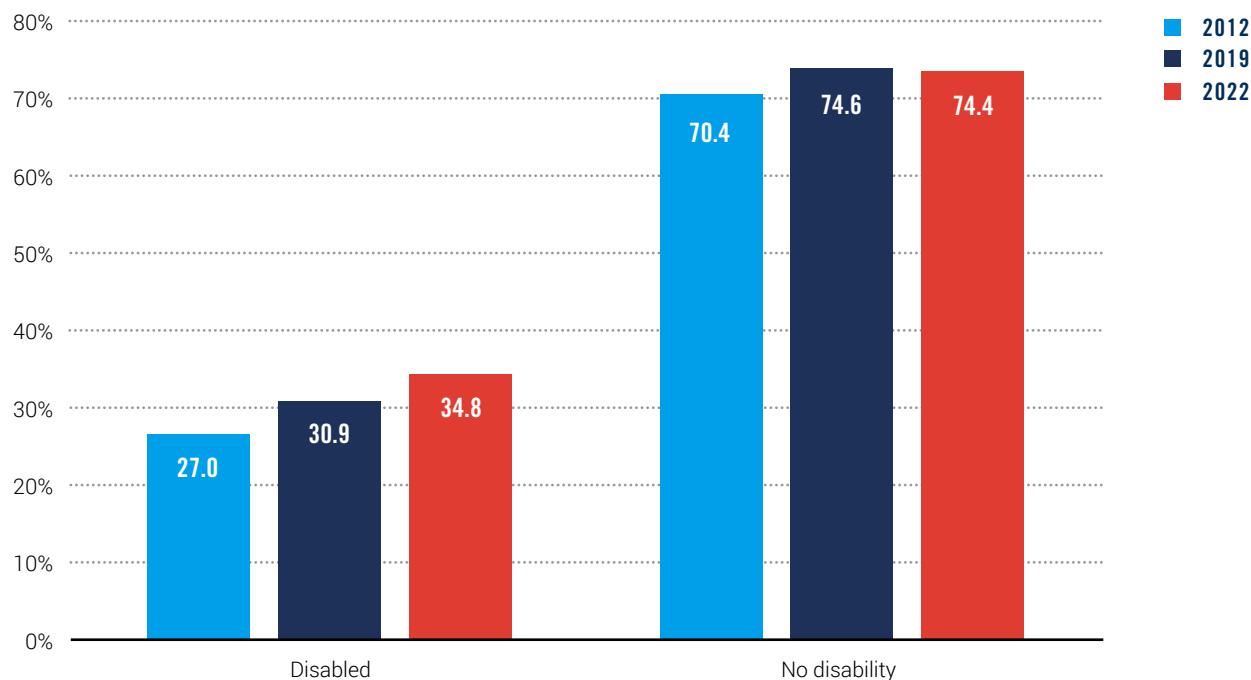
From 2019 to 2022, the employment-population ratio for working-age Americans with disabilities rose from 30.9% to 34.8% (Figure 4). By comparison, the employment-population ratio for the non-disabled working-age population dropped a bit over the same period.

These trends continued into 2023 as well. For example, the employment-population ratio for working-age men with disabilities rose by 4 percentage points between August 2022 and August 2023, compared to a rise of only 0.2 percentage points for men without disabilities.

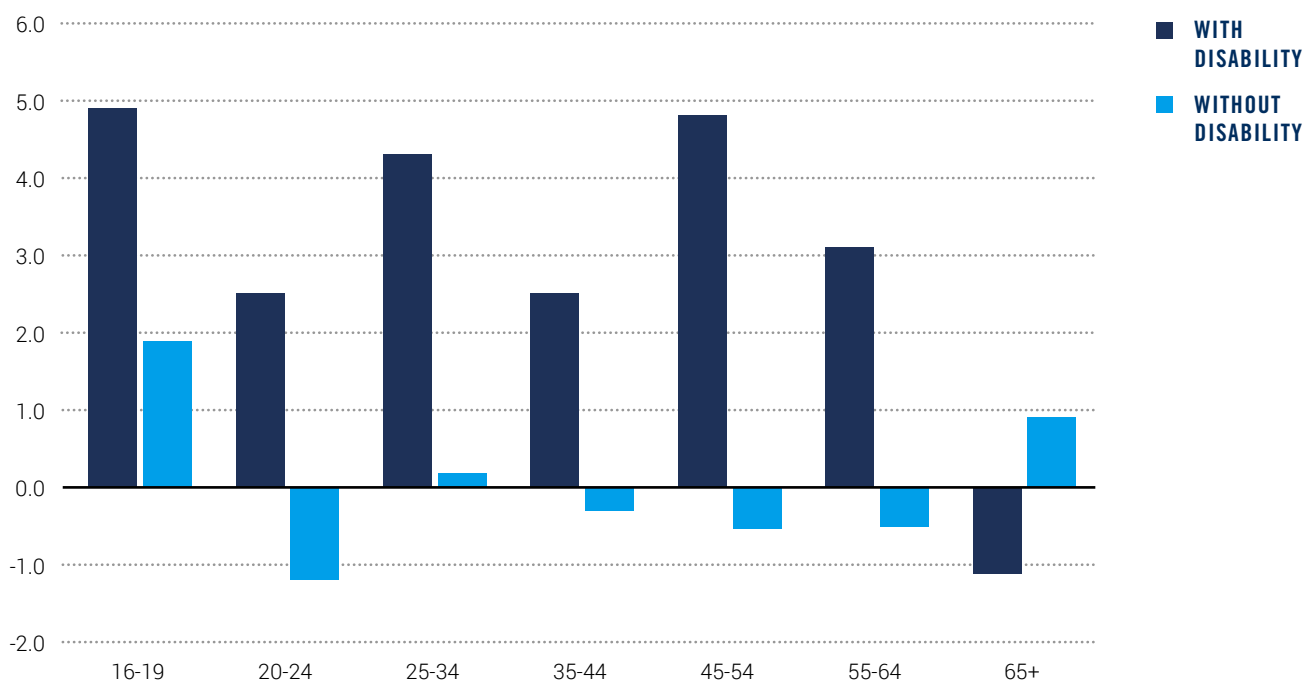
The improvement in the employment-population ratio shows up for all age groups with disabilities except for the 65 and over group (Figure 5). For example, for workers aged 45–54 with disabilities, the employment-population ratio rose by 4.8 percentage points from 2019 to 2022, while falling for the comparable population without disabilities.

The combination of more working-age people with disabilities and a rising employment-population ratio translates into a strong increase in the number of employed working-age Americans with disabilities.

FIGURE 4. EMPLOYMENT - POPULATION RATIO, 16-64



Data: CPS

FIGURE 5. CHANGE IN EMPLOYMENT-POPULATION RATIO (PERCENTAGE POINTS, 2019-2022)

Data: CPS

PANDEMIC-RELATED ADAPTATION IN THE WORKPLACE

Why has the employment of Americans with disabilities risen so sharply in recent years? To get some insight into this question, this section examines changes in patterns of occupational employment. From 2019 through the 12 months ending July 2023, the data shows three broad categories of occupations where employment of workers with disabilities have risen the most: Computer and mathematical occupations; transportation and material-moving occupations; and healthcare support occupations.

The number of workers with disabilities in computer and mathematical occupations roughly doubled over this stretch, an astounding increase. By comparison, the number of workers with no disability in computer and mathematical occupations rose by 20%, a respectable but far smaller gain in percentage terms.

One possible explanation is that at a time of high demand for technically skilled workers, employers were less apt to discriminate against workers with disabilities. Even without considering discrimination, more jobs became possibilities that might not have been before. That's especially true since it became acceptable to do most computer-related jobs remotely during the pandemic. That gives greater flexibility to workers.

The second big category of growth was transportation and material-moving occupations, including both employees and independent contractors. These include drivers on ride-sharing and delivery platforms and most fulfillment center workers. In this category, employment for workers with disabilities rose by 43% between 2019 and 2023, compared with a 15% rise for workers without disabilities.

Here one explanation is that platforms offer participants the option of adjusting their working schedules in real time, which is exceptionally helpful to people with disabilities that have an unpredictable effect on work performance. According to a 2022 DoorDash survey, 18% of drivers on the DoorDash platform say they have a disability or other chronic condition.⁶ By contrast, only 4.3% of workers under 65 years had a disability as of August 2023.

Similarly, the 2023 Lyft Economic Impact Report found that flexibility was important to 43% of drivers with a disability on its platform “because it allows them to respond to their health care needs.” In effect, the platforms manage an always changing queue of potential opportunities for independent contractors, who have the choice of being on or off.

The third big category of growth was healthcare support occupations. Health care support occupations include home health aides and personal care aides. Health care support occupations accounted for 3.9% of employment of workers with disabilities in the year ending July 2023, up from 2.5% in 2019. This translates into a 93% increase in workers with disabilities in healthcare support occupations, compared to a 31% increase for workers with no disabilities.

This third category can be interpreted in multiple ways. On the one hand, health care support workers have daily contact with others, inevitably exposing them to COVID during the pandemic. So the rise in disabilities might be a direct effect of lingering impacts from COVID infections. On the other hand, personal care and home health aide work can offer flexible schedules through employment firms.

THE ROLE OF POLICY AND EMPLOYERS

The U.S. has reached a rare convergence of changes in the workforce and changes in the workplace. On the one hand, people with disabilities are a rising share of the working-age population, driven by long Covid and other forces such as increased awareness of the distinct needs of neurodivergent individuals. It seems unlikely that these trends will reverse.

At the same time, workplace changes have made it easier to accommodate, in the most general sense, workers with different needs. The acceptance of video conferencing has made remote work the norm for many people, especially those doing digital work. The other major change in the workplace during the pandemic was the increased importance of platform work. Rather than go out to restaurants or groceries, many people availed themselves of delivery services such as DoorDash or Instacart — and many of these delivery workers have disabilities. The result has been spectacular. Increased work opportunities for people with disabilities has helped drive the rebound from the pandemic.

Yet policymakers have been sending mixed signals about the desirability of this outcome. On the federal, state and local levels, there have been multiple attempts to pass legislation reducing the flexibility of platform work.⁷ On the federal level, the Department of Labor has proposed a rule that would make it hard to classify platform workers as independent contractors.⁸ Rules of this sort have the potential to undercut the job gains made by workers with disabilities in recent years, since flexibility is precisely what draws people to this kind of work. Moreover, from the fiscal perspective, creating more work opportunities can reduce financial pressures on government safety nets.

Employers, too, have an important role to play. Many employers are putting pressure on workers to return to the office, citing productivity and innovation concerns. This forced change could hurt workers with disabilities who have benefited from the normalization of working from home. According to the 2022 American Time Use Survey, which was released in June 2023, among

workers aged 25 and over, 54% of employed people with a bachelor's degree or higher performed some work at home on days worked. The sharp rise in employment of Americans with disabilities is a triumph for the new flexibility of work. Policymakers and employers should avoid snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael Mandel is Vice President and Chief Economist of the Progressive Policy Institute.

References

- 1 Data from the American Community Survey shows a similar pattern.
- 2 The CPS uses a set of six questions to identify persons with disabilities. People are classified as having a disability if there is a response of “yes” to any of these questions. Each of the questions asks the respondent whether anyone in the household (civilian, aged 15 and older) has the condition described, and if the respondent replies “yes,” they are then asked to identify everyone in the household who has the condition. A brief description of the six conditions are: (1) deaf or serious difficulty hearing; (2) blind or serious difficulty seeing; (3) serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions; (4) serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs; (5) difficulty dressing or bathing; and (6) difficulty doing errands.
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- 9 “American Time Use Survey Summary - 2022 Results,” U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, June 22, 2023, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/atus.nr0.htm>



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