

Employing Writers With Disabilities

A Best Practices Guide

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**Media
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Why should the entertainment industry care about reaching the disability community?

Much has been said and done on the topic of diversity and inclusion in media. But somehow people with disabilities are often left out of the conversation, even though they make up the largest minority in the country. According to the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), there are now 61 million people with disabilities in the US. In other words, **one out of four adults** in this country have a disability.

There are many stories and distinct points of view being left out of television and film greatly due to the dearth of writers with disabilities working in those fields. Not only does this not make sense creatively and socially, but it also does not make sense financially.

Definition of a person with a disability and reasonable accommodation:

The ADA (American with Disabilities Act) defines a person with a disability as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity. Employers are obligated to provide reasonable accommodations to qualified applicants or employees with disabilities. A reasonable accommodation is any modification or adjustment to a job or the work environment that will enable an applicant or employee with a disability to participate in the application process or to perform essential job functions. Accommodations may include, but are not limited to, providing a ramp, specialized equipment or adjustments to work schedules or responsibilities.

The only legal limitation on an employer's obligation to provide reasonable accommodation is that it may not cause "undue hardship" or be significantly difficult, costly or disruptive. "Undue hardship" must always be decided on a case by case basis.

Let's talk Statistics:

According to Americans Institute for Research 2018 report:

- The total after-tax disposable income for working-age people with disabilities is about \$490 billion, which is similar to that of other significant market segments, such as African Americans (\$501 billion) and Hispanics (\$582 billion);
- Discretionary income for working-age people with disabilities is about \$21 billion, which is greater than that of the African American and Hispanic market segments combined.

This is an untapped market with great purchasing power. Stories that feature characters with disabilities will reach and engage this community which seldomly sees itself on television or film.

Representation in Film:

According to the study *Inequality in 1,100 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBT & Disability from 2007 to 2017* only 2.5% of all speaking characters in the top 100 films of 2017 were depicted with a disability.

Of this 2.5%:

61.6% had physical disabilities
30.4% had communicative disabilities
26.8% had mental disabilities

Nearly three-quarters of characters with disabilities (73%) were white. 27% were from underrepresented groups.

More than two-thirds (70%) of characters with disabilities were male. Only 30% were female.

Only 1 character shown with a disability was LGBTQ+.

These percentages do not consider whether actors with an actual disability portrayed the disabled characters. No such figures have been collected to date but it is widely known that able-bodied actors overwhelmingly play the roles of a person with a disability in both film and television.

Representation in Television:

According to GLAAD's "Where We Are On TV" 2018-19 Report, people with disabilities are severely underrepresented, with only 2.1 percent of all series regulars on primetime broadcast programming depicted as people with disabilities. This includes characters with chronic illnesses, such as cancer and HIV/AIDS.

Only 4 out of the 23 of LGBTQ characters on cable television have a disability. No gender or racial demographics were provided.

95% of characters with a disability in TV's top 10 shows are played by able-bodied actors

According to the Writers Guild of America West, in its Inclusion Report Card for 2017-18 TV Season, writers with disabilities face the greatest inclusion discrimination of all diversity groups. Even though 61 million Americans identify as disabled, and represent roughly one fifth of the population, writers with disabilities make up less than 1% of employed TV writers.

Why TV representation matters:

We all know the reach and power of media, particularly television. The absence of disability on screen coupled with stereotypical depictions has had significant consequences. Unfortunately, as multiple research studies confirm, the majority of people have an implicit negative attitude towards individuals with disabilities, both physical and intellectual. However, more positive attitudes are seen in people who've had more exposure and interaction with people with a disability, such as caregivers. What is more interesting, and also not surprising, is that caregivers as well as able-bodied students in inclusive classrooms held more positive unconscious attitudes. The positive attitudes were contingent on exposure and interaction.¹

Television representation can help make positive change. One way it can foster change is by portraying people who are disabled with the same needs and desires as other characters. By normalizing the existence and relationships of characters with disabilities, audiences become familiar with disabilities and more welcoming of people who have them.

¹Wilson, Michelle Clare, and Katrina Scior. "Attitudes towards Individuals with Disabilities as Measured by the Implicit Association Test: A Literature Review." *Research in Developmental Disabilities* 35.2 (2014): 294-321. Print.

Should writers with a disability only be hired if the pilot / film calls for a character with disabilities?

If you're working on a show that features a character with a disability, you should seek out writers with disabilities to help generate unique, honest and powerful stories about that character's experience with their disability.

But that is by no means the only thing that a writer with a disability can write. Does your show feature characters in love? Characters who have complicated relationships with their parents. Characters who enjoy fine foods, fashion, travel-ling? So do most writers with disabilities! In many cases a writer with a disability spends most of their time focusing on family, work and fun, not dwelling on what they may or may not be able to do. And as a special bonus, their unique experience with a disability has probably created unique situations at home, at the office and with friends that can breathe truth into your show, even when the story and characters have nothing to do with disability.

*"When you meet a person in a wheelchair, you think I'm meeting a person in a wheelchair.
Once you spend an hour with a person in a wheelchair, you are spending an hour with a person"*

– David Shore, creator of *The Good Doctor* and *House*

During an Interview

Do you bring up the disability right away?

Answer: No. Under the ADA, an employer may not ask about the existence, nature, or severity of a disability. As the producer or showrunner, you should avoid talking about disability during the interview unless it is relevant to the discussion. Stay focused on assessing the writer's skill set or pitch idea. If the writer brings up their disability, hear them out, but try not to dwell on the subject. It is a disservice to both you and the writer.

What if the disability bears directly on the script material, either because the writer can draw from personal experience or has a broader range of applicable knowledge?

Answer: Then clearly, it's a point of discussion. In this case, the disability becomes an **asset** the writer brings to the table, in the same way someone who speaks a foreign language or fought in a war might. A good way to broach the subject is to ask the writer how they responded to the material personally. Let them tell you about their disability in their answer.

Possible questions to ask:

Why do you think you're the right writer for this project?

What do you think you bring to the show?

What personal experience do you have that you find relates to the show or character?

Is it okay to ask the writer with a disability if they can work the same unrestricted hours as other writers?

Answer: If the writer has never worked in TV before, you should lay out the time requirements. But don't assume the writer can't handle the workload. With most writers, they wouldn't be sitting there if they didn't think they were up for the job. If they have scheduling problems, they should let you know, like any writer with extenuating circumstances such as being a single parent. (For example, writers in chairs may need to take periodic breaks from sitting.) Make sure all questions asked prior to hiring are asked of all potential hires.

So you decided to hire a writer with a disability. Now what?

How do I make my set accessible?

Stage:

Most sets are already accessible as they must be clear enough for dollies (which are on wheels), etc.

Location:

Most locations can be made accessible. When not, video village is always used as a solution. In some cases, like a mile into a forest, accessibility could be an issue. But it would also be an issue for equipment and crew.

Portable bathrooms and eating areas:

Often both have steps at their entrance. Make sure to provide a ramp for wheel- chair accessibility.

Multilevel sets and locations:

Make sure when shooting in such situations a safe and secure lift has been worked out for easy accessibility.

Safety:

It should be second nature to every production to ensure the safety of its cast and crew. With that in mind every production should consider the following:

- In case of a natural disaster, a terrorist attack or any other unpredictable event, make sure that all paths to the exits are clear and ramps are set up for easy exit
- Have a visual emergency alarm system in place for the blind and visually impaired
- Have your emergency plan include the disabled

None of these safety measures are cumbersome or costly. With only a couple of thousand dollars any production can be safe to all people working.

“The fact that a writer in a wheelchair came to us was a non-issue. Whether he was a good writer or not was the only thing we thought about. The chair has nothing to do with it. Is he someone we can work with was the only question and that is true with everybody.”

We do try to actively cast actors with the conditions we portray in the show whenever possible and that comes sometimes with unique challenges at times, especially when it's an intellectual disability. So, you educate the crew and especially the 1AD. I think any reasonable producer or producing team would do the same. Treat everyone with respect, be aware of the issues you're dealing with and respond accordingly.”

– Shaw Williamson, producer of The Good Doctor

Working with deaf or hard-of-hearing writers:

When considering a deaf or hard-of-hearing person for a position or an interview, it is best not to make assumptions about what accommodations they may or may not need. Some deaf people rely on lip-reading and do not need an ASL interpreter. Some do. Simply asking if any accommodations are needed is the best way to ensure that efforts are not misguided. In using the phone, for instance, deaf/HOH writers can use live captioning, captioning apps, or blue tooth hearing aids. And they can text. If they have a quiet place to make calls, all the better.

In a writers' room, some deaf writers may need ASL interpreters. Others may not need any accommodations or only minor adjustments. A writer who relies on lip-reading may benefit from sitting in a central location where they can easily turn to see the person speaking. Clear sightlines and good lighting are essential, as are captioned videos.

Both lip-readers and signers can benefit by sitting next to the writer's assistant to read their notes as they type. The writer's assistant can also share their screen remotely or to a second monitor. All written notes are extremely useful.

Finally, if there is an ASL interpreter, it is important to remember to look and speak to the deaf person, and not the interpreter.

Does the cost of insurance increase when you hire a person with a disability?

Answer: Insurance usually comes from the studio and it does not go up.

How do I let someone with a disability go who's either not doing a good job or is not a good fit for a show without the fear of a lawsuit?

Answer: Firing someone is always a difficult decision, but sometimes a necessary one. It goes without saying that gender, race, sexual orientation, and disability should not have any impact on such decision. So, the procedure should be as in any other firing: always document every situation that comes up which might lead to letting someone go. Also, work with your Human Resources department throughout the process and involve legal if the situation may not remedy itself.

Best Practices:

- When interviewing a writer with a disability realize that they will be bringing a fresh point of view to your writers room. Once hired make them feel acknowledged by asking if they need any special accommodations to best perform their responsibilities.
- Introduce your writer with a disability to the line producer and transportation captain so logistics can be worked out right from the beginning, avoiding issues later.
- When hiring an actor with a disability, have a conversation with the AD so that they can make all the preparations necessary to make the process go smoothly.

These arrangements should be second nature to every production the same way turning a production green has now become the norm.



Storytelling and Disability

Story types matter:

It is also important when creating characters with disabilities to shy away from stereotypes such as the tortured and / or saintly character with a disability. People with disabilities have a term for that: "Inspiration Porn." The characters exist for the sole purpose of making other characters feel better about themselves.

People with disabilities are complex human beings with the same needs and wants as everyone else. They are not defined by their disability. Disability is simply a component of their life experience. Perpetuating stereotypes only robs this community of its complexity and creates content that is simplistic at best.

Characters with a disability vs. actors with a disability:

While the nature of acting calls for an actor to embody someone else's life, the truth is that so few actors with a disability get to audition - let alone book a job - that it is imperative that we at least try to audition and cast actors with disabilities to play characters with disabilities.

If we want to change society's landscape, we need to create a pipeline of successful actors with a disability that can become household names and create a greater familiarity for those who do not engage with people with disabilities in their day to day.

Takeaways:

Changing the landscape:

Content starts with the writer. If a writer writes; “a person in a wheelchair approaches...”, the casting director will bring in actors in a wheelchair for the director to see. If a writer writes; “among the people waiting to cross the street is a woman with Down Syndrome. She sports ponytails...”, extra casting will cast a woman with Down Syndrome. These small changes in the writing of crowd scenes and small parts will have a great impact on the inclusion of the people with disabilities in media. It will also give actors with disabilities experience with auditioning and performing so that they will be better trained to try out for more substantial roles.

We can change the landscape by being aware and making conscious decisions that consider gender, sexual orientation, race and disability.

- **Producers and Showrunners**
 - Write characters with disabilities to bring a different point of view and bring specificity to characters with disabilities.
- **Writers**
 - In crowd scenes: along with other diverse characters, specify including persons with disabilities.
 - Small parts: specify persons with disabilities and, most important, know that his or her disability need not be the focus of their presence.
 - Encourage the casting of non-descript roles with an actor who has a disability. A bank teller or schoolteacher might be disabled, and the disability never mentioned.
 - Main characters: If you write a character with a disability, indicate that actors with disabilities be included in the auditions for the role.
- **Casting**
 - Ask casting directors to audition actors with disabilities for non-descript roles.
 - Make sure casting sessions are conducted at accessible places.



Media Access Awards

About the Media Access Awards:

The Media Access Awards aims to recognize depictions of disability that are accurate, inclusive, and multi-faceted. It honors those industry professionals who have advanced disability-related narrative in fields including writing, producing, casting, performance, and directing. We are proud to be at the forefront of creating and promoting opportunities for some of the brightest talents in the industry. mediaaccessawards.com

About Easterseals Southern California:

For 100 years, Easterseals has been an indispensable resource for individuals with developmental disabilities or other special needs and their families. The services provided by Easterseals Southern California (ESSC) – in Los Angeles, Orange, San Diego, Imperial, Kern, San Bernardino, Riverside and Ventura counties – make profound and positive differences in people's lives every day, helping them address life's challenges and achieve personal goals so that they can live, learn, work and play in our communities. With 2,800+ employees, 60+ service sites and hundreds of community partnership locations, ESSC assists more than 13,000 people, providing adult/senior day services, autism therapy, child development/early education, employment services, veteran employment support, independent living options, and more. At Easterseals, 88% of our income is spent on services. Join us in changing the way the world defines and views disabilities at Easterseals.com/southercal and WeCelebrate.org.



Contact:

Deborah Calla
debcalla@callaproductions.com
(310) 503-3263

Written by Deborah Calla and Allen Rucker – members of the WGA Writers with Disabilities Committee, Chairs of the Media Access Awards. Edited by Alison Dale.



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