

The Changing Conversation Around Work and People with Disabilities

To mark **National Disability Employment Awareness Month**, Brandwatch has teamed up with Monster to understand how the conversation has changed around **people with disabilities and employment**. Explore the biggest themes and the emerging trends in online discussion since the pandemic began.

Introduction

The last few years have seen all kinds of disruption to the world of work for people with disabilities (PWD).

First, the financial toll of the pandemic has had a negative effect on employment. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, “The unemployment rates for persons with and without a disability both increased from 2019 to 2020, to 12.6 percent and 7.9 percent, respectively. Data on both groups for 2020 reflect the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and efforts to contain it.”

Meanwhile, the widespread uptake of remote working policies for office-based roles has presented an opportunity for many to explore work opportunities they may not have considered before. For example, jobs that would have been based in inaccessible cities suddenly became open to workers everywhere with no commute required.

And diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and roles have also seen increased investment from organizations, though there is much work still to be done.

Within this evolving context, and to mark National Disability Employment Awareness Month, Brandwatch joined forces with Monster to understand how conversations around employment and people with disabilities have changed over the past two years. In this report, you’ll learn about the biggest themes and emerging trends, and what organizations should take from the data.





About Brandwatch

Brandwatch is a digital consumer intelligence company based in the UK. While Brandwatch Consumer Research, our flagship platform, can process all kinds of data side-by-side, we are best known for our capabilities in making sense of the voices of billions of people through analyzing sources like public social media posts, reviews, blog posts, and news articles.



About Monster

Monster is a global leader in connecting people and jobs. Every day, Monster aims to make every workplace happier and more productive by transforming the way employers and candidates find the right fit. For 25 years, Monster has worked to transform the recruiting industry. Today, the company leverages innovative digital, social, and mobile solutions to enable employers and candidates to find the right fit.

Capturing the data: Methodology

To understand the conversation, Brandwatch analysts wrote an in-depth query that captured content relating to employment and people with disabilities across publicly available online platforms (news media, Twitter, forums including Reddit, and blogs). The data in this report spans January 1 2019 to July 31 2021. All mentions captured are in English and geo-located within the US. We filtered the data to capture content with a consumer focus or authored by consumers. Content has also been segmented into themes. Note: In some cases where we've included verbatim examples, we've paraphrased real posts to protect the anonymity of the author.

We've also included various data points from Monster based on surveys and polls of workers and employers that the company has conducted. Follow the links to the reports to find out more.



Key findings

This report will explore a number of trends and themes within conversations around PWD and employment. Key findings include:

Conversation around remote and flexible working in relation to people with disabilities has grown dramatically. If employers are to be truly committed to inclusivity going forward, then options made available in this area during the pandemic should become permanent.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is one of the biggest topics of conversation and has seen strong growth throughout the pandemic, especially with corporations investing in new initiatives and training. But there is also a sense that disability is an often-overlooked part of DEI, and research by Monster shows that only 7% of employer DEI strategies focus on disability.

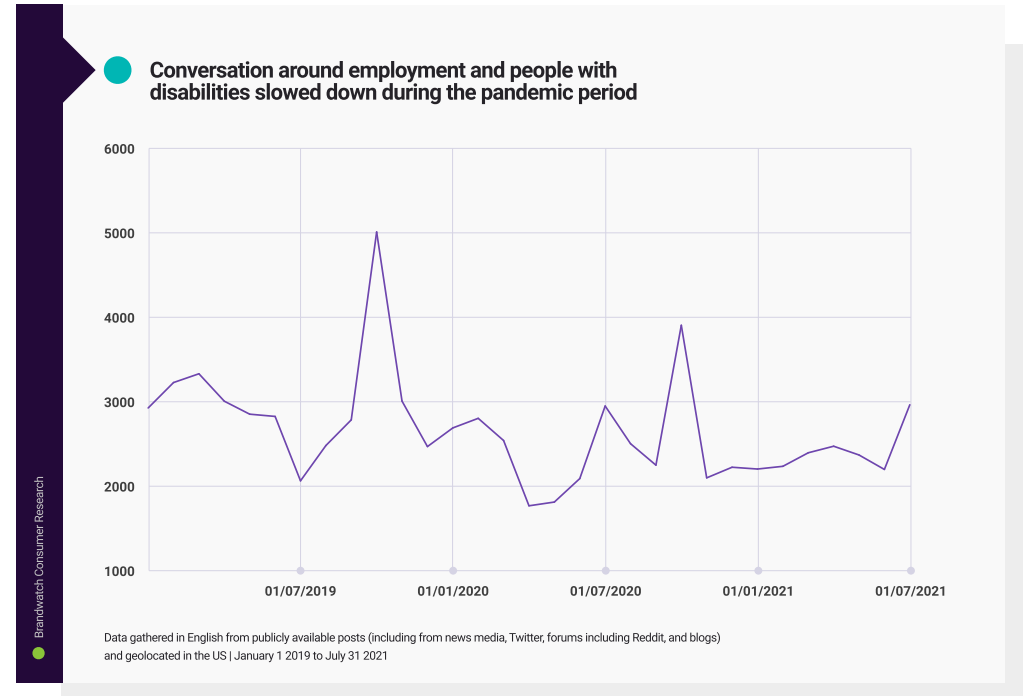
Hiring practices, barriers to employment, and ways to improve job searches and application processes are also key conversation drivers.

▶ Let's explore the data in more detail.

The Conversation

There were 84.1k public conversations around PWD and employment between January 1 2019 and July 31 2021 across the platforms we studied.

There are clear peaks within this conversation, often driven by national events like National Disability Employment Awareness Month. Popular articles like this one from Fast Company on disclosure can also lead to spikes in conversation.



You'll notice that conversation slowed over time, particularly in the pandemic period. This is likely reflecting the 'pause' experienced in the job market, including hiring freezes and a lack of face-to-face events.

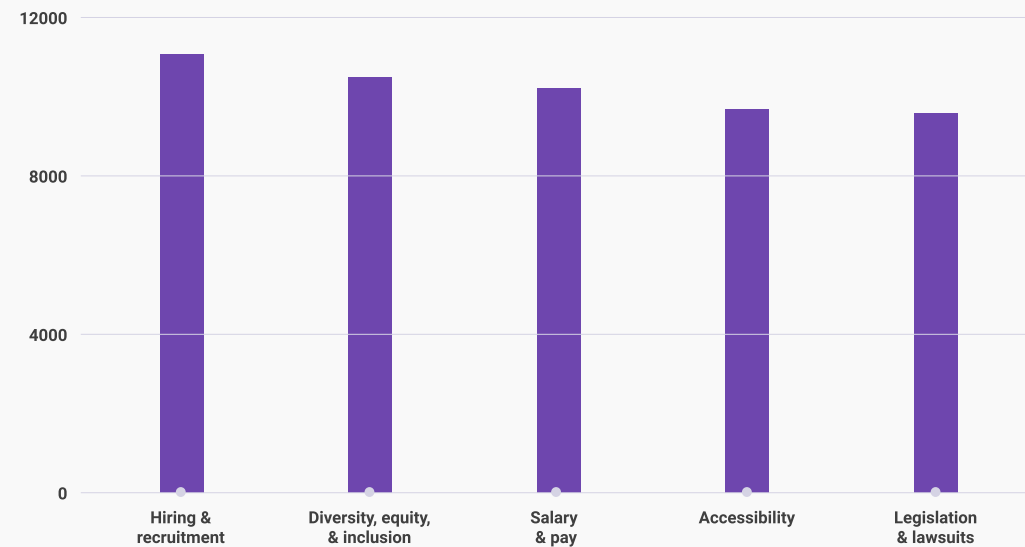
While looking at the data over time is useful for spotting key events, segmenting it by key topics and looking at them in terms of volume and growth can give us in-depth insight on how they're discussed.

The biggest themes and emerging trends

Top-discussed themes

Within the overall conversation, we spotted five themes that were generating high volumes of conversation: hiring and recruitment; diversity, equity, and inclusion; salary and pay; accessibility; and legislation and lawsuits.

The top five topics in online conversations around people with disabilities and employment



Data gathered in English from publicly available posts (including from news media, Twitter, forums including Reddit, and blogs) and geolocated in the US | January 1 2019 to July 31 2021

▶ Let's go into a little more detail on some of the biggest topics:

DEI and Accessibility

DEI is the biggest theme that experienced growth in the time period we studied. There were 10.5k mentions of diversity, equity, and inclusion within conversations around PWD and employment.

Meanwhile, accessibility made up 12% of the overall conversation around PWD and employment and also saw modest growth over time. The conversation around accessibility is partially driven by increased interest in remote and flexible working, which we'll explore more in the next section.

DEI conversation has grown significantly, likely influenced by the global momentum around the subject after the death of George Floyd and ongoing BLM protests. Monster research conducted at that time revealed that job candidates were more likely to want to work for an employer based on the company's positive response to the BLM movement

Accessibility for PWD has become a key part of the expanding DEI narrative and Twitter hashtags such as #AXSChat promote weekly discussions around accessibility and inclusion.

That said, some consider disability to be an overlooked part of DEI. Examples we found included a lack of equal pay, DEI training that does not encompass disability, non-inclusive job ads, and employer 'box-ticking' instead of meaningful change.

“3 areas of inclusion that often get forgotten or ignored in discussions around DEI: Disability, age and neuro diversity.”

Twitter user, 2020

According to Monster's Future of Work global survey, the majority of employer DEI strategies focus on race, gender, and ethnicity, with only 7% focusing on disability.



Hiring and recruitment

Even if it didn't grow in mention volume in the period we studied (likely due to the pandemic-related jobs downturn), hiring and recruitment is still the single biggest topic of conversation.

Hiring practices, barriers to employment, and ways to improve job searches and application processes are key conversation drivers. (These topic areas of course frequently intersect with DEI, accessibility, discrimination, and disclosure, as all impact the employee journey).

We should note here that personal experiences posted about hiring and recruitment tend to be negative, and the choice of whether to disclose a disability or not during the process is a key theme.

A recent poll by Monster revealed that 50% of candidates do not feel comfortable disclosing a disability to an employer.

There is a consensus that more should be done by companies, governments, and individuals—both at policy level and in terms of cultural mindset—to improve employment processes for PWD.

“One of the most stressful parts about a job search is deciding **whether or not to disclose a disability — and, if so, when. The implications are different for people with invisible disabilities, and those visibly disabled.”**

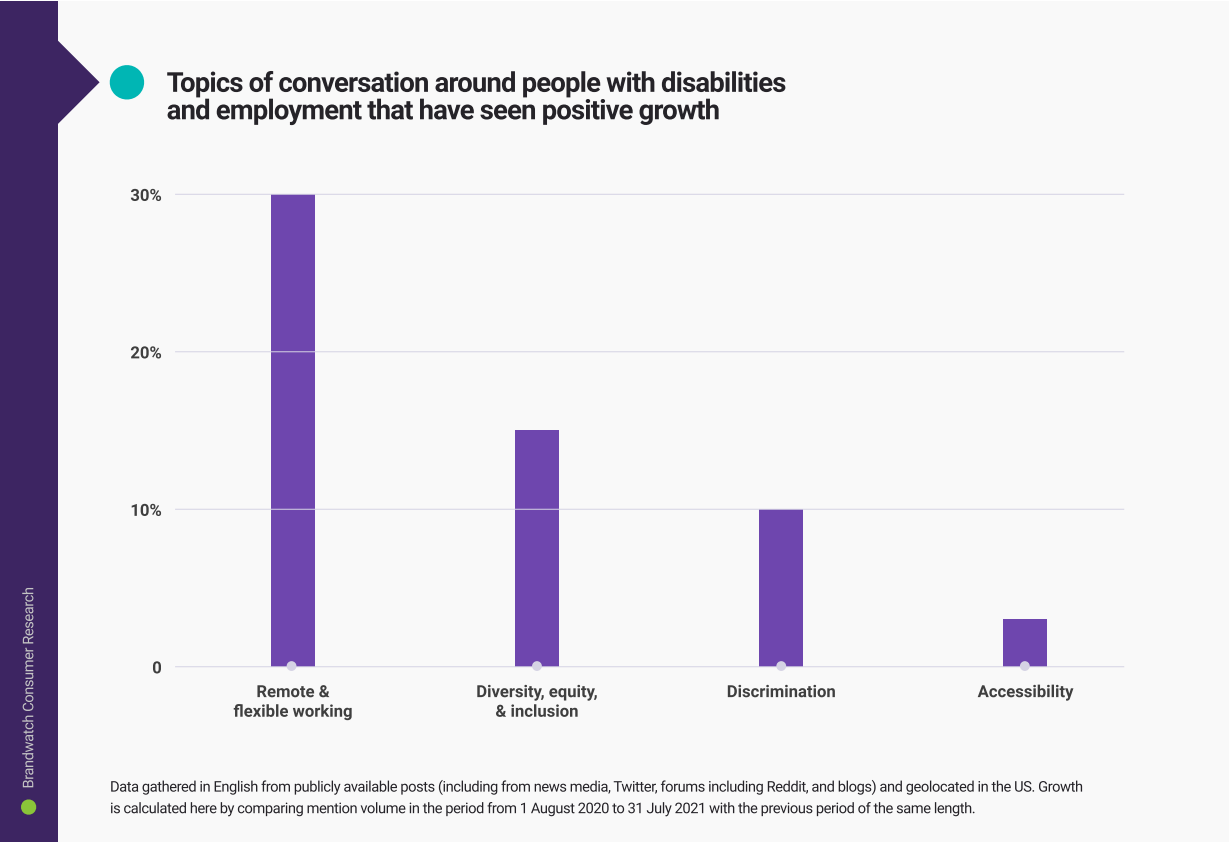
writes Wendy Lu in Refinery29.



Emerging themes

As shown above, mention volumes around PWD and employment have decreased during the pandemic period, meaning many of the themes discussed have also seen a decrease in mentions.

That said, when we compare the period between 1 August 2020 and 31 July 2021 to the previous period of the same length, some themes have seen positive growth.



▶ Here's what we found when digging into conversations around remote and flexible working and discrimination.

Remote and flexible working

While remote and flexible working was not a big theme in the conversation in terms of volume, it's the topic that saw the most growth over time.

Pre-pandemic, PWD, activists, and advocates championed flexibility as a way to drive inclusion. Many shared personal anecdotes about the ways teleworking allowed them to flourish professionally.

“I wouldn't be able to work without remote work. I have limited mobility and it's not possible for me to drive.”

Reddit user, 2019.

But as companies facilitated remote working in response to the pandemic, some reactions on social media were resentful. The fact that it took a crisis to finally trigger shifts in policy has caused frustration.

Post-pandemic, there is a push to see remote and flexible working become permanent options. Now that these models have been shown not to hamper productivity, there is no excuse to scrap them. However, there may be resistance from some employers. According to Monster's Future of Work survey, flexible work schedules and remote work were the most frequent policy changes made during the pandemic, but only 44% of employers planned to make the changes permanent. For nearly a quarter the changes are temporary and the remaining 30% of employers are unsure if they will make those changes permanent.

Discrimination

Discrimination was a theme appearing in 10% of overall conversation around PWD and employment, and it saw 10% growth over time.

This topic has grown in prevalence as PWD open up online about instances where disclosure led to discrimination rather than accommodation, and some people discussed hiding or downplaying their conditions.

“I’m tired of hiding my Asperger’s at work. I got treated poorly when I opened up about it at my last job”

Reddit user, 2019.

Discrimination is one of the most negative themes, with PWD often highlighting the gap between companies’ positive language on DEI and the reality of a less-than-inclusive workplace or work culture. Monster’s polling supports this: The research found that a majority of PWD are not currently feeling supported by their employers when it comes to managing a disability at work.

The disconnect between what is required by law and the real-life experiences of PWD is also a regular talking point. There is a sense that companies are able to exploit grey areas in order to avoid accommodating people with disabilities.

As per the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), employers must: “provide access for an individual applicant to participate in the job application process, and for an individual employee with a disability to perform the essential functions of his/her job, including access to a building, to the work site, to needed equipment, and to all facilities used by employees.”

▶ **The online space will continue to be used to draw awareness to ongoing discrimination.**

Spotlight: Neurodiversity



In a separate part of our analysis, we also identified growth in discussion around neurodiversity.

Conversations about neurodiversity within discussion around PWD and employment increased 16% between August 1 2020 and July 31 2021, compared to the previous period.

Emphasis is growing on the need for companies to hire people with neurodiverse conditions, whereas mentions of chronic conditions fell by 41% and mobility by 18%. It may be that the shift towards remote work and more flexible models has opened up discussion about accommodating a neurodiverse workforce, whereas less office time has meant less focus on how to improve access to physical workplaces.

As Monster points out in their guidance on workplace diversity and equity,

“Neurodiverse employees add significant value in organizations, yet this largely **untapped talent pool is being screened out by recruitment and selection policies, including **automated personality tests**, that have been shaped exclusively for neurotypical minds.”**

Summary and learnings

What's loud and clear from online conversations is the importance of meaningful action. This is not paying lip service to accessibility, nor is it exploiting legal grey areas or doing the bare minimum to make accommodations.

The view from PWD, their advocates, activists, and voices in the media is aligned: with DEI gaining ground as a priority within corporations and society, companies must walk the walk and enable accessibility.

In practice, that can mean:

Extending remote and flexible working options beyond the pandemic.

Equally, organizations can learn from the frustration caused by previously declined requests for remote or flexible work policies from PWD. What kinds of policies that enable inclusion and accessibility will be seen as the standard in future which today's companies lag on?

Building fairer and more inclusive application and selection processes.

Job ads with non-inclusive language, personality tests, questions that probe into medical history, and pressure to "prove" the need for accommodations are all flagged up as being discriminatory and off-putting for PWD. Be sure to include information on your website on how to contact someone if a candidate needs to request an accommodation to apply for a job or for interviews.

Create inclusive working environments and employee journeys. Many PWD discuss negative experiences in their employment journeys, including discrimination or bias following disclosure. This leads to the counter-productive phenomenon of PWD hiding their disabilities or downplaying chronic conditions.

There are simple steps employers can take to signal their commitment to a more inclusive recruitment strategy that includes PWD. Changes can range from auditing your website to ensure it is accessible to those with vision impairment and color blindness to using appropriate language. Here are suggestions that can be used across your recruitment marketing materials.



Tips for recruitment marketing materials from Monster

Instead of:

Disabled person

Focusing on how the task is performed

Able-bodied or “must be able to carry/lift...”

Must be able to stand for long periods of time

Speak or write effectively

Use:

Person with a disability

Descriptions of the job task and the desired outcome

Ability to complete tasks with or without reasonable accommodations

Ability to remain at work station for long periods of time

Communicate effectively

People with disabilities want companies to go beyond a regulatory box-tick or fluffy statement. Language used in a job ad can signal a commitment to inclusive hiring, but it's the action behind it that is paramount.

