

How Employers Can Accommodate Immunodiversity in the Workplace

By Liz Travis Allen

Did you know that 133 million working Americans have a silent second job? These people are never sure when they'll be called in for their second shift. They don't know how long the shift will be or when they'll be able to rest. Sometimes they get called in during the middle of the work day. Sometimes the shift lasts an hour, sometimes several months. Almost all of these people quietly plug away at these jobs whenever they have a free moment. Most of their co-workers and managers will never know they hold down another job.

This is the life of the working immunodiverse. Immunodiverse people are those who have atypically functioning body systems. They manage invisible chronic illnesses such as multiple sclerosis or Crohn's disease. They represent almost 10 percent of the workers in the United States, and yet they are often overlooked for accommodations because they present as well or "able-passing."

I am one of these immunodiverse people.

I manage several complex chronic illnesses, originating from a tick bite that gave me Lyme disease back in 2003. My illnesses do not disable me completely and I love my job working in public policy as a lawyer. However, like most immunodiverse people, I have "flare cycles" that keep me swiveling between temporary remission and debilitating pain. These cycles are unpredictable, but they can be reduced or managed with the right support from willing managers.

Receiving accommodations from our employers can allow us to contribute meaningfully even as we manage complex medical conditions. And we are worth it — not least because we represent the millions of people just like us who perceive products and services in different ways because of our unique experiences. We have access to an understanding of what life is like for millions of people whose voices aren't usually represented in the workplace because of ableism.

Immunodiverse people are very good at the work we do— and often determined to do it. That's why companies are starting to wake up to this reality and accommodate immunodiverse employees. Many companies and states offer short-term disability for incidents such as a one-time surgery or

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Liz Travis Allen



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"A tick bit me in 2003 and I went from a Division 1 athlete to bed-bound in my childhood bedroom, my mother spoon-feeding me soup."

-Liz Travis Allen is a lawyer, public policy strategist, and speaker who applies her unusual combination of experience in service of a more equitable future. She is available to speak at your workplace about diversity and inclusion, invisible disabilities and women's empowerment. Learn more about her work on her [website](#), on [LinkedIn](#) and through the [Invisible Stories Project](#).

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recovery from a car accident. Some companies are even doing better with addressing and accommodating those with mental health issues. These changes help people stay active, ensure employees don't leave the workplace preemptively, and reduce the need for lifelong dependency on disability benefits.

In spite of this progress, we are seeing a large part of the immunodiverse community opt out of formal work due to the difficulty of finding truly supportive employers. Many people move to consulting, taking on projects as their health allows. Some people use their creative side to make art or coach or teach online. Others set up some sort of relatively passive income like landlordship. In other words, when companies can't accommodate us, we start our own small businesses.

Of course, some people with chronic illness do have to make health management their full-time job and need to be compensated for it. Others cannot leave their jobs because of poor healthcare options. Others of us are eager to use our healthy days to contribute to the world around us through work at a company. And some of us want to do that work as members of teams, and enjoy the kind of work that requires sustained, long-term advocacy and expertise. I'd rather work in an office with a robust team and daily collaboration. All it takes is finding a company that's as willing to work with me as I am to work with them.

Which companies are doing this well? [Read on.](#)