

Transcript: How to Create a Sustainable Disability-Inclusive Hiring Program; Meg O'Connell, Kevin Updegrove, and Frances Ruiz. AccessibilityPlus 2022.

Meg O'Connell

Hi everybody. Welcome! I'm Meg O'Connell with Global Disability Inclusion. And I'm happy to be here today to talk to you about Creating a Sustainable Disability Inclusion Program. And I have two of my favorite folks from Michael's joining me here today, Frances Ruiz and Kevin Updegrove.

Kevin Updegrove

Thank you so much for having us. My name is Kevin Updegrove and I'm currently the Vice President of Talent Management Inclusion Diversity at Michael's. I've been with Michaels for about six years. I'm sorry, six months, feels like six years, but I lead all of the efforts around recruiting, learning, and development and inclusion and diversity. Frances?

Meg O'Connell

Great. Thanks, Kevin.

Frances Ruiz

All right. Hi, my name is Frances. I am the Manager for Inclusion and Diversity at Michaels. I've been with Michael's for nearly two years. And so just leading our programs and strategy for everything inclusion and diversity.

Meg O'Connell

Great. Excellent. Well, I want to zero in. I know you both are focused on the broader topic of diversity, but our audience today and the work that we've been doing together is really focused on disability. So I really want to start there and dive into what Michael's has created because I know I say it to you guys often in my 30 years doing this, what you guys have created is truly unique, and I think it's going to be really valuable for the folks listening to hear about it.

So Kevin, let's start with you. Let's start with the basics. Tell me about the disability inclusion program at Michael's.

Kevin Updegrove

Yeah, so gosh, it's probably been a little over a year ago where we really sort of talking about this idea about what we could do with having a disability hiring program at Michael's. So again, last year 2021, we landed on an idea to really launch a pilot program. So we thought it was really important for this particular

program to do a pilot first, before we went out to the whole enterprise because, you know, we are a pretty large organization across North America.

So we focused around 25 stores total. We wanted to go into our distribution centers. So we have eight of those distribution centers, and then we have a manufacturing facility called Artistry, which does all of our custom framing pieces and assembly and things like that for the custom branding business. So across those 34 different units in the US, we launched our pilot program for disability hiring.

And what the program did, it was it was all about taking a connection between our field leaders. So the folks who run, you know, within those units or store managers or general managers in our distribution facilities, and partner them with local community partners within the markets. So again, those 25 stores were in different areas and distributions across the country but they were able to partner with different community partners, which resulted in a total of 39 disability hires for the kickoff for the pilot program.

So it was a we thought it was pretty successful that each unit got at least one, an average of one hire just in the short time we launched the program going into our peak season last year. And then we concluded the pilot in December 2021, so just a few months ago. So that we could take time to really understand the review, our learnings.

But you know, we had great success. The retention rate was probably the biggest driver of success in that program. And we're currently in the process of figuring out what is the next steps. So taking it out of pilot and now starting to expand it across a larger scope in the organization for 2022.

Meg O'Connell

That's, that's great. And I love how you guys went across all your lines of business. And, you know, I want to take one step back and talk about what was the real impetus for this. You guys have a strong commitment to diversity and inclusion across the board. What made you guys really zero in on disability in the last couple of years?

Kevin Updegrove

Yeah, great question Meg. And 100% I can confirm, you know, even just being at Michael's for a short period of time, there is a really strong cultural and value connection to inclusion and diversity here at Michael's. And really it's driven by our core values. So you know, one of our core values is doing the right thing. One is putting people first, you know, and we also identify that we're better together.

And part of that inclusivity is like if you're going to say it has to be part of, you know, an inclusive environment. So, you know, we started doing some research and of course connected, Meg, with you and your organization to really start

understanding where are the gaps or where are the pieces missing. You know, when we talk about building and creating an inclusive working environment for both our team members and our customers, you know, shopping in our in our stores and online.

So, you know, started doing some some research and really understanding that there were some pretty astonishing statistics out there, especially, I think, you know, going through 2020 and 2021, where it was the great resignation and my gosh, the talent or where do we find talent? And the talent is getting eaten up out there and especially in retail where we saw there was a pretty large demand for and a need for talent because the talent pool was, you know, diverting to other areas.

And we may not have had enough people to fill those seats. So, you know, we always look as recruiters and talent acquisition specialists in the field to figure out where are we not tapping into the talent? Where is talent available that we're not tapping into? And, you know, starting to look at some of these statistics where, you know, just in the in the U.S., we've got 15 million people that are working age, that are living with a disability of the US, and they're there in need of jobs.

They need to be included. And it's like, oh, my gosh, like there is a really, really large population of individuals out there that we have not tapped into. Where, number one, they may think that they can't work at Michael's because of, you know, what, maybe the demand of the job is. So we knew there was a component of educating around what are the jobs? How do we, you know, we have reasonable accommodations? And those accommodations not only in stores, but we did it in distribution centers. And so, you know, looking at that and then, of course, you know, we have our eye on Canada as well since we have stores in Canada, which, again, you're talking over half a million Canadians who there's talent out there that's untapped, that are capable of working and they just haven't found that spot.

So, you know, I think that was really the drive when you use the word impetus for it. I think it's two things. And so I think it's part of our values. We want to be an inclusive company. And in order to do that, we have to include all potential candidates.

Meg O'Connell

I love it. I love it. Because it's so grounded in the business imperative and what this program could bring to the overall business. Frances, I think this one's for you. I mean, Michael's is all about it's Makers, and you guys have a really special Maker, Charlie French. Can you tell us a little bit about Charlie and why he's so special?

Frances Ruiz

Yes, Charlie is very near and dear to my heart. He is a Michael's Maker, an influencer, an abstract artist. He lives in London currently, and he has his own studio there with his family. And so last fall in 2021, we actually had Charlie come

on live and speak with our team members and paint live for us. So it was just such a great experience getting to know him better as an individual and getting to know his family as well and just super great people.

Charlie French

Sometimes my art tells a story. My name is Charlie French. I'm an abstract artist. I use acrylics paints and lots of colors. My process is to be free. Let go and create.

Karen, Charlie's Mom

We knew early on that Charlie was interested in art. I'm Karen, and I'm Charlie's mom. His teacher said he has this natural talent for color and composition. I didn't even know what composition was. And he came home one day and he was like, You know, I'm an artist. That's my job. And he called it Art for Dollars. We were renovating a house, and my husband said, Let's build a studio and Charlie said, "yes. My own studio." We want this space to be therapeutic and positive.

Charlie French

My space is important to me. I love painting here.

Karen, Charlie's Mom

Having a business and selling his art makes him feel good. Art has given Charlie the means to have a community and his self-confidence flourishes.

Charlie French

I hope my art helps people see my happiness. I want my art to be in the Tate Modern Museum.

Karen, Charlie's Mom

He doesn't have any fear. There's never been a canvas he's afraid of. That's that's pretty cool to be that free.

Charlie French

"Weekend Vibes". Made by Charlie. Made by You.

Meg O'Connell

Kevin, one of the amazing things that I really love about Michael's is the culture that you guys have there. And people ask me to describe it, and I will tell you what I say to people and then I'm interested in how you and Frances would respond being on the inside. But the thing that I love so much about Michael's culture is the, the yes and. Or yes and how do we do it? And what do we do next?

There are very few roadblocks. It's all, how do we make that happen? And it's so refreshing because a lot of times with companies there are more questions than

there are answers. And you guys are coming up with the answers as the questions are being posed. And I just love that just action-oriented approach. So on the inside, tell me what it's like and what Michael's culture is like.

I know you've only been there six months and Frances your two years, so I'd love your both of your perspectives.

Kevin Updegrove

Yeah. Now, you know, here's the thing, Meg. It is only six months, but when I made the decision to leave the company that I was previously at that had a really good culture as well. It was really really important to me to find a company that also matched that culture and being part of leading the inclusion diversity efforts.

Obviously, that was a pretty significant part. Nobody wants to lead that effort if the company doesn't want to make change. So, you know, in that investigative work, you know, and you're looking on the outside, I was that person you know, eight, nine months ago, you know, looking at, you know, what is the culture of Michael's? And, you know, I think I mentioned it earlier now and I'll probably repeat a little bit of it, but, you know, the culture here is, it's ingrained in people.

You know, it all is about those those core values that have been in place. And, you know, really comes down to caring about our team members and caring about our Makers. And I think that's where your example comes from. From a customer centricity standpoint, like our job in our stores and online is to help find solutions for our Makers.

So I think that's what's kind of ingrained in our company culture is like asking the okay what, what else? What, what else can I help you with? Or Yes, let's figure that out. Let's, we're very solutions based. And I think that's really what set the company up for success over the last few years as well. But, you know, back to really understanding the culture for the company is is we are focused. Our values are focused around doing the right thing, putting people first.

And, you know, we know that people are at the heart of everything we do. So, again, our team members are our largest asset as a company, as our human capital. And it translates right over to our customer, our Maker. And so we have to put people first and we know that we're better together. So we're included to committing to inclusivity.

We're included, are committed to continuing to grow and do better at diversity, not just from the Maker standpoint and the products that we develop and the products that we have to offer, but also how we're represented in our stores and in our support center and in our distribution centers.

Meg O'Connell

That's great. I love it. Frances, anything you want to add on the culture component?

Frances Ruiz

Just that I feel the same way, Meg. It's very evident by working with our team members across all of our divisions that everyone is in this together and truly does feel like we all have a seat at our craft table. And so just, such a joy coming to work every day and getting to work with such great people who truly do believe that we are better together.

Meg O'Connell

I love it. I love that you guys say that and you live it. It's not just a tagline or talking point that you guys come up with. Well, you know, Frances, you and I worked together a lot over the last year or so. As with every project, not everything goes smoothly. So what were some of the roadblocks that came up for you that maybe you were surprised about and you feel more confident you're able to tackle in the coming years as we expand this project?

Frances Ruiz

Sure. So, Meg, as you know, we did partner together. And having gone to the pilot program, there were some roadblocks, but great learnings that we're taking away and implementing into our expansion program. I would say probably the biggest roadblock or what I'd like to mention is the fact that we have over 1300 stores in North America and some of those stores are located in smaller markets.

And so accessibility to resources or talent or even public transportation can sometimes be limited. So that was something that as you know we worked on. Tried to get some creative solutions and we'll just continue to reiterating that going forward. So that was one of the challenges I think that we faced. So that was maybe unexpected.

Meg O'Connell

Yeah, yeah. And unfortunately it's a challenge for every company. So it's not specific to Michael's. It's just you know, geographically, locations can be challenging just based on the services that cities offer them. So, Kevin, what about successes? What do you think some of the greatest successes of the project have been?

Kevin Updegrave

Yeah. So, Meg, I thought about this question, and I think I can actually kind of tag on to where a potential roadblock could have been that actually was a success. And I'll give Frances credit on this one because it was all about the communication and education to the organization. So, I mean, you know, you can imagine a larger company, you know, trying to move everybody in the right direction. To throw out something like a pilot program for disability hires is going to create a lot of questions and people are going to raise their hands and think, okay, what are we doing?

How do we do this know? Because it's different. It's new. But, you know, the culture's in place, like I talked about earlier with we're better together. So people innately are like, yeah, we could do this, but part of the front of it and the success of it was getting the buy-in from the start. So when you have the buy-in at the beginning and you're able to really educate people on the way to understand what the program is. Because I think overall the biggest fear was like, how are we going to find these people?

Like, how are we going to find the team, these team members, these potential team members? Because you know, we don't necessarily have feet on the ground to go recruit people, you know, and really understanding that. So I think that really was one of the biggest successes getting early buy-in on the project so that they could quickly adapt and say, yeah, here's how we're going to move forward with this.

And then the next one is definitely our retention rate. So this was a really, really exciting statistic that came out of this program. We retained 87% of the team members that we hired through the pilot. And I won't tell you what our normal retention rate is in stores. I could just tell that it's lower. I could just tell you that that was significantly higher than our average retention rate.

So that in itself, you know, there's a story there to tell. So we're very excited to see how that continues through this year. You know, that was always through the pilot. And we'll go back and look to see where those close to 40 folks are, you know, six or nine months later. And then of course, obviously with those results and with the success of the overwhelming feedback we got from the pilot store managers and general managers in our distribution centers, was like, hey, we got to expand this.

We need to do more. So making the decision that in 2023 we're going to expand this out and we're going to hit on, you know, continue to hit on all the business. So the manufacturing, the distribution, the stores, and the support center. But hitting 100% of our units by the end of this this year or by 2023 I should say.

Meg O'Connell

That's amazing. Those are incredible statistics. Well what do you attribute the success of the project to?

Kevin Updegrove

So definitely team members. So I think the excitement, you know, Frances and I can't be the feet on the ground. We can't go out to all of those locations. You know, there may be one, you know, up in the middle of Montana or Idaho that we just can't get there to help them with this. So it's really getting, you know, all of the buy-in from the leadership in the stores.

So definitely leadership and team member buy-in and then, you know, educating around, you know, the program and understanding what we're doing as an

initiative. But I, I think the other thing is, is really, we really started really seeing the passion for disability inclusion across the organization. Because we've had one of our ERGs that we have here at Michael's, we call them our Michael's Resource Groups, is around disabilities and they're a very active and very engaged group of individuals. So we've always seen the passion around that group.

But to see it expand out past the support center here in DFW and start getting our store partners and our distribution partners involved and seeing, you know, how we can really be ahead of the rest has been really exciting.

Meg O'Connell

Yeah, it's, it's been so fun to watch that in action and to have people, you know, contacting Frances and saying, when can our store join? When can we be part of the project? And so and it's a nice place to be to be able to say, I'm sorry, we're not there yet, we'll get to you soon. And so you can see that passion just trickle in through the organization already.

And that's what makes this project so exciting. So, Frances, as we think about the pilot project and what we did over the last year and a half or so, was there anything that surprised you about the about the work that we were doing or the project in general?

Frances Ruiz

I really think just how quickly we were able to ramp up excitement with the program. You know, the pilot was only a few months and so there's no surprise. We have a great culture. Everyone's very engaged and bought-in, that there was passion for disability inclusion and hiring. But how quickly it took off. It's spread like wildfire. And we're talking about it right now.

And I think that surprised me a little bit. But it was a good surprise in a good way. And so it was very, just very heartwarming to see, you know, very happy to be a part of it and really, really proud of all of our team members that are involved.

Meg O'Connell

It really has been so fun to watch that unfold. What about... Is there anything that you would do differently? Kind of that hindsight is 20/20 view. Or is there anything you would do differently in launching the pilot if you were going to do it fresh today and have a little bit more knowledge?

Frances Ruiz

Sure. One thing I would really recommend is to get to know national and community partners earlier. I think if you're able to begin those relationships and build those relationships sooner. It just helps with them knowing what you're trying to accomplish and build even greater trust at a faster rate. So it's just getting acclimated, getting more comfortable and up to speed more quickly.

That's really the only thing I can think of that would really, really help and just get you kickstarted really quickly with launching a program.

Meg O'Connell

Yeah, yeah. It's a great suggestion. Well, Kevin, you know, thinking about the folks that are watching us today, what advice would you give another company looking to start a disability inclusion program? Do you have any nuggets of wisdom to share?

Kevin Updegrove

Yeah, project manage, project manage, project manage... Because there are, you know, because of the breadth of this for us, you know, I think if it's a company that's a little bit more focused on if we were just doing our support center here at DFW, I think it would have been significantly easier, if you will, because we were just focused on on this one unit.

But because we were expanding out across the country, you know, I think, you know, prepare, preparations and planning is definitely key. Like you have to kind of know what you want going into it. So aligning with goals and objectives. So be realistic about that. So I think there were moments and even still planning for 2022 and 2023, Frances and I have had to kind of step back and say, okay, wait a minute, we got a maybe a little too aggressive so we set realistic goals.

The second thing is, I think is so true in any, any big initiative or and I think I said to communicate before, but collaborate, communicate. So, you know, just because of the size of our organization, you know, we've got leadership that we have to align to the stores, we have leadership we need to align with in HR., we have leadership we need to align within the operation. So, you know, I think it's collaborating together to get everybody else on the same page. And through that, I would say, you know, the company, the company has to be passionate about it. You know, I think you can really you can really want to do this. You know, that may be an initiative, but you have to have the passion for it and you have to know that it's the right thing to do.

Because I think naturally people are going to ask questions and it's like, you know, because because unfortunately, there's a bias where it's like, you know, companies want the most productive and they want the high performing individuals. And there's a bias sometimes that comes into play here where it's like, well, you know, can we afford to hire individuals with disabilities, you know, in some of these roles?

And we were very fortunate that we didn't have to face a lot of that. I think it was through educating and people understanding, like, you know, that this is a reality and this is really possible and can actually be a huge competitive advantage for Michael's overall. So you've got to get people on the same page, passionate about the program.

You know and understand that, you know, this is the right thing to do and tie it back to those values. And if your company doesn't have a value in place, you know, maybe, maybe redirect it to you know, it is the right thing to do or really figure out what is the competitive advantage. Because a lot of time leaders like to hear you know, our ROI and how that competitive advantage plan to it.

Meg O'Connell

No, that's great. That's great. So, Frances, you were kind of the day-to-day manager. What advice would you give to another company out there that's looking to get started?

Frances Ruiz

I think, you know, very similar to what Kevin said, just making sure that all stakeholders are aligned. Communication is key, both internal and external, between community partners. And again, just just having an organization that's passionate makes it so much easier. It's been such a fantastic time working with our team members and seeing that they are excited and they are ready to go.

And we're having to pull back a little bit sometimes. So always a good problem to have because we're super excited and super happy with the pilot program and just ready to continue on to the next phase.

Meg O'Connell

Great. Well, that's a perfect segueway to my next question. So we've talked a lot about what got you here and the impetus for starting the program and what your pilot program looked like. So I'd love to hear, of course I know, but I'm acting like I don't since I'm interviewing you, but I'd love to hear what your plans are for 2022.

Kevin Updegrave

Yeah. So, you know, we don't, I don't have exact numbers to share with everybody because we're still kind of working through some of those, you know, again, going back to being real about it and making sure we're setting an attainable goal. We do know, though, that we are going to roll out to half of our store population. So, you know, we're, you know, you think about we've got a little over 1300 stores.

So, you know, let's just say we're going to be at 600 plus stores, you know, and of course we have to look at some of those because back to that roadblock, as you know, I may have units somewhere in, you know, across North America that they're just not going to get the support of an agency nearby. So that community support.

So, you know, we're definitely being realistic that we probably won't get a higher per store but we are going to open the program up to, you know, potentially half of the store population. So still working through that. And then we do have a two-year goal so that by 2023 we bring in the other half. So really hoping that by the end of 2023, 100% of the company is up and running on this program.

Meg O'Connell

It's so exciting and I have said it before, retail has been a struggle for many organizations when they try to launch their disability inclusion program. So the fact that Michael's put a stake in the ground that we're going to do this. We'll be in all of our stores by 2023 is huge and I love that you guys are thinking about it from the standpoint of attainable goals.

Like we can start with one or two hires. We don't have to have, you know, 15, 20 hires in every store to make this a successful program. Let's start it and launch it and build it from there. So I think that's what makes you guys really special. So I've had a lot of fun talking with you guys. Any last words for folks listening in?

Any last words of wisdom?

Kevin Updegrove

I mean, hey, good luck. You know, if this is something that's that we've helped inspire, you know, I would. I hope so. You know, be nervous about it because, you know, there could be work and but you really have to put that plan behind it. And, you know, again, I think Meg, you said, it, too, is is don't don't aim big right away.

Start small, like build the process, build the buy-in and, you know, grow from there.

Meg O'Connell

Great. Thanks. Frances, any last words?

Frances Ruiz

I think he hit it right on the head. But thank you so much, Meg. I just appreciate you know, I've worked with you for the last year, so your partnership and for the opportunity to speak today, it's great to share these learnings and spread the disability inclusion word and love. So just appreciate the chance to be here.

Meg O'Connell

Great. Thank you both for joining me. Appreciate it. We'll talk soon.

Kevin Updegrove

Thank you.

Frances Ruiz

Thank You.

Kevin Updegrove

Bye bye.