

For Disabled Workers, a Tight Labor Market Opens New Doors

With Covid prompting more employers to consider remote arrangements, employment has soared among adults with disabilities.



By Ben Casselman

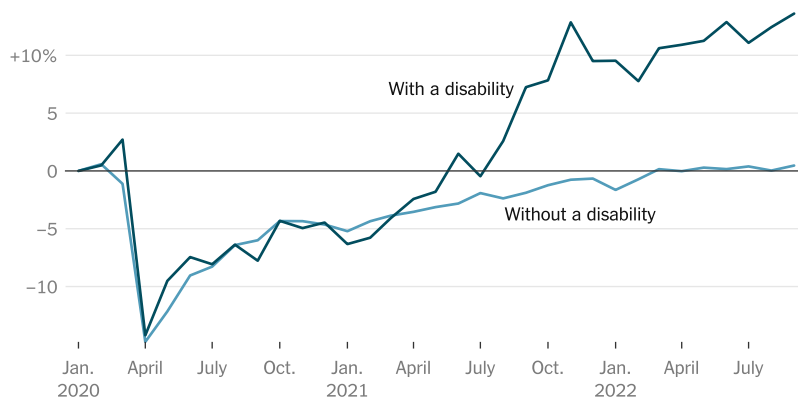
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The strong late-pandemic labor market is giving a lift to a group often left on the margins of the economy: workers with disabilities.

Employers, desperate for workers, are reconsidering job requirements, overhauling hiring processes and working with nonprofit groups to recruit candidates they might once have overlooked. At the same time, companies' newfound openness to remote work has led to opportunities for people whose disabilities make in-person work — and the taxing daily commute it requires — difficult or impossible.

As a result, the share of disabled adults who are working has soared in the past two years, far surpassing its prepandemic level and outpacing gains among people without disabilities.

Share employed, change since Jan. 2020



Note: Includes workers between 18 and 64-years-old. Data is not seasonally adjusted. • Source: Current Population Survey, via IPUMS • By The New York Times

In interviews and surveys, people with disabilities report that they are getting not only more job offers, but better ones, with higher pay, more flexibility and more openness to providing accommodations that once would have required a fight, if they were offered at all.

“The new world we live in has opened the door a little bit more,” said Gene Boes, president and chief executive of the Northwest Center, a Seattle organization that helps people with disabilities become more independent. “The doors are opening wider because there’s just more demand for labor.”

Samir Patel, who lives in the Seattle area, has a college degree and certifications in accounting. But he also has autism spectrum disorder, which has made it difficult for him to find steady work. He has spent most of his career in temporary jobs found through staffing agencies. His longest job lasted a little over a year; many lasted only a few months.

This summer, however, Mr. Patel, 42, got a full-time, permanent job as an accountant for a local nonprofit group. The job brought a 30 percent raise, along with retirement benefits, more predictable hours and other perks. Now he is thinking about buying a home, traveling and dating — steps that seemed impossible without the stability of a steady job.

“It’s a boost in confidence,” he said. “There were times when I felt like I was behind.”

Mr. Patel, whose disability affects his speech and can make conversation difficult, worked with an employment coach at the Northwest Center to help him request accommodations both during the interview process and once he started the job. And while Mr. Patel usually prefers to work in the office, his new employer also allows him to work remotely when he needs to — a big help on days when he finds the sensory overload of the office overwhelming.

“If I have my bad days, I just pick up the laptop and work from home,” he said.

Workers with disabilities have long seen their fortunes ebb and flow with the economy. Federal law prohibits most employers from discriminating against people with disabilities, and it requires them to make reasonable accommodations. But research has found that discrimination remains common: One 2017 study [[The Disability Employment Puzzle: A Field Experiment on Employer Hiring Behavior](#)] found that job applications that disclosed a disability were 26 percent less likely to

receive interest from prospective employers. And even when they can find jobs, workers with disabilities frequently encounter barriers to success, from bathroom doors they cannot open without assistance to hostile co-workers.

Workers with disabilities — like other groups that face obstacles to employment, such as those with criminal records — tend to benefit disproportionately from strong job markets, when employers have more of an incentive to seek out untapped pools of talent. But when recessions hit, those opportunities quickly dry up.

“We have a last-in, first-out labor market, and disabled people are often among the last in and the first out,” said Adam Ozimek, chief economist at the Economic Innovation Group, a Washington research organization.

Remote work, however, has the potential to break that cycle, at least for some workers. In a new study, Mr. Ozimek found that employment had risen for workers with disabilities across industries as the labor market improved, consistent with the usual pattern. But it has improved especially rapidly in industries and occupations where remote work is more common. And many economists believe that the shift toward remote work, unlike the red-hot labor market, is likely to prove lasting.

More than 35 percent of disabled Americans ages 18 to 64 had jobs in September. That was up from 31 percent just before the pandemic and is a record in the 15 years the government has kept track. Among adults without disabilities, 78 percent had jobs, but their employment rates have only just returned to the level before the pandemic.

“Disabled adults have seen employment rates recover much faster,” Mr. Ozimek said. “That’s good news, and it’s important to understand whether that’s a temporary thing or a permanent thing. And my conclusion is that not only is it a permanent thing, but it’s going to improve.”

Before the pandemic, Kathryn Wiltz repeatedly asked her employer to let her work from home because of her disability, a chronic autoimmune disorder whose symptoms include pain and severe fatigue. Her requests were denied.



Ms. Wiltz's new job allows her to work from home permanently. Sarah Rice for The New York Times

When the pandemic hit, however, the hospital in Grand Rapids, Mich., where Ms. Wiltz worked in the medical billing department sent her home along with many of her colleagues. Last month, she started a job with a new employer, an insurance company, in which she will be permanently able to work remotely.

Being able to work from home was a high priority for Ms. Wiltz, 31, because the treatments she receives suppress her immune system, leaving her vulnerable to the coronavirus. And even if that risk subsides, she said, she finds in-person work taxing: Getting ready for work, commuting to the office and interacting with colleagues all drain energy reserves that are thin to begin with. As she struggled through one particularly difficult day recently, she said, she reflected on how hard it would have been to need to go into the office.

“It would have been almost impossible,” she said. “I would have pushed myself and I would have pushed my body, and there’s a very real possibility that I would have ended up in the hospital.”

There are also subtler benefits. Ms. Wiltz can get the monthly drug infusions she receives to treat her disorder during her lunch break, rather than taking time off work. She can turn down the lights to stave off migraines. She doesn’t have to worry that her colleagues are staring at her and wondering what is wrong. All of that, she said, makes her a more productive employee.

“It makes me a lot more comfortable and able to think more clearly and do a better job anyway,” she said.

The sudden embrace of remote work during the pandemic was met with some exasperation from some disability-rights leaders, who had spent years trying, mostly without success, to persuade employers to offer more flexibility to their employees.

“Remote work and remote-work options are something that our community has been advocating for for decades, and it’s a little frustrating that for decades corporate America was saying it’s too complicated, we’ll lose productivity, and now suddenly it’s like, sure, let’s do it,” said Charles-Edouard Catherine, director of corporate and government relations for the National Organization on Disability.

Still, he said the shift is a welcome one. For Mr. Catherine, who is blind, not needing to commute to work means not coming home with cuts on his forehead and bruises on his leg. And for people with more serious mobility limitations, remote work is the only option.

Many employers are now scaling back remote work and are encouraging or requiring employees to return to the office. But experts expect remote and hybrid work to remain much more common and more widely accepted than it was before the pandemic. That may make it easier for disabled employees to continue to work remotely.

The pandemic may also reshape the legal landscape. In the past, employers often resisted offering remote work as an accommodation to disabled workers, and judges rarely required them to do so. But that may change now that so many companies were able to adapt to remote work in 2020, said Arlene S. Kanter, director of the Disability Law and Policy Program at the Syracuse University law school.

“If other people can show that they can perform their work well at home, as they did during Covid, then people with disabilities, as a matter of accommodation, shouldn’t be denied that right,” Ms. Kanter said.

Ms. Kanter and other experts caution that not all people with disabilities want to work remotely. And many jobs cannot be done from home. A disproportionate share of workers with disabilities are employed in retail and other industries where remote work is uncommon. Despite recent gains, people with disabilities are still far less likely to have jobs, and more likely to live in poverty, than people without them.

“When we say it’s historically high, that’s absolutely true, but we don’t want to send the wrong message and give ourselves a pat on the back,” Mr. Catherine said. “Because we’re still twice as likely to be unemployed and we’re still underpaid when we’re lucky enough to be employed.”

Disability issues are likely to become more prominent in coming years because the pandemic has left potentially millions of adults dealing with a disability. A recent study by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York estimated that close to two million working-age Americans had become disabled because of long Covid.

Employers that don’t find ways to accommodate workers with disabilities — whether through remote work or other adjustments — are going to continue to struggle to find employees, said Mason Ameri, a Rutgers University business professor who studies disability.

“Employers have to shape up,” he said. “Employers have to pivot. Otherwise this labor shortage may be more permanent.”