

# WeCo – 2020 NDEAM – Accessing Our Own Opportunities

*10/15/20*

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[Live transcription beginning at 5 PM ET.]

Andy Emerson: Welcome. Today's presentation is on accessing our own opportunities. This is being brought to you by WeCo accessibility services. We want to thank WeCo for sponsoring today's discussion.

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The meeting will be recorded and available following the event. If you have questions or need assistance, please email [admin@theweco.com](mailto:admin@theweco.com), a great place for follow-up or to continue the conversation.

A little about WeCo. We foster independence regardless of disability. We offer training, auditing, usability, access of mobile website and documents, etc. All staff at WeCo live with 1 or more disabilities, having special significance to us. We live with the results of our work daily.

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We have been recognized as a leading employer from entry level staff to executive management. We live and breathe disability employment. National disability awareness month is held in October and focuses on disability employment. WeCo honors our own staff to celebrate and showcase what those living with disabilities bring to the workplace through drive and motivation. People with disabilities offer so much to products and services in the world.

I'm Andy Emerson, event coordinator with WeCo. I'd like to introduce my colleagues.

[On screen.]

Sue Ann Rodriguez: Hello, everyone. Thank you for joining us.

Andy Emerson: Next, a few members of the WeCo certified test team. First, Lynda Little, CTC coordinator.

Lynda Little: Thanks for coming.

Andy Emerson: Paul Daye is senior CTC.

Paul Daye: Hello, and thank you for joining us this lovely evening.

Andy Emerson: Next, troy, lead CTC.

Troy Larson: Hello, and thanks for coming.

Andy Emerson: From the WeCo operations team, Laura Andert, operations assistant.

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Laura Andert: Hello, and Thank you so much for coming. I'm very excited to speak today and to hear questions. Thank you, Andy.

Andy Emerson: The panel moderator is Melanie Zeuske, a client relations specialist.

Melanie Zeuske: I'd like to add my welcome to everyone. I'm glad to be here. I'm excited to have you with us. Since this year's theme for National Disability Employment Awareness Month is accessing an opportunity, we hope to give insight to increase your access to employment opportunities.

Let's start with success stories. Troy, will you start talking about how you found WeCo?

Troy Larson: I found it through vision loss resources for some event. Someone's PCA mentioned to the group that WeCo was looking for testers. Given that the job search wasn't going well at the time, I thought why not? Let's take a shot and become a certified test consultant. Here I am.

Melanie Zeuske: Thanks, Troy. Laura, how did you get to WeCo?

Laura Andert: Thank you for asking. I got to WeCo because my former job had me coming to a point where I thought I could do more than what I was doing. I was looking for a job like where I am today at WeCo.

In other words, WeCo accessibility services was my dream job, and I'm very glad I found it. My job coach sent me a position description on Indeed, the job search website engine. It was really up to me to actually go for it. I said thank you to my job coach. I loved what I saw and did everything I could to make them notice me and bug them in a polite way to let WeCo know that I'm interested in working for them.

I persevered in reaching WeCo. I called and emailed different staff. I did what I could. I spoke up. I'm so happy that I'm here today. Thank you, Melanie.

Melanie Zeuske: Thanks, Laura. Lynda?

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Lynda Little: I was working at a law firm in Chicago with a friend who was an advisory member. I found WeCo through social networking.

Melanie Zeuske: Paul, what's your story?

Paul Daye: Mine was a lot like Laura's. I was working as a specific technology specialist as a person with a disability and training clients to use a website. You run across different barriers faced. I always had an interest in accessibility and accessibility testing. I had the opportunity when I first moved to where I live now and transitioned from a job in Pennsylvania to get a contracting job working on the governor of New York's website to test his website for accessibility.

That piqued my interest. Working at that company I was at as a technology specialist, I didn't get to use those skills. I had that drive to learn and took courses on accessibility testing, trying to get more experience and skills. My ultimate goal was to find a job where I could use those skills.

I got certification around web accessibility testing. In talking with a friend, he told me about WeCo and that I should reach out. I didn't have much experience yet. I wanted to do more self skill building and taking more courses.

After a year, I was fully qualified and could talk the lingo, explaining the problems I had on a website. I knew why something wasn't working for me. I could communicate that in a professional way and had certifications. I applied to be a certified test consultant. That's how I ended up at WeCo.

It's been a pivotal decision and role. My full time position as an accessibility tester for Verizon Wireless was thanks to WeCo as far as being part of a major corporation.

Melanie Zeuske: Terrific. Sue Ann?

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Sue Ann Rodriguez: I was in graduate school just about to be through with my degree in technical communication and a fellow student while I got my Bachelor's degree asked me if I wanted to do a disability test for her company. I agreed.

After the usability test, she said there are a lot of companies interested in having an individual like you I often disclose that I am blind. Having someone be blind and doing these tasks meant companies would be interested in me. I do a Google search for disability companies in Minnesota. That's how I came to WeCo.

Melanie Zeuske: Thank you. It sounds like word of mouth, friends, coworkers, a job coach, and doing research to see what's out there are ways everyone has found their way to our company.

What was your biggest fear about seeking employment? How did you overcome this? Laura?

Laura Andert: I will. Thanks, Melanie. My biggest fear in seeking employment is that I do have a mild condition of Cerebral Palsy I was scared that companies would take one look at me and say they don't want me because of that. That was my big gut feeling. I wanted this job at the time at a restaurant where I was seeking employment. They wouldn't hire me. I hate the words "I can't." I struggle with lifting heavy dishes or it would be hard to learn to be a cashier. They wouldn't want me. That's an example.

I put my best foot forward. This is who I am. Take it or leave it. Thank you, Melanie.

Melanie Zeuske: That's great. Paul, what was your greatest fear?

Paul Daye: I had 2 fears. My first was how to get to the job. Being blind, you'd see a lot of jobs that would not be close, especially living in New Jersey, depending on what part you're in. You almost need a car unless you're in a major city. A lot of jobs were in the suburbs.

A lot of job descriptions had in the qualifications that you must have a license even though they were jobs for working with people with disabilities. I thought they weren't hiring a person with a disability. Having a license eliminates a majority of us.

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Getting there and planning on getting there in fair weather in summer, but how would I get there in winter when it's cold and with snow? I could learn mobility and take someone to get around. I live in Trenton, the center part of the state, traveling 1.5 hours by train and bus to get to work.

The other was when I walked into an interview with a white cane and someone's preconceived notion of what I could do that overshadowed my qualifications and passion for that job, which I have had happen to me.

Straight out of college, I was applying for a job. A person interviewing me said he couldn't imagine how he would do the job if he was blind, so how could I do it? That stuck with me. I wish I knew more back then about the steps I could have taken to come back at that employer.

It did teach me a lesson. I had to overcome that by putting that aside. I can't control what people think, but I can project confidence and being qualified to make it harder for them to be prejudiced against. I'm the best qualified for the job. That employer will see that.

Troy Larson: The biggest fear was that a job wouldn't work out if I ultimately got the job. I could say the same things Paul talked about. I'm blind and have a Cochlear Implant. My hearing loss can be a barrier to employment.

When I was looking for work, I found office work, answering phones, etc. The biggest issue for me was if the job would work out for me or not. If they didn't call me to hire me, it was obviously not the best fit for me.

You have to send in applications and go through the interview process to see if it works out and if it's the best fit. My best advice is to send a resume and application to the job you want. Go through the process. See how it works out.

Melanie Zeuske: Thanks. You've said the biggest fear is how to get over the preconceived ideas of others over your disability and abilities despite that. The way you overcame was confidence. This is me. I'll focus on my strengths and see if it's a good fit. Good things to remember.

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What steps have you taken to make yourself work ready, whether that's formal training or networking strategies? Paul?

Paul Daye: No matter what I've done, I've been looking for the way I can bring more to whatever company or organization I'm working with. A lot of education. When I was with my first job as a youth leader and advocacy program manager, I studied ways I could provide more counseling and opportunities to staff below me.

When I was a specific technology specialist, I trained on current technologies and also doing the web certification stuff to bring an asset to the company that wasn't there before. It was always about continuing your education and training in the field you're in. Take advantage of anything your company may offer to gain experience and skillsets. That's the way you move up in companies.

Also, other opportunities may come along. I made sure my resume was updated once a year or so, keeping my skills updated. From when I started working, social media wasn't up there. When it became a thing on LinkedIn, I made sure it was out there. Also Indeed and places like that. Get your resume out there.

Melanie Zeuske: Troy?

Troy Larson: I got a degree in college. I have had a lifelong dream of being a radio broadcaster. A few years ago, I was able to job shadow the Minnesota Twins radio broadcast team. For LinkedIn, you can look at people you know and go through their network to see if there are people you're interested in. I did a bit of that.

I also found info on one blind guy who worked minor league baseball games with his college buddy. I found a news article on the guy who was blind and in grad school at the time. He did commentary for the college he graduated from, like sports broadcast for women's basketball.

I reached out through LinkedIn and was able to talk to them about how he got there. If there's something you're interested in, look for someone with your disability you might be in the industry.

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Contact them. Perhaps you can talk to them and find out how far you want to go with your passions that you share. How far do you want to turkey dream?

Melanie Zeuske: Thanks. Good advice. Laura?

Laura Andert: Thank you. I do have points to add. My answers to previous questions were about working with a job coach. I've worked with a job coach since 2010. It's not the same job coach. Several have left. I'm currently still with a job coach.

Previous job coaches have taught me what you have to do for going into an interview. They were who I went to for advice or if I had questions. I remember practicing, doing a mock interview with one of my job coaches. That was really helpful. On the personal side, as I'm working now in an office environment, that's always been my dream. I didn't know at the time that it would come true.

Again, I thought no, I'm not good enough to work in a corporate setting and office position. My sisters really coached me and have been my role models that I've looked up to, setting the stage for me of how I should present myself in the world, the work and office settings.

My story has been different than their stories. They set an example for me to look up to and have taught me what to wear, how to get ready, be confident, etc. Also, I can't forget my parents. I'd say my sisters played a big part in coaching me on how to present myself.

Melanie Zeuske: There are a lot of different things you've each taken on. Certainly formal training, college, and certification programs. Googling, networking with people on the path, role models and a support system, whether that's job coaching or a family, those are ways to support yourself.

Let's go from the perspective of a hiring manager. We have two with us. What are 2 - 3 things that stand out about an applicant? What makes you remember different applicants? Lynda?

Lynda Little: People who stand out are work ready, prepared for the interview, read about who we are, and in the industry. If you don't have an interest in what WeCo does, that won't fit for us.

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Melanie Zeuske: Mmhmm. Sue Ann, do you have things that stand out?

Sue Ann Rodriguez: One more point to Lynda. She pretty much covered them all. What impresses me is when you can tell a candidate has prepared for the interview and the fact that they've practiced those basic interview questions that you know your typically employer will ask you. There are a lot of online resources about that.

For example, what are your strengths and weaknesses? Why should we hire you? Etc.

Melanie Zeuske: Great. Thank you. Do you have dealbreakers that turn you off for an applicant? Sue Ann?

Sue Ann Rodriguez: A dealbreaker is if you can tell the candidate you're interviewing isn't prepared. One example is has not read the job description. When you ask them certain questions, you can tell they have not read the job description.

If you're applying for a job, it's important that you've read all of the job description, know the responsibilities and job experience so you can apply them to other experience and education.

Melanie Zeuske: Lynda?

Lynda Little: One more thing. Another dealbreaker is if you are not prepared or not on time without any communication via email saying you're having technical difficulties or anything like that. That's a big dealbreaker. Make sure you're on time for interviews.

Melanie Zeuske: The main topics that put a candidate in the definite plus or minus column are being interested in the industry, work ready, having read the position description, and being timely. Stay in contact with your interviewers if you're having difficulty. Thanks.

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Now back to our other employees. What ways have you taken your disability and shown it to be an asset to a company or in an interview. Troy?

Troy Larson: When I interviewed for WeCo, this is what I said. Doing this type of website testing is like customer service. You are providing feedback based on how my experiences are how I interacted with the website being tested. I'm blind.

In that sense, my disability is an asset in that I'm taking my experiences and relaying in my feedback how the website is working out for me. That feedback is hopefully used to improve the website for other people who blind or may have a hearing loss and that improvements would be utilized to help those people use the website.

Melanie Zeuske: Laura, how would you show your disability as an asset to a company?

Laura Andert: Thank you, Melanie. This is a really good question. In my previous job, we showed how my Cerebral Palsy is an asset to my position. I don't know if this answers your question fully. I'm a huge people person. I love talking to people. I have really good communication skills.

My physical writing shakes. I'm a slow typer. My fingers don't work well typing. I would say that I present myself really well and speak up to what I need or what works for me and what doesn't. I'd say that's a great asset for what I bring to the table in working for WeCo.

Melanie Zeuske: Paul, how have you taken a disability and made it shine?

Paul Daye: I'll relate to how I got the current position I have now at Verizon. I knew going into WeCo that it was a company for people with disabilities. I was going to be there with a lot of good people that could relate to me.

With the job I'm at now, I was fortunate to be in a position where I was sought by them. I can't say it enough. It's because my resume was out there on LinkedIn and Indeed. WeCo was on that resume. Anyone can search WeCo and see what we do here.

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I was being recruited. When I went into the room, I looked to see where the other disabled people are on the team. At that time, they didn't disclose that they had other people with disabilities. I needed to make sure they knew they needed to hire me. If they didn't have anyone else there, they needed to have a voice at the table for accessibility that actually had a disability and has worked with clients around the state that had disabilities and could bring insight into the company and team for what our community's needs are.

I use that to say I can benefit your team by bringing that insight and from the work I've already been doing around web accessibility testing. I can already hit the ground running without training.

In the meeting, they stated that they wanted me to train them. That's how I used my disability as an asset or showed them that it could be an asset.

Melanie Zeuske: You had a unique skill. Yes, great. How have you approached needing accommodations with an employer? Laura?

Laura Andert: Thank you for asking, Melanie. Yes, I do work with a job coach who helps me in any way that she can or that I've worked with with previous job coaches.

In my head, I always thought I was supposed to let my employer know that I had a disability. Out of all of my jobs, I've always disclosed my disability. I didn't have a problem disclosing it. Yes, I was obviously nervous in disclosing it.

Again, that's where fear came in that they wouldn't hire me. Once I got it out there, I felt relieved. I'd say I need accommodations in this area. For example, if I couldn't lift something, write, or take notes, getting over my fear of disclosing that disability made it easier to ask for accommodations in the past and present.

Melanie Zeuske: Paul, how did you experience talking about needing accommodations in an interview?

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Paul Daye: I'll go back to the last 2 companies. They're more educated now in certain industries. When I first started job searching and working jobs back in the early 2000s, the question would come up of what you would need to be able to do this job.

I would tell them all I need is a screen reader. This is what the technology is and what it allows me to do. I'd come to the interview prepared with my device to take notes because I had questions to ask the employer. Your head is spinning. You want to document what happened in that interview. It also shows the employer that you're taking the job seriously and you want the job.

They'd see I have technology there. That would break the ice. They'd be curious. What is that? This is my talking whatever or laptop with JAWS software on it. This allows me to do this. It opens up my computer for me.

They're blown away. I just get the software, and they can do it. Depending on who you work with, a small business or corporation, the thought of cost to do it may come up. You let them see that that is an investment. If they put that in you, you'll bring back 20 times the value.

I sum it up and bring my technology with me to break the ice. Have it come out in the interview part where I ask the employer questions.

Melanie Zeuske: Great points. Anything to add, Troy?

Troy Larson: If it was a phone interview, I never really brought up my disability. The next step is usually an in-person interview. I could show up with whoever I was working with for the job search. They see my white cane.

At the end, I'd explain that I need whatever, screenreader software or whatever the case may be. That's how I did it. During phone interviews, I usually didn't bring it up. I did bring it up for in person interviews.

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Melanie Zeuske: That's good to remember. Lynda and Sue Ann, is there anything you'd like to hear from an interviewee, a candidate about accommodations? How would you like to have someone bring up their needs? Lynda?

Lynda Little: Sure. Thanks, Melanie. Sorry. I would have to say - can we come back to me?

Melanie Zeuske: Sure. Sue Ann, does anything come to mind for how you want someone to bring up needing accommodations?

Sue Ann Rodriguez: Paul explained when he was responding to this question. I think he said it best when he said an employer will ask you what you want need to do this job or something to that effect.

My experience has been when I was doing different job interviews. An employer would ask me questions. Do you have experience with this? How did you go about that? I'd incorporate that I use a screenreader. When I worked here, I did this. In college, I did it this way. That's another way of incorporating your needs if the employer doesn't ask a direct question about that.

Melanie Zeuske: Bring it up in the context of other questions. Show your experience with different accommodations?

Sue Ann Rodriguez: Yes.

Melanie Zeuske: Lynda, another point?

Lynda Little: I agree with Sue Ann. Don't be afraid to ask for an accommodation whether it's easy or not. It means they're willing to work with you and do things. Don't be afraid to ask.

Melanie Zeuske: Be proactive so you can do the best job that you can. Thank you.

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We have a few minutes left. How have you handled a question that stumped you because you had no experience it or weren't expecting it? Had that happened to you, Laura?

Laura Andert: Yes. Fortunately, that has happened to me more than once. I say fortunately because the more I had to respond to a question the more I got comfortable with my answer. I wanted to add on to my answer.

When I've experienced that question, I would be honest and say I'd never dealt with that situation before. In my view, here's what I would do if that has happened to me. If the question was pertaining to an emergency on the job handling a rude customer, I would say how I would handle it. If that ever happens to me, I am more than happy to take care of it this way.

Melanie Zeuske: OK. Paul?

Paul Daye: I agree with Laura when she said be honest with the employer. If you don't know it, you don't know it. They'll see if you make something up. They'll know if you don't know. Let them know that you're willing to learn.

I was in an interview to be a person that does evaluations for people with assistive technologies and getting them the right equipment. I was thrown a question about proper magnification. I have friends who are visually impaired but I didn't care about the magnification.

If someone can't see a certain magnification, it's the right time to recommend zoom text. I didn't know. If hired, I was sure there would be training or I could learn. I also said I'm sure that there will be some minor swings within the types of magnification for different clients. I would definitely make sure I know that info if chosen for the position.

Being honest and willing to learn are the two important points.

Melanie Zeuske: OK, thank you. Troy, has it happened to you? How would you handle it?

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Troy Larson: Depending on the question, I might pause and say I want to think for a second if you're unsure about something. If they ask how familiar you are with this, I could say I have experience using it in my personal life or can learn about it on the job.

Emphasize that you're willing to learn. Be honest about it. That's all I can say. Say you don't know much about it but can learn or have used it in your personal life. I may not know everything. Be honest about it.

Melanie Zeuske: Be honest and let the employer know that you're ready to learn whatever you need to.

Let's take the rest of our time. Do we have any questions from participants?

Andy Emerson: Yes, we have a couple of great questions that have come in. Sam asks, Do you find that a four-year degree is a must for finding a corporate job?

Lynda Little: You don't need a 4 year degree to have a corporate job. I had my Associate's and worked in corporate in 2 different work environments. I don't think it's necessary at all. Great add on but not necessary.

Melanie Zeuske: Great. Thank you.

Sue Ann Rodriguez: I agree with Lynda. Read the job description. Depending on the kind of job you're looking for, make sure you read the job description. Lynda is right though.

Melanie Zeuske: Thanks. Back to reading the job description and being prepared. You said there were more?

Andy Emerson: Yes, Lance asks, What kinds of web accessibility courses and certificates are most helpful for entry-level positions -- the top 3 to 5 skills or tools? Who are the best providers of these courses and certificates? Paul?

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Paul Daye: Sure, I used Deq University's course. I continue to utilize that at Verizon. Having that on my resume went a long way of helping out with getting that position. It was a company they're familiar with. They're familiar with their standards.

Take a basic web accessibility course. You have to know the language, what it means and the terminology. Dig down from there. You don't need to know HTML, but you should get familiar if you want to move up. You'll eventually need to know it when speaking with developers, depending on the kind of position you get. You have to know how to tell them what's wrong. You'll need to know HTML.

Get familiar with automated testing tools are out there, which are accessible, using the inspect tool in different web browsers, and web tech guidelines. We refer back to them daily. Everything we do branches off of those guidelines. You need familiarity to know where to go. That's the best place to start, Deq University. They should pop up with anything around accessibility courses.

Andy Emerson: Would anyone else like to speak to those courses? Anything they've found helpful?

Sue Ann Rodriguez: Knowing the WCAG guidelines, which stands for web content accessibility guidelines, like Paul said. They use them daily where he's employed. We use them at WeCo, as well. There are a lot of standards and internationally and legally applied. It's good to get familiar with them.

It's also from W3C. There's are tutorials on their websites to understand code. There's a tutorial on HTML and programming language. Also, CSS is one that you should be familiar with, as well.

Paul Daye: If you're going to apply for a job, read the job description. If they say you need to know HTML, Aria and CSS, don't apply. That's all you'll speak with developers. That's their language. If you don't know it, you can't communicate with them. You can't tiptoe the tulips when it comes to that. You can't fake it. You know it or don't.

Sue Ann Rodriguez: When it comes to accessibility, it's a good thing to know not only about your own disability but other disabilities, too. A disability isn't just about one disability. It's about all of them. The

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four major ones are site-related, hearing-related, cognitive-related and motor-related disabilities, as well.

Paul Daye: I'm shaking my head yes. I totally agree. I'm not being very accessible there.

[Laughing.]

Andy Emerson: Excellent. We have a couple minutes left. I want to wrap up. First, thank you to all of the panelists today. It was great to hear everything you had to say. Amazing insight. You brought a lot of value to our attendees. Thank you very much.

We also want to say another special thank you to WeCo for making this panel possible. Thank you to WeCo for sponsoring. There are a few resources that will be helpful following the panel discussion.

[On screen.]

I'll put links in the chat.

[On screen.]

That concludes our presentation today. I'm going to work on getting those links posted in the chat in a moment. Are there any last questions? Thank you for all of your insights today. It was great to hear.

These are in the chat. That ends our presentation.

[End of meeting.] [6:01 PM ET.]

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