

Transcript Mansfield Knowledge Sharing Call

Disability Inclusion V: Combining Professional Development and Neurodiversity

Hey. Welcome, everyone. Thank you so much for coming to our webinar. This is disability inclusion 5, combining professional development and neurodiversity. And before we get into the topic, I want to ask you if you can please rename yourself on Zoom to include your name and your organization.

And I also want to remind you that closed captioning has been activated, and the chat is limited to speak with the host and co-host. So please, if you had something to say, send it to one of my colleagues. I won't see it probably until the end of the call. So please keep that in mind.

This call is being recorded for future viewing. And I'd like to remind you about the disability inclusion commitments. We have more than 100 law firms in the US, UK, and Canada who are partnering with Diversity Labs to continue building a culture of inclusion for people with disabilities by implementing one or more of the disability inclusion commitments. So if you want more information, please contact kavita@diversitylab.com. And turning to our topic now.

So I believe and we believe that as more people become aware of neurodiversity and what it means, the responsibility of allowing neurodivergent people to exist and thrive in your organization is increasing. And neurodiversity is just the range of differences in individual brain function and behavioral traits, and it encompasses an infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning. It touches on how we socialize, learn, pay attention, our demeanor, our temperament, and more.

And that definition of neurodiversity is a biological fact, just like biodiversity. Everyone is included within it. But neurodiversity is also used as shorthand for the neurodiversity paradigm, which is a perspective or framework and that views neurological differences such as those associated with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and other conditions as just natural and valuable variations of the human brain. And it rejects the idea that there's one normal or healthy type of mind or a right style of functioning.

And neurodivergent means having a mind that functions in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of normal. And just learning as much as you can and adopting a neurodiversity paradigm will allow you to build environments where people have complementary strengths and can help each other regardless of whether they identify as neurodivergent or disabled or having disability.

And I know there was some questions about why we included this topic in the disability inclusion series. But disability is relevant to neurodivergence and developmental conditions, but not everyone who may be considered neurodivergent identifies as disabled or having a disability.

And also, not everyone knows that they would be diagnosed if they sought a diagnosis. People are just functioning and living. And sometimes their needs match the environment, and that is perfectly fine. And so they might not have anything to ask for or to identify in a special way. They're just living.

So we're going to get into our questions. And the first one is just about background, and I'm going to start. So I'm Courtney Munnings. I'm from Springfield, Massachusetts, the home of basketball. I was considered a talented and gifted as a kid, and then I went to college where I was a flop.

I struggled through undergrad for six years, including Summers. But then I went to Rutgers-Camden, and I did really well. Law school was one of the best things I ever did. I got a summer associate position in big law, and I became a summer-- I mean, I became a permanent associate for eight years. And I worked really, really, really hard, but I burned out really badly.

And I was exhausted and physically sick, and I couldn't function. And I didn't want to live and be a burden or a disappointment. I don't fully remember the thoughts back then, but it was really difficult. And I was admitted to a psych hospital, which was horrible. And after that, I did three months of partial hospitalization. And that year, I found out I was autistic with ADHD, OCD, anxiety, migraines, complex PTSD, other things I had no idea that I was compensating for all that time.

And I came back to work, I told everybody what happened. And in my eighth year evaluation, I was told, there are some good lawyers who just shouldn't be in law firms. And I said, where should we be? And they said, well, there are coaches for that. But I found Diversity Lab, and now I get to work here and do disability inclusion work as part of my recovery and building a life worth living.

And I get to talk to people like you, and I'm doing really well, and I love that. So let's get into it. First, Aaron Baer, managing partner at Renaud and Co and ex big law partner, co-founder of 4L Academy, and a very neurodiverse lawyer as he wrote. Please tell us a little bit about yourself.

Thanks so much, Courtney. So I am based in Toronto, in Canada. My professional background is a wild one. I'll try to make it quick. I was one of the rare one hires. I crushed 1L exams. Turns out I'm a good exam writer, which was helpful. And that got me a job in big law. I spent about 10 years in big law summer student in Canada. We have articling, was an associate, became an equity partner.

All that jazz, that normal traditional path. But along the way, that journey was anything but linear and anything but easy. I did not get the level of training I felt I needed or the support. I felt I needed and things in that way. My mental health really suffered starting in my third or fourth year. Various thoughts in my head about different things we won't get into. Was pretty close to leaving law. Realized if I leave or take a timeout off, I'm never coming back.

So I just committed myself to self-teaching, and I taught myself all this stuff that was triggering all the imposter syndrome. Came back and was like, well, this wasn't that hard. Why the heck did nobody teach it to me this way? And committed myself to making sure that other associates, other students at our firm weren't going to fit that way.

So I rebuilt our professional development stuff off the side of my desk because I I'd gone through it. I was like, this isn't working. And in classic autistic fashion, I got in a lot of trouble for helping and doing the job of other people when those were causing a lot of issues. Got super into the legal tech space and all sorts of other spaces. And eventually, I was trying to figure out, what the heck do I do with this all? And about three years ago, decided to leave the firm I was at.

So I was the first partner in my cohort to leave, and probably unexpectedly in many cases. But essentially, I was so passionate about professional development and really wanted to drive change, and was being limited by that. And I was being told to choose a lane-- lawyer, professional development, one of those things. And I said, why not both? So left to join a boutique law firm, which three years later I now run, which was not the plan.

No, no, no, no, no, no.

So a rare neurodiverse led law firm where we have a ton of neurodiverse folks who have worked with us. To be very clear, some have gone great, some have not gone so great. Learned a lot of lessons along the

way there as well. On the side run, a professional development company called 4L Academy, solely focused on corporate lawyers.

We literally train on everything from substantive stuff, to managing people, to business development, you name it, soft skills or power skills, whatever you want to call it. Working with firms across Canada and big firms in the US as well. So essentially we're in lots of hats. And along the way, just really committed to trying to drive change in the profession.

As I mentioned, or as Courtney mentioned, am super neurodiverse. So late diagnosed autism figure that out. A couple of years ago, everything finally clicked. Was diagnosed with ADHD, I think two or three times, but didn't really understand what that meant until recently in how much I'd been developing coping mechanisms that had allowed me to go through law school and big law successfully with no medication and none of that sort of stuff. And then a whole lot of other neurodiversity.

Went through a ton of abuse, I would say, during my time in big law. Some was the normal stuff, but so much of it was also related to being neurodiverse despite being at a firm that believed they were gentler and kinder. And like I said, these days, I'm committed to driving the legal profession forward, both on the neurodiversity side, professional development side. In general, and super active on LinkedIn talking about neurodiversity and professional development. So I'm so glad to be here today.

Thank you, Aaron. I love to hear about the work that you're doing, and we're just so glad that you're here. Next, I'd like to go to AJ link. He's autistic, self advocate, and a disability justice advocate, space law and space policy nerd-- and that's his words, not mine. And he will have to only be here for the first half of the call, but we're really thankful to have him. AJ, please give us some of your background.

Yeah. Hey, y'all. I'm AJ. I'm a Black dude in a Red LA hat and a black T-shirt. I am one of the people who went to law school twice and doesn't really practice law. I teach space law at Howard University, School of Law. I think for me, being autistic, I was also diagnosed as an adult, but it was before I went to law school.

So my experience-- P-12 through undergrad and law school was different because I didn't know that I had access to accommodations. And my experience was learning to grow as a self-advocate, but then an advocate for others. I'm sure everyone on this call can attest to law schools not necessarily being the most accessible places or the most accessible institutions.

And so I've been doing advocacy since, I guess, my first or second week of 1L, and that's been I don't even know how long now, like seven or eight years. And for me, I think it's really important to communicate that being accessible isn't giving out special favors or accommodating someone isn't something that's a choice. It's a legal obligation.

But mostly that building more accessible spaces is what's going to allow everyone to thrive in whatever way. I think Courtney did a great job describing how neurodiversity really encompasses the way everyone thinks, functions, interacts. And so making sure that spaces are accessible for neurodivergent folks and disabled folks is going to make it more accessible for everyone. And that's the work that I do, and I do that in various different capacities. I won't list all the things that I do, but thank you all for having me.

Thank you, AJ. Olena.

Hello, everyone. I am Olena Ripnick-O'Farrell. I am so delighted to be here, and thank you to everyone who's on this panel just for being honest and vulnerable. And that's how I'm going to start because I actually originally got involved in this space as an ally before I got my own diagnosis. So I am like your typical gifted and talented, high perfectionist, high achieving, always makes the deadline down to the last

second, totally missed and diagnosis woman because there is not nearly enough research on ADHD in women.

But I have been involved in this space for a while because I have seen how a lot of people with various types of neurodivergence have been stigmatized, have been pushed out of their jobs, managed out is the way that it's told. And basically, I've seen a lot of really bad and unfair things happen to neurodivergent people and the legal profession.

So I'm determined to ensure that doesn't happen. I made it through high school, college law school, another master's degree, and two law firms without a diagnosis and medication. And, oh, holy god, I look back and I have no idea how I did it, quite frankly, because my life would have been a lot easier and a lot more manageable.

But now, I'm in in-house IP attorney at Meta. We have a really, really inclusive and open environment, so I spend a lot of my nonlegal work working within our own legal department to educate people and to work on implementing neuro-inclusive practices across the board because, as you might be aware, there are a lot of people, even within my own legal department, who are not comfortable being out as neurodivergent. And I always say, this is an exaggeration. Every time I open my mouth to speak for the ADHD-ers, there are at least 20 other people that I am specifically aware of who are also in the same boat but who aren't comfortable saying it, which is very understandable, [LAUGHS] given the way it's been treated in the legal profession. So that is me.

Olena, thank you. I'm sorry, I forgot to give your full introduction before you started, but you did let them know. So thank you. Simon. Simon Margolis is an autistic lawyer, public speaker, neurodiversity consultant, and tax law LLM candidate. Thank you so much for being here, Simon. Can you tell us about yourself?

Yeah. So I'm Simon. Like Aaron, I live in Toronto and have practiced in Canada, but I am also American. I grew up in Michigan, and I was diagnosed with autism when I was eight. So my parents operated on the assumption that I was autistic starting when I was about three.

And because we lived in Ann Arbor, it's a high educated environment. People knew about this stuff. I received basically every service imaginable. And most of the big life decisions that were made for me by my parents as I was growing up factored in what professionals told them about my disability.

And after undergrad, which I'll spare you, largely because I was getting rejected for volunteer work, because I couldn't even volunteer before law school, I couldn't really get anything, I did an internship at the Autistic Self Advocacy Network, at which is where AJ now works. I don't believe he was there at the time, but no.

But I worked I worked under Sam Crane, who was there at the time when Ari Ne'eman was there. It was a lot of fun. I was hoping to be a tax lawyer when I went into law school because I had heard that with my systemic brain skills or whatever, that was a good thing for me to do.

But for a variety of reasons, I ended up in litigation at the large full service firm that hired me during OCIs. And it wasn't working out. I quit my job a few months ago to do this tax LLM, and I'm going to dedicate-- and because it's part time, I'm going to dedicate the rest of my energy to speaking and talking about this autism stuff because I felt that Canada-- while there are lawyers who talk about being autistic in the legal profession in Canada, few have been diagnosed early, few received the autism services at the time, and few have any sort of policy background.

And these three things are very key. I don't want inappropriate ideas about autism services to be backdoored through the diversity work. I feel like I need to be there to set the record straight, and so that's why I'm doing it. Thanks.

Thank you, Simon. I really love knowing you. Yeah. Thank you. So our next question, I will start with you, Aaron. What was work like as a new lawyer?

Yeah. Work as a new lawyer was interesting. I think work for all new lawyers or attorneys or whatever term you want to use is tough, because law school does not prepare you to be a lawyer. And if it prepares you in any kind of law, it's probably litigation. And I had no interest in litigation, and I did corporate stuff. And as a corporate lawyer, I knew nothing. I see that with our students now who I supervise for the summer. They also know nothing. So naturally, you're dependent on humans to train. And as good a job as we all try to do with different resources, there's not a lot that's written down at law firms. Practical law was just coming out maybe my third or fourth year, which was my-- my number one mentor, I always say, was practical law.

And I obviously had some good human mentors too. But there was a lack of real like, how do you do this? And I found it a little nuts, number one, that we spend all this time for busy people orally telling the same thing to one student and then another student and then another associate or what have you. It's not very efficient.

But more importantly, if I'd had the map, oh, man, it would have been so much easier, so much less stressful, so much more efficient, whether you want efficiency or not, it's a whole different conversation, and all that kind of stuff. So that was really tough. And I remember really thinking about the details. I am a details guy, but also not a details guy at the same time. I'm a big picture thinker, but I can get micro really well, and that's a fun little ADHD-autism combo, I think, that serves me well.

But you can imagine your first time doing a closing agenda or a closing checklist, and you're updating the status column. You're like, well, what do these words mean? I don't know. And then you start realizing, every lawyer you're working with or every attorney has their own way of doing things. But they all think they're right, and so you got to build the playbook on each lawyer to figure it out.

So it was really hard just to figure out what I was supposed to do, and that's, I think, been a challenge.

And so a lot of the stuff we do with royal academy, we build these literal things. You see how the OCI process works? Here's 60 pages on that. Here's how to close a deal. Here's the playbook. Each firm has their own unique stuff, but like, here's the playbook on the basics because if you have that, it's easier for the assigning attorneys, the associates, you name it, and it's also easier for the juniors.

I'm also a bottom up thinker, like a lot of autistic people are. And what that means is I like to see a lot of details, and then understand how stuff works. And I need to build a map in my head. And I've talked about this on LinkedIn a bunch recently. And if you haven't seen those posts, they might do a good job of explaining it.

But essentially, if I don't understand the why, nothing sticks. When I understand the why, I am unstoppable. And if you think about the average way we teach lawyers, they work on a random deal, and you do some stuff, and then you work on another deal. You're missing the map and how it comes together.

And for me, I remember in my fourth year or so, I was starting to run deals. And I was like, I don't know what to do. I spent the last three years changing names, Control F, doing this, doing that. Suddenly, I'm in charge, and I've got to deal with that initial thing from the client and figure out the whole universe of, what

do we do? And that's a very different skill set that I don't think most firms prepare associates for. And that led me to be like, holy crap, massive imposter syndrome, all these other things.

So to me, I'm so passionate about teaching people the why up front, simulating deals, doing practical stuff. But I think especially as someone who is neurodiverse, whose brain needs the why and needs to understand how the pieces fit together, that was an even bigger struggle. But honestly, everyone would benefit from this stuff.

It's also probably doing a ton of masking. I come by nothing naturally, I like to say. So I've got a sizable book of business. I've got lots of clients. I do all these things. How I learned all these things was not natural. This is all manually taught as an adult, and there was a whole lot of masking along the way as I had to fit in the work environment, do a lot of things that did not naturally-- come naturally to me.

And I will say, just to wrap up here, when I started practicing 10 years ago, DEI wasn't even a term anyone in law was using. Obviously, we see a lot more of that now. But at a lot of firms, if I go on their website, I see nothing about neuro-inclusion or neurodiversity or neurodivergence, which to some extent is unfortunate. To some extent, I understand because holy crap, there's a lot to deal with already. And to add this in is a challenge.

What I will just say is, every single person on this call works with neurodivergent colleagues, whether they know it or not. And at the end of the day, what is best for neurodivergent people is pretty much best for everyone. And it really is all about just helping people excel and leverage their unique strengths and figuring out how to mitigate those weaknesses. So whether you like it or not, it's in everyone's best interest to better understand it, and I hope this webinar will help get that started.

Thank you so much. AJ, same question. What was life like for you when you first graduated?

Yeah. This is AJ. I think I really resonated with Aaron talking about learning on your own. A lot of people, when I was going through law school, disagreed with how I went about it. So I didn't do skills competitions. I didn't do journal. I didn't really go to class that much. I didn't super duper care about the readings or being cold called.

What I use law school for was practicing to become a better advocate. So that was navigating the administration. That was navigating the different bureaucracies at the law school, but also the main campus because a lot of law schools are not necessarily working together with the main campus.

And what that prepared me for when I graduated is one, figuring out that I didn't want to practice law, even though I knew that. And I found space law, which I loved and allows me to teach and do space law communication. So I went to law school again to get an LLM and did the same thing, navigating a different bureaucracy and learning different skills in a different environment because DC is very different from Oxford, Mississippi.

And then that prepared me to be an advocate, which is what I do now. And it prepared me to be an advocate in different ways and different places with different target communities and also with different constituencies that I have to represent. So for me, as someone who hasn't practiced and has never been in a firm, post-graduation, I haven't had the same kind of frustrations that a lot of people have had and are sharing on the call, but my frustrations are a little different.

I had to basically build a career that no one had designed for me. I think Aaron talked about this. Again, law school doesn't do a good job of teaching you how to do things that are not litigation or writing briefs. They don't tell you, hey, you could be a lobbyist with these skills, and here's a way to do that.

Even though I took lobbying classes out of school that is famous for lobbyists, it didn't teach me like, this is how you build a nonprofit advocacy organization and how you navigate the IRSC3 application and bureaucracy, and how do you stay in line with not violating the things you can and can't do?

It doesn't teach you that, and I had to learn that on my own. But I was really fortunate that the way that I chose to do law school prepared me for that in ways that my classmates didn't necessarily do because there's this huge pressure to do law school the same way as everyone else, to go about it in the same way, to fight over the same grades, to prepare in the same way, to study the same way, to be in the library for however many hours.

I didn't do any of that, and I'm glad with my choice. But a lot of people didn't understand that. But those choices that I made prepared me for my nontraditional career path now. So I would just say that it's really important, if you feel like you don't want to do a traditional post graduate career as a lawyer, to practice those skills in law school because it's really beneficial once you graduate.

Thank you, AJ. Next, Olena, the same question. So what was it working like as a new lawyer? Well, it's funny because I was actually just thinking about this the other day. I have these moments where-- and I think it happens when anyone, especially when they get a diagnosis later in life, I look back and I'm just like, wow, this could have been really different, and I would have made so many different decisions.

I would have left private practice so much earlier if I had had a better understanding of my own brain at the time, because that would have enabled me to understand how to leverage my strengths and what kind of environment I should be in to do that. And I think it will probably not come as a surprise to most here. Most law firms are not really neuro-inclusive, and it's really challenging.

And I miss the intellectual challenge of being in private practice. I loved it. And any time I even so much as toyed with that idea anymore, I'm just like, I can't. I can't because the structure and system of that work does not support me. When I say I made it-- earlier, I made it through law school all the way here with the diagnosis, the cost was my health, and the cost was burnout.

And I'm much better able to manage that now that I understand it. But I've been practicing law for 10 years. And before that, had a whole other profession with no awareness of it. So what was my work like as a New Yorker? It was burnout. It was not understanding why everything seemed so easy to everyone, and I just couldn't get my brain to do things or why it was taking me 12 hours to build something that should have taken six or eight.

And it's a blessing and a curse because at this point, I am who I am because of what I went through. And in spite of it, I'm a very firm believer of that. And if I hadn't had that whole experience, I don't think it would have brought me into the place where I am now where-- I was talking to this with some of the other day, my job isn't my purpose.

My job is fulfilling and it enables me to live my life, but it's not my purpose. And I'm very much at a point in my life where if I can make this world just a little bit better by the time I leave for people who are no divergent, the other area I work a lot in is the LGBTQ community because I'm a gay woman-- I'm like, if I have done at least one thing, then that is my purpose.

And I think that is the impact that having been in private practice so long and seeing how it doesn't work and seeing how it's treated-- I'm not exaggerating when I said earlier, I literally know people personally who have been pushed out of their jobs illegally because they're neurodivergent, and that's wrong. And that's illegal. And that's the first thing that needs to change. And then the second thing that needs to change is creating a culture of inclusion.

Creating a culture where, as you pointed out, there is a wide spectrum on whether or not people within this community feel disabled or not or-- but either way, inclusion and creating a space and valuing that perspective, because we don't have to be square pegs in round holes. I saw a meme the other day. I was like, if you can't handle my executive dysfunction, you don't deserve my hyper focus. And I was like, yes, that is it, and that is the world that we need to create for everyone.

I love that. Thank you so much. Yes, I have a friend who posts about spiky skill sets. He says autistic people have spiky skill sets, so you might be very great at something other people aren't great at. But then there's something else that everyone can figure out, but you just can't do it. And that's how I am with forms. I just cannot fill them out, but I can do lots of other really great things. So thank you. Simon, what was your experience as a new lawyer.

Yeah. So look, I actually-- I'm going to be a little contrarian here. I think my previous firm did actually try to include me in events, and they tried to include me in the firm. There were partners at The firm who did go above and beyond in trying to train me. The very best one retired during COVID though, so that was not great.

But I think the big problem is that the firm I was at had some of the leading education and health law practices in Canada. And as a result, had I done the corporate commercial stuff, which could have led into tax law, it would have-- I would have been pegged as a not for profit lawyer.

Now, the problem is that work was very interesting. It would have been very interesting, but there would have been a business conflict with my autism advocacy past. The debate in the US are not there yet in Canada, and people just assume that the scientists and the doctors know what they're talking about. And that was awkward because the firm saw that I was good at speaking about this stuff, so they were encouraging me to do the public speaking. And I didn't feel used. I was like, yeah, this is good for me. It builds my exposure. I'm getting more exposure than any of the associates in the firm, any of the other associates. And it helps them. It's good for everyone, and it still is.

But because of this business conflict I perceived, I moved to litigation because the firm had a much broader client base in litigation. And it was-- the most interesting files were in litigation. But I had no business doing litigation. In Canada, we were these goofy robes like in England. And I tried wearing a sensory, it was just not going to work. And I looked like a warlock, and I didn't want to do it. And I was like-- the moment I tried the robes on, I'm like, how the hell is this going to work? And the answer is it couldn't.

So for me, the problem was being at a firm, which while full service, placed emphasis on practice areas not fully attuned to my skill sets and natural business fit. And that's what happens when you sort people in the firms based on personality because personality-wise, I think I was actually a really good fit at my previous firm. But I needed to be at a different firm to enter a practice area I could really thrive at. And this mismatch is the key-- is one of the key things I talk about on my LinkedIn page and on my substack because I'm now going to have to start over. It's not that I can move to an in-house department. I have to literally start over from the beginning now, because I was just in the completely the wrong practice area. So that's what--

Thank you. Simon. For me, as a new lawyer, I was very naive and inexperienced. I didn't hear of the word big law before I started, so I really knew nothing. And I came back after my summer, and I was so disoriented because people who worked there during the summer didn't work there anymore. And I thought, we got a great job and we would stay there for the rest of our lives.

So that just shows you how much I really didn't understand. I remember at orientation, a partner said, the minute that you make a mistake-- the millisecond that you make a mistake, let someone know. And I raised my hand and said, what kind of mistakes might we make? And it was just like once I started working, there are infinite ways to make mistakes. But that was where I started.

And it was also really cold and lonely, and I really, really, really hated being in the office. So the next question. How have you handled disclosure about your neurodivergence or disability at work? And I wanted to start with you, Simon. I know you feel strongly about this one.

Yes. I feel strongly about this. And the line I used last time is that it's a good way-- if you disclose, it's much easier to communicate your accommodation needs. It's not necessary, but it's much easier to communicate at that point. So that's the quick answer I usually make with you. But now that I'm free, I can tell you what I think the real problem is. And it's not-- and I'm not burning bridges here. This is just what's actually going on.

So look, well, it was a little-- well, the disclosure process was a little confusing. And there are people at the firm who were like, did Simon disclose? I actually did disclose during the OCI process. And according to the partners, I asked as I was leaving the firm, when I disclosed, word actually went around the office that I disclosed because no one had ever done that before, and it was shocking to them.

But the truth is that I felt like I had no choice but to disclose. And the reason why is, I don't think the US does this as much. But in Canada, they do hold your prelaw school experience against you, at least I felt that way. And if you don't have any business background, like, none whatsoever, it is much harder to become a corporate lawyer.

And that was a problem for me because when you have an early autism diagnosis, you can be pushed into less entrepreneurial educational paths, pretty substantially. So a lot of people talk about how an early autism diagnosis is a gift, and I think we have to be careful because if you're really privileged, you get all the resources. And that means you get put into the system. And you get put into the system at a very young age, and that can push people down the wrong trajectory.

So when I was 11, as in response to being bullied, and also the regular middle school was too big, I was put into a progressive magnet open concept school where I grew up in Ann Arbor-- like 1970 styled chairs, sofas in the classroom, that sort of stuff.

And the general thrust of the expert-- and the research now, I think particularly in the UK talks, that is actually not a good learning environment for autistic people most of the time. Sometimes it might work, but most of the time it's actually not good. But the general thrust of the expert advice that my parents had was, well, Simon's a weird kid. He should go to a weird school. I mean, that's basically what the idea was. And that's a problem because several weeks of either seventh or eighth grade were basically dedicated to discussing how evil Walmart was. There was no nuance about free trade or anything. It was just, yeah, Walmart destroys communities, and that was just that was what they would lead with.

And then, some of the stuff-- some of the social studies curriculum is basically Naomi Klein. And I don't know if you know Naomi Klein. She's a big deal in Canada, and certain people in the US like her too. And just like anti-brand stuff like-- so it was a little bizarre. So naturally, I get coded as a leftist.

And also, my math education wasn't nearly as strong as it could have been. So my thought is that, I probably should have had tutoring. But they were like, well, Simon doesn't fall below the standards. He's exceeding the standards, so he doesn't need tutoring. But a lot of the jobs open to me required some math skills.

And at the University of Michigan, I majored in history and political science, and Michigan put a hard curve on their introductory economics courses. And because I don't have any self esteem on quantitative stuff, I didn't have-- I didn't take those. But in hindsight, looking at the history courses I was taking, I was taking-- these were courses which discussed material economic relationships. You were really thinking about things in a sophisticated way.

The problem was, they were taught by Marxists, and they had Marxist names. So revolutionary movements in modern Latin America. And so got coded as an even bigger leftist. And so as a result, people would have seen my transcript, they're like, why the fuck do you want to be a tax lawyer? And so as a result, there was no way I was going to get through the door.

So I was like-- so I had this, this autism advocacy experience. I'm like, OK, it's on my resume. I'm going to disclose. And I hadn't heard of any idea of there being any sort of affirmative action type thing for autistic people. But I'm like, I hope that one of these firms just unofficially implements one so that they can hire me. And most firms were not persuaded by that, but the firm that hired me was. And so that's what I would say. That's why I disclosed I didn't really feel like I had a choice.

Thank you, Simon. Olena, same question about how you handled disclosure about your neurodivergence or disability.

Because, again, the level setting of me getting my own diagnosis was as an ally and seeing really bad things happen to other neurodivergent people, I have been very vocal and very open from day one, both thinking like a lawyer, disclosure is important. That's how you protect yourself legally. It's easier for the accommodations process, et cetera, et cetera. And the other part of it is just like, I think it's really important to destigmatize.

And I recognize every time I open my mouth, it's really risky. I recognize-- I just sat on an internal panel with all of senior legal leadership, and it was one of the most terrifying moments of my life. I came out as neurodivergent to literally an entire room of all of the most senior attorneys at Meta. And I did it in the context of, I'm open about this, but there's a lot of other people in your department who aren't, and we need to take steps to make it more inclusive so they don't feel like they have to. And they aren't struggling because the systems aren't here.

I recognize that I'm very much in the minority on that. But for me, I think part of it is also-- as a gay woman, I've always had to advocate, I was marching in the streets in California to get my right to get married. So it's been a very-- for me, it was never an option. It's who I am, and they're just-- it's not just about me.

I made a decision at the beginning of my legal career, I was always going to be openly gay. And if a law firm didn't like that or a workplace didn't like that, that is most definitely not a place that I wanted to work because my life is short, and it's far too short to hide that.

And I just got named one of the top 40 LGBTQ lawyers under 40 this year, which has showed that that decision paid off. But I'm doing the same thing here, because it's the same set. Nothing's going to change if nothing's going to change, and that's-- we all got to support each other to do that. So I'm happy to take the hit if it's going to make things better for others.

Agreed. Thank you, Aaron, how did you handle disclosure?

At my old firm, I didn't disclose, and that was for a couple of reasons. I mainly didn't disclose because I didn't understand. And if I had disclosed, they would not have been helpful anyways, just due to the level, unfortunately, of ignorance and still ignorance. To be clear, I am very public about stuff. I don't think they

understand still, unfortunately, and that is not an uncommon thing when you're autistic or have neurodiversity. Is, even when you try to explain, the explanations don't always land because it's so hard to actually understand the reality when you don't live that reality.

My wife was pregnant a couple of years ago, and she had a day where literally, any smell of any-- she could smell the refrigerator from feet away. And was partly mocking her, but was also super empathetic because, like, I get it. I have very heightened sensitivities. She was at an extreme beyond my day to day. But I could empathize because I'm like, yeah, my sense of smell is always heightened, and my sense of touch.

But so it took that for her to be like, OK, I'm starting to get it. Most people don't have those experiences. Similar to maybe you have a concussion and suddenly you're like, wait a second, I'm so sensitive to light all of a sudden. Like yeah, my day to day, not quite that level of concussion bad, but now you're starting to understand how the world might be different for different people.

So I actually went down the ADHD rediagnosis path while I was at my old firm. Your classic autism misdiagnosis versus anxiety-- and this is common with ADHD too. First it was anxiety, and it was like, oh, shit, it's ADHD. And then I'm like, no, something's still not working. Went through the classic-- what's it called? program, the mental health benefits have with your firm.

And the wrong people who didn't understand neurodiversity with therapists who didn't understand it, which didn't help. So a lot of independent learning there to figure it out. But when I went to appointments for the ADHD stuff, I would just say I had a meeting. I wasn't going to tell people where I was going to go, just like I'm sure lots of people, all your firms are going to therapy and booking it on their calendars is something else.

But didn't know what I needed, so what was disclosing going to do? Because if I was them, I would have said, well, how can we help you? And I would have said, look, I don't know. [LAUGHS] I'm not sure I didn't know enough. These days, I'm very public about it. Literally been talking about it a ton on LinkedIn the last few months and also on the substack I run called the authentic lawyer.

And really what I've been trying to do is share stories, like the one I just mentioned about my wife, and things like that because, to me, stories are the way that people understand and can start to empathize without having to have that lived experience because there are so many people who want to help. You're all here today because you want to help, because you want to get better, but it's tough when you can't really understand what it's like.

And if you could switch brains for a day, that would be the easiest thing. But I don't think Elon's quite there yet. And even for my wife, it's been tough. She's neurotypical, and she's living with me, and it's been tough for her to understand and appreciate all these things. So why am I public about it? Because I have absolutely nothing to lose.

I work for myself. I will actually benefit by talking about it. I get to do things like this. I get to drive firms, training forward, blending PD and neurodiversity and do stuff I'm really passionate about. And I'm passionate about other people who are neurodiverse or just other junior lawyers in general not feeling the way I felt.

But would I be doing this if I was a second year associate? Absolutely not. I'd have too much to lose. And I recognize the privileged position I'm in, and that's why I need to use that privilege, I'll call it at least, to speak out because I have nothing to lose. If people don't like me, that's fine. I got enough clients. I will get more clients.

Since I disclosed publicly the ADHD was maybe about a year ago. The autism was in the last four or so months. I've been talking to a lot of people. A lot of them are, of course, not comfortable disclosing. They work at your firm. They work at a similar firm. They are not disclosing because they don't know what's going to happen if they disclose, and there's no takebacks.

And I cannot stress enough how daunting that is. How will people react? How will people react behind my back and not to my face, and what will happen? And will this brand me essentially in a bad way for a while? There's a lot of people who are still at the very early stage of trying to figure out how their brains work. And like I said, disclosing isn't that helpful until you understand because like, what do you want people to do with that information? And I think a lot of people are early in that journey.

There are so many people who are starting to realize they are neurodiverse and starting to be like, oh shit, that is why this has been so hard for me. I thought everyone was like that. And that's the challenge. Is, you assume your brain is the same as anyone else's. And once you discover it's not, you're like, holy crap. All the things I got berated for, all the stuff I was told I was lazy, all the times I was told I was talking back, sorry, I'm autistic, and I communicate in an entirely different language. And that is a bit of a challenge in many ways there.

The one last thing I'll say here-- a couple last things I'll say here quickly, I've also talked with a lot of DEI folks and professional development folks at law firms, and there are so many amazing people out there, including, I'm sure, many on this call who want to help drive change. But the challenge they're facing is the system that they work in.

They don't have the power and many of you may not have the power to drive that change. If you are stuck with a billable hour and those targets and you expect each first year corporate associate to be a great project manager and detail oriented, and you've got someone with ADHD who's going to be a fucking amazing rainmaker if they can get to that level later or running deals, but you're judging them on the traits needed for a good junior corporate lawyer, which is the opposite of ADHD traits for most people, you got a challenge because we're trying to have everyone fit into the same box for a certain journey, and that is really tough when you're neurodivergent because you are not going to thrive in those boxes.

Last points here, disclosure should not be the goal in my mind. I think people feeling fulfilled and being able to do their best work without burning out is what matters. And there is a true triple bottom line approach here. At the end of the day, almost everyone on this call works for a law firm or an organization. Bottom line matters. You've got responsibility, but good understanding of neurodiversity can actually help the entire organization financially, reduce attrition, all of that kind of stuff.

And what I will say is, the better you can spot neurodiversity, which these days I can spot incredibly well, the better you can do the right thing without them needing to disclose because they shouldn't need to disclose for you to be able to figure out, how can we put them in a position to thrive, set them up for success, and just really do what your goal is, which is helping these people be valuable members of the firm and hopefully make the firm or the organization a bunch of money?

Thanks, Aaron. I'll be quick on my story so we can get to some other questions. But once found out everything that was going on with me, I was really excited and relieved to learn about it. And I told people. I was naive. People tell me now like, you're so brave. How are you so brave? I didn't know. Didn't know better. I didn't the way that things would change for me.

In my last evaluation, I got comments like, I'm too gullible. I'm overly empathetic with the clients. I speak too formally in my writing. And I was like, oh, this is great because you've noticed my neurodivergent

traits. One person said, Courtney lags behind her peers in professional development. I'm like, oh, well, I have a developmental disability.

And I said, I'm happily working through all these things. And then a partner responded to my email saying, these sound like medical issues. I'm forwarding this to HR. And so it was really pointless for me to disclose. And I don't know-- I don't really regret it because I was over it, but it wasn't helpful.

I think people who are looking to be more inclusive should look at askjan.org to find different accommodations that people do have, whether it's by disability or just by the trait or symptom, just learning what helps people because, like Aaron said, you don't know. Like, I just found this out. I don't know what to tell you as far as what I need.

But isn't it your job to invest in me and to just make sure that the environment works for others? So just browsing websites like that, what helps people work, I accidentally found out about how listening is much better for me than reading. And so, using different ways to communicate and being curious when someone's having a hard time rather than just deciding they don't belong there.

OK. So I want to-- let's see. I'm going to jump to a question, and then maybe we can go back. But I will start with you, Olena. What are some aspects of your training and the professional development that really worked for you and some that did not?

So much of it did not. And actually, Aaron's response just there, I actually nearly started crying because you actually just articulated something about your being judged on this standard when you can make to this standard. And I was like, no one is actually ever put it into words like that, and that's exactly what it is. So the things that have worked for me, I guess, in my training-- so I was trained at a law firm that unfortunately is not on the list of law firms. That's part of the Mansfield Project. But I was trained to have a really precise attention to detail and follow through and all of these things that were very, very natural to me, and that has really, really served me well.

And I feel like-- I mean, it's not a great answer, but I was literally so much everything else about the law firm-- the lack of clear communication, the expectation that you do x thing at x level, the lack of flexibility on anything, quite frankly. Let's not even get started on the billable hour or the in-office work culture.

I work full time remotely, and I always joke-- I was like, I invented-- I invented remote work before COVID because I never went in the office unless I had to. And I'm like, this makes so much sense now because I lose the first most productive hours of my day if I go in. So sorry, I'm doing the tangent and rabbit hole thing and not giving a ton of specific examples because, honestly, law firms are not particularly neuro-inclusive.

And in the day to day, it's just not-- I don't even know where to start. I can only compare it to where I am now where there's a real openness and desire. And we have a very open feedback culture that goes both ways. So there is an openness to changing practices and to listening and to doing things better.

That is the most fundamental thing, I think, that needs to shift moving forward to-- and to just make it better and develop neuro-inclusive environments, and to really create an environment where everyone can thrive because we can all thrive. I have a really hard time getting my brain engaged in something if it's not interesting.

But if you give me a last minute assignment, it needs to be out in six hours ready for a filing, I'm your girl, man. I'm going to crush that. So it's building that environment where it's better for everyone, where we can all thrive individually and thrive as a group. Sorry, that probably didn't answer the question. I apologize. [LAUGHS]

Thank you. Let's see. Simon, what aspects of your training and professional development worked and didn't work?

OK. So I'm going-- because my answer to that's short, and I'm going to I'm going to add part of question 4 to that. So what I would say is that early on, people at my firm-- they placed too much emphasis on the social component of the autism disability. And the lawyers who were doing work that would have interested me worked on that assumption. And as a result, they drifted into a microaggression.

And if you overestimate the impact of the social component as opposed to, say, the sensory component, as Aaron discussed, as I've discussed, that's a debilitating microaggression because what's happening is you're building on top of the challenges you already have. You're adding some assumed challenges, and you're taking away work based on those assumptions.

So you're assuming they're socially inept, but then you're also yelling at them because they're working on a tight deadline. So now they're not doing anything. They're not accomplishing anything. But unfortunately, it's understandable that they would operate on that assumption that it's primarily a social disability because that's the key diagnostic criteria in the DSM.

So eventually, you have to look at the source here. And it's the fact that they haven't articulated what the disability is properly. And so it's really hard to get an expert in to give you accommodations that actually work because you think that-- you think these computer-- I mean, I'm sorry, but this computer autism consulting stuff where you bring in these autistic people to work, it's big money.

A lot of these people are sitting around for two to three years, they're not doing anything except talking on behalf of their computer company and on behalf of the consultant that placed them. So this is-- so it's a universal problem, but not with law firms. It's with how autistic people are being accommodated. And so that's been a real challenge.

And as a result, because of this sort of problem, the biggest skill I developed was public speaking. So everyone said, oh, no, Simon can't go out there. He can't go talk to people. He can't impress people. But that's what I've been doing. I go out there. I go to events. I get invited to speak at conferences in other cities.

And so my development was actually strongest in the soft skills, and they said that was the thing I was going to be worst at. And it was actually the substantive stuff I ran into issues with because I couldn't get the accommodations I needed. And so in theory, that would mean that I'd become a finder rather than a grinder when I get this LLM. But we'll see how that works out. I'm not too optimistic, but we'll see.

Anyway, that's--

Thanks, Simon. Aaron, what worked for your professional development and what didn't?

Pretty much none of it worked, and I spent the last five or so years literally just thinking about this, rebuilding stuff on my old firm because I saw what didn't work. It was too abstract. It was too high level. There wasn't enough in the weeds, but the stuff in the weeds didn't tie back to the bigger picture either. It wasn't practical. It wasn't interactive. It was boring, and that was both in-person and on Zoom as well. The challenge is, most people who are experts suck at teaching because they're just naturally good at it, and they don't know how to teach things because they're not-- they're too good. And it's been too long since they sucked. And lawyers don't necessarily have the time or incentive things like that.

Because I am autistic, it's all already connected in my head. So my understanding of corporate law, and I practice every day as a corporate lawyer, it's all connected. So it allows me, if I'm teaching, to be like, OK,

what are we actually teaching here and how does this all connect? And the ADHD comes in actually super handy there, because love tangents. But it's all connected.

You can't just train in a vacuum. And I think so often, training sessions are unfortunately at the mercy of the attorneys or lawyers who are going to do them that day on a topic, and they don't all connect. So what have I tried to do? I'm like, cool. What would I have wanted if I was an associate? And to be clear, I was a thriving associate, at least on paper. I was doing well. And I was like, if this wasn't working for me. It probably wasn't looking for a lot of people.

So, for example-- I'll just share my screen quickly if it'll let me. Well, you need to understand what an M&A deal is. So whoever took the time to be like, cool, here's an M&A deal from start to finish. You act for the buyer, there's diligence, there's a term sheet. You act for the seller, you got to do an NDA and stuff.

What's the difference in structuring on the buy side, sell side? Who are your advisors? You got a purchase agreement. Cool. Are we signing and closing the same day or not? What's the difference? Oh, huge difference, that changes the closing documents. Which ones do we need in this case? OK, different stuff.

What the heck is this escrow concept. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. How does releasing from escrow work? What if the wire doesn't land on time? All these things, all these firms do these deals over and over again, and wish some might have been like, cool, here's how it works. Here's the map. It's all connected, and now we're going to focus on part one here. But we're always going to bring it back.

I'll give you just a different example here. On one of the diligence courses we run, we talk about why diligence matters because, again, everyone wants to know the why. Diligence is really fucking boring if you don't understand what you're doing. I love diligence. I think it's awesome. It's fun. But we put the least experienced attorneys on these things high volume, and it's like, they don't understand how it connects. Like, what happens based on your diligence? What are the people five years ahead of you doing with your stuff? And how does that tie-in to a tipping basket or a specific indemnity or a cap? We teach this to summer students because my belief is, you should know from the get go how this stuff works to, number one, be able to start understanding what people are doing who are a bit ahead of you, and number two, to understand the importance of this stuff and how it all connects.

Your diligence, informs the purchase agreement, which informs the pre-closing stuff and the conditions of closing and the post-closing stuff. It's all related. And the more we can tie it together and do it practically, the better off people are going to be. And just to share one example of this free resource we're literally building, this is meant-- we're going to give this out for free to first years, your step-by-step guide to closing an M&A deal, literally written from the ground up with the rules documented on how this works, like, literally what to do because it's really hard starting as a junior attorney or associate or what have you when you don't know what you're doing, law school didn't teach this to you, and you're just trying to figure out, what am I supposed to do? You have all these unwritten rules, all these unwritten expectations, which are already hard enough if you're neurodiverse, especially if you're autistic.

And then you're trying to figure out, what is my job? As someone's telling you, no mistakes, no typos. And you're like, I don't know what I'm doing. As the client's breathing down-- as you're juggling a million deadlines. And keep in mind, for a lot of neurodiverse people, the multitasking can be a big challenge. Autism is characterized by tending to do one thing at a time, so you can imagine how challenging some of this can be for certain people.

All that to say is, it turns out Gen Z needs almost all this stuff anyways. They really suck-- I'm stereotyping here, at a lot of these things. They want the play by play guides. And more importantly, I'm sure almost everyone here has seen, post-pandemic, or at least as people came back to the office, a regression in certain skills, especially from juniors and asking all sorts of questions or wanting to know more about things that historically, we all took for granted.

So the days of taking them for granted are over. The neurodiverse folks need them, the Gen Z's need them, and I'm sure Gen alpha, whenever they get here, will need them even more. So it's really time, I think, to rethink and say, how do we do PD in an interactive, proactive way that's practical, but also in a way where, quite frankly, we've got to build this level of documentation and resources about the stuff we took for granted and used to pass down slowly, orally, or just assumed people knew intuitively.

Thank you, Aaron. OK. So we're over time. I just want to give some quick takeaways. Please be clear when you're giving instructions. Be clear. Mean what you say. Say what you mean. Also, encourage direct feedback. A lot of us just won't pick up on what you're thinking when we send you something. We need to hear from you how well we're doing or if we're not doing well.

Please be curious about us instead of saying things like, we don't belong in a law firm or just deciding based off our personalities and demeanors that we wouldn't like something or we wouldn't be good at something. And when you're giving feedback, please, don't just pick on people's traits. I've gotten lack of confidence or gullible.

It's like, well, what are some steps that I should take? How do you think I should behave? Because you're just telling me I'm this thing only makes me less confident. So I'm sorry that we ran out of time. Please reach out to any of us if you have any questions that you want to discuss. We're happy to hear from you. We love talking. So thank you so much again for coming, and thank you so much to all of our speakers who joined.