

Episode 298: Creating Inclusive Apprenticeships with Josh Christianson of PIA



Intro: [00:00:00.96] Welcome to the Workology Podcast, a podcast for the disruptive workplace leader. Join host Jessica Miller-Merrell, founder of Workology.com, as she sits down and gets to the bottom of trends, tools and case studies for the business leader, H.R. and recruiting professional who is tired of the status quo. Now, here's Jessica with this episode of Workology.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:00:26.62] The Workology Podcast is sponsored by Upskill H.R. and Ace The HR Exam. This episode of the Workology Podcast is part of a podcast series powered by the Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships, or PIA. PIA is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, ODEP. In November of 2020, ODEP launched to ensure all apprenticeship programs are inclusive and accessible to people with disabilities. PIA collaborates with employers and apprenticeship programs to help meet employer talent needs and enable people with disabilities to benefit from apprenticeships that increase their opportunities for lifelong access to high growth and high demand jobs. Today, I'm joined by Josh Christianson. He's the project director at Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships, or PIA. Josh is a passionate advocate for diversity and inclusion in the workplace with experience in D&I training, conflict resolution, non-profit leadership group facilitation and change management. New approaches to apprenticeship programs are taking shape across the US to meet employer talent needs and enable job seekers with disabilities to gain credentials and skills to succeed in growing industries. I'm so excited to have Josh with us today to talk more about inclusive apprenticeships. Josh, welcome back to the Workology podcast.

Josh Christianson: [00:01:51.31] Thanks for having me, Jessica.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:01:53.47] For listeners who might not be familiar with what PIA does, can you talk a little bit about how PIA supports employers into creating apprenticeship programs that are inclusive of people with disabilities?

Josh Christianson: [00:02:06.31] Sure. So we're highly collaborative in nature, so that takes a few different manifestations. I would say, you know, one thing we do is help to facilitate the design of an apprenticeship program and we try to meet people where they are so that looks different for different employers. In short, we're helping them set up an apprenticeship program using us as a free resource by the Department of Labor, to ensure that it is inclusive and usable by all people. I would say we oftentimes with employers build bridges with what are called intermediaries, which we can, you know, get into the details of that later. But they are an entity that can really help an employer facilitate the development of the apprenticeship program to streamline some of the logistics, et cetera. And we oftentimes can help make those connections in there.

And sometimes we're working with a fully developed apprenticeship program and we're expanding it to make it more inclusive and accessible. So it can really depend upon where the employer is in their in their process. And they're thinking about apprenticeship and we're happy to jump in and, and help where we can.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:03:28.30] I love that you offer kind of a customized approach to helping support employer apprenticeship programs, because every organization, just like every apprenticeship program, is different and very unique.

Josh Christianson: [00:03:44.71] Yeah, if I could add, as we work, we partner with different entities. Some are huge, some are small. Some have been doing it for a long time, some are just starting. Some have a focus on people with disabilities, some have never thought about it. And we really try to understand what their specific needs are and see how we can best support or help them where they are and their maturity of a program and do what we can to fit into their needs as opposed to fitting into ours.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:04:19.48] Can you talk a little bit about inclusive apprenticeship programs and how they benefit employers and the why those employers should consider creating one in their organization?

Josh Christianson: [00:04:30.97] There are a number of reasons, and I should mention that we are working to categorize and capture those reasons and share them in resources now and in the near future. But if I were to highlight a few, I would say, you know, quite frankly, they can contribute to your bottom line. They can increase revenue, they can lower turnover. Some of that is by virtue of what apprenticeship brings. The yield on apprenticeship is extremely high for employers. Over 90 percent of people that go through apprenticeship programs, registered apprenticeship programs, end up getting hired. The dollars spent on training are much less, so there are some specific things around just apprenticeship that add to the bottom line, similar to disability. People with disabilities, recent studies have shown have a lower turnover rate, have higher productivity and other things that just really help the bottom line. So inclusion of people with disabilities is the right thing to do from a values based perspective. But it's also proving to show that it is the right thing to do from a bottom line perspective. So that's important. I think also, as we look where we are as a country, the increased focus on diversity, equity, inclusion, or as President Biden recently put out, diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility in a recent executive order. You know, we as a country are figuring out ways to include more people, to open up the resources and opportunities and benefits that lots of people have been excluded from for a long time, and people with disabilities are a part of that.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:06:22.10] I want to have you talk more about this new resource that you guys have just released for employers. It's called Perspectives on Apprenticeships: What Employers Should Know About The Value of Inclusive Apprenticeship Programs. Can you talk a little bit about that? And how might our listeners use this resource.

Josh Christianson: [00:06:39.20] For sure. Well, I hope you plug our URL, InclusiveApprenticeship.org. We are putting out resources. This is our latest. But these are new and people should follow us and stay tuned because we're going to have more. This one in particular, we set out to engage the important stakeholders and learn what was needed, what was happening, what are some of the best practices where we could fit in as an entity, because we really just started in March of this year. And so we sought stakeholder input from employers, from intermediaries, from people with disabilities and advocacy organizations, from the Department of Labor itself to understand where the overlap was and we could have the most benefit, and that's the the starting point of this resource. And what it can really do is, is help kind of advance understanding of all this overlap. So, you know, these perspectives are going to help people understand how they can work with others to create a more diverse, inclusive workforce and also explicitly how we can work with them to collaborate and support that or how there are other connections and resources that could help them. And so this resource is kind of setting the table for why inclusive apprenticeship is important and how organizations can use it to meet their unique talent needs. And, for us, it's just the beginning. We hope it's useful and beneficial to folks.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:08:09.50] Well, we will link in the show notes to this resource so you can go to Workology.com and look for that directly as well. I wanted to also ask you, Josh, what does it take to create an inclusive apprenticeship program? Kind of walk us through. Maybe if somebody is just getting started, what steps do they need to take to put together an inclusive apprenticeship program?

Josh Christianson: [00:08:33.41] Sure. If I take a step back before kind of some specifics and and frame it almost theoretically, I think people are aware of what's called universal design, thinking about how you could make, build, create anything or a space and make sure the most people possible can use it increasingly, and people with disabilities, it's called inclusive design, and that oftentimes plays out in technology. So how can you design something, a technology that lots of people with differing abilities can use? And that to me is kind of the crux. Sometimes people talk about accessible technology and focus on, you know, how to make it inclusive or work for people with disabilities. But really it's about how is it usable? How do you make something that is practical and usable by people and focus on the user experience? And so people, companies do that all the time. They think about the user experience and it's just broadening that. If you want to make a product or build a program that is usable for the people that engage, you need to think about the inclusion of people with disabilities. So that's my broad framework around it. And if you look specifically kind of at apprenticeships and how to build an inclusive apprenticeship for people with disabilities, there are many kind of baseline things to consider from the get go. A lot of that has to do with accommodations, understanding what a person might need to be successful in your program. Some of it has to do with looking at your program, the curriculum, the the platforms used, the materials used, and how you can make those accessible to people with disabilities. And I would make a plug that this is important now and will be so increasingly as technology use broadens, as telework becomes increasingly common, as training becomes increasingly possible via computers and remotely that thinking about how you design and set up those programs so that they're inclusive of all people is critical now more than ever.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:10:51.58] How about the life cycle of apprenticeships? Josh, what is the role of apprenticeship intermediaries? You mentioned those earlier and maybe how employers can find opportunities to collaborate with those intermediaries.

Josh Christianson: [00:11:05.41] First, let me kind of fine and outline what an intermediary is or sometimes called an apprenticeship intermediary organization, and they are diverse and what they are and what they do. But broadly, you know, an apprenticeship intermediary organization connects apprentices and employers to help them launch, grow and maintain apprenticeship programs. So they often kind of sit in between the talent and the company and depending upon the needs of each of those groups, facilitates that relationship in regards to apprenticeship. They can be run by industry associations, chambers of commerce, community and technical colleges, nonprofits, et cetera, et cetera, labor management partnerships, workforce developments. They come in all shapes and sizes and who is in charge of any one intermediary, but in the end, they're basically helping the employers navigate the logistics and protocols, standards that are required for a registered apprenticeship program. And, you know, our group PIA can be a connector to help create those relationships, to help streamline the process for creating or or building and supplementing inclusion of people with disabilities into a program. And as I mentioned earlier, that depends on where you are. So that can be about outreach. It can be about training.

Josh Christianson: [00:12:38.08] It can be about funding incentives or all of them. So that's my long winded explanation of what an intermediary is or can do and how we can help connect those. I think if I if you think about the life cycle in apprenticeship, it's not so different from how any organization would bring someone in. You know, you have the recruiting and outreach. That's an important part. A major difference is there's related technical instruction, so some baseline fundamental learning of information and skills that happens before they are placed with the employer. So that's part of the cycle. Then once they're on board with a company organization, there's the on the job training, there's mentoring, etc. to kind of round out that lifecycle before they finish their program, which has a certain amount of standards hours, they have to demonstrate knowledge learned, et cetera, and, and then move on to be employed. As I mentioned, it's over 90 percent of the people in apprenticeship programs move on to be hired and chosen by the employer. So anywhere in that kind of lifecycle journey, we can be supportive and someone could and should think about inclusion in those processes.

Break: [00:13:55.39] Let's take a reset. This is Jessica Miller-Merrell, and you were listening to the Workology Podcast sponsored by Upskill HR and Ace the HR Exam. Today we are talking with Josh Christianson, project director at Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships. This podcast is part of a podcast series about inclusive apprenticeships powered by PIA.

Break: [00:14:16.93] This episode of the Workology Podcast as part of a new podcast series powered by the Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeship, or PIA. PIA is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, ODEP. In November, ODEP launched PIA to ensure all apprenticeship programs are inclusive and accessible to people with disabilities. PIA collaborates with employers and apprenticeship programs to help meet employer talent needs and enable people with disabilities to benefit from apprenticeships that increase their opportunities for lifelong access to high growth, high demand jobs.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:14:54.56] One thing I know is that employers are always thinking about ROI or return on investment. What is the ROI for companies to create apprenticeship programs, particularly programs that create a pipeline of talent for people with disabilities coming to that organization?

Josh Christianson: [00:15:12.99] Sure. I mentioned earlier that we're going to launch some more resources around this, around the business case for inclusive apprenticeships or the return on investment. We're doing specific work with states now that we will share and release in some form in our launch in September. So I hope people stay tuned. There are so many reasons that you should do this. There are so many return on investments. But we really want to distill the most important, most compelling, largest things to leverage that make sense to an employer. And we're working on doing that and bringing that out as a resource. I mentioned some of them earlier around the benefits of apprenticeship or the benefits of disability. And so when you're thinking about how those overlap and are combined and compounded, I think the biggest things are driving innovation, widening the talent pool, lower turnover in general. You have increased productivity, lower absenteeism and bottom line incentives, there's funding, folks can receive for running this program. These programs. There are tax incentives and breaks for companies to do apprenticeship and inclusion of people with disabilities. And so we're going to put those together hopefully in a succinct, digestible form. So I guess my my long answer is stay tuned and hopefully people will check that out on September.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:16:44.59] And we can have you back on the podcast and and then we can get an update with more information on the specific case studies for ROI. Because I think that this is really going to help employers and HR leaders.

Josh Christianson: [00:16:56.95] Agreed. And there's a lot to delve into, which is maybe why I didn't hit that question, you know, fully. And I would love to come back and dig into the specifics of that.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:17:07.00] Can you talk to us about the industries that stand to benefit the most from inclusive apprenticeship programs? Is there one or two that you feel like or in the work that you're doing, you feel like are really seeing a great benefit or it could be a real competitive talent advantage?

Josh Christianson: [00:17:26.10] Yes. Specifically, our program is asked to focus on high growth, high demand jobs. There are sectors in this economy that we know are going to grow that are going to be the jobs of tomorrow. And unfortunately, companies look out and they realize the talent pool isn't there. The education and the training isn't there to create larger pools of talent that they will need. And so we are, at PIA, focused on those areas. Those include clean energy, technology, clearly, IT is a sector. Finance, health care. We're also working on HR and human resources. We hope and expect that is a growth as well. But so, you know, if you think about where the world is going and where work is going, those are the sectors we're trying to work with. And those are sectors that have been traditionally used apprenticeship. So it's the time is ripe now for those to really those industries to pay attention and figure out the ways to build and secure their talent pools. Because how we've been doing it, whether it's higher ed or, you know, getting the H-1B visas or whatever those are, it's not enough and it's not going to sustain the talent we need. I think I would highlight one thing that if you look at President Biden's, the jobs plan he put out, that is focused almost exclusively on

clean energy. So clearly that sector needs to ramp up how they can find the talent they need. And so I think that is a big area to pay attention to and something we are, at PIA, focusing on now and hoping to help build those bridges between the clean energy sector and the talent they desperately need to find.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:19:24.96] I love hearing about other industries other than tech. And then you think of like the traditional sort of old school apprenticeships, like plumbing and the trades, that there are other different types of positions and industries that are going to be looking more to and relying on apprenticeships so that they'll really be able to grow in scale.

Josh Christianson: [00:19:46.12] Exactly. I mean, if we take IT as an example, I forget the numbers, but, you know, there's X number, say, three hundred thousand jobs a year or something in IT that are posted. There's only, you know, say one hundred thousand kind of computer science graduates that those skills and those numbers are wrong. But I think the point is taken that that's not going to sustain the IT sector. That's going to grow. The IT sector has to have new and innovative ways to train and recruit the talent they need and apprenticeship. It is currently being used by many people in innovative ways, but it's new. Apprenticeship is new to IT. Apprenticeship would be new to finance. Apprenticeship is new to HR. Relatively new to health care. And so these growth sectors have to see how they can get over the skills gap. And I truly believe apprenticeship is the way to go and inclusive so that raw talent pool and include people with disabilities who have traditionally been excluded from the workforce just adds the benefits on top of that.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:21:00.15] Let's talk about intersectionality. What does this mean and why is it important specifically to the DEI or DEIA and creating inclusive apprenticeship programs?

Josh Christianson: [00:21:12.66] Yeah, well, you know, an inclusive workplace, if we think about it, that is that's one where people of all races and these genders, ages, disability, of course, sexual identities, religions, et cetera, et cetera, are valued and respected and can achieve their fullest potential. So that's the theoretical kind of notion of inclusion companies. We as we as people and companies, you know, struggle to make that real. And that's good work and that's a good struggle to have. And so I'm thrilled to be a part of kind of what that means. And increasingly, it's about intersectionality. You know, we as a people and definitely companies, even the government, tend to kind of silo things. So we might focus on a particular target group. Someone in H.R. might be given the task to go out and find a particular demographic. We might look at women or veterans or returning citizens, BIPAC, et cetera. But, you know, people can be part of multiple, they are more than one kind of demographic. And people with disabilities can identify across different demographics. You may have a black woman who is a veteran with a disability, and it's important to see and recognize, to respect and consider. Not only all aspects of that person, but the interplay of those aspects and identities, and we just, frankly, aren't that good at it, but we have to get better in order to succeed, you know, in business and but as human beings.

Josh Christianson: [00:23:00.19] And so I'm excited to hear this new talk of DEI and A. If they check out the fact sheet that we're going to put on, know diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility and how those overlap is really important. And employers must approach inclusive employment practices through an

intersectional lens if they're going to be successful. I know we break out and categorize and people have their own ERGs and that's totally fine and relevant. But we also have to kind of keep a broader lens about how this the intersectionality of identities works after, say, women or I guess men are technically the minority. But if we're talking about excluded groups after women, disability is the largest, quote unquote, minority group out there with estimates of 20 to 30 percent of Americans having a disability. And so clearly that's going to cut across identity groups. And so clearly, if you're looking at trying to recruit, include a certain demographic paying attention, disability is only going to underscore and support those efforts.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:24:07.18] What do you see for the future of inclusive apprenticeships? We talk about some industries, but any other future casting,

Josh Christianson: [00:24:13.57] You know, if you're kind of looking at the tea leaves, it looks good for future and growth. There is a renewed emphasis on apprenticeship. There's legislation in front of the and in Congress now that has bipartisan support that will increase the promotion, investment, and etc., of apprenticeship. And so I do think this is the future, especially the sectors that have never really utilized or tapped into it in the past. And so to me, that means professional and economic opportunity, especially to traditionally marginalized Americans. It also means no student debt. This is a earn while you learn program. We hear about a no the the burden that student debt is on on young professionals. And this is a realistic way to build the skills needed by US companies to thrive in business and to do it in a way that works for people. And so I see and hopefully not just because of my own myopic world I work in, but I see apprenticeship in these new sectors, these new fields, as really being an answer to how citizens, how Americans can have opportunity, good, strong professional jobs in the jobs of the future that we haven't been doing well for the past few decades.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:25:42.70] I, I absolutely agree with you. I think that most HR leaders, TA leaders who are listening to the podcast right now are shaking their heads because they're thinking like what we have been doing, the recruiting, the TA work is not working. It's not filling up our funnels fast enough. So we need to look at alternatives like apprenticeship programs. And it's even better when they're inclusive apprenticeship programs because it attracts more different kinds of people, including people with disabilities, into our organization.

Josh Christianson: [00:26:12.82] Yep. And I would add, you know, I'm the beneficiary of higher education. I worked in that field for a long time. I am a supporter of higher education. But it's, it can't be the only tool to help build our workforce and it won't be sufficient. And so to me, this is a real way that companies can find the talent or develop the talent that they need beyond just traditional recruiting methods.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:26:45.85] Well, Josh, thank you so much for taking the time to chat with us today. Where can people go to learn more about you and the work that you're doing on inclusive apprenticeships with PIA?

Josh Christianson: [00:26:56.76] Sure. Well, you can type in your search engine, probably Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeship. But our URL, URL specifically and our website is really where we have all our resources, contact information, et cetera, et cetera, is [InclusiveApprenticeship.org](https://www.inclusiveapprenticeship.org).

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:27:16.99] Awesome, and we'll include a link to that in the show notes, as well as the White House fact sheet with the diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility resources. So, and your new resources as well.

Josh Christianson: [00:27:32.80] Awesome. Yes. I'm excited to hear that accessibility added on to DEI. I hope people pick that up and keep it going. It is a critical part to all of that work.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:27:44.21] Agreed. Well, thanks again, Josh, for joining us.

Josh Christianson: [00:27:46.54] Thank you. It's always a pleasure

Closing: [00:27:48.73] Designing an apprenticeship program, especially one that is inclusive, it's all about creating a practical and usable program that is focused on universal design principles. I'm linking to the new White House fact sheet on DEIA, diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility, as well as PIA's newest apprenticeship resource on our Workology Podcast show notes. A special thank you for Josh for giving us some great information and resources to get us inspired about creating inclusive apprenticeship programs. This apprenticeship series on the Workology Podcast is powered by PIA, the Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeships. The Workology Podcast, our sponsors are Upskill HR and ACE the HR Exam.

Closing: [00:28:33.87] Personal and professional development is essential for successful HR leaders. Join Upskill HR to access life training, community, and over one hundred on demand courses for that dynamic leader. HR recert credits available. Visit [Upskill HR.com](https://www.upskillhr.com) for more.