



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

EPISODE 11: JAMES MILAM – DIS/ABILITY PART 2

James Milam

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Phil Wagner

Hello, from the halls of the Mason School of Business here at William & Mary. I'm Phil, and this is Diversity Goes to Work. Buckle up because we're getting ready to take a deep dive into the real human lived experiences that shape and guide our diversity work in the world of work. Should be fun. Hi, friends and welcome to another episode of Diversity Goes to Work. Actually, today is a little bit more like a mini-episode. You know, those rare instances where you're able to just make calendars align and facilitate a conversation that's sort of how today came to be. It is an honor, however, to host our guest, even for just a brief conversation. Today's guest is James Milam. He is a proud MBA graduate from 2019 and somebody we are certainly proud to affiliate ourselves with. Like I said, James is an alumn of the College well known across Miller Hall and across campus. He now serves at Deloitte as a senior consultant based out of Nashville. James has an incredible story incredible passion, and I'm so incredibly grateful that he has created time to speak today and share some of that with us. James, thanks so much for making time to join our podcast today. A beloved alum, someone whose name is mentioned regularly down the halls of Miller Hall. So I guess before we begin today, I should ask you, what have you been up to since you've left the halls of the Mason School of Business?

James Milam

Yeah. Thank you so much for having me. It's wonderful to be able to talk about this topic, so I wanted to go through a little bit. So prior to graduating with my MBA, myself, along with three of my fellow classmates, we're fortunate enough to receive full-time offers from Deloitte supporting their government and public services practice as human capital consultants. So that's what I've been doing. And since onboarding back in July 2019, I've served on the Military Health System account, where I was given the opportunity to support Navy Medicine's Financial Business Operations team by managing their portfolio of SOPs or standard operating procedures. I've recently taken on an additional role with the State of Tennessee account, supporting Ten Cars Engagement and Training team with Organizational Change Management and Training Development Services or their upcoming Medicaid Eligibility System upgrade. So, in addition to the client work that I do, I support Deloitte's William & Mary recruiting team as the Campus Engagement Workstream lead, the National Office

Council, and the Gps org suite. PMO team org suite is an upcoming asset within Deloitte's Human Capital OT offering, and I also work on numerous client pursuits.

Phil Wagner

Very cool. And we should probably mention James. So you're coming as a proud representative of Deloitte but not speaking for Deloitte, right? Speaking from personal experience today.

James Milam

Yeah. Thank you for teeing that up. Right. So this topic, just in its form, is very much based on a case-by-case situation. And so today, everything I'll say is coming from me, and my experiences and are my opinions, not those of the Deloitte.

Phil Wagner

Excellent. Always important to make that note. So, James, we're going to jump in here because, as a young professional, you're very forthcoming about living your professional life while in a wheelchair. What have those experiences been like, and what surprised you most about your professional experiences?

James Milam

Yeah. So I think it's really important that I tee up the nature of my disability. Right. So I think you're probably interested in me sharing that I was born with something called sacral agenesis, which requires the use of a wheelchair in my daily life. Now, sacral agenesis is a birth defect of the spine, which in my rare and mild case, prompted the development failure of the lower three vertebrae in my spine. However, I do want to be clear that I feel very fortunate as my condition will not worsen throughout the course of my life. And I have full sensation and feeling all the way to the tips of my toes. So going forward, I can tell you a little bit about my background just as a person outside of that. I grew up in White House, a small town north of Nashville in Tennessee, and through grade school, I played trumpet in the marching band, became an Eagle Scout, and on numerous campouts, carrying on a normal childhood, as you might imagine, from a very young age, my parents enabled me and sometimes forced me to become independent. Even though this thought never entered my mind, the expectation was communicated very early on that I would not allow my condition to hinder my life's advancement, achievement, and character development. I can go on a little further. From high school, I attended William Jule College in Liberty, Missouri. It's a ten-hour drive from home, so that was really helpful with becoming independent. I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in physics and economics. And while in school, this is kind of interesting. I completed a ten-day, 120 miles outward-bound trip through the Florida Everglades as part of a leadership fellowship program. While on that trip, I ditched my wheelchair and spent the entire time with a crew of my peers in canoes. So I think very much survival style trip. Right. So we're camping in canoes, pitching tents on a beach. If there's not a beach, we would sleep on the water. But this experience taught me that your body is a machine, and it can do as much as your mind has the capacity to make it do. In hindsight, I see my college years and the three years of professional

years after as a period of awakening. Throughout this experience, I became very in tune to society's tendency to put differently-abled individuals into a category. If I achieved, I was seen as inspirational. If I struggled, it was seen as a direct result of my situation. So when I left the Kansas City area and began my MBA at William & Mary, I sought to learn and understand how I could achieve and become valuable simply for my knowledge and skills instead of because I was an inspiration. I also drastically shifted my focus to people. How am I perceived and understood by others? How could I do as I've always done, which is to overcome in spite of barriers, rather than just expecting society or people to change their perspectives of me on their own? So that's a little bit about my background.

Phil Wagner

So, James, earlier, you came to speak in one of our undergraduate courses earlier this spring, and you noted that COVID 19, though horrific in so many ways, actually helped you a little bit in your professional life. Can you speak to that sort of digital divide example that you shared and how it's played out in your professional life?

James Milam

Yeah, definitely. So the separation of a computer screen for me provided an opportunity to understand how interpersonal interactions might be different without the scariness that someone might feel when first reaching out to me or approaching me in my wheelchair at a crowded after-work networking event. It also reassured me that my managers weren't holding back responsibilities due to a fear they might overwhelm me. I saw no change in the amount of work that was expected of me, which, again, is probably kudos to Deloitte on that end. Right. But it allowed me to just kind of understand it a little bit further.

Phil Wagner

That's very cool. James, terminology is something that I think you and I have chatted a little bit about as well, and you spoke on this in my course earlier this spring. Terminology is a tricky thing. In your own professional or personal experience. Are there certain phrases or certain words that you recommend when talking about your own experiences? For instance, do we say disability? Do we say disabled? Do we say wheelchair-bound? Uses a wheelchair? What do we say, and what do we not say? Do you have any insight?

James Milam

Yeah. So for me, I think terminology is 10% content and 90% delivery. Right. I typically and casually describe myself as confined to a wheelchair or wheelchair-bound. Now, I read in an article that you gave request that that may be negative. Right. So I'm apparently doing it wrong. I see no impact on my self-esteem or capacity to accomplish things based on what people say right. Now from an activist perspective, separate from my own experience and how I feel, I do see an importance with when you're referring to people who have different abilities, placing the person before the adjectives when describing a person who is differently-abled. So as an example, I notice and sometimes educate people who say things like the wheelchair guy or the blind guy. Right. So I just think that those, in general, are bad. You don't want to

describe someone by their disability. They are someone first, and then they may have a different ability.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, that's really good. The article that we read, I would agree, sort of like really goes to the far side. And I think when we work in context with students who do not have a physical disability, we try to get them to the safest place first and then work backwards from there to have interpersonal conversations with those that we interact with, make sure that the labels or descriptors we use meet that person's own specifications. So that's super helpful.

James Milam

An example I like to use here is in the grocery store, right. There's always a three-year-old or a four-year-old. They'll kind of look at me funny, and they can't really contain their stares. And it's kind of hilarious because their parents are like hiding them and be like, no, you can't do that, or you can't say why you're out loud. Right. I love that opportunity because the first thing I'll do is I'll ask the parent, hey, would you mind if I take like 20 seconds to just explain. Right. You give the kid version. You don't give the version I just gave previously. You tell them a little bit about, yeah, I use a wheelchair, but I also go swimming and I scuba dive, and I love to do outdoor activities. So you just kind of give them that. You reduce the scariness from a very young age. And I think if we start the conversation as early as possible, we'll start to see even more positive changes.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. It's a tricky balance, isn't it, because you want to foster a sense of connection, and connection and curiosity are related, but curiosity can quickly become something it wasn't intended to be. And so, as much as you want to foster those connections to encourage someone to say, hey, tell me what's up with your story. It's just a really tricky area. I think that's part of what we're trying to do here is to open up conversations where we can ask some of the things that we may not normally be able to ask, where it's not appropriate to ask so that we can really cut through that noise and develop those relationships. James, I'm certain that people somewhere along your journey have said something offensive to you. Perhaps it's the language they use, a comment they said about your experience. How do you navigate those interpersonal conversations when someone says something offensive or uses an offensive term, perhaps not even meaning to?

James Milam

Yeah. So this may be an unpopular answer or maybe not even what you're looking for. But for me, I would much rather come out and have people say something, even if it's a bit brash or unrefined, than cover up their true feelings or thoughts. An example of this might be what if someone in a wheelchair or someone who had trouble getting around didn't receive an invite something because the location had maybe like two or three stairs at the entrance. And in this case, if this was to happen to me, I've never and don't intend on ever letting stairs stop me from getting somewhere that I want to go. I've climbed ten flights of stairs at will to go zip

lining or go down water slides at water parks. And it's the assumptions that people make out of misinformation that sort of drives strong emotions for me, much less than being misinformed or not exactly sure how to describe it. And maybe they just say something unrefined. And furthermore, I would just say to the capacity that people are able and on a case by case basis, there is an ownership on the person who's differently able to have an appropriate perspective. And so to reduce that offending culture. Right. That can be very debilitating if it can become an excuse. Right. Like, oh, I don't want to go there and get to know that CEO because he doesn't believe what I think he should believe, or he doesn't describe my ability in the way that he should. Right. I think that it's really important to avoid those types of excuses and get away from that toxic perspective if you're able to.

Phil Wagner

Good. That's really helpful. Well, James, this is really insightful. I've got one more question for you, and it's the question we like to ask all of our guests on this podcast. We know that no magic wand exists to sort of wave and solve all of the problems in the world of work that surround disability in equity. But if you had a magic wand, what's that one thing that you'd really like to see the world of work do to make itself a more inclusive place for those with different abilities?

James Milam

Yeah, I think it's all going to start with being bold, addressing the elephant in the room. Right. It's very similar to the idea that if you don't know how to pronounce someone's name, you ask them at the beginning of the conversation. If you have to leave a call early, you manage those expectations at the beginning of a meeting. If we can do these things in corporate America, we can also bring out the elephant in the room in a respectful manner. Ask open-ended questions. So I said this in your classroom, but I want to reiterate it again because I just think it's a great piece of advice. And I received this while at a discussion at a lunch at work. And it's an open-ended, top-down approach for managers. Right. So managers should ask open-ended questions to everyone upon joining the team. So not just people that you can see they have a different ability, but a lot of abilities you can't see.

Phil Wagner

Right.

James Milam

I highly recommend if you're a mid-level manager or higher, ask open-ended questions to learn about your team. Things like, are there any team norms or things that I could implement within the team to help you optimize your work with us. Are there any thoughts you think I should be aware of or that you'd like to make the team aware of to help you perform at your best? Right. So putting the ownership on the person with a different ability to be transparent about that, and then you can address it in the most the least highlighted way. Right. You want to be really discreet with these types of changes, and so it allows you to be very smooth in the way that you manage people and also have a high-performing team.

Phil Wagner

Very cool, James. Anything else you want to share?

James Milam

No, I think this is just a fantastic discussion that you're opening up, and I can't thank you enough for starting the conversation and providing a lot of these deep insights. I think the last thing I would say is that as someone with a different ability, I certainly understand that these are case-by-case answers that I've given today. And I just want to say to anybody else who's listening to this, I have a level of optimism in my life that is, I think in a lot of ways unmatched, and it's something that I've worked on for a very long time, and I realize that times are hard and that I have a very, in this case, the situation because I have overcome a lot and have been enabled by a lot of people to overcome a lot. So I just wanted to say that, and so I'm very thankful to everyone that is in my immediate network and family and friends.

Phil Wagner

Thanks, James, and I'm very thankful to you. You provided such great insight in so many different domains, both in my class and in our podcast, and through our alumni networks. So it's always a privilege to connect with an alumn. It's certainly a privilege to connect with you. So we really appreciate your time, and thanks for your insight.

Phil Wagner

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