



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

EPISODE 8: JESSICA RICHMAN – SMALL CHAIRS AND OFFICE CULTURE: SIZE DIVERSITY PART 2

Phil Wagner

Hi, friends. Welcome to Diversity Goes to Work. As promised, we're continuing our three-part arc on size diversity, building upon our conversation with Dr. Rebecca Puhl. I'm joined today by someone who has spent her professional life advocating for body positivity, specifically within the context of the world of work. Jessica Richman is a San Francisco-based Trade and Investment Director for the Australian Trade and Investment Commission. But we're talking today about something else that Jessica is involved with. In 2019, Jessica founded the Visible Collective, which is an initiative that advises companies on product development, marketing, and new business development to better serve people of size. 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. Welcome to our podcast, Jessica, and I think our first question should be, what is the Visible Collective?

Jessica Richman

Hi, Phil, so good to be here. Thank you for having me. So the Visible Collective is really kind of a consultancy that helps businesses better understand people of size or people of higher weight. And we help businesses understand through insights, and we help them use those insights to focus on product development, to focus on kind of internal strategy, you know D&I strategy. So it's really about working one on one with companies to help them better understand the customer, basically this customer and then help them kind of execute against that understanding.

Phil Wagner

That's interesting. So right away in the intro, we hear something I think really interesting. You say people of various sizes or people of higher weight. I think that leads us to a really important question as we begin today. And when we speak to people for the episodes that we're recording, we recognize the language. It's a tricky thing, and it varies from context to context, particularly in conversations on diversity and inclusion. So can you tell us what should we or should we not say, dare we say fat? Do we say people of various size? Like, what language do you use? What language do you recommend that we use as we talk about this issue?

Jessica Richman

Yeah. So I think it's a really good question. I would equate it with what's kind of discuss pronouns, right. Like people select their pronouns. But people who are higher weight really are not ever encouraged to kind of say the particular words that they prefer. Right. So in my case, I would say fat, right. I don't want someone to refer to me as overweight or obese. And I think when you look at the data, you see that a lot of those terms, they're medical terms. They are used in medical environments, and most people really don't prefer them. Particularly obese is one that turns a lot of people off. So for the purposes of this conversation. I think focusing on fat, also focusing on higher weight and people of size, is really the approach. But as I mentioned, I think giving everyone the opportunity to pick their own wording. There's a clothing company called Kingsize, right. And so some people like Kingsize, it really is open to the individual, I think. And that's really important.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. I love that framing because it sort of just owns the language on the nose, and it takes the value proposition out of it, right. There's not over or under that's there's not really better or worse. There just is. And that is, is the humanity really good? All right, Jessica, that's super helpful framing. As we begin our first question for you, dealing with your area of expertise is really all about how you got into this work, to begin with. We're finding that all diversity and inclusion work goes back to a central why. And we're really interested in the why function here. So what's the why behind your advocacy, the why behind you doing size diversity work. And then we're really trying to think about why organizations should focus on weight in their D&I efforts. Can you tell us a little bit about your why and how organizations can find their why in this area?

Jessica Richman

Sure. So I've always lived in a larger body ever since I was a child. I've always been fat of some type or another, some type of fat, basically. And so my background is primarily in kind of retail and kind of consumer insights and marketing and strategy. And so it occurred to me as I kept progressing through my career that there was really a lack of insights and data to inform organizations about how to approach anything related to people of size. Whether it's diversity, product development, whatever it is, and there's starting to be more data, of course, when it comes to apparel, but it's still not good enough, frankly. We have a ways to go. So my particular story is this is something that affects me. I distinctly remember going in for an interview for my first job out of school, which was working for Walmart.com and just trying to look for a suit. And at that point, I was a size 14. The average size in the U.S. is 16 18, and it's 18 20 for African American women. But at that point, I was a size 14, and it was pretty much virtually impossible for me to find something and spent a lot of time crying in dressing rooms. And I think a lot of people kind of relate to that. And it's just added pressure that I didn't need when preparing for an interview. But I guess it's moments like that that really made it occur to me that this is really important work. That's kind of the journey on my end is my own lived experience combined with my own professional experience. In terms of companies focusing on this. So to me, obviously, it would be nice to say it's the right thing to do, right.

But the truth is that I think first and foremost, it comes down to talent, and it comes down to business outcomes. Right. So from a talent perspective, talent is very rare right now. It's very rare in the field, especially that it's most needed in. And so when you look at some of the data, particularly around people of size, LinkedIn published a report basically suggesting that there's potentially millions of people missing out on job opportunities, which could be unlocked by particularly tackling the issue of size bias. So missing out on millions of people who could be good at doing particular roles, and then they identified. And this is yes. They identified. Over half so 56% of employers surveyed stated they believe that they're missing out on talent due to discrimination against people because of their weight. So people are basically missing out on talent. And the challenge is that there's 2.1 billion people in the world, nearly 30% of the population, who are labeled as obese or overweight right. Who would fall into those for the purposes of this discussion? BMI categories BMI conversations, a whole other conversation. But there really is a need to address this, particularly to get that talent, because to lose out on that much talent, it's a problem when there's a shortage of talent. The other thing really comes down to product innovation, and because of weight bias in the workplace, there are not as many leaders, especially female leaders in decision-making positions of power, who can help inform strategy because those people were biased. We're taken out of the system early on because of bias. And so, therefore, you may have less senior managers who are able to influence decisions and, therefore, may not think as much about plus-size clothing or may not think about the need for creating larger office furniture because they've never had that lived experience. So that's really key. And there was a really interesting study as well in the MIT Sloan Management Review, which basically talked about it's not only when it comes to kind of hiring and employing people, but they conducted and this once again as lived experience this is not shocking to me, but they hired people to thinner people, right. And then they hired people, and they put on prosthetics to appear overweight and say overweight because this is what their study said, and the overweight customers received poor treatment from salespeople than their thinner counterparts. The key issue here is that the shoppers who experienced the subtle discrimination unshockingly spent less money and reported a lower intention to visit those stores, right. And so it really comes down to the bottom line here. People really need to, especially in one on one customer-facing settings. It really comes down to the bottom line. People will spend less money if you don't treat them nicely. Kind of common sense, actually.

Phil Wagner

Jessica, you note in your work that we've made great strides in D&I work. But there still remains an opportunity to sort of better address size in that equation. What do you think the role of weight or size or our body is when we're talking about inclusion in the world of work? Any thoughts?

Jessica Richman

So right now, most companies don't see weight and size as playing much of a role, which is, I think, part of the issue to begin with. But when you look at some of the research, so Harvard just published a study. It was a ten-year study. And when you look at that study, attitudes about sexuality and race have become more neutral over the years, but bias against overweight

people has increased. In particular, implicit attitudes and unconscious stereotypes found that racism bias had dropped by 17% and anti-gay bias by one-third. But bias against higher weight people went up by 5%. So just from a pure data perspective, there's room for work to be done. And when you look at some of the assumptions that people make around people of size, it's lacking in self-discipline, sloppy in appearance, less healthy, less agreeable, less emotionally stable, less extroverted. These are all assumptions that people have, and the results of some of these assumptions are obviously not hiring as many people as size, not putting people of size in customer-facing roles, or where they can be seen. So people at the front office, office managers, secretaries. But employees who are higher weight have issues around, obviously hiring practices, but lower wages is huge, fewer promotions, harassment from co-workers, and unfair job termination. So there are a lot of reasons why this work needs to be done. There's only one place I've heard of. Actually, that has an employee resource group for people of size, and that was Square. Interestingly enough. But those support systems and those networks and that education just doesn't exist. And I think the challenge is when you go back to why a lot of D&I programs exist, to begin with, is because the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and a lot of companies were afraid of being sued, right. So they needed to upskill their employees and educate them so that they didn't do anything wrong, which would have led to a lawsuit. Now we've seen a significant transition. The reason why I'm bringing that up and why that's important is because I don't think companies will really adjust overarchingly until there is some type of policy, either, especially at a federal level, but at a state level as well. And the culture now, I think, has changed where D&I is being seen as the right thing to do. But it's also being seen as the best thing to do for the business. And I think that companies don't yet see. I think weight and size is so far back because A it's not in actual policy. But then, when it is actually in policy, it's going to still take another, let's say, 10, 15, 20 years for people to actually see it's the right thing to do. So I think we're, frankly, decades behind, but because of the data because of this really implicit bias issue, and just because going back earlier, too, it affects the business, it affects the ability to get good talent. I mean, this is why the D&I work needs to be done. So there's a lot of space for that work to be done, I think.

Phil Wagner

There's a really good segue here. I think related to the divergence between inclusion and then sort of legal mandate. And I think it's really interesting that you've done work in both. For me, it's easy to see that issues of size scaffold under inclusion. You want your employees to feel included, you want them to feel like they're part of the culture, you want them to feel valued. We get the business case for that. But as a consultant, you help companies also better understand and comply with weight-related laws. I think many companies are probably surprised that such laws even exist. So from your perspective, how is size really covered under the law?

Jessica Richman

Well, it's not covered enough is the bottom line. And the most important thing to know is there is no equal employment opportunity coverage for people of size. It is not included at a federal level in policy. The only state that has passed a law that has protected people from

weight discrimination is Michigan. Washington State has recently held that the state's definition of disability in the Washington state law against discrimination included individuals with obesity. But that is a different thing than what Michigan has done and what Michigan has done, by the way, years ago, like decades ago, right. So in Massachusetts, lawmakers have continually tried to introduce a bill which would focus on the intersection of kind of height and weight because a lot of this is weight-related policy kind of intersects with height-related policy as well. In this particular legislation would focus on addressing body size, stigma, and discrimination, and it would add to the state's anti-discrimination laws the words height or weight similar to how it has sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation. So right now, there really isn't much coverage. There are some local places, kind of locality, San Francisco, Urbana, in Illinois, Santa Cruz, in California that actually do. Their local laws prohibiting weight discrimination. So there are local laws, but there really is nothing at a federal level. And what's interesting is that the Rudd Center at the University of Connecticut actually talks about how public support is in favor of actually making it illegal for employees to discriminate against for employers to discriminate against employees because of their weight. So when you look at that data, public support appears to be increasing from 2010 to 2015, research found that support for laws to prohibit weight discrimination in the workplace increased from 73% to 79%, and support was high among people who identified as male and female and regardless of political orientation. So there is movement in favor. A lot of people then ask, does the ADA provide legal protection and overarchingly not really, because it has to have some intersection with something else, right. And it could be a psychological condition. It could be a physical condition. It could be type two diabetes, hypertension, thyroid disorder. But weight by itself, not really still. And so I think once again, going back is why are people not focused on this? Because, frankly, they don't have to. And when you I touched for a moment on that list of schools and their policies against discrimination. And when you look at this list that I was looking at of schools who have policies that are focused on anti-discrimination policies against people of size, right. That focus on not discriminating against people of size. The place that, oddly enough, not oddly enough, has the most schools is Michigan. Why? Because in Michigan, it's illegal to discriminate against someone based on their weight. And so, of course, universities in Michigan put that in their anti-discrimination policies. And you also see that even quick Internet searches start to show that you have tons of law offices in Michigan that have a focus on educating companies about this. And you're starting to see the same thing with those policy changes in Washington that more and more legal organizations are really focused on educating people about that as well. Yeah. So I think that's really how it's covered is the answer is not very well.

Phil Wagner

So, Jessica, what's made states like Michigan successful in passing those laws and other states, maybe not as successful or not as motivated to pass similar laws?

Jessica Richman

It's a good question. The Michigan law was passed. I think it was passed initially with the civil rights law, and it was all passed at the same time. I don't think it was actually added. And that

was, I believe, in the 70s, the only one that exists. So it happened in the 70s. The challenge that people come across is a lot of it is often people don't want to glorify obesity. I mean, I do think that that continues to come up. I think that there is significant bias as well, just people's own internal bias against people of size. But I think probably most importantly, is there is a fear that there will be significant lawsuits emerging once you start to incorporate this into the law, and companies are probably lobbying against it because they don't want to have those lawsuits. But the truth is, when you actually look at the policies that have when you look at what happened in Michigan, there were not a torrential amount of lawsuits that occurred as a result of that. It just didn't happen. The newfound challenge, I think, with some of these policies, arguably, one could say that COVID makes it even more important to institute these policies because of the bias that we've continued to kind of see in the media. There's been a lot of press around kind of anti-obesity, anti overweight publicity that's come up during COVID. And so I think there's two sides to that coin. One is you could say, well, if you put this in the policy, aren't you just making it acceptable for people to be obese and overweight in quotes, right. And I think with COVID, and the data that people continue to promote during COVID is that no one wants to be seen as promoting that. But on the flip side, when you actually look at some of the root issues of why some of the things turned out the way they did in terms of COVID, in terms of some of the outcomes for people who are higher weight, a lot of it is rooted in the fact that there really is a lot of bias, and there really is a lot of stigma. And there's an intersection with social determinants of health, with race. There are a lot of things that play into each other, and COVID has elevated some of those issues, especially with regards to the kind of medical system. But at the same time, there's still this hatred and this bias against people of size, particularly in the medical, in the medical space, and lack of education as well.

Phil Wagner

Okay, so you've gotten into a good conversational intersection here. There's the medical perspective on obesity. And we know there's a lot of literature out there on how those medical perspectives maybe aren't as innocent or as rigorous as we might suspect. And then there's the sort of social perspective, right. Where we understand at the ground level the limitation of how those medical guidelines, the BMI, have complicated things beyond their original intent.

Jessica Richman

Yeah. And it's really the spaces where we see the most bias within the field of education, within the field of medicine and within the work environment is where we see the most significant bias against people of higher weight. So it will be interesting to see how things continue to progress and what the perception is of higher-weight people, hopefully, post-COVID.

Phil Wagner

Are there any lessons from other cultures, like from a global perspective? Are there places or spaces or cultures that are sort of doing this, right?

Jessica Richman

Yeah. The one that most people point to would be New Zealand. There's a lot of kind of people studying this topic, particularly in New Zealand. But I would say that we get a lot of people referring to New Zealand for everything, basically as New Zealand does a lot of things well. We get a lot of that just across the board. I'm sure you've seen it, too, with people pointing to New Zealand lately. But in particular, this topic, I think people feel like it's dealt with better, and it's more accepted societally in New Zealand, particularly because more of the Indigenous cultures, I think, is what people would say.

Phil Wagner

I'm going to jump in and ask what happens if we don't do this work? I mean, what are sort of the emotional stressors that people of size carry with them in the world of work. And what happens if we don't address size diversity as part of our inclusion efforts? Got any insight?

Jessica Richman

Yeah. Where to start on this one? There's a lot of insight. So there are so many emotional stressors, and I'll just go through a couple of my favorite ones. So eating in public. I mean, there's so much judgment around if you're a person of higher weight eating in public in terms of, oh, well, they shouldn't be eating that that has too many carbs or that's a sweet or that's pizza. People don't look at people in thinner bodies and judge what they're eating. So I think that's one of the things people go back to offices and continue to eat in cafeterias. And just that is an emotional stressor. Judgment on kind of looks right. People's look, people's apparel. It's harder to find clothes that fit when you're in a higher-weight body, especially professional clothes. And it's getting harder. LOFT just announced that they're stopping their plus-size clothing assortment a couple of weeks ago.

Phil Wagner

Wait a minute. They're stopping because we see so many companies expanding. I mean, H&M being, like, pretty inclusive now. We see even major athletics companies like Lululemon finally opening up and including more size diverse options. It seems so much of the world is heading towards size inclusivity. But we've got brands backtracking that area, too?

Jessica Richman

Yeah. Which is so funny because I saw them first launch their line a couple of years back at this event called CurvyCon, and everyone was so excited about it and basically got bought by a private equity firm, and they're trying to optimize the business. And this goes back to what I mentioned earlier, which is kind of lack of data. A lot of people have trouble finding what are the right sizes that they need to have in stock? How do they make sure to have the right inventory? How do they not have too much inventory? And so I think in this particular case, they probably found it too difficult to manage sizing in inventory, which is unfortunate. And in this particular case, because they're being run by a private equity firm. The whole focus is to make it more efficient, right. And so, I think they maybe are not as sensitive to the need to be inclusive as other brands are at this point. But that's another conversation. Another issue that

I kind of love to address is furniture. And we touched on this a bit, and it's very embarrassing to not fit in a chair at work. So a lot of chairs have armrests and chairs with armrests, not very comfortable for people who are wider. The same thing goes for desks, which may not be as wide, not very comfortable having furniture that's not built as well. Very embarrassing. It's extremely embarrassing to break a chair at work. It's extremely embarrassing to break a chair at home. But to break a chair in front of other people is next level embarrassing. There's issues around flying, right. So if you are in a larger body, do you go to your boss and say, hey, in order for me to actually get my best work done on this flight, I need to be in a seat that's going to cost more money, right. And these are the conversations that think about how each of these things would add up in someone's mind to make it very exhausting every day to exist in the world of work. Another issue would be around benefits and wellness benefits. And one of my favorite things to talk about is the CEO of Whole Foods, John Mackey. In 2010, Jezebel wrote an article that basically uncovered that you will get to keep the original 20% employee discount at Whole Foods, but you'll be paying more than your thinner co-workers who are going to be getting 30% off. So if your BMI is above 30, you basically get less percentage off of food. And these types of benefits, so benefits, to begin with, they exist, right. And there are BMI-based benefits and wellness programs such as how many steps can we take? How much weight can we lose as a team? They're supposed to be team-building exercises, and they're supposed to be good for wellness. But they actually really harm people who are in higher-weight bodies. And we see a lot of these challenges, people trying to institute challenges like this in the workplace. And I don't think that they understand the emotional havoc it wreaks on people. And then the same thing goes for a lot of companies not yet having insurance benefits that cover issues that may arise when people are in larger bodies. People may want to get surgery, people may want to do things, and the benefits are not kind of covering that. And so, I think that becomes another challenge. Wording we talked about wording earlier, we talked about words, the importance of words. And so, in this particular issue, I would say people still finding it okay to make fun of people, people of size, and also just comments that people don't even recognize. So I think one of the things is especially in cafeteria locations, comments on other people's food, comments on what people are eating. But then in places like the bathroom, when you hear other people say, oh, I look so fat in this or things like that, they can add up. So those are just kind of a couple of the things right now. I think one of the interesting ones that we're seeing is around with the vaccine. Is people's bosses or organization saying, can't you qualify for the vaccine now? Probably not a good idea to say that, right. These things, they're happening in real life. They're coming up, and each one of them just continues to add up.

Phil Wagner

Yes. That's such a good point. We're recording this as vaccine rollout is still a little bit wonky. So hopefully, by the time this airs in late 2021, not only will the vaccine be widely adopted, but perhaps even COVID will have met its match and gone away. Who knows? So I'm wondering how much coverage the medical community sort of provides for discrimination. I mean, the BMI is a medical assessment. BMI seems to be the standard that everyone talks

about, but we know that it's been debunked, at least called into question by medical professionals. So we have this sort of standard. Either you're in, or you're out.

Jessica Richman

It is very problematic that everything focuses around that one particular measurement. And I think people are starting to call it out. But when you have 70% of a population falling into what is labeled as obese or overweight, what does that say about the number you're using to identify that percentage, to begin with? Right. And so I think looking back at kind of how that emerged and what the history of it is and how that particularly continues to affect policy in the medical space. But in the benefits space, and just words, right. It's the word overweight, and the word obese they're having specifically to do with BMI with this measurement that a lot of people really don't find useful anymore.

Phil Wagner

Jessica, in your research, you've talked a little bit about algorithm bias, suggesting that our data structures are biased against fat, too. When you talk about Instagram's algorithm of flagging images of fat people, I'm wondering, are there algorithmic trends out there that discriminate against people of size? This seems like something we should keep our eye on.

Jessica Richman

Yeah. So I think one of the biggest issues so much of recruiting right now is done in an automated fashion, right. A lot of recruiting is done with sending in a resume, scanning the resume. And the challenge with that is already from a very early point in one's career. A higher-weight person is not going to get the same opportunities, right. So if you're putting a resume through a scanner and that scanner is looking for particular roles, particular keywords. Did that person manage other people? What was their title? Right. Like you're already going to miss out on a ton of candidates because they were already disadvantaged early on. Right. So I think simply, I guess that would be kind of the closest thing to an algorithm perspective is what algorithm are people using to scan these resumes? And does it already discount significant percentage of the population who are higher weight because they have not had those opportunities? With that said, I think that human bias is really more of an issue at this point, in particular, because the research I stated earlier around implicit bias. For instance, in the case of LinkedIn people looking at images of people, maybe they see someone with a rounder face, and they assume that that person might be in a higher weight body and then they assume that that person can't really do the job. Maybe that person is not fit to do the job. The challenges is that human beings, with our implicit biases, we create the algorithms, right. So as more and more recruiting and more processes become automated, I think then you're going to have an algorithm which immediately takes out people who might have wider faces out of the pool of candidates that might be suitable. Right. So right now, it's done on a human basis. But we've seen algorithms study biases in terms of race and in terms of gender. But what we haven't seen, particularly when it comes to work as well, is what is the bias against people who have wider faces? Is there an algorithmic bias? Will there be algorithmic bias over time with so many

pictures of people on the Internet in terms of not hiring those people because of the data that you're receiving back from those algorithms?

Phil Wagner

Right. Because algorithms learn by taking examples. And since most of those examples of, say, executives or people in management might show you those with not round faces, maybe. The algorithm is learning that they should not choose people with round faces for those positions. So the bias, it's certainly going to factor in it's the age-old you can't be what you can't see.

Right. So the more sheer diversity. That's why diversity and inclusion get lumped. Right. Like you have to have that diversity to become inclusive. So it's really fascinating. Jessica, earlier, you noted that size diversity in the workplace has disenfranchised women specifically. And my partner and I have lost a combined 300 pounds. She's lost 160 some. I've lost 130 some. And we've really walked that fine line between fat, not fat slash, thin slash not thin for the better half of a decade. And it's been really clear to us that men and women experience fatness and size diversity very differently. Can you speak to some of those intersections? You've talked about gender? You've talked about race. How does size intersect with all those other identity elements that work together to define us?

Jessica Richman

Yeah. So I think one of my favorite kind of pieces of data is a study, and it's an old study. And once again, we need more people to study these things. I think is a key takeaway, hopefully. But between 5% and 22% of U.S. top female CEOs are overweight, and 5% are obese. Male CEOs, on the other hand, 45% to 61% are overweight, and 5% are obese. Right. And so once again, I'm using overweight and obese because that is what the study said. Those are not the words I prefer to use. But let me repeat that. So 5% to 22% of U.S. top female CEOs versus 45% to 61% are overweight of males. So we already see, and that's at a senior level, right. As the funnel continues to get more and more senior, you can only imagine how that can affect someone's career. First and foremost, gender, I think, is a real issue here. And it's very clear that men are not as affected until they reach a significantly higher BMI. Women are affected at a much lower BMI when it comes to discrimination. I think the intersection as well of race and ethnicity, and gender in terms of size is also very challenging. And I think that find that African American women who are higher weight or Hispanic women who are higher weight are at a significant disadvantage and are really discriminated against. The one that I think is quite interesting and is going to be more important is the intersection of size and age in particular because as people get older, they tend to get bigger. So then you really have two things, let's say going against you, right. From a discrimination standpoint, one of them happens to be covered, which is great, but the other one doesn't. Those are some of the kind of intersections that I spend time thinking about.

Phil Wagner

All right. So I'm wondering there's a lot of problems related to size discrimination. So I'm wondering if you had a magic wand, you could simply wave it to fix one thing. What would

that one thing be? What would you do to make the world of work more inclusive for people of size?

Jessica Richman

Yeah. I thought really hard about this question, and obviously, what I would like to say is incorporate is a federal policy is having a federal policy that then encourages, or rather forces companies to incorporate weight and size into the D&I strategies. But just companies themselves at this point, I think it's really important to educate employees, not only recruiters, by the way, everyone recruits in organizations, right. Especially more senior people are very involved in the recruiting process. I think it's really important to elevate some of those implicit biases when it comes to size and weight. And I think that that's really the most important part right now of D&I in this space is getting people to recognize their own bias, getting people to see that sometimes when you hate the fat within yourself, you hate the fat within someone else, and especially this can significantly affect women. And so, I think getting people to really address their own biases is going to be the first part of this process. So just encouraging companies to really add that to some of the curriculum that they have in the D&I space would be what's on my wish list at this point.

Phil Wagner

I think that's precisely what we're here to do, or at least what we're here to explore as we work sort of at the intersections of diversity and inclusion. We have so many conversations about those themes, but they often reach the sort of same stopping point. And the goal of this podcast is to push a little bit more, ask questions that take us in a different direction, explore themes that really, truly do make the world of work a more inclusive place.

Jessica Richman

Something simple that everyone can do, I think, is sit down for a few minutes by yourself and ask yourself, what are your reactions to the word obese? What are your reactions to the word overweight? What are your reactions to the word fat? Or when you think of someone who is fat? What do you think? When you think of someone who's, and it's very easy then to see immediately biases arise. It's very rare that someone does that, and there's not a bias that arises. So these are kind of the simple things you can do to really start to catch yourself and to hopefully then inform how you treat people differently. So that's just a little exercise. I think that is very easy and very challenging at the same time.

Phil Wagner

Okay, I want to ask a tough question here. I mean, there are people out there who might say maybe even reasonably being obese is a choice. We hear that sort of rhetoric a lot. And I think we also hear things like I mean, sure, if I really care about my employees, wouldn't I want them to be healthy? How does that sort of rebuff factor into your work? And how do we reply to such claims? I think what I'm really trying to ask here is, how do you engage with critics like critics of any variety in this topical space?

Jessica Richman

Yeah. I think a lot of it sometimes comes down to look. You could pull out data that talks about social determinants of health. You can pull out data that talks about genetic backgrounds. You could pull out data that talks about how difficult it is to lose weight. All of these pieces are very compelling. I think what's most important is individual stories of individual human beings. Right. And in my particular case, I have been up, I have been down so many times, so much weight. It's exhausting. I've tried everything that you can ever imagine and think of. I've had just eating, disordered eating. And by the way, not all higher-weight people have disordered eating. I will say that. But I associate my issues around having a higher weight body with disordered eating. I would say the more people can hear individual stories of people, the more they can understand that it doesn't come down to willpower and the challenges, especially in places like San Francisco and New York, but in particular San Francisco because there's this kind of health and wellness vibe everywhere. Right. And there's also this you can do anything vibe. There's this real assumption that why wouldn't you be able to do that? It's just a matter of you not wanting it, not wanting it enough. And so that really does exist. And it really exists. Frankly, I think it exists a lot on the coasts and in some cities that are kind of considered more health-conscious cities, probably like Denver and Boulder. But it is really challenging. It's interesting. Going back to that last question that you asked, what would you like to see the world of work do. And I guess maybe one of the parts of that is educate people that this is not. People are living in higher bodies for different reasons, and most of it is not a personal choice. It's not that someone is just deciding to continue to be in a larger body. It's because it's hard. If you ask any medical professional, it is very hard to lose weight. It's very hard to keep weight off. This is why the diet industry is, I think, a \$70 billion industry. So your question is a challenging one. But it is probably the number one thing that really prevents lawmakers prevents executives from incorporating these things into law and also just into their organizations and D&I strategies. Is those assumptions really are ingrained in people?

Phil Wagner

Yeah, I like that framing. I think we should ask ourselves what feelings we feel when we hear or say the word fat because if we interrogate those feelings, I think we can get closer to that end goal of empathy.

Jessica Richman

And go deeper. Not only ask why but ask then. Oh, well, I think people who are obese, they're lazy. Why do you think that? What have you seen? And generally, it probably comes back to seeing a character on a T.V. show because there's so much media and this once again a whole other conversation, so much media that represents people of size as lazy and as ugly and all sorts of things. Right. And I think we just have to question, where are we learning from?

Phil Wagner

I think it takes a critical lens to really examine those spaces and that media, often those spaces that are, quote, unquote body positive spaces are not really all that body positive.

Jessica Richman

Yeah. That's why I think there's more of a movement into more like body neutrality or body liberation, which is it's no one's business to comment on what you look like. It's just no one's business. It's your own stuff. It's your own issue that you're dealing with, and no one else can comment on that. Right. So I think, look, it is really challenging. And media, the media is just so powerful. And I think that's one of the other things I didn't really talk about when we talked about how are people affected as well in the workplace, which is like even in recruiting campaigns or in advertisements, just people not being featured, people who are in larger bodies not being featured, not being seen. I'm seeing some differences occurring now with more people kind of featured in ads. There is more diversity when it comes to size, but it's another issue.

Phil Wagner

Jessica, you've given us some great nuggets of truth. We really appreciate your time and your insight. Thank you so much for being here today. We look forward to following your work and hoping that our listeners will do the same. We so appreciate the conversation today on size diversity.

Jessica Richman

Thank you so much, Phil. This has been great, and I hope that whoever is listening to this podcast feel free to reach out to me. I'm always kind of interested in having these conversations. They're very important, so thank you so much.

Phil Wagner

Thanks for taking a second to listen to Diversity Goes to Work. If you like what you heard, share the show with a friend, leave us a review on the podcast or wherever you listen to podcasts and reach out because we're always looking for new friends. And if you'd like to learn more about any of our programs or initiatives here in the Business School at William & Mary, be sure to visit us at mason.wm.edu. Until next time you.