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**A Conversation with Kelly Woodbridge, Lehigh Accommodations Specialist**

**Hillary Kwiatek and Kelly Woodbridge**

**Hillary:** Welcome to the Spotcast. I'm your host and Lehigh University's Employee Communication Specialist, Hilary Kwiatek. Today on the Spotcast, we are welcoming in Kelly Woodbridge, Lehigh's Accommodation Specialist. We're going to learn about her unique role at Lehigh and her career journey, but I'm especially excited to have her join us so that we can discuss the university's newly updated disability accommodation policy for faculty and staff. Welcome, Kelly.

**Kelly:** Thanks, Hilary. So glad to be able to have you here today.

**Hillary:** You've been at Lehigh for how long now?

**Kelly:** It will be two years in December, so a little over a year and a half.

**Hillary:** And you're our first disability accommodation specialist in human resources. Are you the first one for sort of faculty and staff, someone dedicated to that?

**Kelly:** Yes. So brand new role, first one here. And it has been exciting, to say the least.

**Hillary:** Kind of like fresh snow. It's like you get to make your mark, right?

**Kelly:** Exactly, yes. Yes.

**Hillary:** So let's talk a little bit about how you wound up here and kind of your journey here. What is your background? What did you think you would be when you grew up, when you were a kid?

**Kelly:** Well, when I was a kid, I thought I was going to be a doctor. Okay. So far from that.

I ended up going to school. I got my bachelor's degree in art therapy. And I thought, okay, that's what I ultimately want to do. I want to help others by using art. That being said, I then realized about, you know, four years in, I want to do art for myself. I don't want to make a job out of it. So I ended up kind of looking and seeing where I could go from there. And I thought, okay, counseling would probably be a good option to kind of look into because I could still help others, still kind of pull in that artistic and creative feel. And then I ended up applying to Lehigh's Masters of Education program in Counseling and Human Services.

So I got into that. I am an alum. And from there, I ended up being a psychotherapist. So that was kind of where I thought I was going to go. And I thought, OK, this is good. This is where I'm helping people. And then I realized, as I had a really general caseload, that I was kind of more guided towards individuals with like chronic illness and like disabilities and individuals that were getting these diagnoses and they didn't know how to navigate their emotions towards these diagnoses.

So I was like, okay, this is kind of the area that I think I want to specialize in. From there, I was sought out. I was invited to kind of apply for, it was called a vocational counselor trainee position. It was one of...I think I'm one of 10 that went through this program in Pennsylvania through the Department of Labor. So I ended up applying. I ended up getting that trainee position. So for one year, I was a trainee and I was doing a full caseload with the government of working with individuals, typically adults from 18 and up with all different types of disabilities.

And then from there, I ended up like progressing into the it was the vocational rehab counselor so I was no longer a trainee I was one of the first to go into this position not having a master's in rehab counseling so I had the master's in education, it was like four or so years ended up getting promoted there but I saw this position at Lehigh specifically on my birthday, and I will never forget that.

So I saw it on my birthday, and I remember sending it to my mom and going, you think I should apply for this? Because I always said I wanted to be in higher education. So she's like, yeah, you know what? Go for it. And I thought, okay, I'll go for it. So I applied, and I remember seeing the position description and thinking, I don't really know if I can do all of that stuff. Like, am I really, you know, eligible and capable of all of that? And clearly, I would say that I am and I'm here.

It has been more than I could ever imagine. I received, you know, the offer. I absolutely loved, you know, the interview process with everyone. The HR team was wonderful and welcoming. So I ended up here and now almost two years in.

**Hillary:** And so...I know this because we've worked together for a couple of years, but if you also could share a little bit about your own personal experience and how that also kind of led you into this work, I think people would be interested to hear that.

**Kelly:** Yeah, of course. And that's something that I'm really open about. So I think that also puts a perspective on things. When I come out and tell people, I am a person that identifies as having a disability. So when I was working at the government i actually experienced something that i was not expecting which was these overwhelming you know migraines to the point where I started like my vision started getting weird and I specifically remember I was in Sam's Club and I couldn't walk a straight line and I went back in my car and I just started crying to my husband and I said something's wrong and this was after I think I went to the doctor two times at this point and I just said it just doesn't feel right.

So I ended up in the emergency room and I was there multiple times trying to figure things out but ultimately I got diagnosed with a super rare neurological disorder which was super scary because I was eight weeks pregnant at the time. And they still don't know if the pregnancy caused it or what happened. But ultimately, I have something called idiopathic intracranial hypertension. So IIH, that's what I'll refer to it as. It previously used to be called pseudotumor,

basically because your brain thinks it has a tumor, but it doesn't. So pseudo Pseudo meaning fake tumor, fake tumor.

So I, at that point, ended up having to request a reasonable accommodation for myself. Because I couldn't drive. And I knew it wasn't going to be long-term, so it wasn't going to be a permanent accommodation. This was kind of right off of COVID, where we were just working fully remote. I had a fully successful performance review and everything. I knew I could do my job fully remote, and I just needed to work, you know, an additional two months remote until I could give of birth so that I wouldn't put myself in any risk.

And it was quite an experience, to say the least. I don't want to go too into the nitty-gritty of the experience, but being on the receiving end of having to go through the accommodation process

made me realize that I want to do that for people. I want to make sure that people can get what they need to be successful at work. And it really changed how I view this process in general. And I think going through it, so now knowing that I was once the person who received the reasonable accommodation and now the person who's implementing the reasonable accommodations, I feel like I have a really unique perspective because I wasn't just on one side. You know, I really experienced this interactive process in its entirety.

And that was a big reason as to why I also wanted to kind of continue working down this path of, you know, helping individuals with disabilities, specifically in the workforce, because I knew I could do my job. I just knew I needed something to be able to help me do my job.

**Hillary:** I love that. And then on your birthday, you saw the job listing.

**Kelly:** And then on my birthday, it came about and I was like, I think this is it. I definitely do. And I think the biggest thing, and I always joke about this, was there was something there that says like coordinates with the Office of General Counsel. And I said to myself, I don't know if I can do that. And now I do that. Yeah. So that, I mean, the growth and just, I think, the confidence in my own ability to do the things that I was like, I don't know if I can do those. Being able to build the position from the ground up, you know, over the past year and a half has been very rewarding.

**Hillary:** And you've spent a lot of time, I think, probably assessing our practices, our policy and all of those things. But also you just hit the ground running helping individuals with the accommodation process here at Lehigh. And what was that like?

**Kelly:** I didn't know what to expect at first. It was really, it was really intriguing because I went, I like to say that when I first, like back in the government, I was helping individuals find a specific job. And now here at Lehigh, I had individuals in a specific job that I was looking to accommodate them for that job. So it was kind of a shifting of like, okay, let's look at all of your skills and see what would fit best to now, okay, this is your position and these are the skills you need to have. So it was just a shift in my thinking.

But then everyone was so willing to just learn, which I think really helped. I mean, I used my expertise from my previous positions to really hit the ground running, like you said. And that's kind of how it worked out. It was just Just like I would learn from this person and this person because we did have people that were doing this. It's just that now I'm the dedicated person doing this.

So I had the time to look into things more closely and I had the education and the understanding so that I could really kind of fine tune things.

**Hillary:** So when we're talking about disabilities that impact people's ability to do their work, what kinds of disabilities are we talking about?

**Kelly:** It could be a whole bunch. I mean, we have individuals with, you know, physical disabilities. So like, you know, we're a campus on a hill. So that in itself, you know, getting from point A to point B might be a little difficult. But then we have individuals with some mental health diagnoses. And obviously, that impacts people in different ways. We could have some different, like, cognitive type of things going on. Like, ADHD is kind of more of, like, a behavioral and,

like, a mental health type thing. So, like, that neurodiversity has become really, really prominent. I would say, like, that is a huge, like, area that I think I've been trying to kind of educate individuals on too is just, like, how can we, you know, help welcome these individuals that are neurodiverse on campus and, like, make sure that they are getting the tools that they need and, you know, they're fulfilling their jobs the way that it works for them.

**Hillary:** Right. And I think that that's one of the philosophical things behind doing accommodations that I think is important for you to maybe highlight in that we may have a standard position description and, you know, expectations and you have to get your job done,

but there's more than one way to get your job done. Is that the right way of putting that?

**Kelly:** That that's 100 percent the way of putting it. I like to look at things in a very creative way. So we may have someone saying, OK, well, this is what I have to get done. How can I get to that point? And it's working with me that we're able to think about, OK, what are your strengths? What is your skill set? And let's look at, okay, what are the areas that you're struggling with? And maybe what are your weaknesses? And how can we overcome those weaknesses and utilize your strengths so that we can get to that end point? It might not be the same way that this person gets to that end point, but we're still going to get to that same end point.

Just one thing I always I think I make known is that like just because two people have the same disability doesn't mean they're going to have the same accommodation because it could impact them in very different ways and they could have two very different skill sets. So we have to really focus on, OK, how are you going to get this job done? So it is a very individualized like person to person approach that I take.

And that I think is shown in the updated policy.

**Hillary:** So why don't we talk a little bit about when you looked at our policy and decided that it needed updating, what were you thinking about?

**Kelly:** I want to say, ultimately, I was just thinking about, like, how can we make this a little bit more fine-tuned? How can we detail this a little bit more? Things were, I want to say, like, general, and we had the general practice, but now it's like, okay, like, let's get into the nitty-gritty. Like, let's put examples of what accommodations are so that people kind of have an idea of, oh, I didn't know that I could do something like this. So, like, that was one thing was I added examples of different types of, like, common accommodations that you could see.

I kind of went through and I really highlighted the process a little bit more of like this is the interactive process. You know, you're going to be working with me. We're going to be talking. You know, we may have to involve some supervisors. But then also like focusing in on even though we're doing that, like this is very confidential, like this is very individualized, like I'm here to help you. We really just need to work together as a team.

**Hillary:** And I appreciated that. I saw the word interactive in the policy. In the updated policy. So it's not kind of a cookie cutter situation. It could change even as you're going through the determination and the conversation with the individual, right?

**Kelly:** Yes. So a lot of times I'll tell people, why don't you come up with some ideas of what you think might help? That way, you know, you're the individual that is experiencing this. You are going to know what's going to work best for you. That being said, I have some experience as well, and I'm looking at medical documentation and I have the background knowledge of how that specific disability may impact your ability to work in X, Y, or Z ways. So through that, it's going to be, okay, this is how you think it's going to work. And this is kind of what I'm putting into the pot. So let's work together and see how can we make this happen.

And then we might try something and we might say, no, this doesn't really work. So then, okay, now we're going to change it. And there's nothing wrong with doing that. It's just making sure that we're working together throughout the process.

**Hillary:** That's great. So in addition to updating the policy in the ways that you explained, you also have updated our processes. Tell us a little bit about the accommodate system, is it called?

**Kelly:** Yes. So we kind of just had like an Excel spreadsheet. That's kind of where we kept our data. That's how we did things. And I mean, truthfully, it was managed well. It's just that in order to manage it more efficiently, in my opinion, especially dealing with not just faculty or just staff and now having all of the employees under my belt in addition to applicants, I think it was really important to have the same language everywhere.

So my accommodate system, you know, it'll send out reminders. So instead of me having to go through and remember who I need to send out reminders to, that does it for me. It goes through and it sends out that formal documentation with dates.

So we're going to start your accommodation on this date. It's going to expire on this date. And then 30 days before that, you get that expiration notice. If people have questions, they can reach out through the Accommodate system or they can reach out to me personally. They can reach out to me through my inada@lehigh.edu account. So like there's different ways that people can kind of reach out.

And it's not just like a one, like a cookie cutter thing like you said before.

**Hillary:** So you mentioned expiration. Is there generally a time limit on an accommodation or is it different for every accommodation?

**Kelly:** It really depends. Yes. So, I look at accommodations as they're there to help you. You may not need them forever. Certain things you may. So, equipment, you know, if you're getting some type of assistive technology, there's not going to be an expiration on that. Whereas if it's, okay, I need to work remotely for, you know, this reason or that reason, it might be, okay, let's do that for one month and then let's check in and see, have things changed? You know, if they have, what has changed? Can we change this accommodation in some way, shape, or form? It really is to make sure that not only is the individual getting what they need, but that the work environment is also, you know, accepting of that because we don't want it to be something that is unreasonable.

And, you know, in today's day and age, I'm sure, you know, remote work sounds very reasonable, but for certain positions, and that's what's really important is like where I look at those position descriptions. And if somebody would benefit from being in the office, then I want them back in the office and I want them to work with the individuals that they should be working with. So again, that's why we go back to that interactive process.

Usually I'll do accommodations for anywhere from like six months to a year. So like the semester timeframe, especially with like faculty, it just makes more sense to say, okay, this is what we're going to do for this semester. We'll look into next semester. For staff, it could be a little bit different where we might look at more of a year. But again, it all depends on exactly what the accommodation is, how it impacts their work, so on and so forth.

**Hillary:** One of the things that you mentioned in terms of the office culture or the department culture, things like that, and just making sure that people understand. And this is a confidential process, but at the same time, it seems like some of the work you've been doing since you got here is also raising a level of sensitivity, empathy, and understanding about this across the university more broadly. And one of the ways that I saw you tackle that was NDEAM. Let's talk a little bit about that and talk a little bit about how, in addition to doing the actual work of helping people through the accommodation process, you're also working to maybe change a little bit of the understanding and culture across campus about this subject.

**Kelly:** Yeah. I mean, I can say that I think just going back to my just training in general, a lot of this stuff is associated with stigma, negative stigma to be, you know, specific. So, I think knowing that, it kind of, it feels like it's my role to make sure that people understand, like, this isn't something that's negative. Like, this is your right. This is, you know, your right under the federal law. And I'm here to help you understand your rights.

And I know that specifically like supervisors come to me with questions like, oh, but if I'm allowing this person to do it, then how do I have that conversation with other people? And that in itself is so important because I feel like sometimes people don't understand that it is a really rigorous process. You know, I'm looking at confidential medical information and I'm making sure that this is something that that individual needs and would benefit from. It's not something that I just go, oh, yeah, okay, like you can have this and then you can have this.

So I think just getting that understanding out there of what the process is so that people can realize like this isn't something to make you work less. You know, this isn't going to take away your responsibility. I always say that accommodations are there to level the playing field. They're really there to make sure that everyone is working at the same rate that they're able to. Some people just need to work differently in some ways. So I think that has a lot to do with just what I'm trying to relay.

Going into like NDEAM a little bit more. So NDEAM is National Disability Employment Awareness Month. That's every October. And really, I think that's just focusing on really noticing that all individuals bring something to the workplace, especially individuals with disabilities. And I can say, like, I have individuals with disabilities that I've worked with that are probably some of the most dedicated individuals. So I feel like, again, it goes back to that stigma. People think, oh, well, if they have this impairment, then perhaps they're not going to be able to do their job, where if we're just able to figure out how we can help them accomplish their job, they're going to do it just as well as anyone else.

**Hillary:** And, you know, we're talking a lot about folks who are already here and may experience a physical disability or a mental health crisis or something like that after having been here and worked here. But we've also added language to our job listings and contact information for you as well to hopefully attract people from different backgrounds and different abilities, whether it's physical or whatever. Tell us a little bit about what goes into that during the application process.

**Kelly:** I mean, I think one of the first things I did was making sure that my contact information was on those job postings because it's so important to diversify the workplace. Because having individuals with different abilities across the workplace, and I don't like using the term different abilities, but essentially individuals that do things differently. You know, having that diversity within the workplace is so beneficial to everyone because then you really turn, for those that are familiar with, like, universal design, you turn the workplace into this universal design place because it's no longer an accommodation. It's just the workplace. You just make things that way because you know that your employees would benefit from it.

I know that like when I go on zooms or something like that I'll always enable my captions I don't need the captions but do I like the captions yes because it helps me follow along and that's a tool you know that some people don't realize so when it comes to just that in itself I think it's important to show individuals like hey we're here to work with you and we want you to be part.

**Hillary:** And so you might sort of confer with them about maybe doing a remote interview or, you know, if there's a part of our very old campus that isn't necessarily super accessible. Sometimes there are places that it's difficult, you know, an interview could happen someplace else or something like that. But also as they go through the process, if they become the finalist, there may be things that you want to set up right from the beginning. Yeah.

**Kelly:** So people really, they have the ability to disclose whenever they want to. Some people might feel really comfortable disclosing up front. Some people might not. So for instance, you may have somebody, like you said, who is doing an on-campus interview and they ask, hey, is this going to be in an accessible place? If the hiring manager isn't aware of that or something, they can always reach out to me and I can work with the hiring manager to make sure that it is in an accessible place. Some individuals like to just have materials beforehand so that they can prepare and prepare. They have a right to that. So there's these little things, but then somebody

may become a finalist or may have the job, you know, offer and then say, hey, I need this in order to be successful. And there's nothing wrong with that. That's what I'm here for.

And I just want people to know that, like, don't be ashamed to ask for those things. Like, that's what I'm here to help you find. And I want you to be successful here.

**Hillary:** I love that. And I will say, you know, on a personal professional note, I've learned tremendously from you in the last two years. I think there are things that even in Human Resources where we're thinking about our employees and our candidates all the time, there are things we didn't know, we didn't maybe have in the forefront of our mind. Even things in terms of the work that I do for communications, you know, making sure that I have alt text on photographs that's descriptive, that's the right kind of descriptive. You've helped me understand better how to make links more accessible to people with visual impairments you know by having them be more descriptive and not just say click here just things like that even that you're changing the culture.

**Kelly:** Yeah and it's it's really it is just little things that make a big difference for people that have never had experience with a screen reader. I mean, I would encourage people to download NVDA [screenreader] and try it out. It's free. But it's really eye-opening when you see or hear, I should say, oh, wow, I didn't realize a screen reader worked like that.

And it's those little things that make you then change the material that you're putting out there.

**Hillary:** That's awesome. So you've, you know, you've said that people can disclose at any time. So give us a little run through of what they should do if they're listening to this and thinking maybe it's time I talk to Kelly about this. I would say, I mean, always just reach out. If you don't know if you would qualify under the ADA, I can work with you to see if you would.

If you think that maybe you would benefit from accommodations, let's have a conversation. Or if you're even like, I don't think I have a disability, but I think I might learn differently or I may benefit from some like tips and tricks. I always say, just reach out. I mean, I have learned so many different things throughout the years in how to just overcome different obstacles in the workforce or just say like, oh, have you ever considered doing this? Or like, oh, oh, have you ever looked into this application? Because it could be something as simple as downloading an application on your phone.

So not all things are like accommodations per se, they're just tools that you have. But,

if it is a formal accommodation though that you need, please go through me. I would say, please, if you know that you need an actual accommodation, work with me.

But also if you want to just talk about some tips and tricks,

**Hillary:** Kelly, thank you so much for joining us. This has been a great conversation. And again, we will put in the materials that go along with this podcast information about how people can contact you, a link to our website, the HR website, where the disability accommodations process and policy are housed. And hopefully we'll be helping some folks who maybe were thinking about reaching out to take that next step. I hope so.

**Kelly:** Thank you so much, Hilary.

**Hillary:** The Spotcast is a production of Lehigh University Human Resources. The podcast is recorded in Lehigh's audio recording studio in Mountaintop Building C.

Special thanks to Jarrett Brown of Library and Technology Services for technical assistance.

I'm Hilary Kwiatek. Join us next time to see who we spot. Music.