



HARKIN SUMMIT

ON SCALING DISABILITY DRIVEN INNOVATION

Key Takeaways and Outcomes

On May 9 – 10, 2023 The Harkin Institute on Public Policy & Citizen Engagement (THI) hosted the Harkin Summit on Scaling Disability-Driven Innovation – a two-day summit at the Tom and Ruth Harkin Center, located at the Drake University campus in Des Moines, Iowa. The Harkin Summit on Scaling Disability-Driven Innovation brought together leaders in the disability movement, entrepreneurs and small business owners, the investor community, and experts from the public, private, and advocacy sectors.

Find this report on the web [here](#). For more information about the report, contact:

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The Problem to Solve: Lack of Opportunities to Scale Disability-Led Businesses

An unfortunate reality is that many disability-owned and led businesses do not have the financial capital, social networks, and commercial opportunities needed to grow into sector-leading companies with access to national or international markets.

Yet, companies of all kinds are missing out on a global market by not bringing a disability-centric mindset to product innovation and consumer marketing.

Cruise control in vehicles, the phonograph, the ever-popular text function or touch features on mobile phones, the electric toothbrush, and the internet. All were innovated by people with disabilities as part of designing themselves into a culture and society that did not center on their needs. Each innovation quickly found its way to mainstream acceptance, enjoying widespread commercial success, and fostering a positive change in how billions of people work and live — regardless of disability status.

Given the massive opportunities before us, smart, innovative companies and forward-thinking entrepreneurs are accelerating their efforts to win a share of a global, multi-trillion-dollar market that serves all of society.

The Harkin Summit on Scaling Disability-Driven Innovation: Solving that Problem

The premise of the Harkin Summit on Scaling Disability-Driven Innovation is that, by convening a diverse group of market participants, we can more quickly and effectively address the challenges disability led businesses face while transforming markets to be more inclusive, innovative, equitable, and profitable.

The purpose of the Harkin Summit on Scaling Disability-Driven Innovation was three-fold:

1. **Grow a Network of Collaborators.** Through fostering more collaboration the Harkin Summit on Scaling Disability-Driven Innovation will accelerate disability-driven innovation across the private sector in a manner that has wide-ranging benefits for society. Disability-driven innovation has demonstrated an ability to bring to market innovative products, spur investment in an

underserved and underappreciated segment of the economy, and create long-term value for companies.

2. **Listening and Understanding.** The Harkin Summit on Scaling Disability-Driven Innovation attendees had the opportunity to appreciate the entrepreneurial spirit, passion, and commitment of business owners with disabilities, either through formal panel discussions and presentations or informal conversations during the two days of the Summit. This was an opportunity for entrepreneurs to provide insights into their businesses, discuss what has worked well and what challenges must be overcome if they are to achieve a larger share of their respective markets.
3. **Sharing Lessons Learned and Best Practices.** Many attendees are on the front lines of integrating disability-driven innovation throughout the economy, be they entrepreneurs, investors, corporate executives, or policymakers. The Harkin Summit on Scaling Disability-Driven Innovation was a chance for every attendee to participate in solutions-oriented conversations while expanding their networks of collaborators, partners, and potential investors and customers.

The Harkin Summit on Scaling Disability-Driven Innovation builds on existing work at THI focused on [assessing vocational rehabilitation policies and self-employment services](#) in all 50 states in the U.S. and the District of Columbia. The research is used to identify barriers that impede equitable access to self-employment services and provide recommendations on how to address these nationally. Additionally, [THI has published research papers](#) that explore the connection between disability employment, environment, social and governance (ESG) investment practices, and long-term value creation for both shareholders and stakeholders.

Overview of the Harkin Summit on Scaling Disability-Driven Innovation

Day 1 of the Harkin Summit on Scaling Disability-Driven Innovation was a series of presentations and panel discussions designed to provide a comprehensive overview of the market opportunities being created by entrepreneurs with disabilities, “on the ground” insights shared by entrepreneurs with disabilities, and the resources available to business owners as they grow and expand their companies.

Day 1 presentations and panel discussions included:

Presentation: *The State of Disability-Tech: Innovations for the Blind & Visually Impaired*

- Sandy Lacey, Perkins School for the Blind

Presentation: *The Value Proposition of Disability Inclusion*

- Ryan Rotundo, CEO Commission
- Molly Gill, John Deere Financial

Panel Discussion: *Day in the Life of a Startup*

- Em’s Coffee Co – Emilea “Em” Hillman
- Poppin’ Joe’s Gourmet Kettle Korn – Joe Steffy
- Chai Ho Tea - Angad Sahgal
- Blinded by Ambition – Jasmin Duffey
- Synergies Work – Aarti Sahgal (moderator)

Panel Discussion: *Local Resources and Perspectives in Business Development*

- Kochell Rickleffs-Weber, Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services
- Kevin Brown, Iowa Legal Aid
- Lee Bissmeyer, Principal Financial Group
- Ciara Ladroma, Entrepreneur and Consultant

Panel Discussion: *Disability as an Innovator*

- Mike Hess, Blind Institute for Technology
- Michele Lee, Cruise

Day 2 of the Harkin Summit on Scaling Disability-Driven Innovation focused on showcasing the innovative ideas of entrepreneurs with disabilities, demonstrating cutting-edge technology designed for the disability market, and creating employment opportunities.

Day 2 featured presentations of five selected entrepreneurs with disabilities or innovators creating products for the disability market. The five entrepreneurs who presented were:

- James Warnken, Clear Vision
- Claudiu Leverenz, Munevo
- Mason Metzger, Universal Design Works
- Joe Steffy, Poppin Joe’s Gourmet Kettle Korn
- John and Mark Cronin, John’s Crazy Socks

Throughout Day 2 THI and its partners hosted a job fair and social gathering where attending organizations networked with and interviewed prospective candidates. Career mentors from each participating organization provided advice to job seekers on skills such as resume building, networking, and interviewing.

Organizations participating in the job fair were:

- Cruise
- Voya Financial
- Principal Financial Group
- Special Olympics Iowa
- John Deere Financial
- Walmart
- Morgan Stanley
- Drake University

The job fair allowed candidates to expand their network, apply for open vacancies, and gain familiarity with the hiring processes of companies across the U.S.

Lessons Learned from the Harkin Summit on Scaling Disability-Driven Innovation

Through the discussions, presentations, and social engagement, five lessons emerged from the Harkin Summit on Scaling Disability-Driven Innovation that can be applied to accelerate disability-driven innovation across the economy:

1. Social Capital Matters – A Lot

We define social capital as the non-financial resources used by entrepreneurs to start, grow, and expand a business. Mentoring, communications and marketing efforts, access to venues and platforms by which products and services can be advertised and sold are examples of social capital. In many instances, lack of social capital is more of a barrier to disabled-owned enterprises than financial capital. As was made clear throughout the Harkin Summit on Scaling Disability-

Driven Innovation, entrepreneurs need mentors, collaborators, and opportunities to bring their goods and services to market. Without social capital, every business – no matter its value proposition – is doomed to fail.

2. **Financial Capital is Not Reaching Entrepreneurs with Disabilities**

Accessing financial capital is a struggle for every entrepreneur, regardless of disability status. Those challenges are exacerbated for entrepreneurs with disabilities, in part due to a corresponding lack of social capital. In listening to the presentations and discussions by entrepreneurs at the Harkin Summit on Scaling Disability-Driven Innovation, it was clear that financial capital was hard to access. In most instances entrepreneurs relied on their social networks – friends, family, and mentors – to get the money needed to grow their business. In other words, the sources of financial capital are very limited and overly reliant on a close-knit network. For those entrepreneurs without access to a strong and effective social network, financial capital is virtually non-existent.

3. **Better Understand and Appreciate the Expansive Nature of Disability**

Disability is the one trait that cuts across every definition of how we define ourselves. However, many efforts to help spur entrepreneurship among underserved communities or populations take an overly narrow approach to defining the entrepreneurs.

Organizations and funders focusing on supporting entrepreneurs who are veterans, LGBTQ, low-income, and other marginalized populations without making these programs accessible and inclusive of entrepreneurs with disabilities are missing large numbers of entrepreneurs within their target populations. Conversely, programs that support disabled entrepreneurs not only benefit disabled entrepreneurs generally, but also benefit disabled entrepreneurs who hold other marginalized identities. Disability is an identity that cuts across all other identities; making it extremely intersectional. Therefore, programs focused on supporting disabled entrepreneurs can also benefit all communities.

We also must better appreciate that – because of entrenched stigmas and biases throughout society – many people with disabilities never disclose their disability. The reality is that 96% of severe disability is invisible, including traumatic stress disorder (PTSD),

traumatic brain injury, diabetes, cancer, lupus, Crohn's disease, and fibromyalgia.

If we are to provide greater, more impactful access to social and financial capital to disabled entrepreneurs and business owners, we must better appreciate that the disabled population is enormous, nuanced, constantly evolving – but often hidden.

4. **Disabled People are Problem Solvers – So, Empower Them!**

For persons with disabilities, innovation is a matter of necessity and survival. Every entrepreneur and business owner at the Harkin Summit on Scaling Disability-Driven Innovation had the courage and desire to use their disability as an impetus for making a better, more inclusive society for everyone. The benefits from disability-driven innovation apply across every business and every organization on the planet. Imagine the influx of new ideas at a company where twenty to thirty percent of its workforce was empowered to bring their best, most authentic selves to work every day. Imagine the value that could be created if those employees were given permission to rechannel the ingenuity of masking disability to instead applying the traits of creativity, resourcefulness, and resilience to their jobs.

5. **Supply Chains Are Game Changers**

Arguably, the most common theme from the Harkin Summit on Scaling Disability-Driven Innovation was the game-changing potential of supply chains. Because of scarce social and financial capital many disabled-owned businesses are never able to become part of the supply chains of large companies. Yet those supply chains represent enormous opportunities for disabled entrepreneurs to grow and scale the products and services.

Unless organizations take a more expansive and inclusive approach to creating diverse supply chains, disabled-owned enterprises will be consigned to – at best – niche markets in the global economy.

Recommendations to Accelerate Disability-Driven Innovation

Below are 5 recommendations to accelerate disability-driven innovation.

Recommendation #1: *Create Space and Opportunity for Disability-Driven Innovation*

It is an established fact that a significant percentage of the population do not feel comfortable disclosing their disabilities. As a consequence, the active concealment of disabilities means we are not harnessing this lived experience to influence product and service design. Our inability to harness the skills and innovation of persons with disabilities means we are failing to reach our maximum innovative potential as a society. That shortcoming impacts all of us through less economic growth, lower productivity, and less advanced goods and services available in the market.

Recommendation #2: *Foster Social Capital*

As noted, the lack of social capital is a major impediment to scaling disability-driven innovation. As individuals, each of us can do more to serve as mentors and advisors to entrepreneurs with disabilities. Local chambers of commerce represent untapped allies and partners in creating social capital for entrepreneurs of all kinds. Organizations can do much more to utilize their many resources to help foster social capital. One easy step – empower the many employee resource groups to serve as resources to entrepreneurs and disabled owned businesses. Another easy step – dedicate a small fraction of a marketing or advertising budget to showcasing the business of an entrepreneur with a disability.

Recommendation #3: *Build Networks of People from All Lived Experiences*

Building on the previous recommendation, all of us have the ability – and opportunity – to build networks of people from all lived experiences. As Caroline Casey, the Founder and CEO of the Valuable 500 remarked in a previous interview with The Harkin Institute, “I’m 50 years old. If I was to innovate about something with a bunch of Irish white women, we would only have one point of view. But I’m not sure how we can problem-solve with such a narrow perspective. It doesn’t matter how great talent is. Without different experiences challenging what we believe I am pretty sure that we would create something that only serves 50-year-old Irish women. What’s the value of that?”

The potential payoff of harnessing lived experiences is powerful and game changing. Rather than seizing upon a small opportunity in a niche market, we can embrace our different experiences to foster transformative solutions that are worth billions of dollars and make society better far into the future.

Recommendation #4: *Create More Inclusive Supply Chains*

A supply chain that is fully inclusive of disability-driven innovation is one that goes beyond integrating disabled owned businesses into purchasing decisions. It also means actively showcasing the products and services to consumers to influence their purchasing decisions. This means incorporating the goods and services of disabled entrepreneurs into marketing and communications strategies, making the products visible on all platforms – online and physical venues, and ensuing internal procurement teams are well versed in the goods and services. It also means setting clear targets around purchasing quotas. A commitment to providing social capital – mentoring, consulting, and administrative support to name a few – so the disabled owned businesses continue to grow and thrive is a further indicator of an inclusive supply chain.

Recommendation #5: *Permanently Transform the Cycle of Innovation*

Innovation throughout the global economy is stunted because it is not open to a diverse set of entrepreneurs. When innovation is confined to a few select communities with a wealth of resources or narrow segments of the population, it is stifled, and we all suffer. The onus is not on persons with disabilities to change the innovative culture of society. As noted, they are innovating every day – most often to simply survive. Instead, it is incumbent on the established institutions of society – the private sector, policymakers, and financiers – to be more proactive in fostering a culture of innovation that elevates persons with disabilities to their true potential. Once that occurs everyone benefits.

The Harkin Institute and Drake University

The Harkin Institute for Public Policy & Citizen Engagement serves as a venue and catalyst for dynamic non-partisan research, learning, and outreach to promote understanding of the policy issues to which Senator Tom Harkin devoted his career.

The Harkin Institute is located at Drake University. Established in 1881, Drake is recognized as one of the finest institutions of higher learning in the Midwest. A mid-sized, private university in Des Moines, Iowa, Drake offers the benefits and resources of a larger institution along with the advantages of intimate class sizes and close personal relationships.

Drake's mission is to provide an exceptional learning environment that prepares students for meaningful personal lives, professional accomplishments, and responsible global citizenship. The Drake experience is distinguished by collaborative learning among students, faculty, and staff and by the integration of the liberal arts and sciences with professional preparation. Our inspiration is that together we transform lives and strengthen communities.