# Audio file

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# Transcript

CHRIS - Hello and welcome to episode 208 of WB 40, the weekly podcast with me Chris Western, Amy Low, and Teresa Loftus.

So, this week we don't have Matt. It's very unusual format not to be here, but I'm afraid it's just me and that's why I vandalised the start of the podcast already.

But don't despair. I do actually have two guests in Amy Low and Teresa Loftus from AbilityNet, and it's a subject that we've been coming back too, a few times recently on WP40, which is about diversity, equality, and some of the things that we can do to improve that situation in the workplace.

So, Amy, why don't you tell us a bit about AbilityNet and what it does and how you're involved?

AMY - Yes, that sounds great and thanks very much for having us this evening. And so AbilityNet has been around for about 22 years. It was formed from a couple of other charitable organisations and with support from IBM and Microsoft. We're a technology charity, unsurprisingly, with those supporters and we exist to remove barriers to participation for disabled people at home, at work and in education. And our vision is a digital world that's accessible to everybody.

We're pan disability and pan technology. And the things that we do to try and achieve our vision, we provide a range of free and paid for services for disabled and older people across all settings. We've got a free helpline that individuals can ring or can email, and that helpline provides support with any sort of assistive technologies that they're using.

We provide home visits as well from IT volunteers who can go out to support disabled people in their homes either to fix tech problems that they might have, or to show them how to activate specialist settings within their devices that are going to help them to be able to use them more independently.

We provide workplace and student needs assessments. So, talking to individuals about the barriers they might be encountering with their studies and their work, and making recommendations for tech adaptations and tools that could help them to work or learn more and more effectively. We've also got a range of online resources factsheets that talk about different disabilities and the types of technologies that might help.

We've got a fantastic tool called my computer my way, which provides step by step instructions of how to adapt your operating system to meet your needs and we also have a really busy comms team that provide webinars like this talking about new and exciting things that are coming down the track from a tech and accessibility perspective.

So, as well as our services to individuals, it's obviously really important that whilst disabled, people can be furnished with a range of different tech solutions that are going to meet their needs if the digital platforms and spaces that they're trying to navigate haven't been built with accessibility in mind. They can be shut out all over again.

And so, we provide a range of consultancy on the technical accessibility side. So, working with designers and developers who are creating websites and applications, making sure that they're aware of the requirements of the web content accessibility guidelines. So that's one area of consultancy.

And we also do lots of work with employers looking at how their working practises are configured, and rather than thinking about adapting to individual’s needs, looking at how you can create a workplace that's inclusive by design. So, Yeah, it's been a really, really interesting 18 months, obviously. Lots of challenges relating to the pandemic and that has increased our activities dramatically and you know we're just seeing it's a time of great change, but there's lots of interesting and exciting things that have come out of it as well as the challenges that we've all had to face.

CHRIS - Fantastic and such an important set of services, and certainly such an important thing for people to consider because you know the tools they improve all the time and there are so many tools that embedded in operating systems and like Windows and the tools that we use such Google or whether we use Office or whatever they're improving all the time, but actually, if you don't have the workplace set up in the right way, then they're not really going to help. It can still be an uphill struggle, and I think you know just giving people that ability to see what's available and how they can best use them can make all the difference really. So, Teresa? What do you think about that?

TERESA - I think it really can make a difference actually, and I think it's really important to raise the awareness of those free tools. I think that when we're looking at people in the workplace, just suggesting some of the tweaks that you can provide them with to help manage some barriers. So, say if it's spellings that people are having difficulty with, it provides them with some confidence by just showing them the types of tools that are maybe in Microsoft Word that can be useful, so you've got things like dictate or you've got things like immersive reader. You've got the editor function. All of those things are really simple to use, but there's also other settings that are set in within ease of access centre as well, and they're very often switched off for employees to access actually, so it's about sort of raising the awareness that those tools are there too for people to be able to use, and if they can just access those independently then maybe they can change the pointer size to be able to track that around the screen. Or maybe they can enlarge the font size a little bit to be able to access that, or perhaps invert the colours and so that you've got instead of the black text and a white background have white text in a black background, because in fact that reduces maybe the visual glare. So those are all really free solutions that people can start using and utilising within the workplace. That's if they're using some basic sort of office products. Basically, Microsoft Office and yeah, so it's really helpful.

AMY - And we always hear probably the thing that we hear most often from people on the individual side and organisations is “wow I had no idea it could do that” or “I had no idea that, as Teresa says, restricting access to these sorts of settings was disadvantaging my, my employees” So yeah, it's definitely a lot about communications. Isn’t it Teresa?

TERESA - It's about raising the awareness of those tools I think, and AbilityNet are really quite good at doing that.

So, you know, we've got our fact sheets that actually help employers understand about disability, but it actually provides them with a little bit more information about how a computer be set can be set up. So, within those fact sheets, it then leads you on to looking at My Computer My Way, and if you open up My Computer My Way it can actually set itself up for your working environment so that you can look at how you can change your settings to your specific needs. But if you're looking up for somebody else, maybe you're championing that the assistive technologies? Uhm, you could be providing some suggestions from them by looking at My Computer My Way and helping people to access the computer settings, but actually that's not all. It also provides you with details about mobile technology, so maybe using your handset or your tablet because workplace are quite agile now, so we're working sometimes in our cars moving around, maybe using the phone in accessing meetings when we're moving about on our phones and all we're sitting in a car using a tablet, and I know I've done it myself, you know, sat in the car and sort of had to join in and a meeting on my laptop before now so you know, we all work in very different ways and it's changing all the time.

CHRIS There really isn't it, and I think maybe for many people, even just the scale of what you're talking about in terms of people that might need to do these things is unknown. You know, we don't, always see the scale of the problem, as it were. What have you got stats about that in terms of number of disabled people in the workforce and maybe how things have changed for them in the last 18 months or so since the world has changed for so many of us in terms of work?

AMY - Yes, so there's eight point 4 million disabled people of working age in the UK, so that's 20% of the working age population. But the unemployment rate for disabled people is 8.4% compared to an unemployment rate of 4.6% for non-disabled people, and that gap. Unfortunately, during the pandemic has widened slightly from 28.1 percentage points to 28.8 percentage points, and you know there's been some research taken from a people management article saying that 71% of disabled people in employment were affected by the pandemic, through a loss of income furlough or redundancy and were more likely to be furloughed or made redundant than non-disabled people.

TERESA - Yeah, I think with that you know when people have been disadvantaged due to the pandemic, and we've seen some really strong stats there as well and kind of the issue is that there's a lack of awareness as to why people are being disadvantaged basically, and so there's 60% of employers say that the cost of workplace adjustments is a barrier to employing a disabled person, so it's like ‘why?’ when there's some free solutions out there and actually there's some really good government funded schemes there to provide support for people in the workplace. And there's some free resources to be able to provide people with knowledge how to change and adapt things so it's about again, it's about that awareness of maybe accessing funds, because if it's the free resources that don't quite work, we know that that provides a bit of a stepping stone, but if it doesn't quite work because the workplace includes sort of other programmes that are being used, specialist software that's being used maybe in call centres and maybe it's not always going to be the free solutions that are going to be useful there. Maybe it's going to need some assistive technology and that can be quite expensive, so it's knowing and understanding the types of software that can be used and be supported through government funded schemes like access to work to provide that help.

CHRIS - Now you think that given that we have a, uh, a tech skills gap across the country really, we have, you know, we've got many roles that are unfilled and given the solutions exist. And as you say, even those solutions which are not free which need a little bit of investment in say, a call centre environment. These are solutions that are essentially being investigated and invested in anyway because of the rise of automation tools in in our businesses.

Which are there to essentially take away some of those things that that people find hard to do, or people do slowly?

A lot of those technologies are useful for people with disabilities too, because there's lots of natural language processing that they can listen to the phone call they can. They can translate the phone call, or they can interpret what somebody saying to provide different options and so that so that you can provide them with options faster.

So, it seems to me that this is these are all part of the same problem set really is in helping people to do their jobs more effectively by providing them with tech but also helping people who have a disability. They struggle with one particular aspect of work to get them over that and to help them to be, you know, productive and enjoy their work in a in a way that, is, you know, beneficial to everybody, including the employer and including the customer.

And of course, when you've got a more diverse workforce, you generally do a better job anyway, because you've got somebody, I mean more perspectives on things, right?

AMY - Well, there's some strong statistics about the organisations with the greatest emphasis on diversity and inclusion are succeeding well ahead of those that don't prioritise diversity and inclusion. And I think disability brings a richness into organisations of that breadth of experience, and there's some really strong, unique skill sets that that come along with different disabilities and impairments that you know. This whole notion of high performing teams where people can play to their strengths and bringing, you know, some really unique skill sets, and you can see that coming through. There was a report by Accenture a little while back. I can't remember exactly what the what the percentages were, but it related to turnover, margin, across the across the whole range they were outperforming the top 10 organisations for diversity and inclusion were outperforming all the others so.

CHRIS - Yeah, yeah, I mean the company I work for IDC we see that too. We have research on the along the same lines and they and it's really just show that where you've got a diverse workforce you tend to have better productivity and better outcomes. Simply, I mean there are lots of good reasons for it right? But just that fact in its own right should be persuading people to see this as an investment in in success, not as a something to be in a like a burden to be carried in terms of extra cost, because you're probably going to spend that money anyway, right? It's just a matter of how you spend it and where you spend it.

TERESA - And I think actually with the pandemic, we've seen that people can work in different ways as well, so we've seen that. In fact, there's been a lot, you know we've all had to work from home and those tools that we've been used to using in the workforce, we've all had to learn and pick up on using at home. And it all gave us a bit of an awareness about disability to start off with, because we're all frightened about using maybe video conferencing and those barriers and people entering into your home and how can we stop people looking at the background? You know that makes me feel anxious? That makes me feel worried and those are feelings that you know people with disabilities have dealt with for a very long time and we were very quick to take on board these new ways of working and we really shouldn't be losing that in the future. We should be working with that and making sure that it's suitable for everybody.

So, you know, in the past we used to go in and do workplace assessments for people and I can remember going in and seeing somebody that was really struggling to come into work on a daily basis and found that the sensory overload of being sort of in the office. Lots of people around them, the sounds and the smell of the office just wasn't working for them and all they wanted to do was work from home, and if they could work from home, they'd be able to do their job. And yet that wasn't possible. This is going back a few years now, but the pandemic has actually shown that yes, we can work from home, and we've got the tools to do that. Everything stored in the cloud. Now we've got that way of working and we can collaborate really well. And we can do it in a way that is actually easy for people, so we don't have to have the cameras on when we're having a team meeting, we can still hear somebody voice and we can use captions if we want to. If somebody is hearing impaired, we can still have the captions on. If somebody needs to communicate in a different way, we can use text and if somebody finds it very difficult because they've got short term memory, we can record that meeting and we can re listen to that at a later time. And that also means that we've got one point of reference, in order to go back to that information so that everybody got the same meeting notes and it's not being taken by, you know four or five different people, and everybody sort of deciphered that information differently.

So, we know that actually we can do working from home, and I'm hoping that we don't have to have so many workplace assessments where you're going in and you're saying well, so and so they need to be able to work from office because of they've got this condition, or they've got a problem with IBS, and they need to be sitting closer to the toilets because they need to get there much quicker well, when you're in your home, that's not a problem. And why should somebody have to share that information that could potentially be quite embarrassing and be a bit of a stigma for some people as well. So, you know, there's lots of reasons for us to keep with this new way of working, basically more ability to be able to work in the way that we want to, and we're comfortable with.

AMY - One of the really positive things that we're finding in the last year or so, is organisations really wanting to interrogate each step of the employee journey at their organisation and really understand how they can you know, evaluate their own set up to make sure it's inclusive by design so you know the recruitment process is obviously your first starting point and there's so much that can be done to create a flexible recruitment process that allows everybody to demonstrate their strengths. Because a lot of the time, if you've got a standard and narrow recruitment process what you end up with is lots and lots of people with very similar and narrow skill sets.

Whereas if you open up that recruitment process and we always say that accessibility is really mostly about choice. It's about saying to people. “If you'd like to give a presentation, you can do that, if you'd prefer to record a presentation in advance, you can do that if you'd prefer to write a paper to demonstrate what you know your skills and knowledge in an area, you can choose that”, and it needn't be linked to disclosing a disability. It's just about people being able to perform at their best, and that then extends through to the onboarding process. Things like meetings that you know Teresa was just saying making sure that you've got a meeting housekeeping sort of set of rules that are going to allow everybody to input not just the loudest voices which I think we we've all sort of recognised. That particularly in the online world, it can be quite difficult to engage everybody if you're not consciously thinking about that. Right through to career development, so we've been providing various training and consultancy around that and it's been really interesting to see people challenging you know norms that had been in place in their organisation for so many years and I think the pandemic has created that, it's almost that growth, mindset, where people were out of their comfort zones and then they didn't want to just slot straight back into them because moving away from the status quo had sort of thrown a light on: “Goodness me. Why on Earth have we been doing it like this for so long?” So yeah, it's been. It's been really, really interesting.

CHRIS

Yeah, a couple of years ago we had a lady called Doctor Nancy Doyle who is something of a neuro diversity specialist on the podcast and we talked about some of these things like people, the trend for open plan offices kind of disenfranchising some people, because Once Upon a time they had been put in a room to work by themselves because that's how they work most effectively. But once it became a thing that everybody had to work in an open plan office, they just became really far less productive and unhappy. And often they're leaving workplaces because it's just couldn't handle it anymore. As you say there, there are some Silver Linings from the pandemic. Because they force us to accept that there are actual choices, right?

AMY - Definitely, I think open plan actually has not proved to be a brilliant working environment for most people and what we're hearing from a lot of organisations now is that whole notion of hybrid working where people can work from home or from quiet spaces. There's lots of workplace design with pods and quiet areas, and all this kind of setup.

And when you're in a collaborative space, collaborate rather than trying to do everything in the one spot. Again, it's that flexibility, and you know Teresa. You've done various sort of onsite assessments in large open plan spaces.

TERESA - Yes, I. I mean, I was just going back to sort of like when I first started working. So, you know when I really first started and I worked for British Aerospace in Weybridge a long time ago, and it was absolutely open plan then, but you had offices there as well which allow people to work very quietly, but then there are really, really very large places and then some of the other places that I've worked in very small offices, and it allowed you to have those unique little conversations.

And then when I've gone in to do workplace assessments, you've gone into these massive great big call centres and where the adjustments really are about sort of like people saying I can't hear the person speaking to me because this one this person got really loud voice next to me and you know, what can we do as a reasonable adjustment to allow me to hear this person that that actually the other person next to me is just much, much louder than me. So yeah, I mean. If we could work in different ways to allow us to actually communicate and interact really well, like working from home, and we know again that we can actually take these phone calls now at home where we don't have that interference from people, whether they've got a louder voice or whether we've got a hearing impairment and we can't hear. So clearly, you know, we can allow us to work in these spaces is far more suitable for us, in fact.

So, it's using. It's probably a bit of a hybrid model, isn't it? Where we have some people working in the office and some people working at home, we don't want to lose the fact that actually we need to make sure that everybody can collaborate it as well when we're in these meetings.

So, we don't want an advantage over some where they're in the office and not able to sort of like communicate. Because we've got actually lost sight of some people when they're in in their homes. So, it's working out. How are we going to bring those people together? And maybe we need to ensure that when we have these meetings that we're including all of our people, regardless of disability, that we're including everybody within that meeting and maybe signing on early to ensure that actually we can have those social chit chats with people as we're coming in and we can say good morning or good afternoon to everybody in the meetings, but we actually all sign in and we're all online.

And we're all collaborating at the same time when we've got meetings as well.

AMY - Yeah, I think meetings is one of the really interesting ones. Actually, because using Microsoft Teams and zoom and the functionality that is inbuilt in them. Again, it goes back to that notion of choice that people can make. You know what I was saying earlier about the loudest voice being heard when the conversation is all verbal. When you have a group of people where you've got some people who extroverted, some people who are deeper thinkers might take a little bit more time to come up with their thoughts. Some people who don't like to speak out loud. Actually, these platforms have been really, really helpful because you've got the chat function that people can use to put in in, you know a thought that's come to them. You've got the emoji reactions that people can use. You've got all sorts of different ways that people can input, and I think it's really actually, you know, brought some people’s viewpoints more to the fore and you're benefiting from that wider range rather than the people who immediately jump into a solution and leave other people behind, you're actually finding that meetings are more collaborative, but also the decisions and actions coming out of them are more well thought out. So yeah, it's interesting.

TERESA - I think actually with technology we can make sure that everybody is included. So right from the beginning of a meeting and especially with Microsoft Office with we've got the accessibility checker. So, if we've created an agenda, if we've created documents and resources to be looked at, we can make sure that those are checked for accessibility and ensure that actually somebody that's maybe using a screen reader can access those documents, or we can provide them in a shared folder that so somebody can actually investigate that information and feel comfortable about actually collaborating during a meeting beforehand. So again, we've got this. This area, in which we can actually share our resources in advance to everybody that's attending, no matter where they are geographically.

CHRIS - I mean, you talk about things like the accessibility checker, but I mean I'll be honest, that's not something that I'm familiar with, and I'm I am wondering how employers can get this into the kind of the culture into the into the muscle of working. You know that so that we're doing this as a matter of course.

It's just a part of what we do rather than having to be something that happens that somebody remembers because they happen to remember about accessibility.

And it's a little bit like security. In that sense, you know, we always talk about in in technology and in in information management we talk about security being something that everybody thinks about all the time. It's so it's just part of what you do. It's not just, it's not something you do at the end, and it's part of the whole information management piece and accessibility and being considerate and thinking about our colleagues in that sense has got to be part of the culture, hasn't it?

TERESA - Yeah, it really has.

AMY - It's that whole awareness thing. Would you say Teresa? A lot of the time as soon as someone understands the barriers that they are unintentionally creating and how that manifests they can't UN know it. I've always said this. You can't UN know accessibility once someone demonstrated it to you.

And in the public sector there's been some regulatory change in 2018. Uh, a law came in that came from a European directive that said that all public sector bodies need to make sure that they are compliant with web content accessibility guidelines and that goes through websites, intranets, databases and so on. And one of the one of the groups that was affected was universities and colleges.

Because they're obviously public sector bodies, but the complexity of a university, it's not like an organisation where you've got 7 people that manage the website and publish documents, and you've got a nice thin funnel that everything is going through where you can manage it. These organisations had to engage absolutely everybody because every lecturer that's uploading content to the virtual learning environment. You've got thousands of content editors operating 1,000,000 miles an hour. And so, they've been really creative in how they've been approaching it, and we've been working with various organisations to say you've got to give people the knowledge and understanding and create that framework within the organisation. You've got strategy and structure. Around that, you've got the knowledge and the tools at people fingertips. And then you've got this sort of governance piece that's making sure it's happening. And a lot of the universities that have been most successful have engaged that champions type role where you have people across the university trained up with the skill set.

And we've worked to develop some e-learning options. Actually, that are quite sort of person centred that people could go through and they'll understand about the different barriers related to different disabilities, and I think it's that sort of what you said about making it business as usual.

Even simple things like checking your policy documents to make sure that they're alluding to digital accessibility. Putting digital accessibility as an essential criterion on job descriptions. All of those sorts of things do the trick in getting to the situation where then it becomes as you say, like security like GDPR. You just know you've got to do it and you've got to get it right.

So, it's definitely a journey and I think if people try and do everything at once. It is challenging, but we always say it's about people are people are very much engaged around personal stories and storytelling and explaining what the impact is of ignoring accessibility. And it you know it can be slamming a virtual door in people faces, you know, and I think that the more you can sort of engage people around the why and then give them the how and it is really impactful.

CHRIS - So then give us a call to action. Then if somebody is listening to this and they think OK, how can I do this in my organisation above and beyond the going in you've talked about; you know how you how you think about in terms of your culture and in terms of what they can do as a kind of practical, what we're going to do tomorrow, other than obviously call AbilityNet and draw on you guys. What the most important things that that they can think about.

TERESA - So, I think take it away from the individual and make it the organisations responsibility. So, it's not the individual’s responsibility to say I can't do this, and these are the reasons why.

So, that shouldn't be their responsibility. It needs to be the organisation responsibility and it needs to be their awareness of the tools that can be used and it's creating champions within those organisations as well. So, it really needs to start, uhm, as Amy said earlier, with regards to sort of how we're going to employ people, ensure that we keep them and have that diverse organisation and the skill sets in there from the whole range of people in the way that we want to make sure that we've got everybody, and they’re on board and retained for long periods of time.

You know, so yeah, I think it's about raising the profile of what can be done by the organisation rather than by the individual.

AMY - Definitely and talk to your people you know. Get that feedback. In most organisations there will be a wide range of people who can feed into what's working and what isn't working. You know, and having that open mindset to say we, you know we really want to get this right. Let's work together to achieve it. It's that dialogue, isn't it? Teresa, what do you think? It really does need to be, you know, at a senior level, people starting to walk the walk and talk the talk, but also that positive representation as well of showing what an impact it makes when people do work in a more inclusive way.

CHRIS - Well, thank you Amy and Teresa. That is another very interesting conversation and food for thought for everybody. And thank you for being with me tonight, I hope that Matt's back next week because we could all do with getting back to normal and it only enables me to say thanks to everybody for listening and we'll see you next week for episode 209.

AMY - Thank you for listening to WB 40. You can find us on the Internet at wb40podcast.com on Twitter at WB 40 podcast and on all good podcasting platforms.