**Podcast transcript**

**Series 2, Episode 5: Disability in the workplace**

**Opening Credits** ‘Talking Inclusion with’ Steven Copsey.

**Steven** Welcome to our next podcast in our second series of ‘Talking Inclusion with’ from Inclusive Employers. I'm Steven Copsey, Senior Inclusion and Diversity Consultant and CMI Programme Director at Inclusive Employers and your host for today's podcast.

Today, we're going to be talking about disability in the workplace, with a focus on physical disabilities and what employers can do to ensure that disabled employees can have successful careers in their organisation.

Our guests are going to share their experiences and offer advice. Before I introduce our guests in case you don't know as we're Inclusive Employers. Our mission is to make every workplace an inclusive employer where every colleague values differences, and can contribute their skills and experiences fully to their organisation.

These podcasts are for anyone who has an interest in inclusion and diversity. In our podcast we share life stories and experiences, learn about best practice and hear practical advice for employers from our guests, as well as Inclusive Employers own Inclusion and Diversity experts.

Today I'm joined by Nathan Stevens, Performance Pathway Senior Officer at Disability Sport Wales and Paralympian. Hi, Nathan.

**Nathan** Hi there - Good morning. How are you?

**Steven** Good thank you. And Natalie Clegg, Technology Officer at Co-op. Natalie was on our podcast last year talking about the impact of Coop’s Represent network for disabled colleagues, of which she is the Chair. Welcome back, Natalie.

**Natalie** Hi. Thanks for having me back here.

**Steven** And last but not least Inclusive Employers’ Senior Consultant, Carol Buchanan.

Hi, Carol.

**Carol** Hi, Steven.

**Steven** So we're going to start today's discussion, thinking about our own experiences.

There are 14 point 1 million people with disabilities in the UK and they are almost twice as likely to be unemployed as non disabled people. So what is it like to live with a disability in the UK today?

Nathan, let's start with you. Can you tell us a bit about yourself and your disability?

**Nathan** Yeah, of course I can. Obviously. I'm Nathan Stevens, 3-time Paralympian and now I currently work for Disability Sport Wales, as their senior performance pathway officer.

I lost my legs when I was nine years old, due to a train accident. So I've lived most of my life, in a wheelchair on prosthetics, you know, having the daily routine of potential struggles for accessibility and getting into and from venues.

But it didn't really come to light actually, until I potentially retired from my sport because everything about parasport was built for the purpose of accessibility and getting anybody with a disability into that environment. So obviously, we did have some struggles when potentially going to some overseas competitions and venues and accessibility was non existent. So we had to kind of adapt to the environment that we were given, always had to struggle with accessible transports and overseas competitions, you know, they didn't have no vans or vehicles with no tail lifts. So it was the demoralising experience of getting out of my chair and sliding up and down the steps while they literally just chucked my chair in the back of the van until we got to where we needed to be.

But actually, from going into my working career, I've felt like I've been pretty lucky with the organisations that I've worked for. And everything has kind of been put in place obviously working for Disability Sport Wales, the nature of their role is for accessibility and inclusivity across the sport sector. So yeah, I feel like I've kind of one of the lucky ones to to find an employer who is all about accessibility and making sure that environments are safe for individuals with impairments and disabilities.

**Steven** And we'll obviously talk more about that employer perspective later. Natalie, how about you give us a bit about yourself and your disability?

**Natalie** My story is a little bit different to Nathan's. So I became, well, identified as disabled for the last few years. So probably since really 2017. So like many people, I caught a really bad virus and it triggered an autoimmune response. So that was in around 2016, I started not to feel too good, and that was consistent. It had a bit of a knock on effect to my health overall. And in 2017, I was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease, which is called Sjōgrens Syndrome. I always joke that nobody's ever heard of it, but it's actually one of the most popular ones. So it's kind of similar to rheumatoid arthritis and a little bit like lupus. So it's a lot of similar things that people describe in those illnesses.

I also have hypermobility spectrum disorder, which I didn't really realise until I started to become more unwell with the autoimmune disease. So I actually was struggling as a child with the hypermobility, but I never knew it. I didn't realise that other people didn't deal with chronic pain every day, dislocations, injuries, the amount of time I spent in A & E as a teenager because my knee had dislocated and had collapsed at school things like that. I just thought it was par for the course of being a teenager, I had no idea that it was related to anything else.

But unfortunately I think once the autoimmune disease kind of kicked off, it had a bit of a colliding effect with the hypermobility disorder as well, and I've had quite a rough few years really kind of transitioning into the world of disability as an adult, like a lot of people do actually, kind of gather illnesses across their life. And for me, it's really kind of immerse me in a world that I really had no idea about and would never have had any lived experience in until really, I started to become unwell.

So I've worked for the Co-op for 10 years this summer. And I think it's quite unusual for employers to talk about people's journeys as being actually they work somewhere and become disabled whilst they are working at that employer.

So often we focus on recruitment as being a real important pathway, but actually supporting your colleagues who are going through diagnosis and becoming disabled, whilst employed in our organisation is quite traumatic, as well. So I think it's important that we do talk about that later on, and I think you know, for me, sometimes with invisible disabilities, it can be quite a difficult experience, I think, in general life, because people will see you one day without a walking stick, and then the next day you've got crutches or need a wheelchair, or you know, different types of mobility aids, and.. people suspect you are faking it, or, you know, being overdramatic, but actually fluctuating conditions are extremely hard to manage. And that certainly been a huge learning curve for me.

And part of the reason why I do what I do at work with the voluntary side of things, because I think it's really important that as a community, disabled people are able to support each other, that peer to peer connection is so invaluable. And I've learned there are so many people who are starting chronically ill journeys, like kind of now or are on their path to being diagnosed and actually the experience you've gained, you can pass on to others and help them with their experiences, too. So I think it's really good that we're talking about this today and continuing to have these conversations.

**Steven** You touched on a couple of potentially negative moments there. In terms of your general life, have you had negative experiences as a result of your disabilities, and do you feel that there's been a time where you've been treated differently because of that?

**Natalie** I think being treated differently is really common, but probably don't stress how common it actually is for disabled people.

When I've was kind of reflecting getting ready for today, I was kind of thinking what kinds of things would I like to reflect in today's podcast?

I think one thing for me is that societal exposure to disabled people still feels like a taboo. So there have been instances where I mean, to be fair, my crutches are quite out there, they’re leopard print ones, I thought, if I'm gonna have some, I'm gonna have cool ones that could go with lots of outfits. But I've had instances where, you know, children have looked at them, and I'm presuming they're intrigued by them, rather than anything else, and the parents have dragged them away, like, you know, don't look at that person, they’re disabled, you know, it's like it's a crime. So I think, you know, that can be a bit disconcerting in the moment, and you do kind of get used to people staring, but at the same time, it does feel unsettling, like you're some sort of person on show, you know, being like, taken around for people to look at.

I think a big one for me, actually, which often isn't talked about is ‘Medical Gaslighting’. And I think this is really common for chronically ill people, and it's probably the biggest reflection I have, actually, when it comes to negative experiences. There have been, so I mean, I think at times, I was under like nine different consultants, because chronic illnesses often affect you systemically. So, you know, we don't have an NHS system, which ties all those pieces together and has a single view, and there have been so many times when I've just been brushed off - oh, you're not really that ill, you know, or it's all in your head, or you're too young to be this ill, so it can't be real.

And you know, having to sit in front of these, you know, very well respected professional medical people and then telling you that, you know, you're imagining it, or there's nothing really wrong with you, that's really damaging for someone to go through, and unfortunately, there's it's quite common and chronically ill experiences. And I think for me, that's probably one of the biggest factors that we often forget that people go through and actually being treated differently to others, because things that are invisible, and people can't always see them going through the system, which is supposed to help you is actually hindering you. And there's quite a lot of trauma for a lot of people there, and I would say that's probably one of the biggest negative experiences that I've had. And it definitely sticks with you.

**Steven** And Nathan, how about you? You touched upon a few things earlier, the fact that actually Parasport is geared up for people with disabilities. But what about that general negativity in daily life coming out of Parasport that are being made to feel different, how’s that been for you?

**Nathan** Absolutely I think growing up, you get two types of the population. You know, as Natalie mentioned, you get the parents who pull their children away, and that can be really frustrating at times, I've had many times but again, I'm just generally walk around the shop. So you get a really inquisitive young child who’s just asking a question ‘oh, what's wrong with them’. I've come across parents who pull their child away… ‘Don’t.. Don’t.. Don’t wanna ask questions”.

Then I have the really positive experience, where I've got the parents telling then ‘we'll just go and ask them’ and I've had the parent quoting “Do you mind my child wants to ask what happened to you”? Fantastic. You know, it's encouraging that inquisitive nature, but also that early onset of learning and making disability normal, but making it acceptable and in the public eye, and I'd love more parents to be that confidence to allow their child to get into that space of ask appropriate questions, and it is appropriate questions. I don't want a child coming up to me and asked me ‘Oh, how did you feel after you you lost your legs’? Or was it I've had many questions of ‘how much blood was there?’ and all of that lot when when I got run over, but I don't mind educating. I don't mind learning, and I don't mind talking about disability – I do it in my day to day job.

But yeah, there are times where, you know, you still get the hecklers in the street, I think you're always going to get them individuals who just don't understand or aren't confident in themselves, so they want to portray their negativity on everyone else around them. And unfortunately, I think it's gonna take a long time before them types of individuals fully understand that the consequences of their words and actions.

**Steven** So, there's something that's really resonated with me about what you both said. And it's that that societal feeling about disability and I'm actually the child of a disabled mother, my mum was in a really bad motorbike accident about 25 years ago, badly broke her leg, couldn't walk for years, couldn't work for years either.

She lost her career started again from the ground up when I was in my teens, she got quite far in a job after 15 years or so and then decided, ‘oh, actually, my, body's giving up on me now’. I think she was diagnosed with degenerative disc disease.

And that's something that happens to a lot of people as they get older, but it hit her about 20 years earlier than it should have done because of her accident because of the wear and tear. She tried to make some sort of reasonable adjustment from that ‘Maybe I can do three days a week perspective’, and her boss was like, ‘No, you're either in full time or you're not’.

So she was essentially forced to leave her job, and even for me, being her child, knowing what she went through. If you'd asked me a few years ago, what does your mum do for a living? I probably would have said, ‘Oh, she's retired’, which is technically true, but she's retired due to her disabilities, rather than the fact that, oh, she made loads of money, so she can retire by the time she's 50. Actually, no, she's has no earnings, no savings, no assets, she survives on that disability benefit.

So there's still that stigma out there. Particularly for those who are connected to those people with disability too. They don't want to talk about it, they don't want to admit it. There's something that is taboo about this. So we absolutely need to have this conversation, and for people without disabilities out there, we need to get over ourselves. We need to be good allies, and we need to make sure that people who have disabilities are able to have their stories told.

Carol, if we just move on to you now, from another perspective, so you are the parent of a disabled son, would you like to share any experiences from that perspective from yours or his?

**Carol** Absolutely. So I'm both the parent of a disabled son, and I have an acquired disability myself, about 6% of children have a disability in the UK. By working age, it's about 16%, and by the time we retire, it's closer to 45%.

So most of the disability that we have in the UK is acquired disability. Ethan, my nine year old son has learning disabilities and what's called ‘Global Development Delay’. That's a bit of a catch all term, when we don't really know what's going on and what the underlying causes are. So it's a bit of a catch all.

I'm listening to Natalie and to Nathan talking about experiences specifically with children, and I've seen it, I've experienced it myself, but I've seen some positivity.

So Ethan's school is a wonderful facility set up for children with significant additional needs. But it is in a campus with a mainstream school, and what happens as students, children go between the schools and work with each other, they go on visits, they go on school days out, people from Ethan’s school and people from the mainstream school, and even the mainstream schools in the area, go on joint visits with kids from my son's school. And that's wonderful because what it's doing is creating a level of acceptance and just bringing normality to the fact that some people within our society have disabilities and those disabilities can be really wide ranging.

**Steven** When I think about careers, and impact of disability on career. Nathan, obviously, disability has impacted your career in a massive way. I would like to talk a bit more about that.

**Nathan** Yeah, it probably wasn't the career path I wanted to take, if I'm honest, I wanted to be a marine biologist, and I loved the ocean, I love swimming, I love everything nature and wildlife.

But obviously, having a physical impairment and potentially spending, you know, days on end on a boat doing marine life surveys, probably wasn't the right place for me to be but obviously, Sport took a massive hold of my life and ended up going down that route.

And it was in 2014 when I retired from athletics, that I was kind of forced into the world of career hunting, I’ve never written a CV before - do I put on my CV that I have a disability, am I looking for jobs that actively promote accessible employers, and so it was a tough experience to start off with, but then the role came up within Disability Sport Wales and you know, I bit their hand off, put in the application and the whole process was inclusive, you know, there was elements in the application pack that stated, please let us know if you have a disability, so we can make reasonable adjustments to the interview process, getting access to the interview venue, and even down to language barriers, BSL to hard of hearing or visually impaired. There was an accessible format for anybody with any impairment, to kind of come in and apply for the job. So that in itself was like they know what they're talking about.

Even when I was accepted for the job, even on the application and the induction into the work, even though I went through a personal evacuation plan for the site building, making sure that the nearest fire exit was applicable to myself, because actually, the one outside the office was up a set of stairs, the nearest fire alarm was up a set of stairs. So it's like, this isn't going to be appropriate for myself, that's fine. This is your personal plan for if we have a fire or anything else like that. And I thought, you know, they know what they're doing, which was great.

And even since I've been working for them now for six years, and very similar to that, I suffered from chronic pain from a nerve disorder from the amputations, and just a complete understanding of how are you feeling today? Well, I've had a little bit of a bad night, take it easy, it's fine. You know, if you need to take the day, take the day, it's just having that open communication with my employer that has really felt like that they really appreciate their staff, you know, the staff is at the centre of everything that they do, the work is secondary, if you're well enough to do the work, fantastic.

And it's only a small organisation, so we only have 14 core members of staff. So it's a really neat family unit. And it's, like I said, I'm one of the lucky ones who have gone into employment and have been able to to fully excel in my role, with the added implications of having an impairment and, and travel. So even down to when I first came into the organisation, we had work courtesy vehicles, they knew I couldn't actually access the vehicles that they had. So they bought in a specially adapted automatic vehicle with hand controls, so that I wasn't excluded from actually using any vehicles for travel, as I travel all over Wales.

So even though they’re small, little things, and just that thought process that they go through to make sure that well, let's take a step back. Let's see what we need to do for everyone. And then, we come together and find the solution. So yeah, like I said, I'm probably one of the lucky ones and having a relatively positive experience within the the employments.

**Steven** And Natalie, what about you mentioned earlier, actually, those that acquire their disability throughout the course of their employment have a very different experience, very different journey. What's your career journey been like?

**Natalie** Largely mine has been positive, if I'm honest, and that's probably because I'm not very afraid of being open and honest, and speaking up for myself - that does help.

Now I've had some really great managers over the past few years, who have been really flexible, really supportive, and as Nathan says, you know, kind of really understanding and having compassion that some days you might not be feeling your best, but other days, you can do a fantastic job, and that's all that really matters, and making sure that the output you deliver is what's kind of measured, not kind of how present you are in the office, or how many hours you working, making sure that people fulfil every single working hour due in your contracted time, that kind of thing. It's more about the quality of the work that you deliver.

I am conscious that a lot of people don't have the same experience that I've had. And I think you know, we really do throughout the UK have a huge sliding scale of where organisations are at, in terms of support systems and routes for people to get the adjustments they need. I think it's really important that organisations are forthcoming with conversations about adjustments.

So as Nathan mentioned, I also when I've gone through interviews where I work, I've asked for adjustments to me it's things like, having a written version of the questions in the session, and I think because I get brain fog with the conditions that have. I forget what the question is halfway through answering it, and I end up rambling on about something, and I don't know where I'm going with it.

So actually having those adjustments in the interview helped me perform a lot lot better. There are a lot of organisations who see physical access as the adjustments they provide at interview, but don't consider that there are tons of other things that might need to be provided for people.

There will be some people who have processing impairments, for example, who actually they need the questions up front to help them prepare to enable them to perform well at the interview, and I think, you know, there's lots of things that I've heard over the years, of people having experiences that have been really poor at interview, not necessarily where I work, but in other places, as well, and that people suggest that it's given someone or it's given them an advantage over other people will actually recognise in what equity actually means. That, you know, it's not about equality, it's about equity when it comes to disability and disability inclusion.

So I think you know, that's really important that not only at interview, people are suggesting options for adjustments that people could have, but also then once they're on boarded to an organisation, continuing that conversation, because adjustments are going to be a continuing part of someone's experience, and having a great time at work.

And personally, for me, I've been fortunate to be able to have flexible hours and condensed hours options for how I work. So I found what works really well for me is I condensed my hours over a fortnight, so I have a long weekend, every other weekend. That gives me the downtime to rest and then come back into the next fortnight feeling really energised because I've slept, and I've just done nothing. Because the time I'm working, I'm literally just working and sleeping and just kind of getting through until the point I can take a break. So having that kind of routine and rhythm to how I work has been really helpful for me,

I also have specialist equipment. So I have a specialist chair that's fitted for me. And I was fortunate to be able to get that from the office and bring it home when we started working from home due in lockdown. It's meant that I've had the equipment I've needed whilst I've been working from home, and actually, I found that working from home for me is amazing. There are lots of people that don't have that experience, and I'm fully understanding of that, and I think that's where hybrid working policies is actually really beneficial for any organisation.

But I have heard so many stories of colleagues who have felt that it has really kind of empowered them to do more, to be more productive, to have more success at work, because they have got everything they need at home, they've got a setup that works for them.

Personally for me, I have. y’know, there have been times I've had meetings in bed, and I know that sounds ridiculous for people who don't need that time to rest, and you know, my blood pressure's a bit wonky. So sometimes if I'm upright, I'm either getting migraines or passing out, so being able to rest and recline where you can't usually do that in an office that we don't tend to have those sort of spaces for people to do the things they need to do such as lying down, or if they're in a bad pin day, just taking some time out with heat packs, ice packs, medication, taken an hour for rest, that kind of thing. Whereas working from home really allows me to do that, and have the freedom and flexibility to do my hours around my health condition and manage my health in the way that I need to.

I mean, there have been negative experiences previously, but it's usually down to a manager's perception of disability, and I think this is where we come up against the societal misunderstandings of disability and the taboo of it, because quite often, it's the individual person's manager that has the responsibility to put the adjustments in place to act on behalf of the colleague to make their work and environment a good one.

And actually, I've heard things said, from other people that their manager just doesn't understand., and I've had the odd few managers where that has been difficult, and I ended up saying to one of them, you know, my health condition is mine, you are here to help manage my workload and making sure I'm performing at work. But my health is my business. And I think I had to really draw the line with some managers because they thought it was their responsibility to look after my health at work, and that was the choice that I didn't want to make, because actually, no one can understand my health and my well-being better than me.

I really personally hate the term reasonable adjustments, because that brings in so much debate around what's reasonable and what isn't, and for who, so I'm making it my mission at the moment within the Co-op to try and change our language around that. I mean, that language comes from the Equality Act, doesn't it and the legal side of things, but actually, I want as an organisation, us to be talking about adjustments and support, and actually not what's reasonable and what isn't, but how far can we go to help someone and making sure that we put as much in place as we can to help someone thrive at work.

As you mentioned, Steven, it's not fair that people are basically told they have to just not work because someone can't accommodate for them. In my mind, there's no reason why disabled people shouldn't be thriving in the workplace given the support and adjustments they need, and it's actually just about making sure that an organisation does that rather than telling people, ‘well, there's no point you come into work because you're not valuable to us’.

**Steven** And before we move on, Nathan, have there been any instances where you felt that being disabled has put you at a disadvantage?

**Nathan** I think it was probably my own perceptions more than anything going into obviously employment, having that negative conversation ‘oh, I have a disability, what can and can’t I do?

I've only ever done two jobs outside of sport and I was working for an independent living company, and obviously working for Disability Sport Wales.

So it was me understanding well, what can I do? What actually am I able to do? Because there's that perception again, of if you have a disability, you're stuck to an office role because manual labour or factory work, you get into your head well, actually, is it an inclusive environment? Is it an environment that someone in a wheelchair or someone on prosthetics and use crutches daily? Is it an environment safe for you and it can be, it can be made safe, it can be made equitable? It's kind of breaking that mould of traditional disabled jobs, then I guess all jobs that are are adequately facilitated, for individuals with impairments.

But as I said, I've had quite a positive experience. But again, like Natalie said, I've heard lots of horror stories. I've heard stories of again, individuals being cut off because they've had a really bad week with pain management, and the employers don't understand what that means, and they're not willing to make personal adjustments for that individual to be able to thrive and succeed in the workplace, and it is down to that managerial understanding and that organisational understanding of diversity and equity, you know that there is reasonable adjustments made Natalie, for individuals with certain religious beliefs - they need to take time out for prayer, and certain times of the year adjustments are made for their personal or religious circumstances. So it's done in other avenues of diversity, it just now needs to be broader and have that impact for individuals with impairments and those who suffer with chronic illnesses.

**Steven** At Inclusive Employers, we encourage employers to focus on the social model of disability, where we shift the conversation from talking about the disability itself as something that needs to be fixed, and instead recognise that any barriers encountered by people with disabilities are not the result of their disability, but the result of how our society is not designed to support different groups of people.

So this in turn moves that shift from those with disabilities having to make adjustments, to society and employers being responsible for ensuring that barriers do not exist.

So we're now going to talk about recruitment and attraction, and how barriers can be removed to ensure you're attracting people with disabilities to your workplace and supporting people to be successful throughout the hiring process.

So, Carol, what advice would you give to employers on how to ensure that their hiring process is inclusive to people with disabilities.

**Carol** The first thing that I would say is don't make any assumptions about what an inclusive hiring process actually looks like, be open to ideas and open to asking people what will work for them, that goes the same for once people are an employment as well as recruitment. But there's a few pieces of good practice.

Firstly, putting statements on your adverts to see that you're encouraging applications. It’s simple and something that can help indicate that you are absolutely up for having the conversation with people about what their needs are, and accommodating that.

A mistake I often see made, is thinking about the physical only, and I think Natalie spoke about that earlier. We think about physically getting people in and out of a building, and we forget about processing, we forget about all of the other types of impairments that people might have, that really simple adjustments can absolutely give them what they need, whether it's something printed out, whether it's a slightly different way of putting questions to people, I would say just don't assume, show that you are willing, and then speak to people about what it is that they need.

The other side, I would say is do a bit of training with your hiring managers. So we've talked today about how different experiences with differently line managers can absolutely transform your experience of thriving at work. It is the same in the recruitment process. So make sure your managers understand how to do a really good job of this, prepare them for it so that they can give a really inclusive feel, a really inclusive experience for people joining your organisation.

**Steven** Natalie, thinking about employers, their recruitment processes, what should they be doing better? What could they be doing better, and are there any obstacles you'd like to see removed from that process?

**Natalie** Oh, it's such a big topic this - We could literally have an entire podcast just on recruitment. And I think, you know, it's one of the most interesting ones, actually, because I don't think many organisations realise just how many barriers are put in place within their recruitment processes, and actually, I think if many of those employers were to ask disabled people, even within their own organisation to test the process and give feedback, they'd be really, really surprised at just how many blockers are in place there.

So often, we are wanting people to do things like psychometric testing, writing big paragraphs of answers, and doing things which ensure that someone fits into their organisation. Well, actually, if someone fits, then it's not a diverse organisation that they're building, and I think there's a real lack of understanding about the impact of creating those screening processes. And it's quite ironic then that you then hear organisations saying, well, we want to ensure in recruiting a diverse workforce, and you kind of think well remove the barriers first, and you might find that you'll get a diverse workforce that have been recruited.

I think something that's really important for organisations to realise is that disability inclusion doesn't mean that they're getting sub-par candidates. So actually, if people don't meet those psychometric testing levels, or that they're unable to record videos of themselves speaking - Well, if someone's hearing impaired, they're going to struggle with doing a two minute video answering a question where they've got to speak fast and get everything in, and actually removing those barriers means that you're getting some fantastic candidates coming through who have a huge amount to offer.

It's really interesting to think that organisations think they're doing the right thing by putting those steps into their process, but actually the hindering themselves in terms of a diverse workforce.

I would also reiterate Carol's message there around training hiring managers, so often, we have huge amounts of bias within the end stage of a recruitment process, and people don't realise that the things that often they're looking for is somebody who is similar to them. Because you feel the rapport with somebody, then you know, if they're similar to you, but recruiting people who are the same as you, means that you're not recruiting diversity, and I think that's something that is often misunderstood when someone's you know, great at interview, or they think their great at interview, and actually, the recruiting people who are just similar to them, as a hiring manager going into the interview process, and being really aware of your biases. There's tonnes of biases out there to learn about, but actually really recognising yourself in those situations and the questions you're asking, and making sure that you are removing all, or as much of your bias as possible as part of that process, the opportunities you can then create for those people to really thrive in that interview and then move on then to be a great employee. There's just tonnes of opportunity there.

And I think as well, what I would add to that is excellent onboarding processes that match the sales pitch. So often, it's, you know, almost the virtual sign on the window, saying, we're a really great inclusive employer come and join us. When someone arrives to realise there's no support processes in place, there's no way for them to get different technology, physical equipment, different types of flexible working to support them, because they require it, then you just turn off people straightaway, and then they wonder why they're losing the great new candidates that they've hired.

So it's a whole holistic process that needs to be looked at as part of that recruitment. But I think, you know, so many organisations are missing out on such a fantastic opportunity, and personally, the amount of disabled people I have met, who are so passionate about, you know, creating an inclusive environment for others, because they know what it's like to not be in an inclusive environment and not have the opportunities. You know, there's a huge amount of people out there who would be incredible to any workforce and a huge asset, and it's just almost like untapped potential, and it's such a shame that organisations aren't doing more. So I totally encourage anyone listening to this, to really think about how you really open those doors for people and get people into your workforce.

**Steven** And Nathan, how about you. Is there anything you think that employers should be thinking about when it comes to recruitment, when it comes to attraction?

**Nathan** I think just being open and honest, in the communication and advertising for roles, I think having an offer to interview scheme is always beneficial.

Sometimes it can have negative connotation and that understanding of it, especially from the outset, if a non disabled employer sees that, oh, well, they're going to offer an interview to a candidate just because they got a disability. You know, I've had quite a lot of backlash from individuals on that, but you still have to hit the minimum criteria for the role to get that interview. It's not just because you have a disability, you're straight to the door. That's not what it's talking about. It's just for individuals who have a disability to have the confidence to apply for a job, knowing that they've got the skills to do it, and they're going to be recognised for having them skills not just because they've got a disability and it takes that fear factor away.

For someone to actually put themselves out of their comfort zone, to apply for a job in that first place, having that little bit of confidence to go, “Well, I know I've got the skills to do it, and I'm not going to be disadvantaged for having a disability”. And again, just having the different mechanisms in place to support them individuals, again, like we've talked about making sure that communication is key, making sure that the applicant can communicate effectively putting them in place, whether that's BSL whether that's making sure that the format of applications and wordings are visible to individuals with visual impairments, or worded in a way whether it'd be easy reads or for someone with an intellectual impairment, and just being a really robust process that not fits all, but can be adapted for all, I think, is really key. And again, it's just putting the person at the centre of it, and realising that you are dealing with people, and it's not just a computer screen, and ask appropriate questions as well. And if the employer isn't 100% sure, ask. And Natalie has said she's the one who understands her own impairments greater than anybody, so unless the employer asks the appropriate questions, they're never going to fully understand.

**Steven** We know from the statistics that those with disabilities are disproportionately out of work. And when in work, there is a disability pay gap with only a third of those with disabilities earning over the national average salary, compared to half of the wider population.

So Carol, I want to start with you. Why do you think there is a disability pay gap, and how can this be addressed?

**Carol** So pay gap reporting exposes where we don't have people earning in the higher quartiles. So what we're seeing there is that there's a disproportionality of those who are earnings potential is in the top echelons.

So why might that be? There's a couple of reasons. And we've alluded to some of them already when we've been chatting, Natalie spoke earlier about that presenteeism and long hours culture versus the outcomes that you are delivering in your role culture. And we see a lot of that. When I do pieces of consultancy, work with employers and ask, are there any barriers to you progressing to a senior role, what might stop you? And often we hear back, well, actually, there's a view that I need to be available at eight o'clock in the morning, at eight o'clock at night, on weekends - there's this, whether it's perceived or whether it's reality, but there's a view of the really long hours culture always on, and that's what's required for senior roles. And in some organisations, that's true and other organisations, it is not.

But there's kind of two fold problem here. First, is the assumption that that is going to be a problem for somebody with an impairment. It may be, it may not be, it’s our old enemy here ‘assumption’, the old enemy of ‘inclusion’.

So let's not assume that people can't, won’t or aren't willing to do that, in order to reach those roles. And the other bit of it is actually is that kind of approach healthy. So should we be looking at what is it that we're looking for the role to deliver, and measuring on outcomes, rather than measuring on how many hours somebody is present in the office, or present in a particular location?

So a couple of barriers there, in terms of thinking, and in terms of the way that we approach those senior roles, and something that Nathan mentioned earlier as well - When either you're born with an impairment or you acquire an impairment, society around you is giving you messages that you're different.

Okay. There are messages that you're different, or sometimes that you're less than, or sometimes that this is not for you, when that's reinforced constantly, from those around you from the environment around you, it is internalised with the best will in the world, it is internalised and we can end up really questioning ourselves. Can we do this, or can I do that role, am I capable of doing that role?

When actually, as a disabled person, your skills, your abilities, your ability to do an amazing job in those roles, you absolutely have that, but sometimes we hold ourselves back because we've had that constant negative reinforcement. So I think there are a number of reasons why we see the pay gap that we see, and none of them are actually because people with impairments are not able to do these rules. That is not the case. There are a number of societal barriers and personal barriers. I think that we need to work through before we will see those numbers become equitable.

**Steven** Natalie, anything to add there about the pay gap?

**Natalie** I would say that I'm noticing, there's so many instances where people offer voluntary work to disabled people, thinking that they are being kind, I think it's giving people work experience, but actually, we know especially when this goes on for years, it's just.. it's exploitation at the highest level, you know, pay people, if you're going to have them work in your organisation, don't be offering things for free thinking that you're giving someone a chance. If someone's working with you, pay them and pay them appropriately. I think that's a big one for me. And I'm also noticing there's a huge amount of people who are disabled who are in part time, or kind of a few hours a week type jobs, which are flexible for them that I think people often do this because it allows them the flexibility to rest or you know, kind of look after themselves otherwise around the rest of their time. But actually, it means that you've got people who are earning significantly less than they could be, in a role where they are able to do a full time role just in a really supported way.

I mean, there's some people that I know of who are in roles, which are kind of four hours a week, because that enables them to be flexible around their health. But I think it's just really unfair that those people haven't got opportunities to maybe do job shares, because we don't see that so often my job as - opportunities to do job shares are flexible, part time roles, if that's what they need, then we should be creating more and more opportunities to have that flexibility in the workplace.

And I think, you know, I want to echo the suggestion as well that actually, consistently people are thinking that the word disability means can't do, or not able to do, when actually, obviously, we know with the social model, it's more that barriers are placed around people that stop them being able to do things, and actually, if more employers were thinking in that context, and realising that taking away barriers from an individual means that they can succeed at work, then actually, it will be a whole different conversation that we were having today, and I think that's something we really need to see starting to happen.

**Steven** And Nathan, how about you thinking about that disability pay gap? Any thoughts from you on how we can address that?

**Nathan** Nothing more than what’s already been said, but I think I'm hoping in the light of this global pandemic, I think it's proven that everybody can work differently, I think being able to be more flexible and have hybrid working is more of an option now.

So I'm hoping employers will make them adjustments that will allow more people with disabilities to be more flexible, the employer to be more flexible in the way that they contribute to their employers health, mental well being and just to make things a lot more accessible, all wide, you know, I think all of us are still currently working from home or we have been for the foreseeable future, and my employer has turned around and said, we're actually going to remain a hybrid working because it works for everybody. It works for those with impairments. It works for those for children, it works for those with additional family commitments, so why not continue this, because it's been a lot more productive, we thought it was it was hard to make the adjustments to start off with, but once we've embedded them in the organisation, everybody seems a lot more happier, and we are productive, we are getting a lot of work done, and we've still got smiles on our faces and not being burned out at the end of the week. Because we can make them adjustments ourselves to make sure that you know, we are putting ourselves at the centre of it and not the work.

**Natalie** I think I just also want to add there Steven as well actually that quite often we don't see disabled people achieving management roles, and I hear a lot of feedback from people that they are stopped from progressing their career through promotions, because they're not seen as capable being a disabled person, or equally sometimes people who are carers as well either, you know, parents or carers of disabled people subjected to that stigma as well that they haven't got the time to be a manager, so that can play in sometimes.

**Steven** Carol - What is inclusive employees advice for organisations who want to support disabled employees and ensure that they can succeed in their organisations?

**Carol** So our advice as the first thing that I would say, is don't make any assumptions. And don't be afraid to have the conversation. Fear of getting it wrong and fear of saying the wrong thing is one of the biggest things that hold organisation back in terms of the inclusion across all groups, not just for those with physical disability.

So I'd say lean into the conversation, and don't be afraid to ask the questions. Ask people what their needs are, don't assume it's going to be really difficult for you to accommodate because it is probably not.

If you don't have the knowledge then for members come and speak to us. We're here for you, we're happy to have that conversation with you.

There are lots of organisations out there who can support you to do this really well. You will also have people inside your organisation like Natalie, like Nathan, like myself, who are really passionate about inclusion for those with physical disabilities. Speak to your staff and they will let you know how to be more inclusive for others.

So there's lots of really easy things that you can do. And there's also great support out there things like access to work from the government that you can engage with and understand what support the government can provide to help you support people to join and thrive in your organisation.

The other piece of advice directly from me is don't cut your nose off to spite your face. There is amazing talent out there, who happen to also have an impairment or be disabled, don't let that stop you going after amazing talent, particularly now through the great resignation, people are thinking about where they want to work, the type of organisations that they want to work with, lean into that and make sure you get the best of the disabled talent out there, because there is amazing people who want to come and work in your organisation. So don't cut your nose off to spite your face.

**Steven** So Carol, we've heard a lot about acquired disability today, any more top tips any more perspectives on that, that you'd like to share with us.

**Carol** Acquired disability means you were not born with that disability. So it’s something that's happened during the course of your life, it may have been an illness, it might have been an injury, there's a lot of misunderstanding about acquired disability, and I've personally had some of this misunderstanding myself.

So having a child who was born with the conditions that he has, I had the assumption that it was tougher to go through your entire life not being able to use your legs, and I've been in situations where I've been parking up at the grocery store, and I've had a bit of a dirty look given to me by somebody else who was looking to park in the disabled to me, so I'm getting out Ethan's wheelchair which looks like a buggy to be fair, and putting my child in it, and it's often older adults that have given me the their not particularly nice look, and I've had that personal reaction that says, “Oh, my goodness, at least you've been able to have your mobility, my son's been a wheelchair user his whole life”.

And I realised now through what I do as a job, through my career, that, as I've learned more about this, those who are born with disabilities, they learn to interact with the world, when they're learning about the world, they do that as the person, the full person that they are including their disability, and they often adjust much better because of that process.

Those who then acquired a disability, let's say something similar in terms of being a wheelchair user, and that is a whole different level of trauma. So learning how to interact with the world, when you're able to walk around, use your legs, and then learning it again, as a wheelchair use, there's a whole bereavement process that goes on, for what we've lost, the life that we've lost, and what we believe we won't be able to do anymore.

I'm not saying that someone who's born with a disability has less trauma, but what I'm saying is that there's definitely a difference in the trauma and when it is experienced. So don't assume that somebody inside your organisation who acquires a disability, actually they've got some level of privilege about them, because at least they didn't have it for part of their life. I did look at it that way, and I was absolutely wrong.

The real learning for me around this, is it is actually much harder to have something to have an ability and then not to have it, and to make that adjustment. So my advice to employers would be, be mindful of that, and look to understand what support that individual needs, because they are likely going through a grieving process, as well as learning to live with that acquired disability.

And another top tip, is thinking about the differences in the way that we react to and support people with seen physical disability, versus unseen physical disability.

So for example, fibromyalgia, IBS, nerve conduction problems and other chronic syndromes. So, what we experience here at Inclusive Employers is often where a disability is seen, for example, a wheelchair user, there is more support afforded to that individual, and where it has an unseen disability, then there's often less support afforded..

When we inquire and ask what this is all about, what we realise is it's something that's quite implicit. It's something that's not necessarily intentional, but what we're finding is that if I can see it, I believe you, therefore I will support you. If I can't see it, you look fine to me, am I really believing you here?

So there's an implied element of trust. If someone is telling you that the have a condition, they have a disability, they are struggling with, for example, managing their pain, in a particular week, where we see less support that's actually that implied do I trust you or not? So be mindful of it, be aware of it, and extend the same level of trust to what you can see, as well as what you can't see, both the seen and unseen have often the same level of implication and challenge for people.

**Steven** And Nathan, how about you - What would one piece of advice you want to give to employees, what would that be, and is there anything that your workplace has done Incredibly that you'd like to see others roll out more?

**Nathan** Reiterating what Carol has just said – ask the questions. If you don't know, ask the experts at the heart of it, and that's the people that you're employing are interviewing. So many people are afraid of asking and potentially questions that they may not be happy with the responses, but unless you know that you can't make them changes to your organisation to best assist the employees that you work with, or the interviewees going through that process, or future potential employees of your workforce.

You need to ask the questions to get a greater understanding of what you need to do to be better, and what you can find the things that you can put in place to allow accessibility and equity to be at the heart of your organisation.

**Steven** And Natalie, how about you - What's your last piece of advice?

**Natalie** I think it's making sure that all organisations realise that disabled people will be an asset, hire them, provide adjustments and pay them equally to the peers, disabled people aren't more difficult or expensive, which I think is a really common misconception.

And I think personally for me, you know, having great people managers who have compassion, their role modelling, compassionate teams, and ways of working, and who listen and take their responsibility as a manager seriously, I think so often, organisations forget about the Equality Act, you know, and the fact that legally, they have to make these adjustments for colleagues who needs them.

And too often, it seems like it's a choice because we talk about whether it's reasonable or not, and that's a huge blocker to so many people being successful at work and having great experiences. So for me, one of the main takeaways from this is role model a compassionate organisation, do the right thing for people and they will stay and they will deliver and they will do great jobs.

So, yes, I think just bearing that in mind can be a real game changer for organisations.

**Steven** That brings us to the end of today's session. Just want to say thank you to Nathan

**Nathan** Thank you very much. Thank you, Steve.

**Steven** Thanks, Natalie.

**Natalie** Thank you. It's been great today. Thanks so much.

**Steven** And thank you, Carol.

**Carol** Thank you.

**Steven** For more information about how to support disabled employees in your workplace. Visit the inclusive employees website, where you can find top tips, resources, webinars and training to help you make inclusion an everyday reality for your employees.

On the next podcast, join me and guests as we talk about fertility, miscarriage and baby loss. It's a very sensitive topic and one that is likely to be affecting more of your employees than you think. Join us next time to understand more as our guests share their experience and advice for employers.

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