



Transcript

Episode 47: Disability Awareness in the Multigenerational Workplace

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Dean Askin 00:02

This is You Can't Spell Inclusion Without a D, the podcast that explores the power of inclusion in business, in employment, in education, and in our communities, and why disability is an important part of the diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility conversation with your hosts Amy Widdows and Dean Askin.

Dean Askin 00:28

Hello there, welcome to the show. This is episode 47 of you can't spell inclusion without a D.

Dean Askin 00:34

What are you doing right now, aside from being here with us? I mean, and by the way, thank you for joining us for this episode. Now, the reason I asked you that question is, well, right now, depending on your time zone, of course, there are in offices and on Zoom or Slack or Teams calls everywhere, four generations of people working side by side, and they don't all talk about disability the same way. Hi there. I'm Dean Askin, and this episode we're exploring disability awareness in the multi-generational workplace.

Dean Askin 01:07

There's the baby boomer CEO or senior management colleague.

Dean Askin 01:12

Figures from the Russell 3000 show in 2025, 41.5 percent of CEOs are at least 60.

Dean Askin 01:21

Other stats show almost 70% of S&P 500 company board directors are baby boomers.

Amy Widdows 01:29

Hello, I'm Amy Widdows with you here at the other mic, Dean. These baby boomer executives came up through the workplace ranks before specific disability legislation existed, and language that's politically incorrect today was commonplace. The disability rights movement only really took shape in the 1970s and 80s when attitudes towards disability were a lot different than they are in 2026. So it means for some baby boomer workers, managers, and executives, well, the word disability may still carry old weight and stigma.

Dean Askin 02:02

Then there are the Gen Xers, Amy. Almost a third of them are sandwich generation caregivers. They're often managing a parent's health, maybe a parent who has an acquired disability, and their children's homework after work. For them, disability isn't just a workplace topic.

Amy Widdows 02:20

And then there are the millennials. They're the generation born starting in the height of the modern disability rights movement in the early 1980s. And for some, their schooling began after the real disability legislation was passed. Laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the Disability Discrimination Act in both Australia and the UK.

Dean Askin 02:43

Research shows a full third of millennial professionals report having a disability. That's a higher rate than Boomers or Gen Xers.

Amy Widdows 02:52

And Millennials or Gen Yers are also now managers in workplaces. They're the ones reviewing accommodation requests, not only filing them-that's a certain irony in that.

Dean Askin 03:06

There sure is. And then there's the Gen Zers, Amy. They talk about disability loudly in workplaces, publicly in person, and on social media. I know there are a lot of posts from advocates that come across my own social media feeds. Over half of Gen Zers identify as neurodivergent in some ways,

Amy Widdows 03:24

and unlike many older workers, Gen Zers don't whisper about disability because for them it's part of their identity. Now this is all a recipe for disharmony in the multi-generational workplace. A boomer manager might read a Gen Z employee's openness as oversharing, or worse, exaggeration. At the same time, that Gen Z employee may read their Gen X manager silence as indifference, when it's really sandwich generation caregiver exhaustion. Meanwhile, a millennial caught in the middle may be pulling in both directions while managing their own invisible disability without anyone noticing it, there can be real tension, and that's what we're exploring in this episode. We put out a call for guests on social media for people from some of the different generations to share their perspectives. Two millennials and a Gen Xer answered the call. We've got perspectives from both sides of the Atlantic for this episode on disability awareness in multi-generational workplaces. Joining us from Ottawa, Canada, the national capital, is Somia Rajaska Karen.

Amy Widdows 04:29

Somia is a mid-millennial and founder of Build Up Women. That's an online series aimed at supporting, inspiring, engaging, and building up women. Somia founded the series in 2020 during the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic, from the U.S.

Dean Askin 04:45

Michelle Steiner is on the line from Butler, Pennsylvania. Michelle's a tail-end Gen Xer. She's a teacher's assistant, writer, photographer, speaker, and disability advocate. Michelle lives with an invisible disability, and as it says on her website, Michelle's Mission dot com.

Dean Askin 05:01

She's on a mission to encourage, empower, and educate people with and without disabilities.

Amy Widdows 05:08

And joining us from across the pond in London, UK, Fiona Spinks. She's a travel writer and also a millennial. Fiona has lived in London most of her life and still calls it home. But she's also spent time living and traveling in New Zealand. Fiona writes experience-based travel guides to help people figure out where to visit, what's worth seeing, and how to make it all work when they're planning trips to the UK or New Zealand. So, Mia, Michelle, Fiona, welcome to you can't spell inclusion without a D.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 05:37

Thank you.

Fiona Spinks 05:37

Thank you.

Amy Widdows 05:42

How would each of you describe workplace generational disability awareness based on your own experiences and interactions? Let's start with Somia.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 05:54

Yes, well, thank you so much for having me.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 05:57

So through my work in accessibility and disability inclusion, I don't think that disability awareness was strictly tied to a generation or a specific age, but what I see more often is that awareness is shaped by the person's exposure or the person's awareness and their knowledge personally based on their experience. So I found older generations may not have had the language that we use today around accessibility or disability inclusion.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 06:31

or you know visible versus invisible disabilities, but I do find that younger generations often have more familiarity with these concepts because they've grown up discussing them in schools or in their communities or with their families or even their workplaces. So,

Sowmya Rajasekaran 06:50

what encourages me is that you know disability awareness is growing across all generations. But the challenge I find isn't necessarily the awareness piece alone, it's more from moving from awareness to action to accountability and creating those,

Sowmya Rajasekaran 07:08

you know, welcoming spaces and those environments where everyone feels safe in having those conversations about their disability or disclosing their disability and kind of requesting

Sowmya Rajasekaran 07:20

the supports that they need as a person who's navigating the systems as well.

Amy Widdows 07:26

Thanks, Somia. Fiona, what about you?

Fiona Spinks 07:29

Well, thank you for having me as well. It's great to be here.

Fiona Spinks 07:32

I would say fairly similar response that younger generations are

Fiona Spinks 07:40

more aware and have more access to terminology, background information that older generations might not.

Fiona Spinks 07:48

I mean, I would say also as a millennial now,

Fiona Spinks 07:52

I don't think I had so much awareness of neurodiversity, whereas now I would think that Gen Gen Z are probably going into the workforce with more awareness, more information about neurodiversity, which perhaps wasn't the case for older generations.

Amy Widdows 08:13

Thank you, and Michelle.

08:15

Thank you for having me on as well. I'm excited to have this conversation. I think one of the big things I work in a school, so we have that awareness a lot of times with students that have disabilities, and we have those conversations on how to best accommodate our students. Now, as a worker though with a disability, I work with multi generations of people, and some of our older employees or supervisors aren't always aware of things like that, so I might tell them certain things that I can't do or difficulties that I'm having, and some of them just don't get

Michelle Steiner 08:53

it, and that that can be frustrating in a sense. But I also had parents that showed me how to advocate for myself, so I have those conversations,

Michelle Steiner 09:05

and that brings that awareness into that. And it really helps me when I work with my students because I know where a lot of them are coming from, and I can show them how to advocate and how to have those conversations to make their lives easier when someday they're out in the workforce.

Amy Widdows 09:26

Thank you,

Amy Widdows 09:27

and and for for whomever,

Amy Widdows 09:31

as a generalization, which generation do you think is the most disability aware, and which is the least?

Michelle Steiner 09:39

I think the the most ones I think the the ones that are coming in with millennials I think Gen Z I think a lot of them are more aware of that and I think sometimes our baby boomers are the ones that that know less and some of our Gen X too I think we had some of them are but the disability has changed.

Michelle Steiner 10:00

A lot. I can even remember when we had the Americans with Disabilities Act that was passed. That was mainly for people that had physical disabilities, and now it's expanded where we're getting having that conversation. Well, maybe somebody might have a disability, and we can't see it, or maybe they have other needs, and we have to kind of we have to think. How can I accommodate that person as well?

Sowmya Rajasekaran 10:25

Yeah, I can also kind of echo what was mentioned here. I mean, I if I had to say, I would say maybe Gen Z appears to be most disability aware because of

Sowmya Rajasekaran 10:36

you know with mental health and accessibility, it seems to be kind of a regular part of every most conversations they've grown up with. However, I feel like awareness doesn't always translate into understanding or advocacy because when we're digging a bit deeper, there's also that intersectionality piece. There's that cultural background piece when there is a lack of awareness or there's a lack of

Sowmya Rajasekaran 11:01

acceptance of someone with a disability, and so

Sowmya Rajasekaran 11:05

although at the same time, I know that many baby boomers and Gen X folks who have become powerful disability advocates because of personal experience

Sowmya Rajasekaran 11:16

or lived experience, like with family members or caregiving responsibilities

Sowmya Rajasekaran 11:21

or their own disabilities that they may have kind of acquired later in life. So, I feel like perhaps rather than maybe ranking generations, I think every generation does bring kind of different perspectives and different strengths that they have navigated, and along with that,

Sowmya Rajasekaran 11:37

possible blind spots that they have had to

Sowmya Rajasekaran 11:42

find workarounds when it comes to disability inclusion as well.

Fiona Spinks 11:48

Yeah, I think I would agree with all of that as well, and that's actually, I guess, the way I would hope it goes in some ways. You would hope that each generation builds off of the previous generation's experience, learns from their mistakes.

Fiona Spinks 12:01

I would think it's much better to go that way than to see younger generations do worse than previous generations. And although,

Fiona Spinks 12:10

I mean, Gen Z will-they'll learn from their experience. And being younger, they haven't had that as much experience yet. But I would hope to see that they are more aware, more open about talking about these things,

Fiona Spinks 12:24

and generally more inclusive, perhaps than previous generations might be.

Dean Askin 12:30

Speaking of the different generations having different perspectives, I'm going to jump in here for a minute. There's a you know there's a famous Mike and the Mechanics song, and and I have to say, every time I hear this on the radio or play it on YouTube, it makes me bawl my eyes out. It's the song "Through the Living Years. Now that song came out in December 1988, so it's almost 40 years old. And the opening goes: Every generation blames the one before for all their frustrations come beating on your door, and the song's about how different generations don't see eye to eye. And there's the line, "I know I'm a prisoner to all my father held so dear. So, how apt do you think that 40-year-old song is today in 2026 when it comes to the different generational attitudes about perceptions of disability? Whoever wants to jump in,

13:22

I can kickstart if that's okay. Sorry

Sowmya Rajasekaran 13:26

to double check.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 13:28

Yeah, no, I think it's incredibly relevant for where we're at. I do feel that every generation, for some reason, tends to put the blame on believe that the next generation, perhaps, or the previous generation, is too sensitive, or there isn't enough being

Sowmya Rajasekaran 13:46

done. I also feel that while the younger generation often sees perhaps the older generation as being perhaps resistant to change or not doing enough,

Sowmya Rajasekaran 13:57

I see this dynamic in kind of several conversations that include, you know, disability, right? And I feel that older generations, although may value resilience and the independence, because those were survival skills that needed to be made to navigate those environments, because the system was not built at that time, and still there's still a lot of work to to do,

Sowmya Rajasekaran 14:22

and they were far less accessible, no doubt.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 14:25

I feel like the younger generations often do push in terms of the advocacy piece, in terms of the systemic change, in terms of raising awareness, in terms of calling out for accountability.

14:38

You know, where are the allies? So I do feel like there's a bit more of a

14:44

no care in the world type of approach because deep down they're really kind of working through it and they're saying, well, enough is enough.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 14:53

So neither perspective is you know entirely wrong. I mean they're navigating based on what folks had access to.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 15:00

That specific time, the opportunity really I find is to bridge those experiences rather than to kind of judge them. So we can honor the resilience I feel while also recognizing that people shouldn't have to struggle.

Dean Askin 15:15

Fiona, what's your take on it over there?

Fiona Spinks 15:20

I mean, it's it's that the sentiment is quite interesting. It's that it's something I think

Fiona Spinks 15:26

blaming previous generations you often see in regards to things like housing. So looking at it in terms of disability

Fiona Spinks 15:34

is an interesting question,

Fiona Spinks 15:37

and I think it is the

Fiona Spinks 15:40

case that

Fiona Spinks 15:43

later younger generations do perhaps find it easier to talk about things that may have been kept silent by previous generations. I know

Fiona Spinks 15:53

myself and some friends. I think it is

Fiona Spinks 15:57

over time we've begun to speak about things more in a way that perhaps we hadn't earlier on when dealing with older generations. So

Fiona Spinks 16:08

it is. I mean, we all change over time. Where different generations are different and have different perspectives. And I do think that

Fiona Spinks 16:17

younger generations sometimes are perhaps too quick to place blame, but

Fiona Spinks 16:23

can

Fiona Spinks 16:26

it can be useful to challenge expectations and beliefs from previous generations as well.

Dean Askin 16:30

Michelle, you've you've been you've been nodding your head and chomping at the bit to get in here. What's what's your perspective on it?

Michelle Steiner 16:40

I think it's interesting to see how different generations do view inclusion and disabilities. I have people that are

Michelle Steiner 16:40

might be older and they might be

Michelle Steiner 16:51

definitely for change, but then I have some other ones that I work with. I have one in particular, lovely woman, and but she is very resistant against like any kind of modern things, and she thinks that society would be better off if everybody wrote in cursive. We didn't have to; everybody had to read on an analog clock. And when I try to explain, I can't do some of these things with having a disability. It often turns into well, why can't you? Why should everybody have to keep things the same? Or why should we change because of one person? And what I try to explain is, this should really be a choice. If you can learn how to do all those things and you want to be able to do them, great. You should have that option. But then somebody should also have the option too if they need to have a digital watch that, or they need to have something that you're typing or using voice to speech. That that's not shamed either, and I just think that that is something that that was her experience that she had, and I can even say with my parents, a lot of times it was

Michelle Steiner 17:59

a shameful thing. They didn't want you talking about having a disability as a protective thing. And I can even remember when

Michelle Steiner 18:06

having those conversations about accommodations with my job. My dad was like, "Well, don't work your way out of a job. And it was more of I had to explain a lot that I'm not doing that. It's having that positive conversation where we're sitting down and we're talking about that, and I've been with that employer for 15 years, and it's a working relationship that I have to have, and it's working with different people. But I see a lot of that has changed, where people are more comfortable, especially maybe in the younger ones, about talking about having a disability

Michelle Steiner 18:43

and getting that courage to be able to to speak over that too. I mean that it wasn't anything to be shameful over, and I could just. But it's interesting just to see how each generation does that. And yeah, you are right. Sometimes we do like to blame the other one, but it's learning how to work together for that. It's interesting to to hear somebody say that. You know, why should we change for one person when history shows us all that

Michelle Steiner 19:10

it's been often in history that it's the actions of one person that leads to progressive change.

Dean Askin 19:17

Thank you for all of that.

Dean Askin 19:20

Disability is diverse, you know. So I'm thinking, you know, again from your own experiences and interactions, what have you found that people from different generations think about first when they hear the word disability, and which is it that usually comes to mind? Is it visible or invisible disabilities?

Dean Askin 19:39

Michelle, I'll let you take the lead on this one.

Michelle Steiner 19:42

I think a lot of people feel when they hear the word disability, we think of the the visual one, so we can see. I will tell people that I have a learning disability, and people will say, "Well, you don't look like you're disabled, and they're looking for a wheelchair or they're looking for a cane,

Michelle Steiner 19:59

and.

Michelle Steiner 20:00

And I have to explain to them that some disabilities we can see, but other ones such as learning disabilities, chronic pain, autism, we we can't see those. And then I get the other side too, where people will tell me, "Well, I'm paying you a compliment, or I don't see you as disabled. And I have to tell them there is nothing wrong with having a disability, whether you can see it or you can't see it. So me, I see you nodding your head here.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 20:28

Yes. Well, it's it's really depends on kind of the cultural aspect, right? Because in some cultures, the word disability isn't something that's

Sowmya Rajasekaran 20:38

in terminology. I guess I should say it's not something that's widely spoken about. So,

Sowmya Rajasekaran 20:44

but certainly to kind of to echo what was mentioned before, I do feel like many people that the first thought would be about the visible disabilities, what they see.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 20:55

But I think it's kind of equally important to kind of recognize, and not everyone at the same time, will identify with their disability first. They would identify with the multiple identities that a folks may have with them. So there's there needs to be kind of that

Sowmya Rajasekaran 21:11

level of awareness as well to even that person to say, well, does it make me less than if I don't acknowledge with my disability? Am I not part of this disability community? So there's a lot of kind of pieces to kind of keep in mind. But

Sowmya Rajasekaran 21:26

what I have noticed with younger generations is that are often quicker to recognize invisible disabilities from what I have experienced. So you know, mental health or chronic illness or learning disabilities or other kind of sensory disabilities. The reality I find is that you know disability is has always been diverse. It's not something new, but what I find is changing is that we're finally talking more about it kind of openly. You know, there's kind of some cultural shifts where there are these very safe conversations about mental health that didn't exist decades ago. So I do see like the shift happening about you know openly talking about the forms of disability that were previously hidden or stigmatized or misunderstood.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 22:16

Has that resolved itself? Absolutely not. There's still a long way to go. We're definitely kind of progressing in the right direction that I feel.

Dean Askin 22:23

Fiona?

Fiona Spinks 22:29

I do think, especially for older generations, that visible disabilities are the ones that you think of first. And if you look at things like signs, posted signs, the

Fiona Spinks 22:41

indications that a service is for a person with disabilities is often an image of a wheelchair user. So I think those are the most common ones, especially if you don't have individual or personal experience

Fiona Spinks 22:56

with somebody with disabilities. You may be in some ways a bit oblivious to some types. I mean, for myself,

Fiona Spinks 23:04

having epilepsy and also having experience previously with chronic fatigue,

Fiona Spinks 23:10

those are very much

Fiona Spinks 23:12

invisible disabilities. And in fact, I think some people wouldn't even necessarily consider epilepsy to be a disability, even though it frequently impacts my day-to-day life,

Fiona Spinks 23:25

so I think trying to explain to people the impact that an invisible disability has on me,

Fiona Spinks 23:33

I often find easier with younger generations than older generations.

Dean Askin 23:39

Thank you all.

Amy Widdows 23:41

That brings us to the next question, which I'd like to start with. Michelle is

Amy Widdows 23:47

often today in workplaces there's senior leadership from the boomer generation, perhaps managers and senior managers who are Gen Xers. Then you've got millennials who may be managers or more senior staff, and then the younger workers who are Gen Zers.

Amy Widdows 24:04

How do the different generational attitudes about and perceptions of disability affect workplace culture, the intentionality of creating a disability inclusive culture, and how do we create truly inclusive cultures in workplaces when you've got all these generations and generational attitudes that often clash,

Michelle Steiner 24:28

that that is definitely a great question. I think it's one of those ways of having those working conversations about that. My experience sometimes has been with maybe older people that that might have been running it, like from a senior level, that is something to definitely talk about, and it's bringing that clear communication. Some of them might be like, "Well, why can't you do it? Or what's wrong with you? Why, you know, we we gave you this job. I can remember I had one position

Michelle Steiner 24:59

with my.

Michelle Steiner 25:00

With my job, that I there were certain job duties I couldn't do, and that was not something that came up a year before because we always get either different children that we work with, or are they tell us all the time your job position can change at any time. So I had a different one, and that brought some different responsibilities. And I can remember our union rep calling me, going with me to the the principal's office, which is so intimidating when you are an adult getting called into the office,

Michelle Steiner 25:31

and I sat there with our director of disabilities, like was that overruns our students' individualized education plans, and he cross-examined me about having a disability, and asking all these questions of like, okay, well, why can you do it? Why can you do this job, Judy, but you can't do that? And I explained that, and people were saying, oh, he must not not understand disabilities, or he must not understand jobs. No, he was making sure that I wasn't making up something, and I pretty much from

what I told them was everything around the job, and we've always have to work on having those accommodations and having those open conversations about things. And there have been times where I was at a job and I could not do the duties, and we had to go and switch things mid year, but I think there's that acceptance that that comes mainly with some of the younger ones, and we're coming up with maybe how how we have to say things or different way or ways that maybe not even how we have to say them, but different ways that are more effective with saying that, different things that are coming, different experiences because for a lot of students I work with, their disability one day they're all going to leave me, and I hope every dream of theirs comes true. But their disabilities are going to be there, so I think that it's so important now

Michelle Steiner 26:55

that we are able to create a lot of spaces to have that and to be able to accommodate and to be able to

Michelle Steiner 27:03

be show that that they're they're able to do that. So I think that it's just that there's that difference, but it's different for everybody, and every job's different too. I think one of the benefits of working at a school is we have a lot of students that come up with that, and that's always a conversation that we're having. We're always learning. We're getting that professional development compared to maybe other job sites where they really haven't heard about some of these things, and they don't have those conversations on how to advocate or or how to accommodate for people.

Dean Askin 27:37

Michelle's kind of stolen my thunder and already answered what I was going to ask in the next question, so I'll put it. So I'll put it to to the other two of you, and then Michelle, if you think of anything else that really really stands out, feel free to jump back in. What I want to know from you, Somia and and and Fiona, is

Dean Askin 27:56

what are been some of the your own experiences, or is there one that stands out, you know, in terms of experiences with disability attitudes and perceptions in multi generational workplaces, what what what comes to mind?

Fiona Spinks 28:11

And I I would say I've had two experiences at the same job that stand out in quite a negative way.

Fiona Spinks 28:19

I

Fiona Spinks 28:20

applied at one point for a promotion quite a few years ago,

Fiona Spinks 28:25

and

Fiona Spinks 28:27

a senior manager on the kind of border of Boomer and Gen X had a conversation with me about if I were to be promoted, some of the

Fiona Spinks 28:38

let's say side effects and consequences of my condition might not be acceptable,

Fiona Spinks 28:45

and I was too young and inexperienced, I think, to really challenge that at the time.

Fiona Spinks 28:51

And I wonder

Fiona Spinks 28:54

if if if someone from a younger generation would have a wouldn't would have addressed that differently, or whether it's an issue that older generations do tend to be in more senior positions, and it can be quite difficult to untangle. Were they looking at that from a

Fiona Spinks 29:10

staffing logistics issue and just dealt with it very badly? I don't know.

Fiona Spinks 29:15

And then another one I experienced was

Fiona Spinks 29:19

that job we our department was given a diversity and inclusion training day, which on the surface sounds like a very good good thing to do, but in practice it felt quite like it was targeting me, encouraging me to disclose my situation, so that so that older staff

Fiona Spinks 29:42

of the older generation were more aware. Perhaps it was well-meaning,

Fiona Spinks 29:48

handled very, very badly,

Fiona Spinks 29:51

and trying to explain to colleagues of different generations what they might see from me because of a disability.

Fiona Spinks 30:01

They definitely could have done it better.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 30:04

I can definitely kind of share an experience from my previous work and kind of what I witnessed as well. I just noticed, kind of over the over course of two weeks,

Sowmya Rajasekaran 30:15

my colleague and friend would kind of show up later and later, which kind of eventually went into kind of not showing up to work and all those kind of pieces,

Sowmya Rajasekaran 30:25

and I recall you know a supervisor at the time you know instead of checking in on them to see if they are okay and how they can best support, they were reprimanded because they didn't come into work, and because they weren't doing their job, and so

Sowmya Rajasekaran 30:47

that was. I'm glad I was able to be an ally, and I was able to kind of advocate for them at that time. But I think as things progress and as all these trainings happen, there I do feel like there needs to be a level of understanding on how to carry these conversations, and but at the same time, I do feel like although folks want to have those genuine touch bases and those discussions, they're not necessarily sure how to start or how to go about it without offending folks. So find some sort of kind of loop around that to be like your experience, and they'll just say, "Oh, not my problem, you know. So there's always like an excuse I find.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 31:32

At the same time, like I, I do feel like there are organizations where you know supported

Sowmya Rajasekaran 31:41

employment and kind of folks that are really kind of focusing on the human experience so much more now, especially the new kind of organizations that are coming out.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 31:50

As you know, we're we're building to kind of create these inclusive cultures.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 31:56

I think there is a need to put more emphasis on the human experience, like the wholesome experience of what that needs to look like.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 32:04

Although I feel like

Sowmya Rajasekaran 32:07

the key it is to in kind of creating these environments where people can learn from another and challenge these assumptions and be able to ask questions and be curious. The big the biggest piece is to work together to really begin these barriers that are in place,

Sowmya Rajasekaran 32:24

so that I feel it's sometimes depending on the organization a bit of a tug of war because there is a different level of understanding, awareness, training, everything that kind of goes hand in hand, and so the person at that time is either choosing to advocate for themselves or are scared because if they do advocate for themselves, what does that look like for their position afterwards? So, it's a bit of a war for sure.

Dean Askin 32:51

Michelle, did you want to add to that?

Michelle Steiner 32:54

I definitely just can echo that. I agree that that is some. It is a war. I'm trying to figure out. Okay, how much do we disclose, and that difference of that of awareness and acceptance is also a big factor as well. I agree 100%

Amy Widdows 33:12

In the last episode of this podcast, it was episode 46. We had a great conversation with a children's book publisher, who himself has an invisible disability,

Amy Widdows 33:24

about the importance of instilling disability awareness in children at a young age. As workplaces get even more multigenerational and with more younger workers coming in, how important do you think that is for the future of workplaces and disability inclusion? Whoever would like to jump in,

Michelle Steiner 33:43

I think that's really important that we do start when they are young with having that awareness that other everybody is definitely has things that are different, and that's okay.

Michelle Steiner 33:58

And the disabilities people

Michelle Steiner 34:01

that that that's a part of the human experience, and is something that people can become a part of at any time in their life too, even if they're not.

Michelle Steiner 34:10

And I think that that is so key.

Michelle Steiner 34:14

And I think sometimes when my students see me that there's things I can't do, all my students know: do not ask me for help with math, and I'm not ashamed of that anymore. And sometimes I might get a kid that might come up and be like,

Michelle Steiner 34:28

"I wish I could help you. I wish you could help me with my math. Or they'll, or they they don't quite understand. I even had a little girl. It was comical. It was in first grade, and we were trying to do math, and I was trying to help her, and she got the answer wrong. But she goes, "You got the answer wrong. And I said, "Yeah. She, I said,

Michelle Steiner 34:48

"Math is just not my forte. And she goes, "There's grown-up school for that, and I just had to laugh. But I think when my students see that is that everybody has something that they.

Michelle Steiner 35:00

Struggle with and adults aren't perfect, and we might have that. And but everybody can do something, and I think that's important that we learn that and have those kinds of conversations. And I think some of the the coolest things that have happened though has been when I've been when I was working with a student that used

Michelle Steiner 35:20

speech to text software and use some other. Was having difficulty with reading, which I don't struggle with, and

Michelle Steiner 35:29

we're in the middle. And they know that I can't help with math. And he he looks at me, goes, "Yeah, I use this software. Is that something that you use?

Michelle Steiner 35:36

And we had that conversation. And I just think those are just some of those real life things that I just think from that young age that we just start seeing that

Michelle Steiner 35:46

as just a part of life is so key.

Amy Widdows 35:50

Thank you so much, Michelle,

Amy Widdows 35:52

Fiona, Somia.

Amy Widdows 35:54

Any input?

Sowmya Rajasekaran 35:57

I'll jump in.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 35:59

I think having conversations

Sowmya Rajasekaran 36:02

at a young age,

Sowmya Rajasekaran 36:03

as Michelle says, is very important. I think

Sowmya Rajasekaran 36:07

talking about disability and diversity, I think, can really help encourage a kind of sense of empathy and kindness in children, which

Michelle Steiner 36:18

is so important for their development and well-being,

Sowmya Rajasekaran 36:22

and then eventually in the workplace, if they've had those conversations when they're younger, if they're already aware of

Sowmya Rajasekaran 36:29

various disabilities, if they already have that empathy for people who are different,

Sowmya Rajasekaran 36:36

who have different experiences than they do, then their ability to work with people later on, I think, will be much improved than if they were

Sowmya Rajasekaran 36:47

unaware and didn't have those conversations when they were younger. Yeah, no, I definitely agree with everything that's been said. I think that when children grow up, kind of hearing

Sowmya Rajasekaran 36:58

more about disability, and you know, seeing what that looks like and having those conversations more naturally in the classroom, it doesn't

Sowmya Rajasekaran 37:08

become something extra. It's inclusion in its whole,

Sowmya Rajasekaran 37:13

and so it's viewed

Sowmya Rajasekaran 37:15

as a form like it's normal, right? And so

Sowmya Rajasekaran 37:19

I think it's incredibly critical

Sowmya Rajasekaran 37:22

in terms of the level of importance, and I feel like the earlier we teach about disability awareness and inclusion, they become allies, they become advocates, and so it's it's incredibly crucial.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 37:36

And the values they learn will definitely kind of shape how they lead, how they work, and how they collaborate, and and kind of build those spaces for their communities.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 37:48

And I definitely kind of feel like growing up and understanding that really kind of critical piece is kind of it's part of human diversity, right? So they'll be more likely to build kind of inclusive spaces, and

Sowmya Rajasekaran 38:03

you know, really kind of set examples about what belonging should look like and what inclusivity should look like from the start.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 38:12

And my hope is that that really kind of creates that lasting change, not only through like the policies that are in place, but through kind of that generations of folks

Sowmya Rajasekaran 38:22

who see inclusion, you know, as normal.

Dean Askin 38:27

I want to jump in and talk about, you know, the model of disability because, in some ways, it's the model of disability that shapes our perceptions of disability. You know, I mean, how much do you think the model of disability affects generational attitudes? You know, here in Canada and the U.S. you know, it's pretty much the social model of disability. But I've got a bunch of people I follow on LinkedIn, some advocates in Australia and in the U.K.

Dean Askin 38:56

and it seems as though in Australia and the U.K. for example, they're still very much the medical model of of disability, and so I'm wondering

Dean Askin 39:07

between those two, how does that affect you know the attitudes?

Michelle Steiner 39:15

I think one of the ways there's two different approaches that I see in the United States, and it depends on where I'm at with with who I'm with at that time.

Michelle Steiner 39:28

If I'm at school, we still follow the medical model, and that is primarily because we get students to come in. They have a that they're diagnosed with something that they get

Michelle Steiner 39:42

either an individualized education plan, or they have a 504 if they don't quite need that plan. So their goal is it's strength based and is to try to help our students as much as possible.

Michelle Steiner 39:56

And I think, but whenever I go for.

Michelle Steiner 40:00

A lot of the advocacy groups or some of my disability groups, we follow the social model. So it's more we don't want to have to fix the disability. We want to have it where that's just a natural part of your experience, your your life. People talk about that. We talk about how we handle that. But we're also more than just having that disability, so I I get two different, very sometimes conflicting views on that, and it just helps to understand that the purpose for each of that, and to to just know that each of those things definitely has shaped how I view myself as one.

Dean Askin 40:44

Fiona, want to get your perspective from the UK? Is it still the medical model, or,

Dean Askin 40:49

you know, is is the UK sort of moving more towards the social model? What do you see?

Fiona Spinks 40:56

I think it is changing, and I think there

Fiona Spinks 41:00

is a mix. So, in the way that

Fiona Spinks 41:03

communication is is done around disability, I think the social model is recommended by the government by prominent charities. But when it comes to

Fiona Spinks 41:15

the more practical day to day life, I think the medical model is still

Fiona Spinks 41:19

the

Fiona Spinks 41:21

prevalent model.

Fiona Spinks 41:24

If you, if we look at sort of around healthcare, education,

Fiona Spinks 41:29

and also around benefits, I think

Fiona Spinks 41:33

often to the detriment of the people being assessed, the medical model is prioritized.

Fiona Spinks 41:40

But I do think it is changing,

Fiona Spinks 41:43

and

Fiona Spinks 41:45

there is something to be said for the best of both worlds if that can be balanced. I think in the UK we have an unusual emotional attachment to the NHS,

Fiona Spinks 41:55

and we often, I think, and especially historically, expect the NHS to provide solutions for everything, even when that's not

Fiona Spinks 42:03

the right place to see change, the NHS can't

Fiona Spinks 42:08

enforce companies to have accessible ramps and

Fiona Spinks 42:13

information provided in different formats. So, I think over time, with successive generations, focusing less on the NHS trying to provide all solutions,

Fiona Spinks 42:26

a social model is more helpful to see what what what can be done by different providers and different parts of society rather than just the medical model from a healthcare perspective.

Dean Askin 42:39

Somia,

Sowmya Rajasekaran 42:40

yeah, no, I think it's it matters kind of a great deal. And what I've seen, you know, even within Canada, is that it is a mix.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 42:50

I think the other element to the kind of the medical lens or the medical model is that folks are not able to access Practitioners

Sowmya Rajasekaran 43:02

to advocate for themselves to say, "Hey, this is what I am navigating, because that is part of the unfortunate system that we also have in place is with these applications to absolutely prove our disability. And so, the system that we have in place to access practitioners, or you know psychologists, it's really hard. The wait time

Sowmya Rajasekaran 43:27

is incredibly long, and so folks, to by the time you access someone and then you apply for something, it's already too late a time. So there is that frustration. So I feel like there needs to be a balance in place, and there needs to be an audit of whether the system that's currently in place is not working. It's not working, so how can we pivot?

Sowmya Rajasekaran 43:49

I do feel that the social model it really kind of focuses on the barriers in systems, which I think it's incredibly crucial to kind of take a deeper dive into

Sowmya Rajasekaran 44:03

what I do see that's encouraging is that we're we are increasingly moving from asking well how do we fix you to kind of a point that was made earlier on to asking well how do we collectively remove the barriers or the system that we have in place I feel like that is such a powerful shift and because it does change, you know, disability from being

Sowmya Rajasekaran 44:25

a a person's issue to a shared responsibility for inclusion. But I also see that challenge with rural versus urban communities in terms of navigating those systems. It's it's not all it's not equitable practices that are put in place right now.

Dean Askin 44:43

Yeah, you you know you remind reminded me of you know even the disability tax credit form. You know, Michelle and Fiona, we have in Canada here a program called the disability tax credit, and it's a federal tax credit you can apply for, and that form is still very much based on.

Dean Askin 45:00

The medical model has to be filled out. Part B has to be filled out by a medical practitioner, and the questions are all you know about well, what are you limited in doing? What you know? What can't you do? What takes you you know so long that you need help with those kinds of questions every day. So very much, it sounds like on all the continents, it's still very much a mix of the medical and social models. Thank you very much.

Dean Askin 45:25

So, across all generations, what do you think still needs to change the most when it comes to attitudes and perceptions about disability? Start with Fiona.

45:38

I think it's

Fiona Spinks 45:40

really important for everyone to consider a person as as an individual.

Fiona Spinks 45:48

Disability isn't

Fiona Spinks 45:50

a one size fits all. There are so many different needs

Fiona Spinks 45:56

that people would have. That we need people. We need society,

Fiona Spinks 46:01

whatever generation they might be from, to think about what that individual needs in the workplace, what accommodations does that individual need, and it may not be the same as another person with the same disability,

Fiona Spinks 46:16

because we we

Fiona Spinks 46:18

all have slight differences in the way that these things affect

Fiona Spinks 46:24

us. So I think it is really important for

Fiona Spinks 46:29

more focus on individual needs rather than

Fiona Spinks 46:34

kind of collectively.

Fiona Spinks 46:37

What would a person with this type of disability need

Fiona Spinks 46:42

as a generalization.

Amy Widdows 46:44

Thank you,

Dean Askin 46:46

Michelle. What are your thoughts?

Michelle Steiner 46:48

I think it's very important for all generations to be able to communicate together and to have that line of communication and that understanding. And rather than maybe blaming each other, maybe coming together and thinking, okay, how do we make this so we are able to

Michelle Steiner 47:09

be able to accommodate, or we're able to be accepting, and we're also just able to just come together. And I think that's something. I think it's that communication, and to make sure that that's kept up.

Amy Widdows 47:20

Thank you,

Amy Widdows 47:23

Sonia. Because I know you, I know that you have young children.

Amy Widdows 47:26

I guess you'd call Generation Alpha.

Amy Widdows 47:30

That's people born between 2013 and now.

Amy Widdows 47:34

What are you trying to teach them about disability awareness, and how are you trying to make them disability aware?

Sowmya Rajasekaran 47:41

Yeah, that's such a great question. I think you know what's been really crucial

Sowmya Rajasekaran 47:47

is you know how that has been

Sowmya Rajasekaran 47:51

how that knowledge has been shared in the school because that's where they spend majority of their time five days a week, and so I'm really you know grateful for the teachers that do embed, you know, and have those conversations. But outside of the school, what I really, you know, strive to do is to kind of continue those conversations about, you know,

Sowmya Rajasekaran 48:15

how people learn, communicate, move, and you know, experience the world in different ways, and you know that those differences really should be looked at, you know, from a respective perspective, and they need to be valued, and all of those pieces. And I'm very- it's very interesting in the sense that I also see that you know my children are growing up, you know, faster than I ever did

Sowmya Rajasekaran 48:39

in this world, and so I do see a huge level of maturity when it comes to advocating or being an ally for a school friend. So that is just phenomenal to kind of see unravel in front of me. So we do talk a lot about you know empathy and you know how can we make sure that everyone feels like they belong,

Sowmya Rajasekaran 49:00

making sure that everyone can kind of participate fully, like what is being taught in class, like how did you folks, you know, approach this activity?

Sowmya Rajasekaran 49:09

I also want them to kind of grow up seeing disability as a part of a person's identity, not like the thing that defines them always. Sometimes, so that's the the definition, but sometimes not everyone identifies with their disability, and so I, I feel like if Generation Alpha can grow up leading those conversations with curiosity and like with respect,

Sowmya Rajasekaran 49:34

you know, with a core focus of you know everyone does belong in our community, I think they'll really kind of help build more

Sowmya Rajasekaran 49:42

inclusive communities and inclusive practices that we've ever seen before. So I'm really, really proud of what's being done in the school today.

Dean Askin 49:51

I want to talk about key messages for a minute. I'm in the communications profession, and we communicators always have to focus on key messages.

Dean Askin 50:00

What's the main message that you want anyone from any generation, you know, who's listening to this conversation right now, to take away from this conversation with with all of you, Fiona?

Fiona Spinks 50:13

Quite the question.

Fiona Spinks 50:16

I think

Fiona Spinks 50:18

I would really want people to communicate with kindness, to really listen to the individual in front of them, to hear what they're saying, to try and put aside their assumptions

Fiona Spinks 50:33

and

Fiona Spinks 50:35

perceptions about what that person might need, and to really listen, to be kind and compassionate to the person that they

Fiona Spinks 50:42

are speaking to.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 50:45

Somia,

Sowmya Rajasekaran 50:45

We spend less time judging one another or nitpicking, you know, what previous folks have done, and just

Sowmya Rajasekaran 50:54

spend more time, you know, listening to folks with lived experience or folks who are caregivers to people who have disabilities, will honestly create more inclusive spaces with a core focus on that community of practice.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 51:09

The other thing I just wanted to kind of piece as maybe not a takeaway, but from a place of accountability for organizations that really talk about diversity and inclusion, to

Sowmya Rajasekaran 51:21

be able to clearly say what that looks like internally, like how are what are some of the practices that they have put in place that actively

Sowmya Rajasekaran 51:32

are inclusive and are a space where everyone does truly belong? Like what does that look like? What is their level of accountability? So that's what I would like to see happen,

51:44

Michelle. I'll give you the thank you, Samil. Michelle, I'll give you the last word on this one.

Michelle Steiner 51:50

Sure, that is fine. I just hope that everybody can work together and that we can be able to just communicate effectively.

Dean Askin 52:00

Thank you.

Dean Askin 52:02

This has been such a really, really, really, really, really good conversation. Getting all of your perspectives, and you've had so many, you know, great anecdotal stories and and insights from

Dean Askin 52:14

both sides of the Atlantic. Before we wrap things up, you know, we've talked about a lot. Is there anything we haven't talked about that you think is important to mention before we sign off.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 52:24

The only thing that I was just going to flag very quickly is just for folks

Sowmya Rajasekaran 52:31

to also kind of express or kind of take that piece of recognition about how folks with intersecting identities navigate the space as well. I think that's so

Sowmya Rajasekaran 52:42

vital in understanding a person's kind of whole experience and how they are looking at the systems that we have in place. Well, I want to thank you all for coming on the show, sharing your perspectives, and a really great conversation. I think one of the most important things that come out of this conversation is that it's not really about which generation cares more about the importance of disability inclusion and talking about

Amy Widdows 52:49

Well, I want to thank you all for coming on the show, sharing your perspectives, and a really great conversation. I think one of the most important things that come out of this conversation is that it's not really about which generation cares more about the importance of disability inclusion and talking about

Amy Widdows 53:07

it, keeping the needle moving. It's about which era each of the four generations learned about disability in, because all of us are shaped in part by the society of the day, by our parents, and how different disability awareness and attitudes are today in 2026, over a quarter of the way through the 21st century.

Amy Widdows 53:28

So thanks again for coming on the show.

Sowmya Rajasekaran 53:31

Thank you.

Fiona Spinks 53:33

Thank you.

Dean Askin 53:34

Thanks for me as well to all three of you, Sylvia and Michelle and Fiona. You know it's been great to get a global perspective on all of this, you know, dare I say it? I've been in the workplace a long time since the late 1980s. Okay, yeah, I'm a tail end baby boomer, and I don't think I ever had a conversation about disability really until 2008, when I was diagnosed with anxiety disorder,

Dean Askin 54:00

and you know, I didn't think of it as a disability at the time, so I guess I never really had a conversation about disability awareness in the workplace until I started working in the disability sector in in 2019.

Dean Askin 54:13

What I do remember most is that there was disability in my family history, but you know, my parents were from the silent generation, so they didn't talk about it much at all, and those are the days when it was very much the medical model of disability. I mean, it's much better and really important to talk about it, especially with great conversations like this one. As Amy pointed out, people's attitudes, perceptions, and awareness about disability are shaped largely by the era they grew up in and their parents' attitudes, because they're the people who influence us all first. So the evolution of awareness and attitudes is a journey for sure.

Amy Widdows 54:50

Speaking of journeys, Dean, next episode we'll have an installment of our occasional Making the Journey series that we do here on You Can't Spell Inclusion Without a.

Amy Widdows 55:00

It's the first in a two-parter of making the journey as we start to wind down our 2026 season. October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month in North America, so in episode 48 we'll hear about how a small and smart catering company in Ontario-it's called Little Mushroom Catering Company-is doing and experiencing big things through disability inclusive hiring. I'll be away, but Liz Goss will be co-hosting that episode coming at the end of October.

Dean Askin 55:30

That's right, Amy. Liz Goss, by the way, is the director of corporate engagement and training for the Ontario Disability Employment Network, and she's worked closely with Little Mushroom Catering Company on their disability inclusion journey. I know Liz is really excited about guest co-hosting that episode. Our Making the Journey series is basically a fireside chat style, and I know it's going to be a good chat. That episode's coming Tuesday, October 28, during the last week of ending, a little over a month from now. Hope you'll join Liz and I for that Making the journey chat with the director of people and culture for a little mushroom catering company, I'm Dean Askin. Thanks again for listening, wherever, whenever, and on whatever podcast app you're listening from. Join us each episode as we have insightful conversations like this one about disability awareness in multi generational workplaces with Somia Rajsakharan, Michelle Steiner, and Fiona Spinks, and explore disability inclusion in business and in our communities from all the angles.

Dean Askin 56:35

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