



Episode 27 – Disability inclusion at work (Part 3): What does genuine accessibility look like? with Samantha Renke

Ellie: Before we share today's episode, we wanted to give our listeners a quick content warning. We'll be discussing some challenging themes relating to disability discrimination, which some listeners might find distressing. With that in mind, we would advise listener discretion as to whether you feel comfortable listening to this episode.

Hi and welcome to the Work Couch Podcast, your fortnightly deep dive into all things employment. Brought to you by the award-winning employment team at law firm RPC, we discuss the whole spectrum of employment law with the emphasis firmly on people. My name is Ellie Gelder. I'm a senior editor in the employment equality and engagement team here at RPC and I'll be your host as we explore the constantly evolving and consistently challenging world of employment law and all the curveballs that it brings to businesses today. We hope by the end of the podcast, you'll feel better prepared to respond to these people challenges in a practical, commercial and inclusive way.

At this time of year, we're marking a number of disability awareness dates, including [Disability History Month](#), which started on the 14th of November, the theme of which this year is disability livelihood and employment and also [International Day of Persons with Disabilities](#) which we're celebrating on this very day in fact, the 3rd of December. So today, in the final part of our three-part Disability Inclusion mini-series, we're going to look at how employers can implement genuine accessibility for everyone, including disabled people at work. And with me to share her top tips on accessibility at work, I am thrilled to be joined once again by actress, broadcaster, writer and disability rights campaigner Samantha Renke. I'm sure many of you listening will know Sam from the fantastic work she's doing to campaign for people with both physical and hidden disabilities and how she's totally rewriting the narrative around disability. So Sam, thanks so much for joining me again on the Work Couch. It's lovely to see you today.

Sam: Well thank you Ellie for having me back. There's been so much food for thought after we last spoke. I really enjoyed our conversation and I get to do a lot of discussions, panel discussions, know, keynotes and I... they don't always go as well... and I think that's because you allowed me to speak really candidly and you allowed me to be my authentic self in terms of...you know, not shying away from the reality, which is something that I pride myself on doing when representing my community. You know, what we're going to talk about today is going to be quite interesting for the listeners and a real honest approach to where we are at the moment. How apt is the title or the theme of History Month to do with employment? I love the fact that each year there is a different focus and I like that this year that employment and kind of that levelling up is the main focus because it's something that we still haven't nailed. We still haven't ironed out the edges.

Ellie: Thank you, Sam. And I'm delighted that we had that time last time to really hear about the realities that are not easy to talk about or listen to, but are so important to bear in mind when we're talking about this topic. We did mention this last time, but I think it's worth bringing up again just, we talked about the business case for accessibility at work, which I know is one aspect of this, obviously, but I do think it's important for us to flag that for those business leaders and employers who are listening to this podcast. If you can just shine a light on why accessibility is actually a business imperative.

Sam: Yeah, mean, obviously, hopefully, listeners have already listened to my previous podcast. But if you haven't, if you're new, just a very quick rundown and a few statistics. know, 1.3 million disabled people in the UK, about 1.5 working adults, that's estimated at around 1.7 who are neurodivergent. You know, we are the fastest growing underrepresented. group or minority group. know, one of the reasons is, you know, there's definitely less stigma around disability. People are living older, longer, which comes with its own unique challenges, as you can probably, you know, imagine. But also, when we're looking at diagnosis, you know, I'm sure a lot of people have heard quite ableist or dismissive comments. I'm sure we all have. I know many people who have uttered these words. you know, "Well everyone's autistic nowadays" or "Everyone's, you know, got ADHD nowadays". And one of the reasons why, first of all, that's quite harmful and second of all, why that doesn't come from a place of truth is because, well, first of all, you know, we are getting better at actually understanding what these complex

conditions and neurodivergences are. And also, you know, back in the day, I don't know how long ago, but definitely back in the day, as it were, you would have had to tick a lot of the boxes to have been diagnosed with something. I mean, even take my condition, I've got type three brittle bones, osteogenesis imperfecta. There's all different types of my condition. I am probably one of the more severe because actually my condition is from a completely different mutation, which essentially means... Although I have a 50-50 chance of passing on my condition to my children, my parents and no one in my family that I know of has the condition, whereas brittle bones, OI, which is normally referred to, you know, it is hereditary, you know, and I guess, you know, even getting a diagnosis for me because I do have what would be called a severe form, other people with my condition would quote unquote look reasonably normal in the sense of I'm a wheelchair user, I'm petite stature, I'm under 4'4", I've got, you know, bowed, my arms are bowed, etc. So I physically look disabled, you know, there's no beating around that. But a lot of people with my condition would look non-disabled. So I think again, this attitude that disability looks and feels a certain way, you we need to understand that actually disability is a spectrum like anything in life and the only way that we're going to really embrace that is by understanding the nuances. But you know, it is important because disabled people aren't going anywhere. As I said, we are the fastest growing minority group or underserved group. We've got a huge spending power globally, the purple pound, which is the honorary colour of disability, very similar to the pink pound or the grey pound. It's estimated to be at 8 trillion globally. So yeah, makes good practice to get disabled people involved. In a capitalist consumer society because we are, I believe we are the largest untapped market and the reason why we are the largest untapped market, you think about this in practical reasons, I'm a wheelchair user, if I cannot physically get into your shop would I spend money at your shop?

I have a confession, if I really like something and I can't get into a shop but you've got a website that I can order from, but I will obviously go for it. As I've gotten older and as I've understood my own identity as a disabled woman and really sought pride in that identity, I would actually say that I do start to make more selective choices. But very similarly, because I'm an animal welfare advocate, so I will... always try and source things that are cruelty free, etc. So I think we need to understand that the barriers that we face, either online or physical barriers, will really determine where disabled people put their hand in their pocket. But let's think about their extended network. Disabled people are rarely just lone rangers. We have our nuclear family, we have our extended family and network. So if you discriminate against... you know, individual, disabled individual, that does have a ripple effect. You know, if you've got a family of, you know, four kids and, you know, you want to go on holiday, you're not going and one of your children has a disability, that's going to shape where you go and where you spend your money.

Ellie: And when we talk about accessibility, what's the best starting point for those employers who really want to improve but they don't actually feel confident in knowing where to start?

Sam: Yeah, well, let's, one thing that came out of the civil rights movement, and I think I touched upon this in the last podcast, that was called the curb-cut effect.

So essentially when the ADA came about, the Americans with Disabilities Act came about in 1990 I believe, there was a lot of positive reform, legislative reform and one of the reforms was to ensure that disabled people could access their local communities and that meant implementing things like drop curbs or cut curbs as they call it in America. So we all know them, we all use them and that's exactly the point here, we all use them. Although they were something that came about to enrich the lives for disabled people, particularly with mobility issues, everyone in society actually benefited. So how can we incorporate that into a workplace practice? Well, I guess you know, let's remove the disability from the word to begin with, you know, let's have, let's think about practices that would just benefit everyone. Because what you'd actually find is that when you start to implement practices that do benefit everyone, or maybe not everyone in your working space, but a lot of people, single parents, people that live in a more rural areas, people who are a little bit more senior in their age. People have different barriers, don't they?

And obviously there can be an intersectional link with that. You can be disabled and be a parent as well, or a single parent, et cetera. But if you think about what would just benefit everyone, make a list. Allowing people to plan their time within reason, so have flexi working styles. Allow that for everybody.

Of course, you know, during the pandemic, kind of embrace that. But what I've actually seen is a tendency to move back to, you know, traditional archaic forms of work. But we need to remember that, you know, yes, disabled people hugely benefited from working styles during the pandemic, know, enormously so. But actually, I'm pretty sure if you did an audit, you know, you'd find that a lot of people benefited from these new these new practices, know, giving people enough notice when, you know, large things are going to change within the work schedule, you know, allowing people to digest information before you go and dump a deadline on their table. You know, if you're looking at workspaces, having spaces that are, you know, have got things like quiet zones. You know, there's so much that we can do that will just ultimately benefit everybody and by proxy will actually hugely help disabled people through this. And then once you get the basics down, once you just create a more, you know, safe environment, and I'm going to call it safe because I think that's a word that disabled people often don't feel is safe.

They feel like if they're going to ask for reasonable adjustments, that may mean that their job isn't safe. Or that may mean that their colleagues will treat them differently. So if we nail down these simple, tangible changes that you can do very, very easily by just kind of taking a step back. And even if you're a line manager or senior management, make a list and be like, would I like? Selfishly, what would I like change. And see whether any of these would align with other people's needs. So I think that's the first thing. Don't get overwhelmed before you start.

Ellie: And so for some sectors, accessibility is going to be both an internal priority and an external priority. So for example, I'm thinking of the retail sector where an organisation needs to understand and support both their people's needs but also their customers' needs. And there's going to be various different people involved in those initiatives. So how can those sectors ensure that they take a joined-up approach?

Sam: Yes, again, I think it's really important that we get to know disabled people and understand that we're not a monolith. But I think, first of all, know, embracing, embracing who, you know, disabled people for who they are. allowing them to have a voice, allowing them to have a voice that is uncensored, know, that safe space, but also, you know, understanding that you can only reach that if you have this like cultural shift, this positive cultural shift internally and creating that safe space. You may not get to a point where disabled people will still feel like they can actually come to you. and feel confident and competent to do so. So, you know, and that's okay because disabled people don't need to disclose their personal medical history in order for you to make reasonable adjustments for them. But if you work on that and if you do absolutely invest in disabled people, you know, and get to know them and get to know how they best are productive and, you know, and how they best do their own work. That's the first step. then ultimately, having this, would you call it cross-function and synchronized approach. So understanding that the barriers may look on the surface different, but actually if you get down to the nitty gritty, barriers are barriers at the end of the day. And so it all comes down to how to easily remove them. So we can actually identify disabling barriers in three different ways. So you've got physical barriers, you've got information and communication, and you've got attitudinal barriers. And I know that, you know, we've spoken quite a lot about attitudinal barriers. So how a lot of, well, everybody in society has biases towards disabled people and other groups. And until we kind of hit the nail on the head and really address attitudinal barriers, we're probably not going to remove any of the other barriers. But I think when we're looking at physical barriers and when we're looking at, you know, communication and information, they really do overlap with one another. So I think, you know, addressing and looking at barriers in this way, I think that's the best starting block at removing the barriers. you know, the barriers that customers will face will be the same barriers that actually someone that works with you, you know, in PR. So there will be a lot of overlap, but like I said, on the surface you may think, how is a wheelchair user going into a dressing room that isn't the right, it's too small, how is that going to help us, you know? help Helen who is in accounting with a visual impairment. But actually what you'll find is, you know, there will be lot of overlap and the only way you're going to really understand disabled people's needs is asking them because we all have different experiences in terms of, you know, even though I'm a wheelchair user, another wheelchair user's experience will be completely different.

Ellie: Yeah, yeah, of course. So it's looking at the individual but also, I guess, trying to map some of those themes that might help everybody. And if we stay with the retail example, what are some other examples? You've mentioned changing rooms, but are there examples of inaccessibility that you experience or that other people you know in the community have experienced in that sector?

Sam: Absolutely. I think, well, I know it was around 2017, 2018. It was kind of riding the wave of the Paralympics. And it was definitely when society as a whole was really understanding the importance of inclusion and a diverse workforce. But also, we saw this predominantly in retail. So I had a lot of disabled friends who were models. and all of a sudden, I saw them on the high street. I saw representation, know, models with Downs syndrome, my friend with limb difference. And it was really, it was in many respects incredibly empowering, like as a disabled woman to see myself represented because growing up, and I know this sounds, you know, I'm sure many disabled people say that, growing up I never had anyone that looked like me, but it was true.

So 2017, 2018 when all of a sudden, a lot of the big retailers kind of were using a diverse range of models. It was amazing. And I remember being in Oxford Street and I went into one shop again, not going to mention which one, and I saw these images behind the tills. So there I am with the clothes. I went up and I was like, my goodness, I know her.

she's like a friend of mine and wow this is amazing and I took pictures of the models but then I couldn't actually access the tills because they're all too high and I actually had to give a stranger my debit card and I just thought wow what a juxtaposition that is, like, in the one hand, and this is where I guess tokenism comes into play and this is where it makes me believe that actually disabled people weren't necessarily brought to the table when, when, or enough, shall I say, when we were riding this inclusion wave. Because if you really wanted to be inclusive, you know, that would have meant also ensuring a till was available and lower for me so that I didn't have to you know kind of because that thing is like never give your pin number to anybody there's me as a disabled woman having to give it having to give it mean now it's different because I can use my

phone etc etc and technology has really really helped so that's one thing for me so for me as a disabled physical disabled woman obviously as you can imagine the physical barriers are the ones that I face the most but if you look at communication and information barriers for people with learn disabilities or intellectual disabilities, know, understanding that if they need help, like who do they go to help, get help in the store, you know, are staff going to be aware that, you know, someone may approach them? How are we going to facilitate that? Are they going to have a badge? Are they going to have, you know, the sunflower lanyard available? for people with sensory disabilities. So I think when we're looking at barriers, we need to look at it from all the different impairments or differences that disabled people will experience. A lot of my visually impaired and blind friends will rely on not necessarily having physical spaces accessible to them, but online platforms. Have you got alt text? Have you got screen reading software available on your website. I think for me, yes, going into a shop and having a changing room. Even the other day I went into one shop and yes, they had a large changing facility for a wheelchair user. But the problem was there was only one and they didn't keep it reserved for anyone who needed access. So I had to stand and wait for about 20, 30 minutes while everyone was going past me in the queue because the other rooms were for them. So again, even if you have the facilities. Are you ensuring that they are reserved for disabled people?

Ellie: Yeah, yeah. It goes back to that example you mentioned last time, doesn't it, about accessing a concert venue and them saying, sorry, we don't normally have this issue. Yeah, it's ableism. Yeah.

Sam: Mmm. Yeah. Yeah. It's ableism because you're prioritizing non-disabled people. It's that whole thing of if you're non-disabled should you ever use an accessible bathroom? And a lot of the response that I get from non-disabled people is, I looked around and I didn't see anyone that needed it. It's like, well first of all anyone like myself could turn up at any moment. But it's also taken me back to my clubbing days and partying and clubs were not accessible whatsoever. I think when you're younger you kind of overlook access issues because all you want to do is go out and get drunk with your mates. So it's like, yeah, you can carry me up the stairs. You just do it because you're so terrified of being left out. I think as you get a little bit older you start to, I mean anyway, I do, I start to advocate for myself and I'm like, no, know, like offering someone to be carried, a wheelchair user to be carried upstairs is not an acceptable reasonable adjustment. You know, that is not a solution. And I think, you know, the same goes for any kind of practice, like, you know, kind of expecting disabled people just to make, be grateful for what's available to them or just, you know, mold themselves to be more able, you know?

Ellie: Yeah and it just reminds me of just you know adopting it as a tick box exercise to just say well we've done that and instead of looking at that looking at it holistically with as you say getting on board the insight from people in the disability community who can actually say well hang on a minute you haven't thought about the till height for example you've just thought about representing people in your adverts which is great but it's not the whole inclusion piece, it's one aspect. But tell us about some examples of some really effective accessibility initiatives that you've found particularly helpful in the work environment.

Sam: Yes, of course. So I think understanding that A, it can be really scary to disclose your disability, your neurodivergence, your needs. So approach that with the greatest sensitivity and understand that you may never even get to that place of people opening up. The only thing that you can do is when that person comes into your place of work, they feel safe and they feel safe because you embrace celebrations that celebrate disability. You've already implemented universal policies that benefit everybody. But wouldn't it be great if we got to somewhere where people like myself wouldn't have to explicitly say what my needs are of course of course it's a two-way street of course it always needs to be a dialogue but wouldn't it be great if we got to a place where I didn't have to worry about that where someone could just go This is the rule. However, if you've got any reasonable adjustments or needs, let us know. Like take that onus away from disabled people. And you can do this by simply, and this is what the Charity Scope does, as like a signature or an out of office reply. You know, they literally have the tagline taken from the Equality Act, know, or the Equality Act. If you have any, you know, requiring reasonable adjustments just let us know ahead of time. I'm not saying that is going to tell you what the reasonable adjustment is, but what I'm saying is it allows people to go, first of all you're thinking about my needs. You might not know what my needs are, but at least you've opened up the conversation.

Ellie: And all businesses, we've touched on this already briefly, but all businesses are going to need to think about digital accessibility, particularly as things like AI and the metaverse are totally transforming how consumers interact with brands, how employers are recruiting and so on. So what are your top tips on getting that digital accessibility right?

Sam: Yeah, so ensure that your software is safeguarding your disabled and neurodivergent employees in terms of understanding what are ableist terms, what are hate speech towards disabled people, because actually a lot of technology doesn't even pick up hate speech. towards disabled people. when we're looking at, what's it called when it's algorithms, that's the word I'm looking for. Algorithms can be quite dangerous for disabled people. So I think safeguarding is a big one to ensure that, the only way you're gonna be able to do that is sitting down with disabled people and going, what here is safe, what here is discriminatory etc. So I think that's a big one to look out for when we're moving towards, you know, kind of advanced AI. It's

quite scary out there how ableist AI technology is. But I also think, you know, really embrace technology because for all its woes, I think what I've actually personally found is it's a real platform for many, many disabled people who are often excluded from the physical world.

So I think, you know, when we're talking about technology, just be mindful. So I use Zoom because back in the day it was Zoom fatigue, wasn't it? You know, you know, Zoom, like we're all Zoom fatigue. Let's be mindful that actually these spaces are a lifeline for many people. If you're, even if you, you know, have a bit of a moment about, God, not another team's meeting. Just be mindful of who's in the room, who's in the space.

Ellie: One thing I did want to ask you about, Sam, is allyship, which is a key ingredient of any diversity inclusion initiative, especially disability inclusion. So I wanted to know what does allyship look like to you?

Sam: I think allyship for me is understanding that you'll never necessarily be 100% empathic towards a disabled person like me. I think we all kind of go, I want to show empathy. Well, actually, showing empathy would be born with my same condition. I think for me, just following through on what you actually have promised is key. Again, step away from tokenism. Understand that allyship isn't empty words, isn't calling a disabled person inspirational and then walking away and thinking you've done a good deed for the day. Isn't objectifying disabled people. It is actually saying, well, I might not know what your life is like, but I am here to learn and here's your space. To with me. And I'm going to shut up. I'm not going to interject. I'm not going to give you unsolicited advice. I'm not going to say, well, my brother's in a wheelchair and he does okay. So I think for me, what an ally is, is understanding the needs of the individual. And yeah, and yeah, that is time consuming, but isn't that what every human being wants?

We all want to be seen for who we are. Because you're just never going to understand the nuances into the intricacy of life as a disabled person even if, you know, even, and my mum won't mind me saying this as a last little analogy, like, my mum has known me all my life and she's a nurse and she's a wonderful woman but she still puts things out of my reach, like she put a mirror out of my reach the other day and I was like, mum, you know can't get that, she's like, yeah, of course, I wasn't thinking. It's like, it doesn't make her a bad person, it just means we are all programmed to just get on with what we know.

Ellie: Yeah, so it's constantly educating yourself, isn't it?

Sam: Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. Absolutely. If you get it wrong, don't let your ego get in the way. Don't feel like a horrible person. Take that opportunity to learn.

Ellie: And as part of accessibility, we also need to think about that wider equality piece, for example the disability pay gap and other barriers

Sam: Yeah, so it's really interesting because we've just spoken about how technology and AI can kind of really enrich the lives of disabled people. And as a disabled person, I've absolutely seen so many disabled, you know, creators really embracing social media, which is amazing because again they're using that platform to say hey we are experts in disability come and ask us but something that keeps happening time and time again and I'm quite adamant in trying to flag it and create awareness about it is you know as you said the disability pay gap is enormous for obvious reasons because you know with disabled people twice as likely to be unemployed. For all the reasons we said earlier, all the barriers that we may face. But something that has occurred, well, kind of I've experienced personally, is at the beginning of my career, and I guess for a lot of creatives, they can kind of sympathize, is that speculate to accumulate, which essentially means, if you're a singer or you're an artist, you do stuff for free because you just do it and then you hopefully get network, you create a space for you.

But I guess for disabled people, why is that really, really difficult? And why is it so important that we pay disabled people for their expertise? It's because, you know, life as a disabled person costs a lot more, you know, close to a thousand pound on average, you know, just to exist. So it's really important that when we're looking at, you know, reaching out to disabled people, that we are paying them for their time. So I had a really interesting interesting someone approached me on LinkedIn and they had a questionnaire for me to fill out that was hopefully to understand disabled people and our needs so their intention their intention was obviously good I don't know I can't remember what it was exactly for but you know I get quite a lot of these interactions and straight away and this is something that I've had for my agency that's something that I've not ever or it's taken me so long to do, I will now always go back and say, hey, thank you so much for reaching out. Is this a paid opportunity? Because time and time again, I have been expected to work for nothing. And the individual got back to me and said, no, it's not, but it will only take you 10 minutes. And I just thought, wow. It may take you as a non-disabled person 10 minutes, but for someone like me, it may take a lot longer. For other disabled people, it may mean they have to use some of their care hours, their support hours. It may mean that, you know, for them to digest that information, for them to actually fill something out, it may take them 20 minutes, 30 minutes, half an hour, an hour, you know, draining their physical, emotional cup, so to speak. So again, I think... people's intentions are there, but as you mentioned earlier, and I mentioned in the last

podcast, please approach everything from a really holistic standpoint. Yes, it may take most people 10 minutes, but let's understand that maybe for some people it may take longer. But irrespective of whether it takes you more or less time, we are what we know, we are experts in our own lives and we should be treated like that. You wouldn't go to any other consultant and expect them to give you information for free. So why expect disabled people? And I think it feeds off this narrative or this understanding that we're doing you a favour. It's a very ableist attitude. Don't make us feel like we should be grateful for any token of help and support. That's again, true allyship is understanding that we deserve the same respect as you would anybody else.

Ellie: Absolutely, I think that's a really important note to end on Sam. And you've offered so many useful insights into how employers can implement effective accessibility at work and how we can continue to learn to be better allies. So thank you so much for joining us today.

Sam: Thank you so much for having me.

Ellie: For anyone listening who would like further information or support, a great place to start is [Scope's](#) website which has lots of brilliant resources for people who are facing some of the challenges that we've covered in this mini-series. There's also [Disability Rights UK](#), and I know Sam would also encourage people to chat informally and get that valuable solidarity with online communities as well.

Well that brings us to the end of our Disability Inclusion mini-series. We hope you've enjoyed our deep dive into this topic and if you'd like to revisit anything we discussed you can access transcripts by going to our website www.rpclegal.com/theworkcouch. Or if you have questions for me or Sam or perhaps you've got suggestions of topics, you'd like us to cover in future. please get in touch, you can email us at theworkcouch@rpclegal.com. We'd love to hear from you. Thank you all for listening and we hope you'll join us again next time.

Ellie: If you would like to revisit anything we discussed today, you can access transcripts of every episode of The Work Couch podcast by going to our website: www.rpc.co.uk/theworkcouch. Or, if you have questions for me or any of our speakers, or perhaps suggestions of topics you would like us to cover on a future episode of The Work Couch, please get in touch by emailing us at theworkcouch@rpc.co.uk – we would love to hear from you.

Thank you all for listening and we hope you'll join us again in two weeks.



RPC is a modern, progressive and commercially focused City law firm. We are based in London, Hong Kong, Singapore and Bristol. We put our clients and our people at the heart of what we do.