

Food for Thought



Thought-provoking conversations about disability and work

Members of the Shaw Trust Disability Power 100, share food, experiences and ideas with senior leaders at Microsoft.

Food For Thought is a series of informative disability advocacy videos. We've brought together three Disability Power 100 advocates, who have been recognised in the top 10 of the most influential disabled people in the UK and Microsoft execs to share their valuable experiences over a spot of lunch. This is your opportunity to learn about the barriers disabled people face when looking for employment. But more importantly, we want to share the solutions to these barriers.

The conversations ranged from how talking about disability on an application letter stopped someone getting to interview to how a simple idea to help a patient in hospital was the start of a business making accessible clothing and lots in between.



To view the videos scan here.

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Disability Power 100



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Shani Dhanda and Chris Perkins

For starters

Chris – “Shani, I’m really interested to understand why you only embraced your disability identity in your twenties – tell me more?”

Shani – “When I was in my teens, I didn’t want to own my disability identity. Partly because life can be difficult when things aren’t designed for you. But also, I’ve got a mix of identities: South-Asian, Sikh, Punjabi, British – there’s a lot going on there! In the South-Asian community, disability faces an even further sense of stigma, and growing up, people had lower expectations for me compared to other children. Even though I’m able and capable, I was often infantilised.

But then at university I stumbled across the social model of disability, and it completely changed my approach. It made me see that I experience disability when I face a barrier or a bias, I’m not disabled 24/7.

And this is ableism – a concept which describes the social prejudice that disabled people face. It’s a form of discrimination like racism, sexism, and ageism.

The best way to spot ableism is to replace a situation with gender or race. So, for example, if buildings made it impossible for women to enter that would be sexist. But the fact that it happens today to disabled people means it’s ableist. I think we live in a really ableist society and that’s what I’m trying to change.”

Chris – “One of the things that struck me is how often blockers and biases imposed by others make life harder, often more than the disability itself. It was profoundly eye-opening finding out about self-limiting behaviours and internalised ableism.”

Shani – “Everyone has self-limiting beliefs, but disabled people live in a society that constantly views you as ‘less-than’.

Do you know, when applying for jobs, I used to include a sentence on my covering letter saying I had a condition, but that it didn’t affect my ability. I applied for over 100 roles with that cover

letter and didn’t hear back from any. But when I removed that sentence, I immediately got an interview. I learned a lot from that.”

The main meal

Chris – “So what can employers do more of to support disabled people when there is this stigma?”

Shani – “Employers just need to understand disabled talent is so untapped – the costs of employing a disabled person are low and are hugely outweighed by the skills and experience the candidate brings.

At interview employers still ask the wrong questions – what’s your medical history? They’re employers, not doctors. All employers should be asking is ‘what are the barriers and how can we remove them?’ Because every decision that we make either can raise or lower barriers to participation in society.

Employers need to get over their fear about employing disabled people, see the talent and skills they bring.

Just desserts

Shani – Disabled people are a forgotten market. There is such massive spending power for products and services for disabled people, and tapping into that will make businesses more resilient, profitable, and inclusive.

Do you know there are more clothes designed for dogs than disabled people?

There are some amazing retailers out there who have done some really great things for disabled people. But they don’t shout about it, they are scared about a backlash if they miss something – if all their stores aren’t accessible, for example.

My view is that if their intent is to be accessible and be fully inclusive, I think that’s okay. Organisations need to lean into their discomfort around disability and inclusion, and go there anyway.”



Shani Dhanda

Shani is an Award-winning disability specialist and one of the UK’s most influential disabled people.

“I’m a big fan of the Microsoft suite, particularly Excel which I use a lot, particularly the built in accessibility features. For me it’s

the out of the box features that is where the magic happens, if it’s built in everyone can use it, and it’s not an added extra you have to buy, so I’m interested to hear how Microsoft is innovating new accessibility features.”



Chris Perkins

Chris is General Manager for Microsoft UK Enterprise Commercial.

“While I care deeply about diversity, I don’t have personal experience of disability. I think this

will be an important opportunity for me to find out more about the issues and talk frankly about how organisations like Microsoft can enhance diversity and inclusion for disabled people in the workplace.”

Takeaways

Chris – “I’ve taken away three main messages. Firstly, we need to be fair and inclusive in how we identify talent and talk more about the positive work we are doing on disability inclusion.

Another thing that really struck me was our discussion about ableism and the importance of not making assumptions and judgments about disabled people.

Thirdly we need to be more open, take positive action and be confident about talking about our achievements, even if it’s not a perfect story, we need to share we are on that journey. It is easy for others to throw stones at organisations but if our intent is good and we’re taking

positive action then we should talk about it and keep going.

This was a great opportunity to understand the challenges disabled people face I might not have considered – and making sure we as an organisation try to make life easier.”

Shani – “It was great to talk to Chris and share my insight into how it is important for employers to be on the inclusion journey, which will make organisations more resilient, productive and profitable.

By sharing my experiences I hope Chris now has a broader and deeper understanding of some of the barriers disabled people face because of people’s biases.”

Amy Francis-Smith and Faith la Grange

For starters

Faith – I’m interested to know more about inclusive design, how and why did you get into it?

Amy – It was really down to exposure, as a young carer I realised how inaccessible physical spaces were, I was dragging a wheelchair up cobbled streets or trying to enter a grand building with a set of stairs and it was almost impossible. I’d be going round the back by the bins, through the kitchen and this started to seed into my consciousness. I could see multiple people facing micro frustrations that in the grand scheme added up to a lot of frustration, and that let me into making spaces more accessible and a little bit easier.

Faith – That personal experience is so important in consciousness. I have a family member who is a wheelchair user and we’ve had those same experiences, a special grand theatre trip isn’t the same when you have to go in the back door and through the bowels of a building. There is a lot to think about when it comes to inclusive design.

Amy – Yes, and people often only realise there is a problem when they have personal exposure, because we all assume things should be better than they are. As an architect I always think about the physical space first – if someone can’t even get through the front door how can they expect to be employed?

Faith – And how can they ever feel included.

The main meal

Amy – I’ve worked in offices where wheelchair users couldn’t physically get in the building, but no one questioned it. Probably because until you look around a room and think who is here and who isn’t, that you start to question why some people aren’t in the room.

And it might not be physical, it might be the hiring process that stops them being included – the form might be really complicated, it could be who is represented on

your website or your social media images.

Faith – Yes and if you have never had those experiences how would you know, if you only have non-disabled people designing products, services and systems they won’t think about those things and the inaccessibility just carries on. We need to involve more people with diverse viewpoints in the process.

Amy – I bang on about this all the time, including more diverse people in the process, you get a completely different perspective and that’s when the innovation happens. We need to involve people using more user-led design and use their feedback to iterate and improve.

Faith – One of the things I stand by is Microsoft’s commitment to empower every person on the planet, and if we’re going to do that we have to represent every person on the planet. It’s a huge ask, but it’s really important to hold yourself to that very high standard. We’re still learning, recently we were doing some hiring and holding assessment days, and I spoke to my team, some are neurodiverse and they pointed out assessment days were really difficult as they didn’t have down time to process the interviews – so we took that feedback and now try to space out the interviews.

But it is really important to have that space to speak up and not feel like there are going to be repercussions, at Microsoft we’re in a really privileged environment with our culture – but that’s not the same everywhere.

Amy – There is always that interplay, particularly when you just start a job you don’t want to appear a diva.

Faith – And there is the specific language of reasonable adjustments, but who decides what is reasonable? It feels like it almost puts a barrier up because you can only ask me for something that is reasonable – we should be asking how can I make you more comfortable at work or help you to be more effective? We need more open questions, so we get better answers.

Amy – Reasonable adjustment is so vague, it’s based on the Equality Act. For example, if I want to visit a shop does reasonable adjustment mean there is a ramp? Do I have to ring a bell? The shop owner might only rent the unit and doesn’t own the pavement so is it reasonable for a ramp to be installed? But if you go to an airport the expectations of reasonable are different, it is reasonable to expect an airport to enable a wheelchair user to access a plane without having to be manhandled or piggybacked up a set of stairs, or have your wheelchair stored or damaged so you can’t access it when you arrive at your destination.

Just desserts

Amy – Mostly it’s about talking to people and listening to their feedback.

Faith – That’s so true. At Microsoft we talk about come as you are and do what you love, and if we want people to feel like they can do this we need to show them that they can. That’s why it’s important we use our staff and colleagues, people who really work at Microsoft in our social media and in our images, to show you really can come as you are.

Takeaways

Amy – It’s great to hear about how Microsoft is open to feedback and suggestions from users and teams and feed this into innovation through diversity and inclusion. Representation is so important, and making sure the people shown in their media and promotion sets the tone for their culture and I think it’s great that they are using their own teams, and recognising who is and who isn’t in the room.

Faith – We all bring ourselves and our experiences to work and that is one of the ways we can drive improvement through demonstrating and celebrating our diversity.



Amy Francis-Smith

Amy is an architect and outgoing Vice President of BirminghamArchitectural Association.

“How design is used not only changes accessibility but perceptions, I’m interested to find out more about how Microsoft is addressing inclusive employment through accessibility.”



Faith la Grange

Faith is UK Consulting Lead at Microsoft

“Talking to my team I know small changes can make big differences, but I’m sure there is more we – and other big employers – could be doing to ensure our actions match our ambition.”

Victoria Jenkins and Orla McGrath

For starters

Orla – Victoria, I’m interested to know more about how and why you started your own business, could you tell us more about your early career?

Victoria – I graduated in 2008 into a recession, and interned with a really creative designer, and like most new graduates I was keen to impress and worked seven days a week. After a while I moved into pattern cutting and then garment technology, which is like being a clothing engineer, looking at how clothes fit, their finish, measurements and working out how to take a designed item into mass production. I worked for some well-known brands. But even during those first few years of my career I wasn’t well, but it kept being put down to being in fashion, stress, being a girl!

Then just as I was establishing myself in my career an undiagnosed ulcer burst and required lifesaving surgery. And it was during a hospital stay that Unhidden was conceived.

Orla – You must have faced some real challenges dealing with everything that was happening to you as you were establishing your career, and not having your condition diagnosed.

Victoria – It was difficult, I would pretend my health issues weren’t happening, I’d take holiday to cover medical appointments and I spent a lot of time and effort not letting the team down, but I ended up burning-out every year. And obviously, when you are working for companies that don’t particularly encourage you to take time off it can be really difficult. You can end up making yourself a lot worse.

The main meal

Orla – So tell me more about how Unhidden came about? It’s an accessible clothing brand, is that right?

Victoria – Unhidden started when I was in hospital, the woman next to me had drips and tubes connected and whenever she

was examined by the doctors, she ended up having to take her clothes off, so initially my plan for Unhidden was linked to accessible hospital gowns. But when we spoke she said her treatment meant she could no longer wear smart or tailored outfits, and would wear sweats, even when she went out and wanted to feel special. This made it difficult to dress for work, and we all know how important it is, particularly if you’re going for an interview or an important event, to feel confident and good in what you are wearing.

It seemed so obvious a need that I assumed there were companies out there making accessible clothing, but when I did my research there were very few.

Orla – So often that is when the magic happens, when you realise you can bridge a gap that others might not even realise is there. One of our fantastic partners has built British Sign Language into their products.

Victoria – That is fantastic, because making a website more accessible opens it up. If I was a BSL user and applying for a job I would be much more confident if a site had that available.

Orla – And we want all our partners to follow our inclusive approach. And we use our role as a Disability Confident Leader to support our ecosystem of partners to become disability confident themselves.

We also mandate all our 220,000 Microsoft employees to do disability training to raise their awareness about disability including mental health, sensory, neurodiversity and how our work with technology can support disabled people.

Victoria – One of the first things to do before you can welcome more people with disabilities is check if your environment is safe both physically and digitally. We work with suppliers based in Bulgaria that are female led. Now through working with us they are also looking to train and employ disabled and chronically sick people.

Just desserts

Orla – Looking back do you think your experiences have influenced the way you behave as an employer? We all like to think we are creating better and more inclusive work environments but what is the one thing an employer could have done to have made your life easier?

Victoria – Flexible working and being able to work from home

was the one thing I constantly asked for and was repeatedly denied. It’s a positive to come out of lockdown and the pandemic, everyone had to learn how to work remotely.

There were days when I would commute and get to work feeling exhausted. I think this was particularly a problem when I first became ill as I didn’t feel confident to ask for seat or have a priority badge. We’re all programmed to soldier on, but sometimes we need support.

When I started employing people at Unhidden I remembered all this and all the team have impairments and we work around our needs. If I don’t feel well, I take time and let the team know that my job that day is to rest and get better. It’s a kinder way of working, we build in extra time and longer deadlines, but we achieve what needs to be done and look after ourselves.

There are so many benefits to employing disabled people, we approach things differently, it’s more creative and is like having an extra checkpoint.

Orla – Exactly, there is a diversity of thought and experience that we channel into our product design when we bring diverse teams together which creates a virtuous circle. We design better and more accessible products, this makes us more inclusive as both employers and product designers.

Takeaways

Orla – It’s been great talking to Victoria and hearing her personal experiences. As an employer there is so much we can all do, but it starts with listening, talking and not being afraid to hear things you might not enjoy hearing. However, from understanding need and seeing gaps new products can be developed that benefit not just disabled people but anyone with an access need.

Victoria – One in five people in the UK has a disability which means in every work environment there are already people with disabilities. Employers just need to be understanding and learn from their experiences, incremental improvements are a great first step, along with being honest about what improvements could be made.



Victoria Jenkins

Victoria is a garment technologist with 14 years’ experience in the fashion industry who became disabled in her 20s. She founded Unhidden after a chance encounter with a woman with cancer that changed the course of her life.

“Microsoft’s approach to accessibility and ensuring they provide accessible features as standard – so no one has to buy expensive add-ons is great, I’d like to find out more about what they are doing in this space.”

Orla is a Global Partner Solutions Lead at Microsoft

“I’m interested to find out more about how Microsoft – as a big employer and through our partners and supply chain – can support disabled people through technology. In my day-to-day role I work with technology innovators, and I’m interested to hear Victoria’s experience of being a disabled entrepreneur.”



Orla McGrath