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**The waves of change are a commin’”**

Welcome to my podcast series that speaks about all things happening in the world relating to disability and the world of work. For those of you who are new to my podcasts, I generally try and bring a real and relatable approach to my topics, which typically combine stories of lived experience as a person with a disability, with my professional experience as a transformation leader and disability confident business consultant.

My name is Lesa Bradshaw. I'm a social entrepreneur and advocates, public speaker and disruptor. My main ambition in life is to build a disability confident economy. Where business, society and individuals have equitable opportunities to thrive. Speaking of equity, well, this forms the central theme to this podcast called The Waves of Change are a common, typically legislation has been quite slow to keep up when it comes to truly backing the rights of persons with a disability, and it can feel quite frustrating.

Let me tell you, when the world is evolving and reshaping so rapidly. But we're still forgetting to include basic accessibility standards, which once again is going to result in unnecessary disabling barriers. It drives me bonkers. So, in order to avoid despair, which one can easily feel in this game, I thought it would be a good idea today to focus on good stuff, the good stuff that is happening out there in the legislative world.

For those of you who have heard any of my previous podcasts, you know that the economy doesn't always recognize the advantage of a disability accessible and confident economy until they've tried it and when, I mean they've tried it, I mean it, that they've tried it properly. In a consistent way, not just sporadically.

So here are a few key areas where legislation is bringing the strong arm of enforcement to nudge our economy along. If you are in an industry or a role where you can encourage the application of these regulations and laws consistently. In your organization now is your chance and I really encourage you to do so.

Now, before I get into some of the global disability inclusion acts that are out there, let me start off with a story about money in my cap. So, there was a time where I was sitting on the side of the road waiting to be collected, to be taken to work. I had my full suit on, I had my ray bands on, which shows you how old I am.

I had my coffee cup in my hand, and I was sitting in my wheelchair waiting for this lift. And you know, the two people walked past me and put money in my cup, and it took me a while to figure out why they were putting money in my cup. And so eventually it dawned on me that they saw a person in a wheelchair.

They assumed that I was begging for money on the side of the road, and it really reinforced the stereotype that people with disabilities have to rely on the charity of others in order to survive. Now the reality is this actually is very common practice in our world right now because we have traditionally excluded people with disabilities from economic opportunities, and so the stereotype of we must give generously to people with a disability is where this kind of assumption came from.

So, I cannot overemphasize how important it is to focus on legislation that provides equitable opportunities for people with disabilities to be employed, to earn their own money, and to not be financially dependent on other people. Why? Because economic independence is so hard to obtain, given all the barriers, and so any legislation that helps you mitigate those barriers, remove those, and give an equitable opportunity for people to be employed and earn their own money, that is a game changer.

So, the Global Disability Inclusion Act, it's not actually a single, universally recognized piece of legislation, but it rather refers to a series of activities and events that are focusing on advancing disability inclusion in our economy. The Global Disability Summit 2025 was held in Berlin recently, and it builds on the Ammant Berlin Declaration on Global Disability Inclusion. The whole purpose of these series of summits and conversations is to make international development programs more inclusive. The intention is to ensure that persons with disabilities are actively involved in all decisions and actions that relate to disability inclusion.

There's a key focus on requiring businesses to make workplace adjustments that remove disabling barriers and give potential employees the opportunity to bring their full value to work. It speaks to tax incentives for businesses to encourage the implementation of accessible adjustments so the business doesn't have to carry the financial burden, but rather is supported in being able to make these shifts that are necessary off the legacy of having inaccessible business traditionally.

It also encourages inclusive design in digital and infrastructural spaces like e-commerce, hybrid working the way we get work done. So we really need to watch these activities and this space in the Global Disability Summit, get involved, find out more about what's happening and where it's relevant to your area of professionalism or your area of passion.

Get stuck in and get involved in being part of the narrative.

So, the second set of legislation focuses on accessibility, and again, that really supports workplace inclusion and access to information. One example that I've been super impressed with is the European Accessibility Act, which came into effect on the 28th of June 2025. This impacts businesses that offer products and services within the European Union and the ACT mandates for accessibility in all digital products and services.

Including websites, mobile apps, and other digital platforms. Failure to comply could lead to funds, legal challenges, and reputational damage. Now why is this so important? Well, because our whole economy is moving into a digital age, so the act promote. Holding tech companies accountable for ensuring accessibility as a standard practice, and it offers incentives to support inclusive design, um, for these organizations.

So, it's such a fabulous opportunity for us to make sure that the new economy that we are moving into removes whole whack of barriers that we have traditionally faced. Another act is the public sector bodies, which is for websites and mobile applications. This accessibility regulation of 2018 in the UK requires businesses and government websites to meet specific accessibility standards so that users with disabilities can navigate and interact with digital platforms seamlessly.

Now, let me tell you, moving from South Africa where this is most definitely not a commonly practiced standard to the UK where it is, I have personally felt the benefit. I love the fact that you are always asked if you reach out to a government, um, institution to ask for information or to ask for apply for services.

You are always asked if you require information in different formats. There are always channels for you to reach out to if you need additional support. And there are independent bodies like the Citizens Advice Bureau that will help you independently navigate these sites. So, what it does is it really gives you a fair opportunity to almost access things that you have the right to access and to become more knowledgeable and aware of what your rights are.

It also mandates that online shopping platforms and services. Offer accessible features. Again, so critical in my world. I mean, let me tell you, I can leave instructions on my order, my online order that says, please can the delivery person when they deliver my groceries, knock and wait so that I can come to the front door 'cause I'm a wheelchair user and it takes me a bit longer to get there. So that means that the Amazon delivery people don't leave my package on the doorstep. If they do that. How am I supposed to smuggle in? The unnecessary purchases that my husband believes are not part of our budget. I mean, there's a degree of espionage that's involved here.

So, in cahoots with my online shopping channels, I'm able to let them know what happens. So, they knock at the door as a standard practice. I open the door, they pass me my package, and I go and smuggle them in and hide them suitably. Another great element of the Accessibility Act group of legislations or laws is that there are exit support programs that teach people with disabilities how to navigate and use accessible technology.

So, it helps them take advantage of digital job opportunities, of accessible education, online services, and so on. Now, this is really important when you consider that a lot of people in our world maybe weren't born with a disability. But acquired it at some point in their life journey. And so, learning how to be enabled is a new skill for them.

Also, for people whose disability may be progressive, their needs may change. And so access to digital enablers and knowing how to navigate accessible support services that are available to you are really, really enabling and can make you really a lot more independent than you otherwise would be. Okay, so the next group or cluster of legislative rights that I think are really important, focus on accessible housing and public spaces.

This is really, really important. In my professional bouquet of services, I offer environmental accessibility audits for employers. So typically. My team go into a physical workspace of an employer, and we go and identify some of the common barriers from an accessibility point of view. We then put together and suggest practical and cost-effective ways to remove these barriers so that this business becomes more accessible to all its customers and its employees.

But so often when we feed back our recommendations, we met with. The pushback that is, well, you know, it's not really our building. We lease this building so it's up to the landlord to decide whether they're gonna do it. We can't make them, and this quite, frankly, is just not good enough. So it's why I'm really excited to see legislation giving property renters legal recourse to do something about this.

So, this cluster of laws and regulations is aimed at improving accessibility for people with disabilities in housing and public spaces. A nice example is the UK's Equality Act of 2010, which places a duty on service providers like your landlords and your building managers to make reasonable adjustments for people with disabilities, and that includes adapting physical features and communication methods.

There are also Building Regulations Act, which provide national standards so that publicly accessed buildings and facilities are accessible by law in South Africa. I know we have the South African Building Regulations Act and the National Standards Act, but there are many different ones in the different areas of the world.

I point here to those of you who are business owners, make accessibility a mandatory feature for the property agents who are finding you business premises. In fact, you know what? Make this a mandatory requirement for all the products and services that your company procures from suppliers. This will benefit people within your organization as well as the customers that you serve.

Now, the next cluster of legislation focuses on accessible education. Why is this so important? Because it speaks to the future talent pipeline that businesses are accessing. All right. If our education system is fraught with inaccessible barriers for people with disabilities, how do we get to the point of entry of employment?

Businesses often ask me, you know, we, especially in HR or talent acquisition teams, well our business is accessible and we're inviting applicants with a disability to apply, but there's not enough talent. Nobody's applying. What do we do? Where are all these people with disabilities? And often my answer is.

Well, they're still trying to get through an inaccessible education system. I know that my world would've been very different if I had not been snuck through mainstream school. Why? Well, in South Africa, when I was a young child, you weren't allowed by law to go to a mainstream school. If you were a kid with a disability, you had to go to a special needs school.

Now, the problem with that is the only disability accessible school in our area was about two hours away. I would've had to board away from my family. I couldn't live at home. And also, the standard of education. Was far below mainstream because it was trying to cater for a lot of different children with different disabilities, and it wasn't given the resources necessary to do this.

So the chances of me achieving a school living qualification that allowed me to go to university were very low. Luckily in our local government school, I had a headmaster who was prepared to sneak me through. He said, I know Lesa. She's a great child. She's got great potential. I don't agree with the laws.

We will sneak her through mainstream schooling. Now, what did that do? It allowed me an opportunity to have exposure to what the real mainstream world was really like. So it taught me how to solve problems, out barriers and logistics. It helped me learn the skills to tackle discrimination and assumptions about my abilities.

It helped me find my value and be able to work the mainstream system equitably. So, access to educational laws ensure that people with disabilities are not discriminated against and have equal access to educational opportunities. It requires educational institutions to make reasonable adjustments, to accommodate specific needs of children, but also to take a broader, proactive approach to removing barriers.

Again, flexible methods of teaching assistive technology and additional facilitation and support are examples, but many parents don't even know about this legislative, right, and so the right to choose whether I'm, I want my child to go to a mainstream school or to go to a specific school. For kids with disabilities, a lot of people choose the recommended path.

Of placing their children in special needs schools, which so often disable that child's prospects of being made ready for our mainstream economy. I know in South Africa, only 6% of children with disabilities that go to these designated special needs schools will achieve a school leaving, um, qualification, which is mandatory for so many work opportunities that are available.

So we really need to encourage people. Find out about the laws of education in your country. Get ready to fight for this, right? If you believe that your child will have a better opportunity to succeed in their life if they have access to mainstream schooling. If you are a business owner, look at supporting local mainstream schools to become more accessible and inclusive as part of your corporate social investment schemes.

One idea that I had, which I in, I've introduced to many of my clients, and which they really are reaping the rewards of, is the idea that goes, if any of your employees have children with a disability as a business, you would like to support those children. And getting access to education, So that not only helps your employees feel loyal to your business, but it also helps them with some of the biggest stresses in their lives, which is how do I look after my child and give them an equitable opportunity to thrive?

And so investing by offering funding to give assistive technology. To one of your employee's children who has this need or helping them pay for a private school which is more accessible and which is what they need, or get a facilitator to help them. These are really good ways that you can build this future talent pipeline.

The philosophy of accessible learning must also apply to your skills, development strategies within your business as well, giving people equitable opportunities to participate in mainstream learning, uh, programs by ensuring that those mainstream learning programs are accessible by design and as common practice.

Now, all of these legislative changes when fully implemented. They will create a more inclusive and accessible economic environment for people with disabilities through addressing barriers in the workplace, technology, communication, housing, public infrastructure, education, and all these other areas. In which we, we thrive and compete and succeed and participate.

It's a really strong push when legislation is enforced because it helps integrate disability inclusion into every aspect of society, ensuring that people with disabilities can fully participate in the economic, digital, and social spheres. My hope is that the enforcement of this legislation. This will start to help businesses recognize how universal and accessible design in everything that we do.

Not only benefits people with a disability, but everybody, as all of us are disabled by barriers at some point in our lives. And all of us have different preferences in how we can deliver our best value. So whether we are business owners, consumers, suppliers, employees, or parents, a collective awareness that expecting disability accessibility in our economy and in our education is not a request, it is a right backed by law.

This is critical for us to bring this legislation to life so that we can help people be accountable, hold people accountable for their role in making sure that this is common practice. So on the days where I get to sit in the warmth of my home office on my laptop, which has been set up for my specific needs, appreciating the fact that I've hopefully been able to influence you in some way, which might spark an idea or passion to do something that ensures that these rights become common practice in our everyday lives.

I'm comfortable in the knowledge that on that day I didn't have to wrangle with my rain poncho to get into the office. I'm grateful for the fact that technology allows me to speak to you at different times and at your convenience, and I'm thankful for the fact that for each of us that become aware of our own rights and go out there to do something to make them applicable to everybody, that we've created a ripple of change that becomes a sustainable practice.

Now I've spoken quite generally about the different laws and regulations. If you would like more specific information about the relevant laws or best practice guidelines in your country or your specific context, please reach out to me at Lesa. That's Lesa Lesa@bradshawleroux.co.za. Or you can get hold of me through my website, bradleroux.co.za, or lesabradshawinternational.com.

Well, that's my message for today. I hope it's been valuable. Look out for more of my podcasts to come.