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**Episode 4 - Bring on C-3PO! How AI changed my world**

 Alexa, turn off office heater. Well, hello and lovely that you've chosen to join me for my next podcast, where I combine stories of my lived experience as a person with a disability, with some practical thoughts around building a disability confident economy. My name is Lesa Bradshaw. I'm a disability inclusion specialist, international speaker, and advocate for building a world where disability is seen as standard rule of thumb.

As you can tell, I've just been speaking to Alexa, who is my new best friend. And so, today's topic focuses on AI and its role in the disability confident economy and world that we're hoping to build. Now, there's been a lot of talk around the impact of digital accessibility and artificial intelligence in how we do business, how customers experience our products and services, and how we access opportunities within the economy.

Like anything technologically new though. It can be used for the power of good, or of course, for the power of evil. And it can include or enable people. It can exclude or discriminate against people. It can enhance the customer experience, or it can drive customers completely off the wall with frustration.

I'm learning so much about this topic, which has been so proactively explored in the disability inclusion circles and amongst disability confidence specialists, I mean, it's been so supported by organizations such as the Zero Project, International Labor Organization, and a number of allies and colleagues who are really committed to making sure, that this next revolution of our industry is disability confidence accessible and inclusive for all.

So why are the topic C 3PO I hear you say? Who is C 3PO and how are they relevant? “I am C 3PO human cyborg relations.” Here is how I came up with the topic of this podcast, which talks about how artificial intelligence Digital accessibility and disability inclusion all work together.

C 3PO was the first artificial intelligence robot I remember seeing in the Star Wars movies as a child. Hello, I think. My dad was an avid Star Wars fan, and so we had the privilege of following all of the series from the very beginning. Now at the time, it was the stuff of fantasies. I mean, I am going back a few years now, and it will forevermore be associated in my mind, as an AI thing, as I remember clearly thinking how cool it would be to have a strong helper to follow me around and do my bidding as a child with a disability. “Did you hear that? This is madness!” Now, as you've probably gathered by now, and for those of you who've already listened to some of my podcasts, I really enjoy sharing my stories about my personal experiences to bring home relevance and relatability to the topic that I'm speaking about.

The topic of artificial intelligence and digital accessibility is a real global and macroeconomic topic. It's a big conversation but let me share with you some of my latest happenings in my life that might make you realize how impactful this future technology may have on the lives of people with disabilities and people without disabilities in this new digital age.

So welcome to the Vicarage. I am very excited to announce that I've recently purchased my forever home in the UK. This was not an easy feat in a country where single story houses are very small, not easy to find and incredibly expensive to afford, if they come with any decent space to swing a cat, never mind manoeuvre a wheelchair.

I was lucky enough to find such a home in Vicarage Road, hence the nickname, the Vicarage. Which is a little bit ironic for those of you who might know me. But I can only imagine that this house must have been built by incredibly tall human beings. I cannot believe how high all the light switches are in this house, and how the door handles are fitted super high.

Either they were trying to keep children in, they didn't really think about wheelchair users at all. So now every time I want to switch the lights on entering or exiting a room, I have to put my wheelchair in bar stool setting. So that I can go high enough to reach, which as you're dashing around your house, you can imagine it's quite annoying.

So, I would definitely have to solve the problem. Now, in traditional terms, what I would have to do is pay for an electrician or a carpenter to come and lower everything down to a suitable height. This is a very costly exercise but let me tell you about the enabling impact of AI technology and digital accessibility used for the power of good.

Enter Alexa, my new best friend. Now for those of you who don't know who Alexa is, Alexa is a virtual assistant technology capable of listening and answering, streaming music, and providing real time information and news. More importantly, Alexa can also control several smart devices as part of a home automation system.

Now my husband, a person who has extreme ADHD and is always forgetting things, first suggested Alexa as a tool to set reminders for himself, to put alarms on and to have to do lists to help him get more efficient. I could see its value for him, but I had absolutely no idea about the enabling impact it would have on my world.

What a life changer. With her smart bulbs, plugs, curtain openers, door release mechanisms and reminders, Alexa's home automation system has allowed me, I mean, I boss her around like a newly elected dictator. I issue instructions to her to crank up the thermostat, switch on my egg cooker. Turn on my kettle so that I can swing into the kitchen, grab my coffee and my breakfast and amble into the office to begin my day's work without being absolutely exhausted from having to physically go and find plugs, place them and reach things.

You know, it's just mind blowing how it's made my start to the day so much easier from a physical disability perspective. What a time and energy saving win. What thrills me the most, however, is that she complies willingly. Without me having to wait patiently for help, wait for her to be in the right mood to get her help, or tolerate irritation or a tone which intones that she's doing me a huge favor by helping, I mean, the psychology of relying on humans for assistance is something that requires extreme patience.

This might not seem as particularly impactful to somebody without a disability, but to a psychologically strong and independent woman who is trapped within a very physically dependent body, this is a game changer. Because not only does smart technology allow me to do more things in my own home by myself, but it gives me a sense of self respect and dignity where I can get things done on my own terms.

And that's massively positive to somebody's psyche. So how does this impact me as a customer? Well, let's have a look at how I'm promoting the brand of Alexa. Alexa is only one of the virtual home assistant devices that are out there, and yet my experience with Alexa has been mind blowing. So, it starts with my enthusiastic commitment to finding Alexa compatible products on Google, because I'm feeding my frenzy to find out about what else I can do to change my world.

I've become loyal to the brand, which I associate with these absolutely euphoric experiences. And I start my search for any products online by going Alexa compatible lamps or whatever it is that I'm purchasing. And let's think about that. Let's take a moment to appreciate our digital economy in terms of online shopping as an avenue for me to enable and empower my ability to access what's out there in the market.

I'm no longer being restricted by inaccessible transport or logistical barriers that limit my shopping choices. Being able to browse, see pictures of real products posted by real people, and compare prices is so much easier when you're not dashing around fighting with people who have parked in the accessible parking spots or asking strangers to reach items down off the shelf with you that are placed too high.

So, it makes me curious to see whether the companies developing and selling these game changing products and services realize the impact that they are making on my world. Which gets me snooping around their websites to see if they've got the insider scoop from employees with a disability. It makes me want to connect with them, to talk to these organizations, find out more about them, and to work with them to explore what else can be done.

And that, my friends, is how you get organizations noticed for all the right reasons. So, what does this all mean for you? Whether or not you have a disability, most of us are active in the economy. We're either spending or making money. So here are a few tips to take away from today's session to think about.

If you are a business, then tap into these lived experiences of your employees through formal employee resource groups. And if you need any help on how to do that, there's some great people, including myself, that can help you with that. Just give me a call. Secondly, in order to make these insights stick and really benefit your business, you need to commit at the highest level of your organization to making sure that your digital platforms that you use and the content that you include are accessible for all.

Developing a plan to undertake, to review your websites and your apps, your communication platforms, your operation systems, your security platforms. And have a look at, compare them to the best practice accessibility standards that are out there. That helps you become aware of where you're going wrong and where you could be doing so much better.

And there are really good resources out there. A simple one being the WCAG, which is the Web Content Accessibility Guideline. There are a lot of resources out there that can help you do this right as a standard practice. And thirdly, ensure that your products and services are represented in an authentic way.

For example, if you have accessibility and you showcase accessibility in your products and services themselves, then also include graphics and imagery of people with disabilities as customers, as in employees in your organization. Make sure that what you're delivering is compatible with things like your assistive technologies, your screen readers, your speech recognition tools, because that allows people with disabilities to access your site without assistance. So, in terms of graphics form and function, make sure that you've designed your digital products and services to be completely inclusive and accessible by all. So, circling back to my story, what's on the cards for little old me and the Vicarage?

There's a series that I've been watching on Netflix called Humans, which is essentially about a time in our future where AI has been converted into synthetic human beings. Now this is taking Alexa to a new level. A physically present human-type form who is able to assist and enable. One who cannot only help me in with the DIY housework, managing the logistics of traveling, doing my gardening, taking my dog for a walk, but it can also be programmed to carry me easily up a flight of stairs or over sandy beaches and into forests for picnics.

Without the commonly human exclamation of, “ Oh my gosh, my back, you're getting really heavy. Perhaps it's time to diet, my love.” No names mentioned dear husband, I'm just saying. What I want is a time where we can get this synthetic, AI enabled human being, who will be able to pick me up, stride across fields and go, “My dear, you've lost weight, you're magnificent.”

I will definitely be purchasing the model that is built for powerlifting. “I do believe they think I am some sort of God.” Now I leave you with a cautionary thought. We have an unprecedented opportunity right now to learn from our past habits in society where inaccessible environments and behaviors excluded, devalued and disempowered people with disabilities.

Our digital economy is in full force in its evolution, but without that constant involvement of people with disabilities in the exploration, in the design, in the development, and the delivery of AI enabled products and services. Things can go terribly wrong. We see it in the AI screening processes that are currently being explored in recruitment, where impersonal, time restricted virtual interviews that are the first screening step, fail to make adjustments for an applicant, for example, who has a stutter.

We see it with voice prompted informational services. Which offer too many confusing options for a person with memory retention or concentrational issues, for example. When we keep in touch with the human, when we involve the diverse insights that this brings, and we close the gap between those who have and those who have not, those who can and those who cannot, we stand a real chance, of leaving no one behind.

Well, that’s my story for today, I hope this podcast has given you a fresh perspective on the topic of AI, which can be terribly scary if the movies like The Matrix are to be believed. But while we're here in this world right now and experiencing the liberating power of enabling technology, I encourage you to get on board, find out more about it.

If you'd like to connect with me directly, please do so. You can reach me via my website, which is bradshawleroux.co. za or lesabradshawinternational.com

“Goodness, gracious me!”