

**Episode 5 – The Pothole in the Road to Disability Confidence**

 Hello and welcome to my next podcast. The title is The Pothole in the Road Towards Disability Confidence. How lovely you've chosen to download my podcast, where I combined my stories of lived experiences as a person with a disability, with my professional expertise and experience around disability confidence in our economy and our mainstream society. Hopefully I can bring some tips and some insights about building disability confidence and why this benefits everyone.

My name is Lesa Bradshaw, I'm a social entrepreneur, an international consultant and keynote speaker and a really passionate advocate whose main ambition in life is to make sure that disability confident economies become common practice. And that's an economy where business society and individuals benefit from fair access and opportunities for all. Today's podcast focuses on the ever so sensitive topic of whether or not to disclose a disability to an employer. What are the risks? What are the rewards and why is this even a thing?

How on earth is this topic related to potholes? Sometimes my titles need a little bit of explaining. So let's start with positioning the metaphor of the potholes. The bane of all travellers - the pothole in the road, has the potential to derail your journey. If you don't see it coming, it can throw you off course. It can jolt your sense of safety. It could hold your journey unless you have the right tools to get back on track, and it can result in you being vulnerable and relying on the help of strangers to get you back on the road. Sound familiar? So let's apply this metaphor to the journey towards disability confidence in your role or your career, and whether or not disclosing a disability to an employer is going to be that pothole in the journey towards success.

Let's start off with the first point. Well, you didn't see that pothole coming, even though they're quite common and you've seen it around. This is the same as when you acquire a disability. Sometimes for people who acquire a disability that are already in the workspace, they may not anticipate some of the barriers that are going to be experienced as they journey towards furthering their career. The reality is acquiring a disability doesn't come with all the tools that you need to learn how to navigate your way around these potholes. And so sometimes part of your journey towards becoming back on track as an in your career is becoming disability confident yourself. The thing is, if you're still learning how to become more enabled and capacitated and comfortable with your new journey vehicle that you're traveling in, how confident are you going to be to trust your employer to tell them? And so what's really important, I think, in the conversation of whether or not to declare or disclose a disability to the employer is starting by saying, how confident am I in navigating this conversation? I'm going to anticipate potholes that are going be coming. I'm going prepare for them, and I'm going make sure that I have all the tools that I need to help repair or navigate when, when I do come across setbacks. For an employer, the important thing to realize is that asking someone to disclose or declare a disability to you is a big trust exercise, and so, empathy and trying to understand the journey and trying to understand what those potholes are is a really key success factor in ensuring that that person's declaration experience is positive, enabling, and has a great outcome for both yourself and the employee.

Now the second thing about a pothole is it can completely throw you off course as you swerve around trying to avoid it and trying to deal with it. Let's unpack the assumptions that so commonly are associated with persons with a disability. There you are on track towards your career goals. You're getting on with life the best that you can, and you get told that you are not suited for a role. This is a pothole. I remember when I was very young and I was a young professional entering the economy - I remember being told when I applied for a position that I was too ambitious for the job that I was applying for. Imagine that being a negative as to why you wouldn't be employed. I was absolutely flummoxed, I had no idea why that was a negative thing. It was only later that I realized that I hadn't actually told my employer that I was in a wheelchair until the day of the second interview when I arrived. So up till then, the first interview was telephonic, It went beautifully, and the employer was very impressed, very excited, and said, come in and meet the team. I then arrived on the day and they were quite shell-shocked when they saw me in a wheelchair. They stumbled their way through the interview, feeling a bit awkward, and I could see they were a bit uncomfortable and we went through the interview, but I still felt that I demonstrated my full capabilities and I left there feeling quite confident.

Little did I know that the assumptions about my abilities as a wheelchair user was their actual concern, and so I got turned down for the job. The rejection really deflated me. It left me perplexed and it made me doubt my confidence to persevere. I was nearly thrown off course on my journey towards my career goals. I had to regroup and I had to go, right - Pothole hit, I've now, I recognized the pothole and I now need to do something about that. Going forward, I'm going to make sure that when I tell an employer that I'm applying for a position, I'm gonna tell them beforehand, “listen, you should probably know, that I am a wheelchair user, this has absolutely no impact on my ability to bring my full value to your organization. I'm very open to discussing any potential concerns that you have, and I'd rather you raise them with me in the interview so that I can answer them and have a fair opportunity to reflect my ability rather than you assuming my disability and disabling barrier barriers.” So I learned from that, it helped me get on course again and off I was in my journey.

And then it comes to hitting that pothole and how it can really jolt your sense of safety. You know, it makes you a bit nervous when you're driving now am I going hit another one? And it's sort of the same when you're on that road towards your career journey and you've already come across your first barrier, like added in that rejection. Not only did I have to get myself back on course, I was a little more cautious with how I move forward. Now, in my case, obviously a wheelchair is very visible and it's a lot harder to hide, but what about all those individuals who have non-visible disabilities? You know, disabilities where it takes courage to tell people because there's such stigma around it. When we talk about mental health, we talk about depression, we talk about schizophrenia, you know, understanding that other people might not be as knowledgeable or capacitated or educated about that disability. And that stigmas and stereotypes prevail, that takes a lot of courage for you to put yourself at risk. When we consider that more than 90% of people with non-visible disabilities are likely to hide this from their employer, well that just speaks volumes. So what do you do as an employer? Well, the first thing is to make people realize that not all disabilities are visible, that many are hidden, and the conversation is not actually about your disability. The conversation we want to have is asking you what is disabling you in this role that is preventing you from bringing your full, authentic, capacitated and productive self to work? And what can we do to remove that disabling barrier? And I think that's the main thing, is understanding that the more you anticipate the potholes, the more you are cautious when you are, you are traveling that journey. But the more prepared you feel to navigate your way around those potholes when you face them, that is really where you start to realize a good return on investment in your own development. And so for me, creating a working culture where people with disabilities are not seen as, you know, we have to accommodate for a person with a disability, but rather we've got an opportunity to learn from someone with a disability, how we're disabling our people, and we've got great insights on the enabling or adjustments that we can make that will remove those barriers that benefits everyone. That's a culture where you feel safe to disclose. So if you want people to stop feeling like they're swimming upstream, then look at them and say, what is slowing you down? What is compromising your ability to bring your A game? What can we adjust that will help you feel like you're swimming downstream towards those goals?

And that's really the whole concept of reasonable adjustments or workplace adjustments. What can we add, what can we remove, or what can we enhance that will enable you to swim downstream towards performance goals and realize everybody's win-win outcome.

Now, the reality is that the pothole that you hit could hold your journey if you don't have the right tools to repair the damage. And here the analogy continues, considering that acquiring a disability doesn't come with an instruction manual. You don't necessarily know how to tackle the barriers. Or you could have a disability, like for example, in my case, I've had my disability all my life, but it's progressive. So sometimes, and when I get weaker, I have new barriers, I have new potholes, I have new obstacles in the road towards my career goals, and I have to be able to make adjustments. Knowing how to tackle those barriers, knowing what enablers you need to achieve that, doesn't always come easy, and it's a skill. For me, what's really important is that when we are supporting employees with a disability who have newly acquired disabilities, or when we are investing in a future talent pipeline that includes people with disabilities, what's absolutely critical is that we recognize the disability confidence Training is not just for people without disabilities, it's for people with disabilities too. So one of the things that we incorporate in my skills academies, which focus on developing in demand talent for our economy, we recognize that it's not enough just to teach people the technical skills in the skills program that we are delivering, but we also want to teach people how to navigate these potholes that they may experience in their career journey. So disability confidence - we've got a program called Potential that I've developed, which says, how do you recognize yourself as being the navigator of your own journey? Understanding potholes are there, understanding you're going to have to be in charge of getting around those potholes, and what tools and knowledge do you need to have in your travel kit that will help you navigate those safely.

Now, as employers, it's not just the person with a disability that needs to have those tools with them. It's you as an employer as well. What mechanisms, what guiding pathways, what policies or structures or processes have we put in place that will help travel that employee's journey with them towards removing those potholes or avoiding them? So making sure that you have a really great solid and enabling workplace adjustment structure, for example, that you have guiding toolkits and references for managers to use to navigate somebody through a declaration or disclosure process, that you have information and resources available to your employees to say, if you want to declare or disclose a disability related need, these are the great ways that you can connect with us and we want to assure you it's going be safe. So making sure that the employer has the same tools in their toolkit to help navigate the journey towards your people's success is just as important as the individual having those tools themselves.

So the last point really is around how potholes can leave you feeling vulnerable and at the mercy of strangers. And this for me is relatable and when we talk about disability disclosure in company practices that leave the fate or your fate as a person with a disability to somebody that is not disability confident. An example I might use, is very often in things like the mining industry or the manufacturing industry, we've got safety standards, we've got policies and so on that are fairly rigid and inflexible. And so what tends to happen is we approach disability from a medical model perspective, which means if you declare you've got a disability, you go to the doctor, the doctor will diagnose you, will give you a prognosis and will determine whether you are fit for work. Now that is a very different conversation, to have when you have it with somebody who is a disability confident medical practitioner. So you must remember that what disables people is not always a medical condition. Sometimes what disables people is their barrier to the environment or a policy or an attitude. So let's say somebody has epilepsy and they go to the doctor and the doctor says, well, yes, you've got epilepsy - that according to our company policy is a safety risk and you may not work in the manufacturing environment. And what if you come back and say, “no, but wait, I have epilepsy, but I am controlled on medication. The triggers that does typically, um, trigger a seizure for me is not present in that work environment, and in fact, I have a dissociative feeling if I am going to have a seizure and that gives me quite a bit of time to recognize that one's coming, which gives me ample time to get to a place of safety. So technically, I'm actually not at any higher risk as anybody else.” What the disabling barrier is, is the policy - the medical practitioner's preparedness to challenge that is leaving your future career journey in the hands of somebody who might not be disability confident. And so it's important for us to be able to realize that when we use a one size fits all policy, when we leave decisions up to the hands of people who are not disability confident, that can be a real stopper in terms of how, how far you can proceed in your journey.

And what we need to do is learn to challenge. Challenge the assumptions, challenge the status quo, challenge the policies that are out there that are unfair. Don't sit back and accept that common practice is the right way. There are different ways to get things done, and so as a person with a disability to push through to continue, do not leave your fate to the mercy of strangers. Get involved. Find your voice. Find your channel of communication, prepare your case and change things.

So what does this all mean in the journey towards being disability confident as an employer, or being confident to have this conversation about declaration or disclosure or just how to be enabled with your employer? Here are a couple of things that I think are critical.

As an employer asking employees or applicants with a disability to disclose. Recognize that if you want that to happen, you need to make people feel trusted. So build the trust, make sure that you reflect it in your behaviours and make sure that the conversations that people have are met with empathy, met with an honest intention to say, how can we remove these disabling barriers so that you can continue to bring the value to the business that we are paying you for, and that's the end goal. As employers, back your actions with a process. So make sure that there is a clear and very easy to follow path. If someone in your team discloses or declares that they have a disability and they need a workplace adjustment, making sure that the mechanism to actually action that is clear, is easy to navigate and is prepared for, makes that experience so much more enabling. Capacitate the stakeholders who are involved in implementing these adjustments, your line managers, your facilities managers, your policies and protocols people, anyone who's involved in making that flex or that adjustment or that shift - they've got to be capacitated to understand why they're doing this and how the conversation of removing a disabling barrier can be very unique and specific to an individual in a specific role, but the process of ensuring that that is a positive experience for all can be standardized.

And lastly, you need as an employer to believe in the return on investment. If you invest in removing disabling barriers, your return is getting people who bring their A game to work, and that's good for productivity and that's good for business.

As an employee deciding whether to disclose or declare a disability to your employer, I'd really give you the advice to say, start off by perceiving yourself as equal and valuable. Remember, you are not asking for special favours. You're asking for the same enabling opportunity to deliver your full value, the same as everybody else. It might be done in a different way because of a unique or specific requirement, but are you able to deliver that value? That's what you're asking for - an equitable opportunity to bring your value to work.

Secondly, remember, this is not just about you. What you are doing by educating your employer on how to remove disabling barriers is going to pave the way for other people not to have to hit those same potholes. So the more we fill those potholes as we go, the less of a troublesome journey people who follow will have. So you're part of a bigger movement. It will ensure that you have access to enablers. And that for me is very important. Remember asking for a workplace adjustment so that you can perform to the standards required is a right, it's not a favor. What's important to understand is what you ask for needs to be realistic within the end goal or objective. If we put this enabling step in place, is it going to remove the disabling barrier to the point where I can actually do the job that I've been employed to do? Nobody will expect an employer to employ someone who doesn't deliver the value for which they're being paid. So be part of understanding what those enablers are, exploring how you can remove those disabling barriers. Remember, you are protected from unfair discrimination, and if you are discriminated against, do something about it. Find your voice. Make a change. Hold people accountable. Because no longer is it acceptable to be excluded as a person with a disability on grounds that are just not valid and not fair.

And lastly, recognize that you are a valuable resource of knowledge, your lived experiences and your insights about the company that you work for, the disabling barriers, the enabling steps, what you're doing so very right as an employer. How well you're treating your customers, how are you delivering your value? You've got great lived insights to share. So find an avenue like your employee resource groups, but be part of that conversation of building a better business for everybody.

Now the reality is that in business at the moment, this conversation of to disclose or declare or not to disclose or declare is a hotly debated topic. You know, technically should you have to declare that you have a disability in order to be treated fairly? But from an employer point of view, if we don't know what's disabling you, how do we know how to enable you? So it's a bit of a contentious issue. But I think what we need to do is bring it back to the basics. I've invested a lot of time and energy in working with organizations to say, how do we actually navigate or prepare for a positive and enabling experience, when somebody comes to you as an employer and says, I have a disability, these are the disabling barriers, this is the impact it's having, these are ideas I want to throw around on how we can remove these disabling barriers, and here's my commitment to moving forward. So I've invested a lot of time in trying to find ways that we can balance the realities of business, the labour legislation requirements of reporting and proving disabilities, and all the administrative complexities around having to sort of be recognized formally as a person with a disability, and balancing the positive lived impact of that experience. So if you need any help with tips and techniques and ways that we can help your business be more prepared, then just contact me on bradshawleroux.co.za, or lesabradshawinternational.com - I'm very happy to have those conversations. If you are a person with a disability and you don't know whether you've got the courage to do that, I encourage you to go and speak to your employee resource groups, speak to other people in the business who have travelled the journey, get tips and techniques on how to be prepared, pop me an email if you'd like to on Lesa@bradshawleroux.co.za, and let's get the journey going. There are going to be potholes for sure, but when we know they're coming, we can anticipate for them and we know how to navigate around them. They don't need to stop our journey towards our career objectives.

Thank you so much for spending your time with me today, and I really, really look forward to sharing more insights into the world of disability confidence. Take care.