

**Episode 1: 2 Inches really does matter**

 Well, I'm really excited that you've chosen to download my podcast and to listen to me for a few precious minutes of your life. My name is Lesa Bradshaw. I'm a disability inclusion specialist. I'm known for bringing a little bit of cheek and humour to the topic of disability confidence. My area of focus is bringing disability confidence to our economy.

And that for me is something that I'm both professionally and personally very passionate about. So I hope you enjoy a bit of time listening to some of my stories, and I look forward to you joining me in future. So I came up with the topic of two inches really does matter. When I was invited recently to join, um, an organization in Atlanta, USA as a keynote speaker.

At the employee resource group summit, it was a great opportunity to come and speak about disability confidence and how it benefits everybody in a room of people and a really big room of people who had the same passion for inclusion. Now that required me to travel from the UK to the USA. And when it comes to global travel, this is always were, as a wheelchair user, logistics get involved.

The logistics of travel are something that need to be really pre planned down to the finest detail. Risk mitigation is critical because things will go wrong. Preparation, absolutely essential because everybody wants to know that, um, what to expect on your arrival. And so began the conversation of how do I plan for an accessible trip to the USA.

And that's where the topic really started to get a bit of traction. So let me tell you why two inches really does matter to an airline when you book a flight. Well, because obviously the dimensions of the chair and the dimensions of you, quite frankly, become very important. So I phone the airline, I go, I'm booking a flight, I am a wheelchair user.

Immediately red flags go off and you have to jump through several extra hoops. to be able to get a confirmation. You have to speak to a special department that determine whether they can cope with you. And so you get asked a number of questions. Depending on the air life, some are quite practical and respectful.

For example, how wide is your wheelchair? Uh, does it fold down? What is its weight? And so on. I get that. Others, it's a little more personal, like, you know, do you emit any unpleasant body odours? And my response is, well, it very much depends on the competence of the pilot, quite frankly. So it depends on the protocol of the airline that you book with, which as a consumer, I have clear favourites because I quite like to be respected and ask professional questions during my booking.

Anyway, I digress. So now we go through the dimensions, tips to people who are travellers in wheelchairs, know the dimensions of your chair, but most importantly, Know the FDA regulations and what it tells you about what kind of batteries you can travel with. Have those facts with you, have the information there, and be empowered and aware of what your rights and responsibilities are as a safe traveller.

Right, having successfully navigated the booking procedure, you arrive at the airport and you go and check in, and you get escorted, usually by a very helpful person, through all the checks and balances. Now this is where having a disability sometimes works to your favour. Because you do get to jump a lot of queues, and that for me is a perk.

Now for me, this is where it gets all a little bit, um, personal. Because what you have to do, I don't walk at all. So when you get to the entrance to the airplane, they bring the dreaded skinny chair. Now this is called an aisle chair in professional terms. But what it essentially is, it's a reminder of how your diet has failed you terribly.

It's a very narrow chair on wheels that they transport you, they lift you onto. Your wheelchair goes down into the hold of the plane and they now take you down the aisle, which is already very narrow. Let me tell you, there is nothing more reflective as you go down 37 rows, um, and each time your bottom cheeks hit the armrest of the chair next to you.

oh that diet should have been committed to with a little bit more enthusiasm, integrity and self-respect intact. You get to your chair; you get lifted onto the seat. And that's where the true, um, ninja powers of self-restraint become real because two inches in this case is a definite game changer. Unfortunately, although the aisles are very narrow and they do have a slipper chair, the rigmarole of trying to go to the bathroom as somebody who cannot stand on an airplane is quite terrifying because the doors are too narrow.

The swing that you need to be able to manoeuvre yourself on a toilet, it's not wide enough in the bathroom to navigate that swing or that transfer. So very often, the choice of actually going to the bathroom during my 10 or 12 hour flight is not an option. So that is where preplanning becomes essential.

You do not drink at least four hours before a flight. Rule number one. When you're on the plane, resist the temptation, every time the drinks trolley goes round, to say, just say no. Okay, for me, the forward planning, knowing that I've got an hour until we land. There are no hazardous landing conditions I am aware of.

The weather is good. All trajectories are in place. I will have my coffee now, because I know I've got one hour. To be able to get off the aeroplane and get to the local bathroom. Of course, hoping and praying that that bathroom itself is accessible. Otherwise, it gets a little more tricky. So the lesson learnt about two inches is to do with physical space.

The space that you need as a wheelchair user to be able to get into a bathroom, to transfer, to be able to move and be able to support yourself. This is really important. So when we talk about planning bathroom accessibilities, it's a real thing. Size does in fact really matter. Now comes my favourite part.

I've had the coffee, I've gone to the accessible bathroom, I've called for help. If it's not accessible, I've solved some problems and now it's time to get from the airport to the hotel. Now, that in itself gives you very limited options. Accessible taxis are a thing in some areas and not so much in others.

When I landed in Atlanta, I was only able to find one taxi company that had an accessible wheelchair accessible taxi that was anywhere within the norms of the economics of hiring a vehicle. And I was very lucky to have that option. I managed to find it one in Atlanta and they were a fantastic company with really great people.

So it solved my problem. But my plan B was catching a train from the airport to the hotel. Now here's the thing where two inches really does matter. The distance between the train platform and the train itself, if it's wider than two inches, well you risk death. And the bottom line is, when it has happened to me before, where the front wheel of my wheelchair has got jammed in that space between the train and the platform, and the doors are closing, and the panic's setting in, and I know that there's very small chance of actually dying in that situation, because I'm hoping that they have a lot of safety regulations in place that would stop that.

But one can never be too sure of these things, so the panic to get your wheel freed and then to take the leap of faith as you ram yourself across that gap, I mean, it's really, it's an adrenaline sport. And so I always prefer to avoid those, those life threatening situations. Um, for me, two inches again really does matter as a standard, if that width between a train and a platform is the correct and universally aligned or standardized width, then you've got no problem.

That becomes an option as a transport solution for so many people who are wheelchair users that was not available before. So think in your designs when you are putting transport systems in place, put yourself in that scenario. Two inches really does matter. So now I've landed in my very bougie hotel. It was absolutely exquisite, a very recently built hotel as well.

And the reason why I chose this hotel was from an accessibility point of view. It was a new building. It was compliant with some of the design, universal design standards that are put in place. And from the pictures on the website, it looked really accessible. And kudos to the, to the hotel. It really was.

So, it was an accessible lobby, I got to my hotel room, um, first little obstacle was the door was very difficult to open, so it was fine. I had a long runway of a long passage that I could build up some serious speed and then slam into the door, which then flicked in and I made a grand entrance into the room.

The room itself, very spacious, which is important because my driving's not that brilliant. And I was very happy to see a bathroom that was actually quite large. It allowed manoeuvrability. It didn't have a step into the shower. Now, let me tell you, that's a rarity. Do you know how many times I go to a wheelchair accessible hotel room and they've got a seat in the shower, but there's a step getting into it.

And I look and I go. Really, so near, but so far. This one, you could actually roll into the shower. It had a flap down seat so that I could transfer myself into the shower and I could move my wheelchair out. Important when you're driving with electrics, let me tell you, for self preservation. I was also terribly excited to see that the mixer tap to switch the shower on and off Now, surprisingly, this is actually something that is very often not done, and so I always have to sit there, you know, with the patience of a Scandinavian leaping into an ice bath, waiting for the water temperature to adjust, so that I can have a decent shower.

But all kudos to the hotel, always good. The only thing that I would say needed a bit of tweaking was the basin. Now, I want you to picture the scene. If you're in a wheelchair, your knees are in front of you. And when they put a fancy little fascia board underneath the basin, you can't get close enough to the basin in order to switch the chaps on and brush your teeth.

Fortunately, again,. Like the anglerfish, I've got an amazing ability to be able to do a perfect arc of spitting my toothpaste out up into the air so that it goes up and lands perfectly in the basin. It's a life skill that people who are not wheelchair users have never even thought they could hone.

So for me, things like being able to reach the basin, that would be a perk, lot more elegant as well. Now, having navigated all those barriers, it was time to get into bed. Okay. Little failure here. Let me tell you, when you transfer your body weight from a wheelchair into a bed, two inches really does matter because if it's bigger than two inches, that space that you've got to lift your body across is about as well be a crevasse in some glacier somewhere.

It's that big and that daunting. So this designer bed, which was gorgeous, it had a thick wooden base around the whole bed, which looked very aesthetically pleasing. But gave me the crevasse fear. It was too far. Luckily, I was traveling with my daughter who was helping me. And so we had to do some serious problem solving.

Now, this brings me to something that I think a lot of people don't often think about disability. We are so busy focusing on what people with disabilities cannot do, that we neglect to look at what their finely honed skills are. Problem solving in my life very important and so we came up with a solution that I would park perpendicular to the bed and then I would raise my wheelchair because it's got a bar stool setting.

So I would raise my wheelchair up into the, into the air. I would then place my feet on the bed and my daughter would elegantly grab my ankles and drag me across into bed and then do some sort of very ungraceful rolling, rolling until I was in the upright position and that's where I lay. Until the next morning so not at all elegant definitely not one of those romantic scenes where somebody lays gently into bed little bit of elegance would have been preferred and had my daughter not been there I would have been sleeping upright for 10 days so learnings to hotels it's not just about the physical infrastructure two inches matters in the functionality Of not only how you design the room, but how you furnish the room.

And that for me is an important factor to consider. Two inches really does matter. So I was very fortunate in my stay in Atlanta to be able to get in a bit of sightseeing and two things about all the attractions that I went to really stood out to me. The first thing was I went to go to the aquarium and it was very well run.

If you're a person with a disability, all the staff knew exactly what to do. And it was a great experience, except for one thing. This is where the difference between proactive planning and reactive solutions is a thing. Um, we must have had about ten people with, with disabilities waiting for the one accessible avenue to get to the Dolphin Show.

And that was the lift. One lift that could fit one wheelchair. That ten of us had to wait in order to get up to the right level to go and look at the show. That is retrofitting. It's thinking after the fact. What can we do to get somebody with a disability from A to B? Okay, proactive universal design was experienced when I went to the high end museum, which was absolutely phenomenal.

The way that it was designed allowed you to be able to get up and down between the floors in a beautifully designed and elegant ramp that went around the whole interior of the museum itself. So we could meander between floors not using an elevator. It was perfectly accessible and interestingly enough, I sat and people watched a bit.

Do you know that most pedestrians actually chose the ramp over the lifts as well? So for me, it's a nice illustration of when we consider the dimensions, we consider design, we consider environmental accessibility and the way that we design our world, it doesn't just benefit people with disabilities, it benefits everybody.

So never in my life as an inclusion specialist did I think that I would be advocating the topic of two inches really does matter with quite so much passion. For me to bring this home, accessibility is something that proactively done is easy to do. It doesn't just benefit an identified group of people, it actually benefits everybody in the long run.

And it's very much part of building a disability confident and inclusive society. Whether it's in the workplace, whether it's in your social facilities, whether it's in your public facilities, or whether it's just how you design your home. Thinking about accessibility really is something that should feature on a day to day basis.

So for me as a disability inclusion specialist, My company approaches accessibility from a lived experience and a compliance point of view. Yes, making sure that we have universal standards, making sure that what we introduced as an accessible solution benefit everybody is important, but it can't just be a checkbox.

It has to be something that from a lived experience makes sense. And so for me, if I was to encourage anyone out there, if you are part of designing an accessible environment, Ask people with disabilities who live that journey to give their inputs and insights. Experience it yourself. You'll start to notice that little things have big impacts.

Things like plastic hinges on the toilet seat. How safe is that for you to transfer your body weight? Things like whether a door opens inward or outward, how much space does that give you to manoeuvre? Things like the height of a light switch. How does that enable you to be able to come into a room and turn the lights on?

From a functional perspective, often we don't recognise how little adjustments have huge impacts. Two inches really does matter in the lives of people with lived experience of disability. So when you are out there and you're wanting to make a change, A little bit of intentionality, asking the right people, the right questions and test driving the goods are three critical success factors to making sure that two inches lands with impact.

Well, that is my story for today. I've got many more stories that I'd like to share with you around disability inclusion and how we can build a more disability confident world. Look out for more of my podcasts and thank you so much for joining me today.