

Meghan M. Biro: [00:00](#) There is an area of diversity and inclusion that's often overlooked, accessibility. What does it truly mean to have an accessible workplace? There's a lot more to accessibility than wheelchair ramps and sign language interpreters. Today on WorkTrends, we get to the bottom of how we can create workplaces that are great places to work for each and every one of you.

Meghan M. Biro: [00:32](#) Welcome to the WorkTrends podcast from TalentCulture. I'm your host, Meghan M. Biro. Every week, we interview interesting people who are re-imagining work, and join us on Twitter every Wednesday, 1:30 PM Eastern, using the hashtag WorkTrends. Today's WorkTrends podcast is sponsored by SmartSearch. Be sure to visit them at [www.aps2k.com](http://www.aps2k.com) to learn more about their new Version 21 interface and all the excitement it's creating in the applicant-tracking software space. Accessibility is something a lot of us in HR are thinking about, so, ask yourself, is your candidate experience accessible?

Meghan M. Biro: [01:11](#) DISH recently settled a lawsuit regarding an inaccessible online application process. The company, get this, will pay \$1.25 million in damages and also work to make its application process much more accessible. I think this is a great reminder that it's important to make sure your organization is accessible to anyone you communicate with. This could be an employee, a candidate, a customer or even just somebody visiting your office, so we'll dig in deeper with today's guest.

Meghan M. Biro: [01:47](#) Our guest today is Neil Milliken. He's the global head of accessibility at Atos and the co-founder of AXSChat, an online platform focused on disability, inclusion and accessibility, and if his name sounds slightly familiar to you out there in the WorkTrends community, it should. Neil has been a regular participant in our WorkTrends chats for about five years now, and it's always great to have a member of the WorkTrends family on the podcast, though to be fair, each and every one of you is family to me, including Mr. Antonio Santos, who is a dear friend of both Neil and I's, but even the best mama bears have their favorites.

Meghan M. Biro: [02:30](#) Neil, we're talking accessibility today, and I'm really excited to have you here, so let's start off with some background for the audience. How did you come to work in the accessibility space?

Neil Milliken: [02:40](#) Thank you for having me, firstly. It's great to be here. I was looking for a job, and I'd been working in the dot-com area, and

I applied for a job for a bit of consultancy work for a small technology company in Cambridge, which was where I was living at the time, and ended up staying nine years, and they were specializing in technology for dyslexia. I then ended up moving to work on the BBC account for Siemens, and I've been there on and off with large companies ever since.

Meghan M. Biro: [03:09](#) For all of you out there taking notes, yes, this is not Cambridge, Massachusetts. Right, Neil? This is the other side of the pond.

Neil Milliken: [03:17](#) Yes, that's right. It's a small town in East Anglia.

Meghan M. Biro: [03:20](#) Talk to us about the personal side of this story, because everybody has one. What's yours when it comes to how this meets your career?

Neil Milliken: [03:28](#) Right, so the reason that I stayed nine years after working there going for a three-week job was because I'm dyslexic, and it runs in the family, and so I fell into my niche. I'm in my mid, late-40's, and so I grew up before technology was ubiquitous, but, actually, technology has transformed my life because it enables me to do stuff that I wasn't necessarily able to do before. I'm relatively bright. I went to university, did okay, but found it hard, and through using technology, I've... It's made my life a lot easier, so that sparked a passion in me to share that with other people, and so I've really been enjoying my working life and passionate about what I do for the last nearly 20 years now. Now, that's a bit scary.

Meghan M. Biro: [04:20](#) Yeah, it is.

Neil Milliken: [04:21](#) Time passes too quick.

Meghan M. Biro: [04:23](#) In what ways did your personal experience being dyslexic affect your career?

Neil Milliken: [04:30](#) When I left university, it took me a long time to get a job, and I struggled a bit with the applications, but, actually, I had one job. I was passionate about music, and I set up a record label, but it wasn't making me a ton of money, so I had to go and get another job to pay for my passion.

Meghan M. Biro: [04:50](#) That story sounds awfully familiar, Neil.

- Neil Milliken: [04:53](#) I was working for a bookmaker or a betting shop, a large chain of betting shops, and they went, "You're well-educated. You should be management," except that bookmaking requires bet settling, which is like complex equations, and when you're dyslexic, that's just the worst possible thing you could watch and to settle complex equations in your head, so I kept being put forward for exams and kept failing them. At this point, I had not been diagnosed, and it was a pretty miserable time, but, actually, then moving into a job in technology was really the thing that made the difference for me. I found my niche and was able to really start to do something that I enjoyed, and when you're enjoying something, it helps you progress.
- Meghan M. Biro: [05:35](#) No question about that. A lot of people aren't sure about the best terminology to use when we talk about employee differences. Could you give us a quick dictionary of the terms we should be using? How should we be communicating with each other around topics that sometimes seem a little sensitive?
- Neil Milliken: [05:54](#) Okay. The first thing to say is actually disability is not a dirty word because, if you speak to most people who experience life with disability, then they're quite happy to talk about their disability, but the best thing to do is always to ask the person, "How do you wish to be addressed, and tell me about whether you need help and, if so, how you want me to help you?" because a lot of people are quite happy plowing their own furrow, but it's really best to just ask up front, be open, be friendly, treat people as people.
- Meghan M. Biro: [06:23](#) Neil, you're a Gen Xer. You mentioned that earlier. Do you feel like it's easier now to have these conversations in the workplace and outside of than it was, say, 10 years ago?
- Neil Milliken: [06:33](#) Oh, yeah, we've made progress. The last 10 years have definitely changed how things are being treated, how things are being addressed. I've definitely seen progress. It's not there yet, for sure. The disability employment gap is still at around 30% in the UK, 31% in Canada, something similar in the US.
- Neil Milliken: [06:52](#) People are still not disclosing. We've got loads more people in work with hidden disabilities that don't disclose, but it is beginning to be recognized. Businesses are starting to have conversations. There are things like The Valuable 500, which was launched at Davos in January, where the CEOs, the people at the very top of the companies are saying, "This is something

that we want to talk about. This is something we're going to put on our board agenda," and that's sending a strong signal to the people in the middle of the organization that actually it's okay to talk about it. It's something that should be brought into the fold.

Meghan M. Biro: [07:24](#) Let's talk a little bit about accessibility. I just discussed a lawsuit. DISH, D-I-S-H, settled about the inaccessible application process. How can we make the application process more accessible to each and every one of us?

Neil Milliken: [07:40](#) Again, this is about meeting personal needs, so, firstly, obviously, if you're going to advertise online, make sure that the website you're putting it on is accessible. There are guidelines out there. There's the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. It's particularly important to follow these, especially there's been a recent judgment. The Supreme Court just refused to hear Domino's Pizza only in the last couple of weeks, so that is becoming quite a clear judgment that any public-facing Web presence needs to be accessible, so... and the link to do that is through the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines through the W3C, and that's publicly available. The guidelines are available for free, so it's not like you have to pay to find out the information.

Meghan M. Biro: [08:27](#) Can you repeat that for the audience? Where do we find this info?

Neil Milliken: [08:31](#) You can search WCAG, and it will pop up everywhere. They're a very well-known guidelines. They are a little bit dense and wordy, but there are four key principles, and then there's the POUR Principles, and that's perceivable, operable, understandable and robust, so, whatever you do, it needs to have these core qualities, but, essentially, accessibility is the art of making stuff work for people with disabilities and interoperable with the specialist or assistive technologies that they're going to use, and if you follow these guidelines, there's a much greater likelihood that they're going to work.

Neil Milliken: [09:08](#) That said, you can do other things, too, because it's not just about your website that is important for people with disabilities, and you may not be in full control of it as well because your organization may have bought a piece of software, it might have bought Taleo or it might've bought SuccessFactors. You don't fully control how that is presented to your applicant, so, if you're unsure, first off, go and get it tested.

If you find that there are holes and you can't get them fixed, then offer people an alternative way, an email address to contact, a phone number. Offer people multiple ways to apply because, actually, for some people, online forms are a nightmare, me included. Online forms are a nightmare of being dyslexic, so, actually, giving people that flexibility is important.

Neil Milliken: [09:55](#)

The other thing that some organizations are doing now is offering job trials, and that's working really well with the neurodivergent community. I know that you were keen to talk about neurodiversity, so giving people job trials, work experience and then into a job is another good way of welcoming someone into an organization, letting them see if the organization is a good fit and if they're a good fit for the organization, and that's proving to be quite successful.

Meghan M. Biro: [10:22](#)

I'd tell you, Neil, some of those conversations can be awkward, difficult, and the list goes on. What steps should people in organizations take to accommodate the new employee in this scenario?

Neil Milliken: [10:35](#)

First off, if we take my own employer, we make sure that people know that we welcome applications from persons with disabilities, as simple as that. We ask people, "If you need anything, because you have a disability, then let us know." We will make those accommodations. We call them adjustments in the UK, so the idea here is that when someone turns up on their first day, we already know what they need and that we can help adapt the workplace to meet their needs.

Neil Milliken: [11:02](#)

Now, obviously, as a massive organization, we've got over 110,000 staff, we also have that whole kind of corporate IT structure, and some of that is quite rigid, so we have to have a catalog of assistive tech to be available for staff and work out how we can continue to keep that working with all of the other stuff that we've got, all of our line of business applications, our desktop publishing packages, our PowerPoint, all of this kind of stuff, so there's an effort that goes into that, but, at the same time, a lot of people's needs are met by relatively simple accommodations.

Neil Milliken: [11:37](#)

The average cost of an accommodation in our organization was less than £300, less than \$500 per person. If you think about the cost of paying a recruitment agency, the cost of a few days' absence is less than the cost of the accommodation, so don't be afraid to spend the money. It's an investment, but try and do it

in such a way that you're not bespoking it every time. Don't reinvent the wheel. Try and have some kind of consistency to this.

Neil Milliken: [12:04](#) If you try and come up with a common set of tools, so, usually, we have four or five major pieces of software which we deploy for our own people and for most of our clients, one, a screen reader for people who are blind or visually impaired, a reader magnifier for people who have low vision, but not no vision, and then software for voice control, so for dictation of text, but also for reduced mobility, so, if you can't really use a mouse or you've got upper limb disorder, you can use something like Dragon NaturallySpeaking and be able to control your computer by voice, and then the final one that often gets used is literacy support tools, so, again, stuff that will read back to you, but it will also help you with proofreading and so on. Useful for people with dyslexia, but also, when you're in a multinational organization like ours, actually, only about 10% of our population's first language is English.

Meghan M. Biro: [12:58](#) I'm not surprised by that number, actually. Interesting.

Neil Milliken: [13:01](#) Yeah. We're a European-based company. We started out in Europe, and, actually, we've got huge numbers of employees in France, Germany, Spain, Eastern Europe, India, Mexico. Everyone speaks English, but it's not their first language, so, actually, the tools that were designed for dyslexia for proofreading, equally applicable to a large cohort of our staff, so, actually, this is playing into my point around doing accessibility. Providing technologies that are assistive is of benefit to the organization not just because they want to be disability inclusive, but it helps everyone be productive, and when you mainstream it, it also makes it less othering and stigmatizing for people with disabilities to be using this stuff and to be... They don't have to be different.

Meghan M. Biro: [13:52](#) I feel like no one's really having the discussion around neurodivergent employees. You just named several steps that organizations can take, but I feel like it's still a term that doesn't feel natural to some organizations still, and so I think just having this conversation today perhaps is that first step and baking some of this into your marketing communications or your recruiting efforts in companies, so there's so many different ways we can slice the onion, so to speak, when it comes to recruiting and retaining employees who fit this criteria.

- Neil Milliken: [14:29](#) Neurodiversity is a relatively recent term. It was coined by a lady that we interviewed last week for our AXSChat, and the idea here is that everybody's brain is wired differently. It's applying the concept of human diversity to our brains and our ways of thinking and how we're wired, and then neurodivergence is the kind of conditions like dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, autistic spectrum, et cetera, where we are divergent, so we're slightly different from the norm.
- Neil Milliken: [14:57](#) There's lots of debate around the language and which words we should use at the moment because it's such a new concept, so it's not surprising that businesses sometimes trip over themselves with this, but, at the same time, what we're really trying to do is just say, "Look, if you see the value in diversity, if you can see the richness in having lots of different types of people, then can you not understand how important it is to also have diversity of thought, people whose brains are different, because actually you're going to reduce group think? You're going to introduce creativity and different perspectives on life."
- Neil Milliken: [15:35](#) What we're seeing is, when we know the stats around dyslexia and ADHD and neurodivergence, that a high proportion of some of the most well-known entrepreneurs are dyslexic or neurodivergent, people like Branson, people like Charles Schwab, people that have made millions, but also a high proportion of people in prison.
- Meghan M. Biro: [15:55](#) There you go. Yeah, it's a spectrum.
- Neil Milliken: [15:58](#) Yeah, it's a spectrum, but it's also about life chances and giving people those opportunities to do stuff, and if you don't get the opportunities, then you might end up being a bit creative on the wrong side.
- Meghan M. Biro: [16:10](#) I love that, being a little bit creative on the wrong side. If you're out there listening today and you're utilizing the hashtag WorkTrends, what does that mean to you?
- Meghan M. Biro: [16:20](#) Neil, this has been a really excellent conversation. It's that time now on the podcast where we call it crystal ball time. What are your predictions for the future of work? Where are we going with all this?
- Neil Milliken: [16:32](#) Oh, gosh, I think that that's a really good question because there's a lot. There's two sides to this. There's the human side and then there's the technology side. We're seeing a rush

towards artificial intelligence, a rush towards process automation and really some scary stuff. If you're an employee, you're probably sitting in your chair thinking, "Oh, my goodness, computers are going to take away my job."

Neil Milliken: [16:58](#) I think that, when we really look at what's happening, it's much more likely to take away bits of what you're doing. There will be some creative disruption. We will see certain things disappear, but I think it will also create new roles, new jobs. It will definitely be putting more onus on human creativity, so I think that's a good news if you're neurodivergent actually.

Neil Milliken: [17:22](#) The things that computers can't do is tangential thinking. They're not there yet. We're making those connections that the computers can't, so I think there's some of that. I also think that the gig economy is a bit of a double-edged sword, so, in some ways, it could be somewhat threatening because you don't have that surety of income that you currently have, and maybe we ought to be looking at things like universal basic income, but, on the other hand, remote working and the ability to work when you want is also brilliant for including people with disabilities because it's quite often quite difficult to commute.

Neil Milliken: [17:58](#) The costs of commuting if you happen to have a physical disability are significant, and not just the costs in terms of money, but the costs in terms of time. There was a study recently where a one-hour journey in London on public transport turns into an average of a two-and-a-half to three-hour journey if you happen to have a disability, so a two-hour commute can become a five-to-six-hour commute, so, being able to remotely work is hugely beneficial and will bring more people with disabilities into the workforce.

Neil Milliken: [18:29](#) The other thing is we've not talked about age. Age is a huge thing, five generations in the workforce, maybe six soon, and people are acquiring disabilities as they get older. They're also retiring later, so we're going to have a huge number of people with disabilities in our workforce, because the average age at which we acquire a disability is 57, and the retirement age in the UK has now gone to 67, so that means that you've got about 10 years of your working life where you're likely to have a disability, at least one.

Meghan M. Biro: [19:02](#) Neil Milliken, thank you so much for being you and being part of our community and being here today. There's a lot more I think

that you and I are going to unfold in the coming weeks and months, a lot of work to do.

Neil Milliken: [19:16](#)

Thank you very much, but let's be sure that we're going to roll our sleeves up and get it done.

Meghan M. Biro: [19:26](#)

Let's keep talking about this. Join us for our WorkTrends' Twitter chat. We are going to be on the Twitters with Neil Milliken on Wednesday, November 6, 1:30 PM Eastern, 10:30 AM Pacific, or wherever you're hanging out around the globe. Join us to talk about making the workplace more accessible, and, by that, I mean love, right? I mean, if you'd like to get our Twitter chat questions in advance, you've got to go over and sign up for our newsletter at [talentculture.com](http://talentculture.com)

Meghan M. Biro: [20:00](#)

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