Transcript of ‘A More Accessible World’

Season 3, Episode 26, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]

Jan: Find out what art can teach businesses and other organisations about accessibility in the marketplace.

Not just physical access, but a feeling of being wanted in that space.

[Theme music]

Paul: How keen are you on shopping, Jan?

Jan: Not very. [laughs]

Paul: Not very. Why not?

Jan: I dunno. It's just like, I'm just not that interested in things that are in the shops. But, I tell you what, um, after, you know, particularly after COVID and not actually getting into the shops and being able to see things, be able to sort of touch them or make sense of them. I did do, was a bit keener on shopping after that.

So yeah, mostly, I'm, I buy the same thing that I've always bought, or if I like an outfit, I buy two of them because I'm really, really not very good at it.

Paul: Typical woman, went straight to clothes when I said shopping, [Jan laughs] I didn't mention clothes at all, but that's all you thought about. There we go.

Jan: [laughing] Yeah, yeah…

Paul: …living up to the bad stereotypes there, not helping your entire gender, I'm afraid, Jan.

Jan: [laughing] Well there, I've failed already, and what can I say?

Paul: But when you do go shopping, when you do go into the marketplace, it must be pretty straightforward for you. There's no obstacles in your way.

Jan: Uh, absolutely. Although I do freak out, I find too many people. And so I, I really don't like staying there very long.

So I quite often take, um, my dear husband with me because he helps me stay in the shops long enough to get the thing that I'm supposed to get.

So I find them a bit noisy and sometimes a bit busy, um, but…

Paul: …so at the minute we have four people in a room is that about as much as you can cope with?

Jan: [laughs] It is about right, actually. Yeah…

Paul: …yeah, yeah. I know you don't like people generally, so…

Jan: Well, bah, humbug. What can I say? Yeah.

Paul: The reason I bring it up because, like I say, that for me and you as people with no disabilities, accessing the marketplace, the commercial settings, it's made for us, it's designed for us…

Jan: …that's true…

Paul: …but that's not the case for everyone.

Jan: No, very, very true. So how do we tackle understanding that inaccessibility of the marketplace for, for people who maybe might be in wheelchairs or might find the visual and the noise disturbance too much?

Paul: Yes, they might have, you know, you're saying you're, the noise puts you off sometimes, but there's some people who have a condition that means that…

Jan: …yeah…

Paul: …the noise is something that they really can't cope with at all. And that the sights, the sounds, there's lots of kind of conditions that people might have, disabilities people might have. Anything that can make it harder for them to be in a big marketplace shop, something like that.

What can we do about it? Shall we speak to some people who might know?

Jan: Yes, indeed, please.

Paul: Yes. well, we've got two people with us today here from Lancaster University Management School, the Department of Marketing. It's Dr Leighanne Higgins and Dr. Killian O'Leary.

And together they lead The Marketplace and I project, which works with businesses across the Northwest and beyond, addressing accessibility issues.

And they've also worked with a lot of people with a disability, their families, groups, to understand from their perspective in order to be able to pass that perspective on the businesses.

Jan: Brilliant.

Paul: Welcome, Leighanne. Welcome Killian.

Killian: Thank you.

Leighanne: Thank you.

Killian: Thanks for having us.

Paul: Can you tell us, first of all, why is your so passionate about the area of accessibility?

Leighanne: So for me, the area of accessibility is really, um, it's really important because one in five people in the UK have a disability. So it's something that is hugely prevalent in society, but is quite often unseen.

Um, on top of that, it's not just the one in five people who have a diagnosed disability, it's all the networks around them, their families, their friends, their loved ones.

And when they're excluded from marketplace settings or from society, their family, friends and loved ones also become excluded. And so for me, accessibility is really, really important because we have an aging demographic, um, that's just a reality. And we are all as, theoretically, um, there's a theorist called Dan Goodley that talks about this idea of, um, that we are temporarily able-bodied, because we will degenerate, our bodies will not naturally always be able-bodied, so we will slowly degenerate.

And so those self-same accessible issues that we see others struggle with, we could very well struggle with in the future. So for me, this isn't just the one in five people that are currently struggling with disabilities, it's the wider

networks around them, and it's ourselves in the future as well. So it's a huge issue that we all share.

Jan: And I guess as well it's us, us at various points in time. So if you, um, have been, you know, inspired by the Winter Olympics and break a leg, then actually for a period of time you have to negotiate the world in a different way.

So it's not just, you know, inevitable decline, which Paul's very keen to remind me about, but it's also temporary lack of access to markets as well, neither of which are great.

Paul: When it came to accessibility, was the marketplace the first place you looked in your work and research, have you looked other areas regarding accessibility as well?

Killian: Well, I think we would probably view the marketplace as everything.

Paul: Mm-hmm.

Killian: So, the marketplace includes shops and cafes and restaurants and cinemas, but it also includes, you know, like education, the university.

So our definition of the marketplace isn't necessarily confined to retail or commercial spaces. It's working with charities, it's working with local councils. It, it's probably far broader than that. So we, we look at accessibility from a very, very broad perspective.

Jan: And so using that, that basis, how did the project Marketplace and I come about?

Leighanne: So The Marketplace and I Project was stimulated, I'd been researching access barriers to marketplace and commercial settings since 2016. And as part of that, I travelled with a charity, and still travel with a charity, called the Jumbulance Trust, which has a fleet of double decker buses that are kitted out as ambulances. And it allows safe travel and holiday making for all different types of disabilities.

So I've travelled with them as both a researcher and as a carer for people on those trips. So I'm caring for people who have quite complex needs, can't walk, talk, feed, or bathe themselves.

And what I really learned in my very early trips with the Jumbulance Trust was, despite the fact that the people I was caring for being reliant on me for a lot of their, their care needs and their everyday needs, they also had very, very

creative and strong ways of expressing who they were as individuals. So one woman who I cared for would paint using her head. Others would, were avid photographers, others wrote poetry.

And so I very quickly recognised that the methods that we utilise and or that we adopt in, in marketing, um, sort of interviews, focus groups, they wouldn't work, because many of them didn't have what I like to call a, a, vocal voice because they're very verbal. It's not that they're nonverbal, they are very verbal, they can verbalise how they feel. They just can't speak, um, vocally in the way that you and I would.

Um, so that was where the idea was really inspired. It was the back of a Jumbulance bus where I basically said to people, do you think this is a great idea? That we should ask people to create art that represents their experiences in commercial settings? And the feedback that we received was really, really positive. And from that, we started The Marketplace and I in 2019, and asked people with disabilities across the UK to create any form of creative expression that explored their commercial experiences.

So we didn't, we weren't elitist by what we meant with art, and we are not artists ourselves. It was any creative expression. So, we have some poetry, we've got song, we've got dance, we've got installations, we've got sculptures. There's a little bit of everything within The Marketplace and I project.

Paul: And I know from speaking to you both in the past, you're not technically allowed to have favourites [everyone laughs] when it comes to the artworks that have been created.

But could you maybe describe a couple of the works that you've got that particularly stick in your mind?

Killian: Yeah, so I can describe, I guess, um, not my favourite, but one of the ones, uh, that I tend to go to most. Um, it's called, it's a painting and a collage called Aurora's Castle.

And it's a, uh depiction of the Disney Castle. So if you imagine the Disney Castle, that's what the, um, painting depicts at the bottom. Uh, the painting is covered in grey, and it has four inlays of the various theme parks in the United Kingdom. I, I don't need to name them - the big ones.

Um, it also has, uh, the medical diagnosis of the Eaton family in particular, uh, their, their child, Aurora, um, at the time of the compilation of the artwork, Aurora was five and she has only one eye, and she is partially deaf as well.

So for Aurora, when going to theme parks, it's, they're highly sensorial places, can be very discombobulating. And what the Eaton family would ask of theme parks in the UK is, can we get an Access Pass? And they found that so difficult to engage with theme parks in the UK to just get a simple Access Pass. And even when they were granted one, they would only grant it to Aurora and not her family.

Now a five-year-old child can't necessarily queue up for a ride on her own. And they contrast in the, in the painting then, they contrast that lower grey area about their experiences in UK theme parks, which a collage of pictures which demonstrates their experience in Disneyland Paris.

And in Disneyland Paris, um, all they had to do was hand over a medical note for Aurora, and Disneyland Paris gave them all, the whole family, an Access Pass. And they said that completely transformed their experience of what a theme park could be, what it is like to consume as a family. Um, and you know, the core message from that artwork is that if you exclude one disabled person, you're not necessarily excluding just them, you're excluding their family, their networks, people who they tell about their commercial experiences, um, et cetera.

But so yeah, that's kind of my 'favourite'. [laughs]

Paul: And I know that, as part of that, Mike Wazowski from Monsters, Inc. …

Killian: …yes…

Paul: …is a part of that artwork as well, isn't he? And I know when speaking in the past, you've said, you know how Aurora really loves Mike Wazowski because she's only got one eye, and Mike Wazowski, of course, is…

Jan: …oh, wow. Yeah…

Paul: …just, he's a giant green, well not even giant green, but he's a small green monster with a giant eye, isn't he…?

Killian: …she, she, Aurora calls, um, Mike Sazowski her super eye body, 'cause he's, he's got one eye just like me. So, yeah, that's, uh, that's sort of how we tell the narrative of that artwork.

Paul: And how about you, Leighanne? Do you have any other artworks that really stick in your mind?

Leighanne: I suppose the artwork that sticks in my mind, and I've got, I love all of them for lots of different reasons, um, but there's probably two that are ones that are incredibly close to my heart.

The first one is we've got huge, big, um, wheelchair paintings that have been created by Nicki J. Conway.

And Nicki is one of the people who really inspired. I cared for her in one of my early Jumbulance trips, and she's a good friend now, and she really did inspire this work. And she has taught herself how to paint using in her head, and since the age of 15, and she wanted to create art using her electric wheelchair because for her, her wheelchair is her vehicle into the world. It allows her to enter conversation, leave a conversation.

And so that was a really, really special moment where we just got plain canvas, long, long canvas, cut it up into strips. Um, she told us what colours she wanted and she, we put the colours onto the, the canvas and she moved around and created this beautiful, these two beautiful pieces of art, called Autumn and Patience.

And I think just the moment of being part of that creative process with her, seeing it come to fruition, um, was just really, really beautiful, um, moment and being able to make a dream that was Nicki's for a really long time, that she'd wanted to create art using her electric power wheelchair. To see that, make that possible was a really, really special moment.

And I think when you see Nicki, she's, she's visibly disabled and I've been out in public with her a lot, people will ignore her. They'll talk to me, they'll ask me what she wants, and I'm like, I don't know, ask her. Um, and I think one of the key messages, or one of the key messages, that we share when we share Nicki's artwork is the idea that there's always ability behind disability, regardless of how disabled visibly someone may seem.

They are a person behind that and they will have ability, they will have thoughts and feelings, and it's just trying to make sure that people recognise that, understand that and are human in the way that we interact with them. So that's one of my favourites.

My other favourite that comes to mind is a piece called Autism Barriers by, um, Amy Dobson. And she's created, it's, it's a really simple collage of, with loads of colours and it's kind of a bit of a cacophony of messiness, and you don't really know what's going on. And it's telling, um, Amy's story of she is, she is autistic and she's partially deaf, and it's the things that trigger her autism.

So there in the background, you've got bold words, autism barriers in the front, and then behind that you've got this collage of all the things that trigger her, which includes things that we don't really have necessarily control over: birds, they have their of their own. [laughs]

Um, then other things like fireworks, crowded places. But there's also really, um, astounding things that we hadn't really thought about before. So there's lots of champagne bottles, and I'm quite partial to a little bit of bubbles myself. Um, but it's the pop of the champagne bottle or the pop of a balloon. Because Amy is, um, partially deaf when she, when she hears that pop, it resounds in a very, very different way, and that triggers her autism even, even more than it would, um, if she had, if she wasn't partially deaf.

And so she fears going into social settings, because there is always that fear that if you're in a restaurant, suddenly there's the pop for the bottle or there's, someone's got balloons in the table. And even though she knows that the balloon isn't necessarily gonna burst right there, there's just that fear that it could happen.

Um, but I really love that artwork 'cause I think it just explains autism in a really simple way. You get the, it's been proven, um, that a neurodiverse brain when resting or when calm works 40 times faster than a neurotypical brain, whatever a neurotypical brain might be seen to be. And I think Amy's artwork is just a really good encapsulation of the busy-ness of a neurodiverse brain and, and what's, what's maybe happening and going through her mind at that point in time.

Um, but also I think what I love about Amy's artwork, um, sorry I'm going on a bit here, but is to see how she's developed throughout the six years that we've been working with her. So when I met her in 2019, she wouldn't say two words to me practically. Um, and now we go for coffee regularly. We, we have a shared love of books. She's helped us with some of our accessibility training, so she's, she's been a mystery shopper for us, and it's just been really beautiful to see how she's, she's also co-authored in a book chapter that's coming out this

year with us about her experiences and like writing a letter to future marketers.

And I think for me that's a really important part of our research, that it's not just about us and what we're getting out of it, but actually what our artists and the fact that it's co-created with them, and it's still empowering them still today, six years on, is really powerful.

Paul: It's really great to hear about those. And I will say I knew two of the things you were going to say between you as [everyone laughs] your, your, not favourite artworks.

So thus, speaking little to whether you do really have favourites. I know you love them all, but there's always going to be something that stands out.

Um, so that's describing some of the artworks. How then do you use them and how do they form part of The Marketplace and I when it comes to working with organisations and business?

Killian: Yeah. So I guess part of The Marketplace and I, um, was we had this set of artworks and Leighanne had the idea, basically we're going to the, um, exhibit them. Uh, so we've done various different public exhibits, uh, throughout the UK and Ireland.

Uh, our biggest was at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2022. Um, we had over 400, uh, people come through the doors over a two week period in a gallery. And what we noticed during that period was that people would communicate to us.

They would say, oh, this is, this is really good. This is really amazing stuff. Um, I wish you could come in and talk to, you know, our organisation or talk to our staff. We, we don't get any sort of insights like this about accessibility or disability.

And if you think about the standard sort of EDI, sort of ,training usually, it's staff who sit in front of a computer for, for half an hour and tick boxes. Um, so we then came up with the idea why do, why not take the artworks into organisations and actually train organisations around disability experiences and accessible insights?

Uh, so the way it works is we'll take a subset of the artworks into an organisation. We can do it physically or we do it online. And we tell the narratives that Leighanne and have just told there.

We tell Aurora's story. We tell Nicki's story, we tell Amy's story. We tell many of, uh, our other artists' stories. And from that we're able to extract accessible lessons for business practice. So that's sort of the first, uh, part of it.

And then from that, what we also get businesses to do is to score themselves on accessible practice. We will audit the businesses, but they will score themselves. Um, and what we found is businesses are quite harsh when scoring themselves. We will think that they're doing a lot of good accessible work, but they'll score themselves, uh, quite harshly.

And, from that then, we maintain an ongoing relationship with businesses. So we, we draw up a report of short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals or objectives for them. And from that then we continue that relationship, you know, over the course of, I guess for some of our, our clients five or six years now. Or no, four, four years, sorry.

Jan: And you, you started with the example of, of theme parks, which are, you know, sort of high stimulation sort of environments, and restaurants where they might be unpredictable environments. What other kind of businesses have you been working with?

Leighanne: So we're working with a range of different businesses. Um, we're working with, yeah, it's, it's really strange. We've been working with charities like Age Scotland. We've worked with lots of nature reserves. Nature reserves seem to be really, really keen on pushing and doing much more. So we've worked with numerous National Trust sites, with RSPB and Leighton Moss, with Martin Mere's wetlands.

Um, and it's really, really cool to see how they, um, they really take our, our training on board, and have sort of made proactive changes in light of that. We're working with theatres such as the Grand Theatre in Lancaster. We're working with community centres such as the Gregson. We're doing quite a lot of work with Lancaster City Council. Um, we just had training last week with the Morecambe councillors.

Um, so there's a real sort of breadth of different organisations that we're working with. It's not that it's just necessarily commercial organisations, it's actually that there's, it's lots of, um, councils and, and things like that as well.

Jan: And it seems to me that some of those are, as you say, public, private sector. Have they ever had training of this sort before, or has this been like a,

an area of sort of unknown incapacity on their behalf, of things they didn't even know they needed to know about? Whereas do you feel there's, there's pent up demand with somebody knowing that they, they could do better, but not quite knowing how?

Leighanne: There's a bit of a mix…

Jan: …yeah…

Leighanne: …in terms of the knowledge, the base that people have. So some of the organisations that we've gone into, they've done different levels of training.

So some of them have done quite a lot of training, maybe in terms of, um, some of them on neurodiversity or maybe in dementia awareness. Um, so some of them have done quite a bit and then others have no training whatsoever.

So in terms of the, the extent of their training will be similar to what Killian mentioned, which is, you know, you sit in front of a computer screen and you tick some boxes, and then you're supposed to routine and remember what accessible information you've learned from that online training.

So there's a real sort of mix then. So some organisations, when we're going in, it's about trying to teach them that accessibility is more than just a ramp or a lift, because a lot of them figure that accessibility is just physical.

Um, so it's about teaching them that actually you've got sensorial, um, accessible issues. You've got neurodiverse, um, issues. You've got, um, emotional issues. Just this feeling, one of the core messages that we try to teach businesses is you can have a ramp, you can have a hearing loop, you can have a braille menu, you can have all these different material features that you think is, is helpful to a person, but if a person walks into your organisation and feels like they're unwelcome, even despite the fact that there is physical access, they don't want to come back. They, they don't feel comfortable there.

And so it's about how you can instantiate a sense of welcome that you feel expected and wanted within the marketplace. Um, so it, it differs in the way that we sort of work with organisations depending on the initiatives that they have in place, the expertise that they have in place.

And so that's where the short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals comes into play, in terms of they will be tailored to both the, the, expertise of that organisation, but also the resources of that organisation.

So one of the things that we always say is our training will never tell you to spend millions and millions of pounds, or thousands and thousands of pounds on access, it'll be working with that organisation about what is actually feasible and realistic and within their resource, um, within their resources.

And I think that's one of the assumptions that people make about accessibility, that it costs a lot and actually it doesn't need to cost a lot at all. There's really small, low-hanging fruit is what Killian always calls it, that you can instantiate, um, that can make a huge, huge difference and be highly welcoming to persons with disabilities.

Paul: What sort of outcomes have you seen then? What positives have you seen adapted by the organisations that you work with?

Killian: Uh, so probably the, the outcomes would fall into maybe three categories. Uh. Like there, there's, various different outcomes, but broadly three categories.

The first of which would be, um, communications. So what we find is with a lot of organisations, uh, they either don't have accessible information on their, their website and their, uh, social media. Uh, they don't use alt text, for example, which is often a litmus test among disabled communities, if an organisation takes accessibility seriously.

Or they actually have a lot of accessible information, they're doing lots of good accessible initiatives, but they're not communicating about it at all. They're not posting it on their social media. They're not making enough of it.

So that's probably the, the first area that we look at. And why that's important is because pre-information, we found through our research, for disabled communities is absolutely imperative. They need to know what the space looks like. They need to know how many steps there are. They need to know if there's a ramp, a hearing loop. They need to know if there's a quiet space, for instance. Um, so all of that, they will spend a lot of time searching.

If we think about maybe able-bodied or neurotypical people, we don't, we might not always engage in searching behaviours before we go to a restaurant or cinema, but for disabled communities, it's really, really important to ensure

that their experience is, is as good as can possibly be. So that would be the first category.

The second category then is physical infrastructure. Some organisations have adapted, or try to adapt, their physical infrastructure. Not that we always recommend this because, as Leighanne mentioned, we work with a lot of organisations who are in listed buildings, or Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, where they can't implement physical changes.

But there have been, for example, you know, we're just started work now with Wentworth Castle, which is a National Trust site outside of Barnsley. And they're planning to develop over the next seven years, uh, the rejuvenation and renewal of this ancient walled garden. But they want to build in accessibility from the outset, and that's a, a really, really cool project that we're excited about working on.

And equally, just last week we were working with, um, Lancaster City Council trying to figure out how we can make communal bin sites accessible. So we're going around Morecambe and Lancaster measuring footpaths in areas where we can replace things to make sure that bins, to make sure they're accessible, as part of the Simpler Recycling, uh, programme.

Um, and then the third, third area, I suppose, in terms of changes or outcomes which organisations are making, is that they're actually implementing a lot of accessible initiatives. Now this starts at something as simple as instantiating an accessibility champion or an accessibility team, or putting accessibility as part of, you know, an item on their monthly meetings as an agenda item.

Um, also we've had, say, Lancaster Grand Theatre, who, who, like Leighanne mentioned, we're working with Amy, who is a mystery shopper there, and they've introduced, you know, relaxed panto showings. Um, and there's various other organisations that have taken on, sort of, their own accessible initiatives. They've, I guess, been inspired from the training and said, right, how can we cater more to the disabled communities?

Jan: And it seems to me from your description right at the outset, that one in five, um, of us either have or will have at some stage through our lives, some, some disability that needs to, you know, needs some help, but also that that's a family thing.

Employees must be sometimes really quite inspired because, you know, you never, you know, you have colleagues and you never quite know what's going on in their lives. But for some of those employees in these organisations, it must be an absolute, you know, joy and delight to feel that their employer actually sees their networks, and the kind of things that they're dealing with in their lives.

Killian: Yeah, definitely. Um. I mean, one training session in particular comes to mind just on that point. It was with, uh, Blackpool Transport and within that training session, um, there was one, uh, woman who wrote us an absolutely fantastic testimonial after, on LinkedIn, after the training saying that, you know, she, she felt heard, she felt recognised. She was able to explain her neurodiversity to her colleagues.

Equally, in that meeting, a manager then was able to interpret why a colleague was acting in a certain way. And also, there was, um, a man there who was saying, okay, my, my child has, my, my son has recently been diagnosed with autism and now I can actually understand it a lot…

Jan: …oh, wow…

Killian: …so yeah, you do see those sort of, you know, from one, a cliche, those light bulb moments going off with people and, you know, for us that's, that's really important. You can't, you can't want that, you can't quantify that.

That will never be an academic paper on the AJG list. But to us that's the really, really good, good squishy, I call it, the good stuff.

Jan: Yeah. And um, my dad had, um, Alzheimer's later on in life, and so like every good academic, I read lots of books, [laughs] 'cause he, 'cause he was a wee bit surprising in how, how he became.

And then once you, kind of, knew what was going on, you could just like roll with the moment. And I had some really, you know, precious and lovely times with him where I'm convinced he didn't know who I was, which maybe, made them more precious and lovely. But we just could hang out together.

And so we'd go and feed the ducks, 'cause that was something that we could do together. And he could do it for hours and not notice that we'd fed the ducks already, but there's a sense in which, if you like, that knowing makes it actually really easy then to enjoy yourself in a way that the other person can enjoy themselves as well.

Killian: Yeah, exactly…

Jan: …yeah.

Paul: How have you seen attitudes change over recent years, with regards to disability access then?

Leighanne: I think there has been a, a big change. So we started this project in 2019, and if I'm honest, I feel like at that point I, I was actually called a square peg in a round hole. [laughing] I remember that was *literally* what I was called from someone in LUMS. Um, because it didn't make sense that someone who was or, we're business scholars, we're Marketing scholars and we are looking at accessibility, and we are looking at it through an art-based prism.

So I think at that point, it wasn't as readily understood. Both our project wasn't as readily understood, but also I think there wasn't the climate at that point in terms of the DEI agenda and the accessible agenda.

And I think over the last six years, what we've noticed, especially probably since post-Covid, 21, 22 time, we have genuinely seen that there's much more discussion of accessibility. I think there's much more awareness in particular of neurodiversity.

Um, you're seeing much more representation in media and television and film and advertisements, and I think that does make this job a little bit easier, or it makes our project a little bit easier, in that way. That we've never actually really had to, at the beginning, we had to really try and chase organisations to want to work with us, um, when we were thinking about where we wanted to exhibit, when we were trying to talk to companies about what we were doing.

But since sort of like 2022 when we really instantiated the, um, the accessibility, um, training and we got our first few companies. Um, we've just found that through word of mouth, they're like, oh, we did this really great training. You should do it.

And so we've never really had to go back out and sort of get companies to come, um, to buy into it. It's more that they're actually now coming to us and saying such-and-such spoke to us and we think, could you come and help us?

And I think that shows a real change in attitude, um, towards accessibility. That people are aware of the fact that the jargon of reasonable adjustments, um, that you have to make these reasonable adjustments, um, to be within the

laws of, um, the UK government or the UK, or within the UN, or whatever the regulations might be that you're following.

I think they're recognising that those reasonable adjustments aren't enough, that they actually have to go beyond that. And um, so I think there has definitely been a shift in attitude that way.

Paul: And what about with the businesses you've worked with? Do you see businesses now that you've worked with, you know, right at the very start, are they sharing best practice with the other businesses they come into contact with?

Leighanne: Yeah, so a really, really good example of that is, one of our first organisations that we worked with was the Grand Theatre, um, in Lancaster. So we did training with them on the 16th of January, 2023.

I remember it to the day 'cause it was the, this is my claim to fame. [laughs] I've presented The Marketplace and I on the same stage that Charles Dickens first performed a Christmas Carol, [Jan and Paul chuckle] so yeah, yeah, I can die happy now.

Leighanne: Um, but no, so I remember that really, really profoundly, and it was a beautiful session. I remember like the two of us came out of the session, and it had just been one of those ones where there was light bulbs going off across all the different people that came, and lots of ideas and sharing of ideas, and it was wonderful. Just really vibrant, accessible session.

And, um, they started to instantiate lots and lots after that. Um, but what was really, really interesting is we've now worked with them, they came back to us currently since 2023, and we've worked with them, currently they've brought, um, Amy in to do a mystery shop for them.

Amy then presented her findings back from that. They created their social story, their for their relaxed pantos, and really worked on the relaxed pantos in very profound ways. And then just in October last year, October 2025, they were hosting the Little Guild Theatre, um, conference, where all the little theatres, kind of, come together for an annual conference, and they were hosting it.

And they asked if we would come along and share their journey with us, as a way of sharing good practice to other little theatres that were, um, or small theatres, that were also there. And I think that's a really good example of how

our organisations that we're working with are taking the lessons and the ideas and the strategies that we are coming up with them, running with them, and then sharing them beyond themselves with, with wider organisations.

And that's a really, really beautiful, um, it's a beautiful thing to see your research do that.

Jan: But also that peer-to-peer learning, because another theatre will really listen and understand a theatre saying what they did. Even though, you know, someone else talking to them will also be informative, et cetera. But that peer-to-peer, you know, it sort of gets away on you and then you can, you know, sit back. Sip tea. See it all. [laughs]

Leighanne: Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

Paul: And what about you? Has The Marketplace and I allowed you to take your research in new directions as well? And to look at other areas around accessibility beyond what the marketplace and I contains?

Leighanne: I think this research has definitely changed me as, as a person. First and foremost, I think it's made me a better person. And I think that's really, really important in terms of the impact of the research. As we mentioned earlier, it's not necessarily just about publications and grant income, although I know the University finds that really important.

But for us, I think it's the, the personal transformation that this makes for, for us and for the, the people that we're working with is, is really, really profound.

So I suppose for me, I've recognised my change as, as an academic or as, as a human being. In terms of how that's, then, affected how I look at accessibility beyond just The Marketplace and I project, and the research that we do, I'm now a charity, I'm now a trustee for Neuro DropIn, which is a, a neurological-focussed charity based in Lancaster.

Um, I'm on the board of trustees and helps support them. And from that we have a PhD student who's working actively with them, um, on neurological access.

Um, so I think it's allowed for the branching out of, of wider knowledge bases, but also just being a better human. I can't really articulate that very well, but I think that for me is a, a hugely important part of this. I just feel it's made me a better person, and I really like that.

Paul: You never met Leighanne six years ago, but honestly [everyone laughs] monstrous, absolutely monstrous…

Jan: [laughing] …you're such a dreadful man…

Leighanne: [laughing] …yeah, probably that did sound like me, myself, sound like I was horrible six years ago.

[Jan and Leighanne continue laughing]

Paul: It was Leighanne's own words I'm using against her there, that's, yeah…

Jan: …but if our, if our, our work and our scholarship can't do that in our own lives and for ourselves then I think we're in a bit of a miserable place, you know, [laughs] so, oh, I feel quite emotional. And then, then you pop my balloon. [laughs]

Paul: Sorry, that's what, that's what I'm here for. I, I'm just here from the cold detached reality. And that, that's it, yeah, no, no emotion from this aspect of it.

Jan: So, so, let's ignore Paul and we'll look forward.

Um, so what changes would you like to see in the future when it comes to accessibility?

Killian: I, I, think more broadly, just in public, just, even though knowledge of accessibility has become far more prominent, we need to move further in that direction.

So everybody, you know, can understand maybe somebody, the experiences that an autistic person or someone with ADHD might have. You know, equally we're in a university setting. I think we as educators need to become far more aware of that because our student body has a lot of neurodiverse conditions. Equally, the staff that we work with may have as well, because people are getting diagnosed later in life.

So I think more broadly, uh, there needs to be knowledge, further knowledge around different forms of disabilities, whether that's physical, sensory, or neurodiverse.

Um, and then in terms of business practice, you know, just, I think what I would like to see happen is just, and we were talking about this earlier, so I'll, [laughing] I'll steal Leighanne's words here, but Leighanne put it very well. She said that, um, what we would eventually like to see happen with this is that

there's no need for accessibility training. There's no need for us to go into organisations that it just is a staple of their staff orientation. It's a staple of their yearly, um, days away. It's, it's a staple of their agenda, of their meetings that they think about accessibility when they're promoting their communications or trying to, you know, set up, uh, new marketing campaigns or offer different, um, services to people.

I guess, so yeah, they're probably the two areas that I, I would like to see change. And I believe will change over the next 10, 15 years because it's going to have to. We've mentioned it already, there's an aging population. People are getting diagnosed, uh, later in life. There's a, it's just going to move that way.

Leighanne: Yeah, I think for me, I would like, I agree with everything that Killian said. My dream is that in the future, someone with a disability doesn't have to overplan, overthink, but can just wake up one morning and decide I wanna go here. And they can just go because the access is there for them.

And that, that would be my dream for accessibility in the future.

Paul: And I know Leighanne's too modest to mention this, but Leighanne does have a podcast which covers some of the issues that Killian's mentioned there about ageing. And it all ties in, people with conditions, memory conditions, older people, and it comes through the Neuro DropIn.

And you've got a new podcast out there called Neuro ChatIn, which we will direct people towards on the podcast notes, talking about the various issues that are there.

Leighanne: Yeah, so, just to tell you a little bit about Neuro ChatIn. It's, it's not really my podcast, it's, it's Neuro DropIn's podcast with Sharon Jackson as the founder.

And it's in conjunction with, um, mentioned earlier my PhD student, Ayesha Alam, who, um, has been working with them as part of her PhD. She's in partnership with Neuro DropIn.

And so they've created, and I've, sort of, been brought, been brought on as a trustee and as a PhD supervisor as part of that. And we're chatting about all things neurological from the, the shock of the diagnosis and where do you go from, from that? The reality of the lack of spontaneity, but also the creativity of, um, neurological conditions. That actually suddenly you have to think a

little bit outside the box, or you do think a lot about outside the box and you express yourself in maybe more creative ways.

So there's some serious topics in there, but there's also some really fun topics in there. And it's just hopefully the, the whole focus of it was that Sharon from Neuro DropIn wanted to be able to extend the Neuro DropIn centre walls, to bring them down and allow people that can't necessarily physically get to the centre to be able to just listen and maybe converse and through a podcast, um, about all things neurological and just bring that to, to wider demographics across the UK. And that's what we hope to do with that podcast.

Paul: Serious and fun, sound like any other podcast you know?

Jan: Ah…

Paul: …no, OK, never mind… [everyone laughs]

Jan: …yes. But I had another word in mind, which actually just sort of like, you know, oozes out of, out of the pair of you. Joy.

Leighanne: Ah.

Jan: We're back to joy, the Pentland Centre for Sustainability and Joy. [laughs]

Paul: Was it not joy and hope, or something like that…

Jan: …yeah, well, let's keep joy…

Paul: …we'll sort that out later…

Jan: …yes…

Paul: …keep, keep joy.

Well, you have brought joy to us for the last 40 minutes or so. Thank you so much, Leighanne and Killian, for joining us.

Killian: Thank you.

Leighanne: No, thank you for having us.

[Theme music]

Paul: I don't think you quite realised, Jan, did you, quite how much the work that Leighanne and Killian do involves?

Jan: No, 'cause I'd seen the artworks and I'd seen them, uh, sort of exhibited and I knew they did stuff on marketplace, but I hadn't seen that whole

connection running through. And, sort of, like, the, you know, the design, the thought, the creativity, um, that's gone into it is, it was just, yeah, that was amazing.

Paul: Yeah. I've seen this evolve from pre-Covid, and there were small exhibits pre- and post-Covid in Lancaster, in Yorkshire, and then it went to Edinburgh. And then, you know, you could see then they had the idea of spreading the word. And then to see it evolve and become what it's become, where they're working with all of these businesses.

First of all in a small geographical area, but then more and more further afield the more they've done, because everyone can see the value in what they do and how they help these organisations create more accessible marketplaces.

Jan: And, of course, you could be cynical and say, well, that means they can, you know, marketplaces can flog more stuff to people. But it seems to me that that's not what they're doing.

And the whole, sort of, dry and horrible language, reasonable adjustment, actually, it can mean something really very different to that. And, and that really came across in what they, they were talking about.

And I had seen like the relaxed pantos, et cetera, but I hadn't realised quite what they were about. Um, so that was pretty amazing as well.

Paul: Yes. And you talk about, you know, getting more money in, um, but there is something called the purple pound.

Jan: Oh, wow.

Paul: And that is the income and the power in the economy that people with a disability, people who, uh, you know, some member of their family has a disability, the money they have to put into the economy. And places aren't always accessible to them, therefore, it's not always easy for them to spend that money.

So, if you are a business that makes it more convenient, you are more welcoming, because that was a key point as well. It's not necessarily just the physical accessibility, but it's the welcoming atmosphere. If you do have that within your business, then you are going to get the purple pound coming to you. And there's billions of pounds of spending power there, that could come to businesses that are more accessible.

Jan: But also when we think about some of our previous guests on the podcast, and I'm now thinking about Lancaster City Council and the, the recycling team…

Paul: …mm-hmm.

Jan: So the idea that you, which of course, now every time I'm gonna look around the world for the next couple weeks and go, *of course* [laughing] every time I see it. Of course, bin sites are really not, a, are not a great place to be trying to access, but people wish to and actually making them something that everyone can access so everyone can recycle becomes really important.

Paul: Yeah. it's good to see that Lancaster City Council obviously worked with the Plastic Packaging in People's Lives project when it came to recycling and encouraging more people to recycle. And then on the back of that, they've taken it to another step of, right, let's make them more accessible.

And they're working with more people from here at Lancaster.

Jan: And I think it really, um, I didn't ask them this question because, 'cause it, sort of seemed a bit unfair, but you know, this anti-woke agenda, I mean, come on guys. You know, one in five of us, um, who are going to need a little bit of help to be able to do the things that we'd like to do, to flourish in the ways we'd like to flourish. Um, and actually catering for that in a really, you know, substantive and, and careful way has, you know, huge ramifications for people's lives.

Paul: Yeah. And one of the first things Killian stressed as well, is when they consider the marketplace, they're not just considering shops and businesses that people go into. There's so much more within that. It's universities like ourselves, it's councils, it's any organisation, it's anywhere and anything that, where people want to do something.

And so…

Jan: …yeah…

Paul: …the importance there of having that accessibility.

Jan: And it's also, I've seen it at, at, um, academic conferences, uh, which are usually, I usually find them a bit overwhelming as well, 'cause too many people.

But, um, at the British Academy of Management, um, you can, you can colour code your badge. So there's codes on the badge of, of a certain colour that says, I'd prefer not to be approached, but I'm happy to approach you. And so I think that's also quite, quite good that you can signal to people, you know, don't rush up and talk at me because it's not gonna, it's not gonna be fun [laughs] for either of us.

So I think there's all sorts of settings where actually making sense of the diverse way in which people experience those settings will come to the fore.

Paul: And in the notes for the episode, we'll share some links so you can see some pictures of some of these artworks that were mentioned. Aurora's Castle, Wheelchair Tracks, Autism Barriers.

Um, Aurora's Castle is one that I've talked to Leighanne and Killian about so many times, and so there's some lovely art there, but there's many other things as well.

Like they say, there's dance routines, there's films, there's sculpture, there's artwork, there's a whole lot there that you can sort of see how each of them tells an individual tale.

They also took this and did their work with Masters students here at Lancaster who created artworks with their own perceptions of accessibility to the marketplace.

So there's loads of artwork that's been created out of this, as well as the work that's gone on practically with business.

Jan: Well, I know myself, and I'm pretty sure, dear listeners, it will be the same for you, is we'll walk around with our eyes open in a different way and see, you know, if you're going to a restaurant you, I think we'll experience that in a different way and make sense of it in a different way.

So that was a great podcast. What's next?

Paul: [deadpan] A really bad one. [Jan laughs]

No, that's not true. Uh, I shouldn't say that because it's one of my friends. You've brought your friends in before. I'm bringing one of my friends in, uh, next time.

Uh, we've talked about accessibility today and, um, transportation and public transport is part of accessibility. If you've got public transport able to take you to places, then that's a big thing.

And we have someone who's gonna be here next week who's gonna be talking to us about buses, electric buses particularly, and it's Ben Wakeley who is from Warrington's Own Buses. He's the Managing Director there, and he's going to be talking to us about how they as a bus company operate, the importance of public transport and sustainable public transport.

Jan: That's brilliant.

Paul: Until then, thank you very much for listening. It's goodbye from me, Paul Turner.

Jan: And it's goodbye from me, Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]