ACCESS 2024 Keynote - Positioning Accessibility at the Heart of Enterprise - Neil Milliken

[00:00:00.02] JOSH MILLER: All right. Thanks, everyone, for joining us for ACCESS 2024. I'm excited to kick us off. My name is Josh Miller. I'm the co-founder and co-CEO of 3Play Media. I'm a middle-aged Caucasian male and go by he/him.

[00:00:16.48] So before we dive in, I want to go over a couple quick housekeeping items. This session is being live captioned as well as interpreted. So for captioning, you can click on the CC button in the control panel for ASL interpretation, courtesy of Deaf Services Unlimited. You can view the interpreter by clicking the Interpretation icon in the control panel. There will also be chat information about these. And you can also ask questions in the chat throughout. And we will try to incorporate as many questions as we can.

[00:00:54.30] So here we go. I'd like to welcome everyone to this first session, Positioning Accessibility at the Heart of the Enterprise. I'm really excited to have Neil Milliken here. He's the global head of accessibility for Atos, which is a global organization. Neil is going to start us off with a presentation about what accessibility means at Atos.

[00:01:15.29] And to give you a little sense about Neil, Neil's been at Atos for I think close to 13 years. He's been in accessibility for over 15 years. He serves on a number of councils and boards related to accessibility and is also one of the hosts of Access Chat. So I would think it's safe to say that Neil lives and breathes accessibility and has fun doing it. So I'm going to turn it over to Neil to start us off. And then we'll dive into some questions together. Thank you, Neil

[00:01:44.66] NEIL MILLIKEN: Thank you very much, Josh. It's a real pleasure to be here and to be with you and an honor for me to open ACCESS 2024. So I'm Neil Milliken. I'm also a Caucasian male, competing with Josh for who has the best widow's peak, as we hit that middle-aged haircut. I'm wearing a white collarless shirt and a light jacket. I'm he/him, neurodivergent, easily distracted.

[00:02:15.42] So I'm here to talk to you about positioning accessibility at the heart of enterprise and hopefully here to entertain you too. So often we talk about accessibility. And then the first thing we do is go and talk about stats. So whether it was Disraeli or Mark Twain, there's a famous saying, "There's lies, damn lies, and statistics."

[00:02:40.92] So accessibility needs good statistics. We need to be able to make the case for accessibility. But which statistics do we believe? Which ones do we use? We have a global population of billions of people that are in scope. Is it 1.3 billion, 1.5, or 1.7? it depends on whose stats that you believe.

[00:03:06.83] We have things like the quoted spending power. Well, is that the spending power of individuals with disabilities on top of their normal spending power? Is it the halo effect of them, and their families, and their supporters, and their allies? Or is it more like the stats that

we've had recently from Boston Consulting Group, who did some decent research on a number of people who self-ID when they feel safe to when they're at work.

[00:03:36.33] And that was really, really interesting because most organizations-- and I'll come on to this in a bit-- think that they have a relatively small percentage. And the numbers are much bigger. It's actually more than one in four, if we look at the percentage of women in the UK, according to the UK government.

[00:03:53.49] And then if we look actually at the number of people who use assistive technology, that's 2.5 billion people around the world. Now, this is according to the World Health Organization. And this is probably not the kind of AT that you would think of in terms of high tech assistive tech. This is things like walking sticks, glasses, wheelchairs, crutches, et cetera. But, overall, it shows that there is a huge cohort of people around the globe that require to be included.

[00:04:28.87] So I mentioned BCG before, big shout out to Hillary Woole, who led the work on this. They did a great survey. And what it said was that most organizations think that between 4% and 7% of their employees have a disability. These are the people that they have on their company records. On the other hand, when people feel safe to disclose or safe to self-ID, it's around 25% that are reporting that they have a disability or a long-term health condition.

[00:05:02.52] Now, if we then extrapolate further, if you think about between 4% and 25% of employees have a disability, but then you think about who are using accessibility features, 85% of all of the videos viewed on Facebook are viewed with the sound off. 80% of viewers are more likely to finish a video that is subtitled or captioned.

[00:05:26.45] So what we're seeing here is that, actually, not only do people with disabilities benefit and are much more prevalent in the working population, but also the fact that, frankly, many, many more people use accessibility features. Just think about dark mode.

[00:05:49.23] Here, we're looking at some stats from the United Kingdom, where it says that actually 24% of all people in the UK were classified as disabled, according to UK government stats. It rises to nearly half of the population at state pension age. Now, that's a moving statistic because the state pension age keeps going up.

[00:06:10.59] And if we think about this, it could really hit about even higher. Because if our pension keeps running away from us, we're more likely to acquire disabilities before we retire. Around 23% of working-age adults have a disability. And it's up to 26% of women in the UK. So again, it's consistent with the statistics that we saw from Boston Consulting Group.

[00:06:36.79] While I was going through these stats, one thing really jumped out at me. And it was this bar chart. I was looking at it thinking, well, yes, mobility, you're likely to get less mobile as you age. Your stamina, your breathing, your likelihood to be fatigued and tired is likely to go up as you get older.

[00:06:57.04] I can't run for the bus quite as quickly as I used to. And I certainly suffer for it afterwards. My dexterity is not quite as good. It's always been crappy, actually. I'm very clumsy, partly due to my neurodiversity. And then if you think about memory, and hearing, and vision, all of these things you expect to degrade over time. On the other side, issues around learning and social behavior, you expect to come up in school, as people go into education.

[00:07:24.79] The one outlier was the mental health of people who report a disability, at working age. And clearly, here, there is something not right. Because if we look at it, there is a huge number of people with disabilities that are reporting mental health issues and at working age. So something is going wrong. And we need to address that when we're talking about disability inclusion in the workplace.

[00:07:54.36] So when we work to improve accessibility, it improves the bottom line for organizations. Whether it's improving inclusivity and performance in the workplace, or addressing the widest possible customer base, or using the challenges that we, as people with disabilities, find in our day-to-day work environment, it acts as a catalyst for innovation. Let's remember that many of the things that we use today-- the ubiquitous technologies the Siris, the Alexas, the other devices that could be triggered if I speak too loudly, are built upon a foundation of assistive technologies.

[00:08:35.26] So regardless of the way that you cut the statistics or which figures you use, the numbers should too large for businesses to ignore. Many businesses are acting on it. But too many still do ignore it.

[00:08:52.57] So why don't companies act on the data? Well, I think it's these trio of things. It's the fear, the uncertainty, and the doubt. What if we get it wrong? A lot of people are very afraid to say the wrong thing. So they don't say anything at all.

[00:09:09.18] Obviously, we're talking to an audience that is in the United States today, quite a lot of you. There is a culture of people suing if they don't get the service or they feel they're excluded. So people are worried that they might do something that might get them sued. I can tell you that you're more likely to get sued if you do nothing.

[00:09:32.24] Quite often, with accessibility being quite a complex topic-- it touches everything-- people are not sure where to start or what to do. They're not sure what's effective. And certainly, there's a fear about what it might cost.

[00:09:48.94] And then there's the old issues of skills. Do we know that we can do this? Do we have a budget? Do we really need it? And frankly, quite often over the last few decades, this has been started within organizations by individuals. And so there is this fear that they're going to be doing it alone. And so it's really important for people to get executive sponsorship.

[00:10:14.49] I'm very lucky that we've had that executive sponsorship within my own organization for a long time. And that has enabled and empowered me to move the organization along.

[00:10:27.67] So how do we address some of this? Well, when we look at a holistic level within our own organization, there are lots of different drivers. We've got CSR, and ESG, and Diversity are distinct programs for our organization. But they all drive towards similar things.

[00:10:46.70] And there are shared goals and shared activities that really support the business. So we have things like supporting of our shared values, our organizational purpose. We want to look after people, the planet. And we need, as an organization, to make profits in order to sustain ourselves.

[00:11:10.58] They also support our culture, employee experience, our attractiveness as a brand. So it may come as a surprise to you, but actually the most engaged of all of the sort of things that we do on social media as a brand every year are actually the events that we hold for Global Accessibility Awareness Day and International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

[00:11:36.61] People engage with human content far more than they do with pure marketing content. So as a business, we benefit from visibility and from people really understanding that we care about them, whether they be employees or customers.

[00:11:54.91] We've made a commitment to doing this. And it's a CEO commitment. We joined the Valuable 500, and we aligned what we do with our ESG approach. ESG stands for environment social and governance. And as a business, we've been recognized as a top 50 leading organization on ESG and sustainability in our sector.

[00:12:18.95] So whilst disabilities and inclusion is a social topic for us, really, when we want to move from disability confidence-- because that's the first step. You need to get confidence to deal with the fear, the uncertainty, and doubt. We need to go beyond that to actually become competent as a complex and large organization. We need to learn how to do stuff, how to do it at scale, how to enable others to do stuff. And that requires good governance. So that's the G of ESG.

[00:12:53.49] So I went to conference best part of a decade ago now, nearly. I went to the Funko Accessibility Days in Sweden in 2016. And there was a great talk by one of the elder statesmen of accessibility, Jim Tobias. And he sort of went, well, you know, inaccessibility's kind of like pollution. And the light bulb went off in my head on this. And we spent some time discussing it.

[00:13:19.99] And what I realized was that, yes, he was right. Negative externality of pollution happens. Carbon emissions happen when organizations don't take into account the impact they have on the environment. And that is an externality because it's not the producer that is paying the cost of that. In the same way, poor accessibility or exclusion is a negative externality of the production and planning process too.

[00:13:52.65] On the other hand, if we plan for it, actually, we can create a positive externality of inclusion, like the curb cut effect. Now, as a business that was already doing inclusion and ESG, what we're able to do is take that framework. So now we're using the same framework we do for decarbonization as we do for accessibility. So we look at direct, indirect, and influence.

[00:14:16.42] So the stuff that we produce and design, we have to produce and design accessibly. Where we're buying it in, we work with our supply chain. So we buy accessible and then we influence. And that means that we are helping to grow accessibility and that awareness and drivers for accessibility right across the value chain is why we participate in things like this, and in conferences, and the Valuable 500, et cetera.

[00:14:41.35] So how do we govern it, as an organization? Well, we have a fairly complex structure set within group. I report-- I'm n minus 2, which means n being Napoleon, or our CEO. And we set the policy from group, governance, and do our programmatic work. And then we have a practice full of experts, where our expertise lies. They drive the growth. They supply the services. And they treat corporate also like a client.

[00:15:10.48] And so our program then takes that whole framework, again looking at those three scopes, and applies it across three key program themes, business, so looking at portfolio, our partnerships and alliances, sales and pre-sales, et cetera, how we can localize this in the different regions.

[00:15:28.05] We're in 70 countries. And then internal processes, so quality and audit, compliance, corporate data for reporting, running events, training programs, champion programs, employee relations, communications, HR, internal IT, yada, yada, yada, yada, and of course workplace adjustments, which are super important. And then, finally, the ecosystem.

[00:15:51.07] So that's our branding we've done a lot of work to make our brand far more accessible, looking at events, external relations, being part of professional bodies, like the IAAP, and of course then reporting on all of that stuff.

[00:16:05.47] So there's a sort of really quick overview of what we're trying to do to wrestle all of this into some kind of shape in the enterprise. But I'm sure that you're going to have loads more questions for me, Josh. So let's just dive into the fireside chat. Thank you very much.

[00:16:25.18] JOSH MILLER: Excellent. Thank you, Neil. Great way to get us started and to ground us in some of our thoughts. So obviously, Atos didn't start with where you are today. So can you give us a little bit of a view of how things have evolved? How have you seen accessibility go from this kind of compliance conversation that would come up from time to time to actually this strategic imperative that you just described within the enterprise? Do you have some examples, maybe, you could walk us through kind of how it's evolved?

[00:17:00.20] NEIL MILLIKEN: Oh, yeah. So we've been doing assistive tech, and assistive tech services, and basically, accessibility within Atos for 20 years, through the various different iterations and shapes of the company. And we started on the BBC account. They were a big client of ours. And I actually joined in 2014-- no, 2010, some 14 years ago, to work on that.

[00:17:28.69] And then really having sorted out the issues there, I was looking to-- all around and think, we're really big. Why are we not doing this systematically? Because it wasn't being done systematically. We had competence, but it was in pockets. And so it wasn't really seen as a strategic issue.

[00:17:50.89] So it's taken quite a bit of time. But what happened was through engagement in DEI workstreams, addressing some of the issues that were prevalent in the UK around some of the other things that the organization was doing meant that it got the ear of the UK organization's C-Suite, and building it into the various different programs as we go.

[00:18:18.68] Whenever I found something that was sort of understood to be strategically important or part of something that the organization understood to be important or valued, I tried to find a way to align accessibility and not make it something that was outside of the life and the workings of the company.

[00:18:42.55] The real key for what we're doing is trying to align and embed it with the things that are already important for the organization and make people understand that this is part of what they already value.

[00:18:55.19] JOSH MILLER: So that's really interesting. So you're taking it from an opportunity where there's business value and connecting it to the company overall values. Is that a fair thing to say?

[00:19:08.49] NEIL MILLIKEN: Yeah, absolutely. In French we have that [FRENCH] in the purpose, and so it's embedded in the purpose. And it's understood that it brings a value.

[00:19:21.10] What we're doing through the various different metrics on our program is attributing values to some of those things. We also do business. And that business is decent business. We provide services for clients. So it's not just something that's seen as sort of pompom-waving value signaling within the organization. It's stuff that we're doing that has value to our clients and value to the organization because we're delivering services that people pay for.

[00:19:55.87] At the same time, end users benefit from this. And what we always try and do is find multiple wins. So we want the business to make more money from doing good things than from doing bad things, because that always wins hearts and minds, and for people who maybe don't consider themselves disabled or are not comfortable disclosing feeling comfortable enough to use our services.

[00:20:25.33] JOSH MILLER: So that really gets into this idea of general usability and kind of getting away from the label of an accommodation, or compliance, or even something that is done for accessibility purposes alone, which you highlighted in your presentation. This idea of the curb cut is such a great example of a benefit for everyone.

[00:20:50.62] When you think about that, in terms of driving value and really building alignment, if you will, what do you think is more powerful? Is it starting with the accessibility argument and how this is going to benefit others? Or is it actually the usability aspect and ignoring accessibility just to build more support?

[00:21:15.67] I mean, because if you think about curb cuts, everybody uses a curb cut. And I can guarantee-- or I'm going to guess-- that most people don't realize why it was originally designed,

which was obviously more of an accessibility conversation. So I'd love your thoughts on what's the right lead.

[00:21:33.90] NEIL MILLIKEN: I think that depends on who you're talking to. And you will frame arguments differently depending on who the stakeholders are within your organization. I think it's a mistake to always lead with the same argument.

[00:21:50.08] First thing you need to do is listen to the person that you're going to be addressing and understand what are the important things to that individual or that group of people. Because if you're talking to the CFO, it's not going to be about individual accommodations unless they have a personal interest. And many of them do, actually.

[00:22:11.09] Lots of people who you wouldn't expect within the C-Suite have personal connections to disability. There are enough of us in the world for it to be not too far away amongst the family and friends, right?

[00:22:23.48] But that said, if you're talking to the CFO, you're talking about how you can do it more efficiently, how you might be able to drive revenue, how you can decrease costs. If you are talking to maybe the COO, maybe it's more about efficiency. If it's HR, yes, they will care about the people, but they're also very keen on reducing employee churn. Right?

[00:22:49.76] Now, if you don't provide those workplace accommodations or adjustments or you don't do it in a timely manner, people are either going to be off sick for a long period of time, or leave. Or you could be in even more trouble if you don't provide it and they've been asking for it, and you get into a more of a conflictual situation. So then you've got mitigation of risk.

[00:23:11.32] So lots of different ways to cut the argument. And I think you really need to understand who it is you're talking to and probably have a series of different ways to address accessibility so it's not monolithic.

[00:23:27.25] JOSH MILLER: Yeah. Yeah, that's great. So let's talk about-- let's continue kind of that message a little bit here with this idea of the head of accessibility, chief accessibility roles that have emerged within organizations. How are you seeing your role and other roles influence that cultural change to really execute what you just described?

[00:23:53.57] I think that feels like something that people maybe need to be taught a little bit to get their point across. I think the accessibility community's a very passionate community, which can maybe sometimes get in the way of that very logical financial argument that you just described that sometimes is necessary.

[00:24:12.19] Can you talk a little bit about how we all, who care so much about doing the right thing, and doing good, and making money at the same time, which I think is very reasonable, how do we do this? And how does that role really help?

[00:24:29.72] NEIL MILLIKEN: Well, there's no reason why being accessible shouldn't be profitable. If you plan for it and you design right, the actual cost of doing accessibility is pretty small, for the most part. The costs of retrofitting, huge.

[00:24:49.34] And so, again, that helps. Once you've been caught with your pants down on a couple of projects and had to spend months and months redoing work that you thought you'd done at your own cost, that reduces the difference in cost between the accessible and inaccessible products.

[00:25:12.47] So I think that whilst all of us that are in this business care-- I care. And I've got skin in the game. I love the work that I'm doing. But sometimes you need to advocate dispassionately, despite the passion inside. So you need to be able to present those business cases.

[00:25:36.38] And I think that this was one of the things that I learned. I did do an MBA. So I looked at shaping my arguments and understanding business metrics and how getting under the hood of business as much as getting under the hood of the code and understanding how assistive tech works.

[00:25:57.15] I think that in order to lead, you need to have that understanding of how businesses work. Because if you're asking a business to commit to maybe spending millions-- because we spend millions on accessibility programs across our group. They're not small amounts of money.

[00:26:17.85] They're making commitments that may be diverting money from other things. Now, I think it's worthwhile because the payback's there. But you need to be able to make those business arguments and to do those in the language of business.

[00:26:33.63] So I think that one of the things that we've been doing as we build skills and confidence within our own organization and we're wanting to do through organizations like IAAP is not just teach people the technical skills, but also teach them the soft skills, the business arguments, the techniques for how these things work.

[00:26:58.17] And I think that there are other organizations that are equally useful in that, in terms of business groups, like Available 500, particularly Business Disability Forum and the ILO's Global Business Disability Network, where they bring together practitioners in a safe environment where we can talk about our failures.

[00:27:19.33] Because things do fail. Things do go wrong. And you learn through those failures. So I would be lying if I said that everything that we've done in the last 14 years was a runaway success. There are bumps in the road. But what they do is they teach you what you can do better next time. And it does really require resilience to push for a topic like this if you're the first person in your organization that's really carrying the torch for it.

[00:27:55.46] JOSH MILLER: Yeah. Yeah, that's a really interesting piece here, this idea of carrying the torch and the resilience factor here. So with this role of head of accessibility, chief

accessibility officer, and the variations of it, like you said, they're carrying the torch. They're clearly driving this forward.

[00:28:15.42] What happens when that person leaves an organization or when the accessibility champions of a more grassroots effort leave an organization? How can an organization keep things going forward in that case? Or does that role become essential?

[00:28:35.03] NEIL MILLIKEN: Well, I would argue that it is an essential role, wouldn't I? But all too often, where you have really charismatic leaders in accessibility, when they leave, things start to unravel. So one of the things that I'm really working very hard to do is make sure that if I get run over by a bus tomorrow, that it won't unravel.

[00:29:02.48] So there are several things that we're doing. One is systematizing accessibility, so not putting accessibility-- we do have an accessibility function, but it's not putting accessibility on as a thing on its own. It's embedding accessibility into the machinery and the governance of how we do business.

[00:29:25.29] So whether that be in our procurement. So we've taught our procurement professionals to embed accessibility. So they've got processes. They've had training. They've got champions. There's stuff built into our procurement system, series of questionnaires and everything else. That will outlive me, right?

[00:29:46.07] Then we've got stuff in our IT, right? So for our own internal employees, we have a quality management and project management methodology for our internal IT. There's an accessibility gate in there. So as stuff comes through for employees, there are checks and so on.

[00:30:03.94] So these are other people's processes. So what I'm always trying to do is get accessibility into other people's processes, into the fabric and machinery of how the organization works, so that if I disappear tomorrow the machine keeps moving.

[00:30:24.33] And then, of course, I've built a team of people that will outlast me and outshine me. Because I'm privileged to have some people working for me that are utterly brilliant and then the next generation of accessibility leaders.

[00:30:41.91] So we've always got to think about what's next, how we can really systematize this stuff, build it into business practices, build it into systems that live beyond us, and then educate and nurture. And so we have champions programs, but also, really start building up that next generation, teach people the skills, not just the accessibility skills, but the management skills.

[00:31:10.85] JOSH MILLER: Yeah.

[00:31:11.55] NEIL MILLIKEN: Put them through the management courses.

[00:31:13.48] JOSH MILLER: That's really good. And you just hit on a few things all at once. And I could go in so many different directions. But let's talk more about this creating this

machine and kind of breaking into and systematizing various functions of the business. How does that start?

[00:31:31.22] How do you actually start to collaborate across the company cross functionally and build support, assuming, let's be honest, a lot of organizations are dealing with the reality that certain functions don't understand this, don't value it, not because they dislike it or have any ill will, but because they just don't understand how to do it differently and how to do it productively.

[00:31:58.23] NEIL MILLIKEN: Yeah. It's a long game. I won't lie. So it's finding the various different things that seem to have levers and then really going and understanding what that motivation is again.

[00:32:13.57] So in terms of our quality management processes, it's, well, if you don't make something accessible, that's not a quality product. And therefore, how they operate, they're looking at certain measures, ISO norms and standards. Well, we'll get maps to ISO. So again, it's looking at those. It's about planning. It's about recording actions and about communication.

[00:32:42.09] I spend 99% of my time communicating with people. And a lot of it's around diplomacy, and persuasion, and listening as well, in terms of understanding-- because diplomacy is a two-way thing-- understanding how these things work, and what motivates them, and how we can benefit them by them doing things that we also want.

[00:33:11.24] So for reducing the cost of non-quality-- great. So it's our quality management systems. Making sure that we are able to communicate our corporate message effectively-- well, then our branding needs to be accessible. Just fixing color contrast issues means that far more people can read it. Because if you can't read a PowerPoint slide because someone has given you gray on gray, you're not communicating.

[00:33:41.92] So these things have been understood over time by the various different departments. And we've worked and we've nurtured these things. And we build collaborations. And to a certain extent, we do things and we sponsor things where we can innovate.

[00:34:01.22] So for example, around things like branding, we went through a rebrand process at one point where we were looking to-- we went to dark mode. Now, dark mode was, for ecological reasons, really quite good. Because you're turning off pixels.

[00:34:18.35] At the same time, we did the fonts. We looked at new fonts for legibility. And we looked at color contrast and our color palette. So what we were able to do was then, through a rebrand, reduce two negative externalities in one go.

[00:34:37.36] And so it's those kind of things. We're reducing real-time pollution, in terms of carbon emissions because we're using less electricity, and then also the pollution of exclusion by creating stuff that is easier for people to consume.

[00:34:54.54] JOSH MILLER: Yeah. That's really great. It's a great example. I want to talk a little bit about this diplomacy idea that you bring up. I was in a session once where someone said, to really build support, you either need top-down support or a really big lunch budget.

[00:35:10.02] And I'm curious, in your case, where it sounds like you have top-down support, at this point at least, how do you get that diplomacy effort going effectively and actually get people to be receptive?

[00:35:25.74] Because it's easy to say that you want to be diplomatic and you want to build ties. But you need other people to also be willing to build those ties. Can you talk a little bit about how to get that part going?

[00:35:39.41] NEIL MILLIKEN: So I've always been fascinated-- I'm quite personable. I will chat to anyone, strangers in the street, you name it, much to the embarrassment of my wife. So I'm predisposed to being sociable.

[00:35:57.26] At the same time, not everybody wants to listen to the argument. So you need to understand what motivates them. Yes, we have top-down support. But we didn't always have it. But I found the topic that motivated the C-Suite and said, I have something that can help.

[00:36:13.31] And it's that offer of help, not that ask of stuff. That trade can come later. First off, it's like, I can support you on this, actually, which is-- quite often, if you're going to a really senior person, all they hear all day is problems and requests for money. So if you come in and say, actually, I've heard that you have a problem and I'm here to help, you've at least got five minutes of their time.

[00:36:48.56] JOSH MILLER: Yep, love that.

[00:36:49.97] NEIL MILLIKEN: And so it was understanding that. And then, also, we started Access Chat. And it was not just an interview series, but a social media chat as well. This was back in the day before Twitter went to being what it is today.

[00:37:10.23] And we studied how people interacted. And we were looking at the intersections of influence and being able to understand who were the people that were influential on two topics. And you'd go and start having a conversation with them. And that way, you can bring in two communities together and start bringing those synergies.

[00:37:31.12] And to a certain extent, having learned that from social media, we then started applying that inside real life, inside organizations as well. Actually, study the org chart. See how the relations work. Also be mindful that Active Directory isn't the single source of truth and that in matrix organizations, huge global ones, often the people that look like someone's boss aren't necessarily. Because you need to have a boss in your local country.

[00:38:02.28] But understanding those sort of relationships and how they interact-- because organizations are big, social groups, effectively-- is really important to being able to make those sort of diplomatic moves.

[00:38:17.84] JOSH MILLER: Yeah. Yeah, that's great. And I love this idea of, hey, I can help you. I have a solution to the problem, rather than a problem that needs a solution. You led off your presentation with data and statistics. Let's come back to that for a second.

[00:38:35.45] When it comes to saying, hey, I can help, there's nothing like offering ROI statistics or ROI data on, like, hey look at how this is going to help things. Can you talk a little bit about that in terms of the key indicators or metrics that organizations should track to show that this is actually working, and rather than say, hey, here are the reasons why we need to do something, starting with the problem, but actually say, look at what's been done that's successful and those stories. Can you talk a little bit about that?

[00:39:09.15] NEIL MILLIKEN: Yeah. So we try and attach metrics to all of those different substreams in those work streams that I talked about. So if it's workplace adjustments, for example, or accommodations, it's in numbers. How many people have we served this year? What's the lead time? What's the average spend? Look at trends in terms of reduced sickness absence.

[00:39:39.65] Because actually, frankly, if someone's off for more than a day and a half, It's likely to cost the company far more than the cost of the adjustment. And in fact, the cost of someone leaving and just the cost that you pay to the agency to recruit someone new is 14 times the average cost of an adjustment.

[00:40:02.80] So tracking some of those things usually gets the attention, tracking the trends in terms of accessibility feature usage across your estate. We've been doing a lot of work understanding how people use assistive features, not just the expensive of third-party assistive technology, but other features that are embedded in operating systems and so on. Because that usage is far, far broader.

[00:40:31.18] Then, in terms of, for example, amongst our Brand and Communications team, we have an employee advocacy platform. Again, effective communication amplifies the organization. This is not direct ROI. But if you think about the value you attach to the eyeballs that you get on your Tweets, and on all of the LinkedIn posts, and everything else, it's important. And we want it to be accessible.

[00:41:05.36] So we have this employee advocacy platform. We have reporting on number of posts without alt text, number of posts without captions. So we're able to report on the metrics. We're able to see which marketing teams had forgotten to do it and give them a little bit more training.

[00:41:24.60] So again, building metrics into the systems that people are using, building the-- looking at the turnaround times for presentations and stuff like this. Because again, as a business, you're going out doing sales. You want your sales presentations turned around quickly.

[00:41:44.38] How quickly can we make those accessible? How can we speed that up? How can we push that to the left? We always talk about shifting left in terms of juniorization and making stuff earlier in the process, so instead of remediating documents, but creating branding, and

PowerPoint templates, and document templates that are accessible from the get go, and then producing icon sets, and so on.

[00:42:11.33] And then looking at particular business areas where there may be issues around stuff, looking at the cost of building remediation, looking at the thousands of little levers that you can pull and building them all up into a consolidated view is also really important. Then you can create your own made-up stats too. Because every stat has an assumption behind it. I think that what you need to do when you are making assumptions is document how you came to those assumptions.

[00:42:50.75] Because you can talk about UX. A lot of the time, people talk about the ROI of UX. Well, we also have a cost of bad UX. And bad UX is often inaccessible. So you can make an assumption that if people are having to take longer to do stuff or can't do stuff, that has a cost because that's the cost of lost time.

[00:43:12.07] So you can start adding up the cost of lost time across the business. So you can give people the stats of the money that they're losing through lack of productivity as well as the stuff that you're doing on the positive side. So you can give upside and downside statistics on return on investment in accessibility.

[00:43:31.44] JOSH MILLER: Yeah. That's great. And so you've referenced now product development and UX in a few different ways. On that note, how can organizations incorporate people with disabilities into that product life cycle and the feedback loop to get to it faster, and avoid having to remediate after the fact, and kind of redo the work? Do you have thoughts on how to do that in a relatively low-touch way?

[00:44:01.07] NEIL MILLIKEN: Yeah. So it depends on A, how big your organization is, or B, how big your project is, et cetera. So it can be engaging things like your employee resource group or your employee network. We have one called ADAPT. It's called ADAPT because people with disabilities are always adapting. And we want to help the organization adapt too.

[00:44:26.15] So you could engage DLG. You could engage other employees. There is a richness, as we've seen, of your employee base, probably about a quarter, that could give you some really good feedback. Then, we can also engage specialist organizations. So we work with partners that help us do disabled user testing across different cohorts, across many different disabilities.

[00:44:54.23] And then, finally, it's personas. Because if you want something quick and dirty and it's a small project, you're not going to engage loads of user feedback. You're not going to go out and try and recruit people for this. You're going to want to do something, but you can do that consultation in the persona creation.

[00:45:12.76] So you build those personas. And you build a broad set of personas that are business relevant. So it's not, hi, I'm your disability persona. It's actually building realistic human beings that also happen to have a disability or a long-term health condition that are working in realistic roles.

[00:45:33.62] So it's not, this is Fred, he's the disabled persona. It's, this is James. and James is working in HR. And James happens to need to magnify his screen to 200%, 300%. It's those kind of things where you can present stuff that don't suddenly stop the production process, that can easily be integrated, that really I think help speed things along and increase the adoption of accessibility practices.

[00:46:04.10] JOSH MILLER: Yeah. That's great. Getting into this-- and you kind of alluded to this a little bit, I, think in terms of the innovation aspect and even differentiation aspect of making better products, more usable products, better UX. That becomes a differentiator for a lot of companies, right? And there's part of me, at least, that thinks, oh, this is great. They see this as a differentiator. They'll be excited to pursue this.

[00:46:31.31] Then there's part of me that thinks, well, crap, that means a lot of companies don't do this. Right? Because if accessibility is the differentiator, well, that's exciting. They are latched on and excited. But that's a problem too, right? How should we be looking at this? Should we position accessibility as a differentiator? Should we run with that because that audience happens to get it? What's your view on that argument?

[00:47:01.74] NEIL MILLIKEN: We have been using it as an argument. But I think by the-- if we get to my end goal, then it will no longer be a differentiator. Because everyone will be doing it. I think that's the thing about quality products. That said, we live in a world where there is constant iteration. It's always ship your minimum viable product. Well, is it really viable if it's not inclusive? Is it really viable if a quarter of the workforce can't use it?

[00:47:31.37] So I think that there's some reframing of arguments. You have to go back to those stats and look at which ones worked to frame the arguments in each of the situations. But I do think that there is a greater understanding of the need to do this work than there was 10, 15, even 20 years ago. Because my career started in 2001 in assistive tech.

[00:48:01.05] So I feel confident and happy that this is really progressing and that it's a topic that now people are having arguments about owning this, rather than not wanting to own it. I think that that's a very different position. Before, everyone was like, no, that's someone else's topic. Someone else can pay for it. And now it's like, well, we want to do this. Well, so great. That's a real sea change.

[00:48:30.65] So that, and for the companies that don't want to do it, well, you're going to have to because you're going to be excluded from markets, folks. Because particularly the way that the European Union works, if you want access to the common market, then you're going to have to comply with the European Accessibility Act.

[00:48:50.80] And it's not about fines and penalties. Because large companies can afford to pay the fines and penalties. We know this. It's been happening for years in the US and other places. That's sometimes unfortunately considered a cost of doing business.

[00:49:09.29] Not being able to do business in a particular territory, on the other hand, is interesting to the C-suite. And the way that the European Accessibility Act works is that it's aligned to the CE mark, which is the quality certification in Europe.

[00:49:27.14] Now, if you have a product that requires a CE mark for you to be able to sell in that market, it needs to meet EN 301 549, the accessibility standards. So if you don't meet accessibility standards, you potentially are going to be excluded from the entirety of the European Economic Area. Big difference. You can afford to pay the fine. You can't afford to not sell into Europe.

[00:49:52.22] JOSH MILLER: Yeah. I think that's such a great point. We so often get wrapped up in this compliance conversation and the risk conversation. But ultimately, I completely agree. Business value will trump the compliance conversation all day long. And so being able to show how this does good for many people and helps make the company more effective, more productive, more profitable, I agree will win every day.

[00:50:21.80] We may have time for one or two more questions. But I want to make sure we hit on the employee engagement. Because you talked about the employee groups that you have contributing to some of the feedback on the product side, as well as obviously voicing their needs.

[00:50:39.74] How do you really build that up so the employees feel comfortable speaking up, and organizing, and identifying as someone who could be a resource in a product development cycle or, just in general, raise their hand, saying, I need this piece of assistive technology? Is that through training? Is that through hiring? How do you really make that sustainable?

[00:51:05.46] NEIL MILLIKEN: So I think that this is a multifaceted question. You have to create a culture of trust. And if you're creating an ERG, particularly one around disability, or particularly sensitive issues where many people with disabilities, they're hidden disabilities. 70% to 80% of people with disabilities, they're not visible.

[00:51:30.72] And therefore, for people to feel safe to self-ID requires a culture of psychological safety within the organization. And frankly, that means that you don't have HR running your ERG. Because HR wears many different hats. Some are employee friendly, but ultimately, they're there to protect the business.

[00:51:55.95] And so there has been a history within many organizations where HR will put people with disabilities through processes to exit them from the business because they're not performing or they're not turning up to work because of absence, mainly because the businesses have failed to give them the accommodations that they need to be able to turn up for work and to excel in their jobs. But because the understanding's not there, there is still a perception that HR is not necessarily your friend.

[00:52:26.03] So whilst they can be supported by HR, they need to be employee-led. The employees leading and then going out and having the executive sponsorship from other areas of the business, the access to the C-suite, and some level of funding-- doesn't have to be massive--

but some level of funding, some level of trust from the management to be able to put things forwards, and for one or two topics per year to be taken up by that executive sponsor and actioned really start building that culture where it's understood that this brings value to the business.

[00:53:00.88] So for example, in the UK, it wasn't the Accessibility team that got the business the disability confident level three status from the government. It was actually the employee resource group, ADAPT, that led the work of engaging the different stakeholders.

[00:53:20.47] Now, the Accessibility team supports the ERG, but we don't own it. And they can hold our feet to the flames when they think that we need to do more. And I think it's that independent voice. They're not a union, but they are a network and empowered enough to be able to raise their voice and raise their concerns.

[00:53:41.90] JOSH MILLER: That's great. That's really interesting. And so just to confirm, where does the ERG group live, in your case?

[00:53:48.89] NEIL MILLIKEN: So it has a business sponsor who currently-- so we've got more than one because we're in different geographies. So we've got our chief legal counsel in the US and our head of big major deals, so sales, in Europe.

[00:54:10.10] JOSH MILLER: That's great. And is that because they've raised their hand to say, I will sponsor this?

[00:54:16.12] NEIL MILLIKEN: So they've done stuff independently that has helped us identify that they might be allies. And then we've gone and tapped them on the shoulder and they've gone, yes, of course.

[00:54:28.87] JOSH MILLER: That's great.

[00:54:29.41] NEIL MILLIKEN: So again, it's that understanding the DNA of the organization, finding those connections, and getting those people to say it. And most of the time, they're happy to do so. You just need to identify.

[00:54:44.17] JOSH MILLER: Yeah. It's such a great example of that cross-functional nature and making it truly cultural across the organization. That's a great way to end this, actually. We've run out of time.

[00:54:58.13] So first, and foremost, Neil, thank you for being so open with us today. I really appreciate this discussion. Really, this was fun and informative. So thank you very much.