

Disability Subcommittee

Diversity and Inclusion

Speakers: Seònaid: O'Murchadha , Founder of Amputee Disability Federation Ireland (Moderator)
John Fulham, Irish Wheelchair Association
Adam Harris, Founder and CEO of AslAm
Davinia Brennan, A&L Goodbody

Davinia: Good afternoon everyone. On behalf of the Disability Subcommittee, it's a great pleasure to welcome you all here today to our first lunch and learn event. We have a great panel of speakers here today and many thanks to Seònaid, Adam and John for joining us, and to those of you I haven't met before - I think I recognise all your faces though! - I am Davinia and I am a knowledge lawyer in the CommTech team and a member of the Disability Subcommittee. It is a privilege to have the opportunity to kick off this conversation today about disability and inclusion. The best description I have ever come across of inclusion is summed up in this quote; "Diversity is being asked to the party, inclusion is being asked to dance and belonging is feeling comfortable to get up and dance." Well I am delighted to finally be ready to get up and dance at A&L Goodbody and have so many willing partners, no pun intended [*laughter*].

Before I hand you over to the panel, I would just like to say a few words about why we are here today. Last July 2019, the Diversity and Inclusion Committee decided to set up a subcommittee to focus on disability inclusion. Now the reason we set up that subcommittee is because inclusion does not just happen organically. It happens, because we strategically push it through, and it is not the sole job of leadership or of a handful of people in this firm, it is everyone's responsibility. At our first subcommittee meeting we considered where the firm is now in the disability space and where we want it to be, and as part of that discussion the group asked me what my experience has been of working at A&L Goodbody as a person with a disability. I had to stop and think, because I realised I had not actually been asked that question before. Over the 18 years that I've been at A&L Goodbody, I have only discussed my hearing loss on a need to know basis, so standing here today is a new experience for me [*laughter*].

Following that first meeting both the subcommittee and myself on a personal level, realised that we needed to open up the conversation about disability. Having a frank and honest talk about disability and challenging our own subconscious bias and assumptions is key to making disability inclusion part of this firm's culture. Disability itself is rarely a barrier – the real barriers are physical, digital and social. Disability inclusion means all of us working together to dismantle those barriers so that everyone has the same opportunity to reach their full potential. People with disabilities are the largest minority group in the world. There are 1.3 billion people living worldwide with a disability. That means to be representative of society, one in seven people in this room and in this firm should have a disability. That may well be the case because we do not have any statistics and 70% of disabilities are in fact invisible. However, the reality is that less than 20% of people with disabilities of working age are in employment.

While we speak with compassion about people with disabilities, businesses are generally very weak in terms of practical supports. The time has come to change our perspective and become more proactive in recruiting people with disabilities and in supporting their needs to ensure their retention and their promotion. As employees of a leading an innovative law firm, we are in a powerful position to lead the charge in the disability space, and when business leads society follows.

I am now going to hand over to Seònaid, who will moderate our panel discussion about disability, which I will be joining and Seònaid is Founder of Amputee Disability Federation Ireland and she has been promoting the employment of people with disabilities for over 20 years, so she is very well placed to raise all the key issues today. Ladies and gentlemen here is Seònaid: [applause].

Seònaid:

Thank you so much guys and thank you so much for having us here today. We are absolutely delighted and we have so much to talk about. I mean, getting the opportunity to moderate this crowd, who never stop talking, is going to be quite difficult. I thought we would let them introduce themselves and I might just start with one little story. Essentially, I had an accident when I was 18 and I lost both my legs and my right hand. I mean, the right hand, you can normally see but today, I am actually in absolute bits, but you do not mind do you? It just took a little bit longer getting ready today, but I wanted to share with you my first story of coming out with the disability because I think Davinia hit the nail on the head. We know that it exists. We know it is there. It touches all of our lives in some way or other, but we do not always discuss it or face it. Often we are afraid of what someone with a disability might bring to the organisation and to the team.

For my first proper interview, I really wanted this job, wanted it so badly. It was like desperation and it was the first proper interview that I was going to so I really wanted to disclose. I wanted to make sure that whatever I needed was actually going to be put in place for me. So, when the interviewer asked me tell me a little bit about yourself, I decided I would go straight in and I would go straight in with all of the horror and the terrible things that happened to me and the blood and the guts and the operations and I would tell them all of the various gory details, and I was kind of nervous so I just looked down at the table and went through all of the rehabilitation that I had been through, all of the difficulty and essentially a really tough story. When I looked up after 40 minutes of ranting nonstop, the interviewer was in floods of tears. You know the kind of crying where you actually cannot breathe - you know the kind of [whimpering]. This grown man was really having a breakdown right in front of me. I did not know what to do. I had to run off and get him a glass of water. I was locked behind one of the other doors with the security swipe. Do you think I got that job? Well raise of hands, yes? No, not at all. That man was so embarrassed, if he ever saw me at an event he would run. So, that is my worst coming out story and I think it teaches me an awful lot about how not to do it. Do not overshare and definitely prepare them in advance where you can.

I work in disability employment. It is always been my main focus ever since I acquired my own disability. I am currently working with the DCU Centre of Excellence for Diversity and Inclusion and I am also working with the Open Doors Initiative, which I'm pleased to say you guys are a part of, which is all about including people with disabilities; refugees, asylum seekers and young people from educationally disadvantaged areas. That is what I do day in day out. I love talking about this subject, but obviously, we are here to talk about how you guys perceive disability. I wonder if I could turn to the panel and I might start with you, Adam. If you did not mind actually sharing a coming out story of your own. Hopefully, not as embarrassing as mine.

Adam:

My name is Adam Harris and I am the Founder and CEO of AsIAM. Ireland's National Autism Charity. We're six years old this year and there is a team of 14 of us. We are the only autism charity in Europe where half of our team are actually on the autism spectrum ourselves. My story, I suppose, is my mother always says about me that I never do anything until I am ready, and then I do it very quickly. This started at birth because I was 20 days overdue and then I was born in 25 minutes, and I was a big baby so I was nine and a half pounds when I was born. Apparently, babies usually lose weight before they leave the hospital, but I actually gained weight and they used to bring in two bottles to my mom and say, "these are for the twins" [laughter]. The reason that this is relevant to my story is that from the moment I was born I had this huge attachment to my mom. She could not put me out of her arms for two seconds without me becoming distressed and I was lucky I suppose because I was the third child in the family and mom could see very quickly that there was differences between my siblings and me. I had lots of speech at a young age, but I understood words exactly as they were spoken or exactly as things were said and

believe me if you have this difficulty, Ireland is the worst possible country you could be born into [laughter]. I never passed my 18-month check-up because I had severe coordination delays, and I would talk and talk and talk about things that I was interested in, but only things that I was interested in.

Now to put this in context - when I started preschool the thing that I was most interested in the world was Tutankhamun, the Egyptian Pharaoh. The only problem is the year I started; he was not particularly popular among four and five year olds [laughter]. As a result, it was very difficult for me to make friends or get to know other people my own age. I also found going to any environment that was busy or there was food very, very challenging. So, very early on the differences were highlighted. I got a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome, which is the condition on the autism spectrum; spent the first three years of my education in a special school before I moved into mainstream. What is really interesting is the question I am asked a lot is, kind of; "When did you find out?" or "When did your parents tell you?" and for my parents it was no big deal. It was something they always talked openly about in the same way you might talk to a child about the hand they use to write with or the colour of their eyes. It was just another characteristic for them and something they spoke about positively, but when I really began to think about the fact of having a disability was probably around the age of when I was 11 or 12 and at this stage, I was much more self-aware. I was at a point where a year later, I transitioned to secondary school independently, but I had begun to notice that if people found out you were on the spectrum they would behave quite differently around you. I cannot tell you how many times I noticed growing up that people were talking just a little bit slower to me or sometimes people speaking just a little bit louder to me and it was not meant to be offensive, but the problem was we mainstreamed people with invisible disabilities into the community but we did not talk about it, and people desperately wanted to do the right thing but did not know what that looks like and that is kind of why I set up ASIAm as a result.

Seònaid: And that is essentially diversity without the inclusion part, it is exactly as you had said. Therefore, you are at the party but nobody is asking you to dance and you don't feel comfortable enough to dance. So, in that situation in a workplace, more than likely the person is going to probably leave I would say.

Adam: Yes absolutely.

Seònaid: Because you are not comfortable there. Thank you so much for sharing. Davinia: do you have a funny story for us?

Davinia: Well today is my big coming out story, and I'm hoping it all goes well! [laughter and applause]. As a child growing up, I was late in learning to speak. My parents suspected something was wrong with my hearing, but I was 13 before I was finally diagnosed with high frequency deafness, which essentially means I could not hear environmental sounds like fire alarms and birds singing, and some telephones ringing. I also had some difficulty with the letter combinations like SH or CH which are higher on the audiogram. When I was diagnosed, my doctors told my parents that I was a natural expert lip reader. The brain, crafty as it is, had been watching people's faces to pick up the missing information from facial cues, and so that is how I managed until I was 13.

When I was finally diagnosed, the first person I told outside my family was my French teacher and that was because I had a French listening comprehension test coming up. I'm sure you all remember those tests - and I knew that the listening test would be difficult. I told my French teacher I lip read and she immediately volunteered to read the transcript of the tape. Now she arranged to meet me at the library to do so which I thought was unusual at the time because of the mandatory silence required there. When she met me she mimed a silent; "Bonjour Davinia ça va?" I had no idea what she proceeded to say after that and when she saw my puzzlement, she took me outside the library and she said; "What is wrong?" I said: "Lip reading is not what it says on the tin. I also need to hear your voice." The fact is that expert lip readers can only make out

30% to 40% of what is being said by lip reading alone and it is not just about reading a person's lips. It is about reading their whole facial expression and their body language. So, the moral of this story I guess is – don't make assumptions about how to accommodate a person with a disability, simply ask them how you can support them.

Seònaid:

You are dead right because when we start making assumptions about other people's disabilities, then I think we end up definitely going down the wrong path. My favourite one is when people help me to walk through doors, but unfortunately once I was at an O2 Ability Awards event and there was a wonderful blind woman who had offered to help me through the door. So, she could push the door, but I could not and I could see where we were going and she could not, but whatever way she grabbed my arm, she actually took it off *[laughter]*. So, she proceeds to storm through the door with my arm talking to me *[laughter]*, as I am shouting at her going; "What are you doing?" So yes, obviously in my situation there is always a comedic element but I totally see where you are coming from. So, next time you want to make assumptions just make sure you are not pulling their own arm off *[laughter]*.

John, I am going to turn to you. I know you have a million stories to share with us, give us one.

John:

How do you follow that really? How do you follow that *[laughter]*? Okay, but I suppose I am on a different, slightly different aspect of all of this because with me what you see is what you get. There is nothing hidden there until my personality comes out that is what is hidden. For me, I was born with my disability. I do not have any dramatic story. I just plopped out in there and there I was and my mother was just faced with then, back in 1971, so I am probably the grandad of the group here, was faced with; "Oh God what am I going to do with your man?" So, and throughout my whole life it has been what you see is what you get. There is nothing hidden there, but and I grew up as a child, like; "When did you become aware that you have a disability?" I must be a bit slow, because it took me a long time. The story I would say to you is that Halloween used to come and go and in my innocence, my mother would dress me up in my mask and Stan Laurel was the one with the belly and the jacket and the cushion up me jumper, and I would go around with all my friends and we would knock on the door and they would say; "Oh, who have we here? Oh, how are you John?" and I used to go back to my mother bawling and crying and go; "How did they know who I was?" I did not have a clue and my mom said: "We will get you a better costume next year love". But for me, I suppose part of the perspective is when did I realise there was an impact to my disability? I did not because as kids you are just children growing up. Everybody is different and kids just accommodate. They can be cruel, but they accommodate and once they know they are fine. It is only when I moved into secondary school and a little bit later on that I picked up on the perceptions and the negativities that were out there around disability and that is when it actually came. I started to realise that okay there is more to this than meets the eye.

But if you are talking about going for a job, before it says up there "President Paralympics Ireland". I currently work for Irish Wheelchair Association, but before that, I was a member of AIB and worked in AIB for 25 years before I left, and when I went for the interview process, like they asked me a question in there; "How familiar are you with the keyboards?" And I said; "Great". Now I lied. I have never touched a computer in my life. I played the piano, but I got the job. But when I went in for the medical, at the time the doctor looked at me and he asked me; "How do you flush the toilet?", and I like an arrogant little pup went: "Well, I press the handle like you do". It had never entered my mind, and you went for medicals at that stage, but it never entered my spectrum that this is the type of question that you get. Now, I am a bit of a blagger here because these guys are working in that sector, but all I can give you today is my experience. My lived experience growing up as someone who did not actually realise I had a disability, which may seem a bit stupid until later in life and then just to give you my experience of what has worked and what hasn't worked.

I loved the analogy Davinia that you used and I am going to rob it in next time - about being invited to the party. I think that is beautifully expressed, and I am going to rob it *[laughter]*. So,

from that point of view, it is that lived experience and my mind-set, what I think about and I would back up what you say diversity and inclusion at the moment is a real buzz word. It is the agenda item at the moment, and I tried to flip that on its head, and I say it is not actually about diversity because if you focus on diversity you are ticking boxes. If you focus on inclusion - if you put yourself in the other person shoes and want to understand what they need and ensure that they want to be a part of your firm, you will get your diversity. You will get more than you want in terms of diversity. So I try to ask people to flip it on its head and just change that mind-set a little bit.

Seònaid:

Totally agree and exactly as you say, it is the lived experience. I mean, I have to admit, I think this is the first panel talking about disability and diversity where all of us have a disability of our own, and I think it is really important to note that we all work. We are all coming from different aspects. I mean, I came to the disability sector quite late in life at 18, but at the same time I had so many friends and family who had a disability that it was always part of my life and part of my family and I think that is what we are really looking for here. It is not just those of us that are affected, it is also our allies and those people who want to change the world for the better. Just a little bit at a time. I think that is all we do it. Therefore, when we talk about disability we have all discussed essentially, what we perceive disability to be - so it is all completely different. So, for everyone in this room, how do we talk about disability? What is a disability? Is it that terminology, perfect terminology, what exactly is the right way to talk about it? We talked about this a little bit in our preparation, is the right terminology "person with a disability" or "disabled person" and I know we all disagreed on this which was hilarious. So, if you cannot have four people who have the lived experience of disability agree, then how on earth is anyone, who is trying to conduct an interview, how are they going to know.

Do you mind, Adam: talking about your own experience because I know that you have a very particular sort of idea here.

Adam:

Yes, absolutely and it is not always necessarily where my own experiences have been but it is very much where I think the experience of autistic people are at in Ireland, but around the world as well. I think if you look at autism as a condition, it has been a reality that for a long time it was medicalised. To the point that even if you look at a lot of universal design frameworks, if you look at a lot of discussions around disability policy, autism has often been excluded, because until just a few years ago, it was very much treated as a medical condition, and something we should be proactively trying to cure, as opposed to actually understanding the person and hearing their voice. Because of that, I suppose autistic adults are very keen to change the narrative around how we talk about autism and there are other forms of diversity that when we talk about it, we would not see them as something negative or we would not see them as something that can be left outside the room. We would see them as something that are fundamental to the person. So, for example, we would not say a person with gayness or we would not say a person with Judaism. We would say a Jewish person or a gay person and we see that as a positive characteristic attribute. As a result, within the autism community we say autistic person because it is a positive part of who the person is. It is not something that can be left outside the door. By the same token, I think it is really important we understand that it is something that is fundamentally to how the person sees, processes and experiences the world. As a result, that we have to recognise that the person will need accommodations because it is not something that can be segregated, removed, or taken away.

I think that language becomes important in the advocacy world and the disability politics world. What I think is important is it can scare people who do not know about disability because what if I say the wrong thing. I think that is the last thing we want, for me language is always about intention. You know, I sometimes talk about, I was away in Boston, just a couple of months ago for work, and I was in the Kennedy Library and there is a very small section on Eunice Kennedy and the work she did in setting up the Special Olympics, but some of the early materials for the Special Olympics I do not think I would use the terminology that was printed on them. Some of it was highly offensive. Yet it is somebody who did it more probably for people with disabilities at

the time that anybody else. Therefore, it is about realising, I think that it is all about intention and calling an individual by their name and let them lead with what language they want used.

Seònaid: Great point and I know that we often talk about person first language, person with a disability and disabled person, which is identity first language and I know you have strong feelings on this as well John:

John: I think it feeds into what Adam: just said, because for me I am less, I am less obsessed about the terminology and I am aware in the professional world that has to be correct terminology, but also on a human level and my obsession about it is that I think, Adam's point, it puts people off. So I'll know very well from your demeanour in your terminology whether you were deliberately trying to be offensive or not in what you say. I think it is the intention - so like "cripple" is the word that people are probably most offended about with physical disability in the world. My family as a joke call me that *[laughter]*. Here he comes. This is your man, but that is fine because I know the intention is not bad there. But for me, and I just think we as a community, for want of a better word, as a group of people have to; if we want to bring our supporters and then following that, the non-supporters and the others who want to embrace this into the fold, we will scare them if we say: "Well you cannot use that terminology because of this. You cannot use that. You cannot say this." So, and that would put you off saying; "Oh God, this is minefield". So for my stance; I am less obsessed with the terminology. I am more interested in the intention.

But if we could get to a point that you know, people, a disabled person because within the community some people who say; "I am a disabled." "You are a disabled person." They will get offended and they will say; somebody said to me; "I am not visually impaired. I am vision impaired." And for me, he was picking at straws because I understand your point but you are ugly from where I am so you could fit both *[laughter]*, but the point, and I knew him well enough to say it, the point being was *[laughter]*...

Seònaid: I think I know who you're talking about *[laughter]*.

John: That is really, really alienating for someone because you are then; "O Lord Jesus what term am I going to use?" I said, and for us the objective is to bring people in, not to push people away and that is the reason that; so if you can get more comfortable with being at that stage of terminology great, but I think we have got to be open minded as a community.

Seònaid: So there is no hard and fast rules. It is all about respecting the individual. I mean, I know when I was getting fitted for my first wheelchair, the sales guy kept referring to the amputee and I was looking around wondering who he was talking about. Maybe that is the name of the wheelchair model, I did not know. I realised he was talking about me, but he just could not even look at me because the disability was the only thing that was visible to the person. I am going more towards the disabled person route, but I think a lot of that is the experience in the UK, because they talk about disability as being a problem that all of us in society have to fix because at the end of the day if you make it accessible for all of us, then it is going to be accessible for as many people as possible, the universal design approach.

Adam: Just one thing to say quickly as well. We sometimes get so hung up on the language we use to describe disability. For me, actually I think the much more serious conversation in terms of informing the world we live in, is the language we use to refer to supports that are available for people. So, to give you just a classic example, there are many autism classes across the country now attached to schools and the idea is you know children move fluidly from the mainstream class into the autism classroom. For 10 years, we have had those referred to as units. Now straightaway that medicalises the concept in your head. In addition, if you are a student or a teacher or principal who does not attend that classroom, who does not teach in that environment - you think (a) it is nothing to do with me, and (b) I probably have to wash my hands before I go

in. As a result, we need to think much more about that sort of language I think, that challenges people's behaviour than words that describe the condition.

Seònaid:

I mean, some people say the worst thing ever was calling the educational needs for children with disabilities the "Special Educational Needs Act" because I think those special needs is where it sometimes gets difficult. I think maybe we need to kind of agree that all of the labels should just be removed when it comes to those kinds of things and see the person for what they can bring. And of course we also talk about "disability pride". The fact that I am very proud to be a disabled woman. Now it took me a while. I mean I think we talked about this earlier. It is quite difficult sometimes to want to wear that badge and of course, do not forget disability is a club that you join whether you want to or not because essentially about 80% to 85% of disabilities as we know are acquired during your working life. So, there is going to be more people in my situation, than in your situation or even just being able to come to terms with these things a little bit later in life. So I always think, and I know it is probably because my grandparents are in their 90s and very active, I always think that if you are lucky enough to live long enough you will join our club and you will end up with a disability yourself.

But you have to remember that we need to think about not just new entrants coming into the firm, but also existing employees and how they can be comfortable with talking about disability. I mean think about it. How would you define yourselves if you had a disability? Would you be in the person first camp or would you be in the identity first camp; just leave that with you but I also think that there are huge barriers. You know when we talk about disability, we do talk about the barriers that exist for various different people, but there is a huge gap of untapped potential out there and I know that you have been very vocal about this. There is a huge amount of people with autism who are looking for work. What is the biggest barrier do you think, for the people you represent?

Adam:

Well I spend the bulk of my time designing autism friendly frameworks for schools or workplaces or whatever, but what I always think if I was given a commission to design something that was not autism friendly, I could just take a traditional recruitment process off the shelf because you cannot find something that is less autism friendly. You start off with the job description that requires you to be able to read between the lines, but also that ironically over time we have autistic people with scattered skill sets so who would often be specialists if you want to think about it in a workplace context. What we do is we take very specialised roles that autistic people might be able to do, and we throw in at the end general skill sets and personal characteristics. So, you must be really good in this niche area but actually as well as that you must be an excellent communicator, good at working in teams and enjoy horse riding *[laughter]*. We kind of throw in these general personal characteristics that are outside of a person's control and as a result, we do specialist talent. The second piece I think of course is an interview is basically measuring your ability to build rapport with strangers, which is going to be a challenge for many autistic people. So, I think it is about looking at how we can better facilitate and meet the accessibility needs of people. And that is simple, things because I think these measures are small but autism friendly measures tend to be people friendly measures, so giving people the opportunity to demonstrate their skills as opposed to communicating. Ensuring that people while they are still in education have a chance to experience the workplace and learn on the job as opposed to going through an interview process and ensuring that how materials are written. It is very clear to people that they can ask for supports and that won't be punitive against them. As another company said if I only knew I would be happy to help. We have to bear in mind it is a huge risk for people to take to disclose and people have to have clarity that (a) they won't lose out, but (b) that they will get supports on the back of that as well.

Seònaid:

So that whole disclosure; I mean, it is difficult to know when you are entering the firm, but when you are actually in the firm, how on earth would you go about actually discussing it? You know you are quite senior at a certain level and then you get a diagnosis of MS. What/how does that change? I mean, I think we have all talked about different barriers, but how have you been, or

sorry do you mind if you might tell me a little bit about your journey to getting those reasonable accommodations? Because as we talked about, diversity is getting in the door but inclusion is being accommodated to be able to work to your best, to be as effective as you possibly can, to be as efficient as you possibly can. Anything you would like to share? Because I know it can be quite difficult and I can tell you a lot of horrible stories for myself if you like?

Davinia: When I joined the firm, I did disclose to my managers about my hearing loss to ensure that any supports I needed would be put in place, and that was partly because I had learned the price of disability denial. When I was younger, when I was at school I did not get any support. When I was diagnosed at 13, the local education board came in to speak to my head mistress, to see what special assistance I might need in class. My head mistress, essentially sent them away, and said; "Davinia is top of her class. She does not need any help". Now, that meant that from day one, I was treated the same as my peers, which was good apart from the French listening test [*laughter*], but it also meant that the burden was on me to make sure that I did not miss anything. So, it made me very resilient and it probably gave me the determination that I have to succeed in life. But at university my experience with just completely different. The disability officer immediately welcomed me with open arms and put all the supports I needed in place and that enabled me to thrive and to reach my full potential so that I received a first class honours at university. So yes, so the first thing I did when I came to Goodbodys was to say; "I am hard of hearing" and I spoke to HR to see what they could do to help me.

As my years have gone by at Goodbodys, my hearing has deteriorated quite unexpectedly to the extent that seven or eight years ago I found myself profoundly deaf which I did not expect, and I got a cochlear implant, which has actually being quite miraculous in returning my sense of sound. It does not work for everyone, but it sure worked for me. But during those years when I was waiting to get my implant, there was a couple of years waiting list, my career at Goodbodys continued to thrive and that was because I was always given the opportunity to focus on my strengths and my abilities. And actually during those years I completed two diplomas and I was invited to join the editorial board of one of Ireland's leading data protection journals. I also received multiple invitations to speak at conferences because I published so widely but unfortunately I did turn down some of those invitations. Even though I knew I could participate, I did not feel empowered to ask for a copy of the panel questions in advance or to have a note taker present. So, I guess you could say I was invited to the party but I was not getting up to dance, but that would not happen today.

Seònaid: Yeah, I totally share your feeling because sometimes when you go through, in a huge firm in particular, you might have to disclose several times over. You know, to ask for your support. I know when you were in AIB John, you were there for a long time but I know that you are not shy about kind of coming forward and asking for something and I also, I am conscious that I am asking a former Paralympian this question. Have you ever seen Paralympians get into their cars from their wheelchair? Holy Moly, it is incredible! So, I am conscious that I am asking someone who is incredibly capable, but did you have any difficulties or any noteworthy experiences when you are asking for accommodations during your working life?

John: I did and I suppose for me, your point there is valid as it goes back to what you see is what you get so people are more aware of it. So they're automatically thinking about it more.

Seònaid: And you are not wallflower you would definitely have...

John: No and I am not shy about telling them. When I was in school, the toilets were not accessible. So, I told them; "I cannot go to the toilet". So, I worked with them. We just changed the door around so it opened outward instead of inward. Very simple solution and just it is one thing to say the solutions do not need to be rocket science. The solutions can be very, very simple things. So, I was lucky in in that sense that I had had enough confidence to be able to just challenge and put it

out there, but not everybody feels that way. Every personality is different, but the one thing that I found by virtue of that was that people used to come to me and say you know what I do not see your disability, and to me I felt like saying; "Well you are a bit of an idiot because it is there [laughter]." But behind it was, I do not want you to sit, like my disability is part of who I am. It is framed my thoughts. It is framed; it does not define me, but it's part of who I am and for want of a betting thing I wear my badge on my sleeve. Yes and I am proud to have that diversity and that difference of thought. I have someone working with me in the in the Paralympic world who has Asperger's. Now if I wanted to, looking at the scales of that person, if I want to get him he is emotionless. He is like completely emotionless, so there is no emotion. So, if I want to deliver a tough message, I'll put him in the meeting and I'll get him to do it and by God the message is delivered. There is a skill, there is an example of using a skill that you have. But I did encounter and what I became very much aware of in AIB is that it is not just about my perspective and so people would use me as an example. Again, I did come across a couple of minor issues like it could be like they put in new lifts, but I just found that the lifts, the buttons were up there and thank God I've got long arms, but by God if I did not have long arms, it was a problem, and then they replaced those lifts with the ones that you press the button and then the display will be up there but there was no audio. So if you've got a vision impairment, my God you are going to be standing outside the lift for a long time, and if you get into it God only knows where you will go. That is what I could say my own experience was - my lesson there was I am not like people say; "Would you go out and check a building in terms of access to make sure it is okay?" And I said; "I am possibly the worst person to send out because I am small, my chair is compact, I am quite able, I can hop up and down two or three steps no problem. I am not the person who needs to assess that for the needs of the people who do need the accommodations." So, again it is to broaden your perspective as you do not assume and so luckily for me my experience was a positive one because I was able to articulate it, but not everybody is that comfortable and no one person is the sole source of knowledge in terms of the accommodations that need to be made.

Seònaid: Now you are messing with my job title here as disability employment specialist expert who knows everything [laughter]. But you know we'll go with that. I totally agree with you and I mentioned Paralympics in particular because is not it an Olympic year, 2020? So my disability is going to get sexy about what, August?

John: August yes.

Seònaid: Yes because I know Oscar Pistorius tried to ruin it for all amputees - but we're trying to work our way back up there [laughter].

John: We do not judge you people [laughter].

Seònaid: But I just know that there is going to be a summer of having difficult conversations with taxi drivers. So, I always want if they bring a wheel chair taxi, you know I just cannot lift the legs the right way. So I always want a little step, but of course the last, I think it was 2012 or it might have been the one after that, and the taxi driver had told me; it probably was 2012 actually with London, the taxi driver told me that he had been giving lifts to lots of Paralympians and why could not I just get into the cab the way they did, and he had given a lift to someone who was born without two legs and he had basically jumped out of his wheelchair, did a handstand right into the taxi and just like flung himself into the chair, and I am kind of looking at him like this holding the two hands and going [laughter]; "Handstand yes," but obviously because all amputees get into a car at the same way - right. It is exactly that; each disability is so different and so specific to each person. But look let's face it, we have been talking about this disability, equality, diversity, inclusion for years. We used to only talk about equality and we did not even include autism at all. It was all kind of sensory and physical and those that you could actually see. So how do we fix it? How do we actually change it? How do we move the needle? I am looking at you, John [laughter].

John: Oh *[laughter]*.

Seònaid: I mean let's face it, you know the numbers are shocking. So, the last time that they did the EU country report for Ireland, it showed that people with disabilities in 2011 were less likely to be in the workforce, but you are really talking 11% of people with a disability who are living in consistent poverty. But then last year's report showed that 24% of people with disabilities are living in consistent poverty, so things are not getting better. They are getting worse even though we're all changing things. So, how are we going to fix it? We have only got five minutes now lads.

John: Well like there is no quick, there is no quick solution but I think we have moved - the O2 Ability Awards was great, and I was involved with the O2 Ability Awards at the time, and I thought it was a really powerful tool to encourage business through competition to make changes because businesses love competition by God they do *[laughter]*. But what happened when the crunch came was we realised that the great stories that were being made were not so great, because the nice to have was no longer a must have, it became a could have. So, it was push down the agenda and the funds were focused in other stuff. We have been having this conversation for a long time. I think we need to acknowledge and recognize that there are still challenges out there and you mentioned the super crip, the super humans that Channel 4; I understand Channel 4 is advertising the participants in the Paralympic Games, as the super humans. We are not super human, we are just human, and I get it, it is a marketing ploy, but I hate it because it because it is divisive in terms of terminology. It is putting those who are the most able up there and just nearly dismissing those who cannot do that, the story you tell. So, I think we need to acknowledge that the challenges are there and I think I know a girl who finished top of her school, top of her class in Smurfit Business School. She had cerebral palsy, so she was a beautiful looking girl, very well presented but she used a power chair and she had a speech impediment. She went for 35 data entry level jobs before she finally got a job - as at a very basic level for someone who finished top of her class. That is a real tangible example. So, I think number one, we now, instead of the nice to have, we now have to go and start calling people out and how do we do that? Well we call out those challenges. But we get advocates on our side so A&L Goodbody. Like if we can get 70 people out of this room, becoming our champions for that cause and being the ones visibly making the changes. For me, I think that is huge and in Irish Wheelchair Association advocacy is such a huge part of role and I have to say that because I sit beside the advocacy officer and she'll beat me up if I do not *[laughter]*. But it is about calling it out. It is about calling it out and being there to support when we do.

Seònaid: And I think that is why I like to use the language that is associated with the marriage equality and with the LGBT plus more letters to be added, but I think that is why I talk about pride and coming out with disability because it is allies and those of us who not who have a disability, but also our family and friends as well. I also think that one of the things that has changed recently is that once upon a time when we talked equality before the recession, we did not have the statistics that actually show that it works - now we do. Now we have all of the data that we might possibly want to show that return on disability actually works. Not only is Accenture getting to equal the disability inclusion advantage report, but then there is also the return on disability, an entire global research funded by somebody with a disability seriously just to look at this. So, just to give you a couple of stats because I just think these are brilliant. Not only are we talking about a market segment that is worth US\$8 trillion, think about the huge amount of customers you could be looking at there. But within that Accenture research, 45 organisations and companies were actually researched and those that were the most inclusive of disability in the areas of employment and leadership were actually shown over a four year period to have 25% higher revenue, double the net income and 30% higher economic profit margins. That is the real reason. So, it is not just to employ beautiful individuals like ourselves, it actually makes business sense. What can we actually do? How can this firm be more inclusive? What do you think might be the challenges for existing employees Davinia?

Davinia: I think we need to create a culture of respect where people can bring their authentic selves to work, and I suppose our ultimate aim is just to be able to create a culture where everybody is comfortable feeling that they can disclose their disability, and that they will get the supports they need by disclosing. So, I think the whole Diversity and Inclusion Committee is working towards achieving this ultimate aim, and like I said at the beginning, it is everyone's responsibility.

Seònaid: Definitely because it does not move forward unless we all talk about it, and that whole conversation of it is okay not to be okay. It is okay to have your skin falling off and still come into work, and what about new employees? What would you recommend that the firm do to be more inclusive?

Adam: I think there are probably two things that I think are important. I think the first is, and I think it is why Davinia's contribution here today is so important, but you have been asking why we have been at these things so long and so little is changing. I think for a very long time the possible solutions have been designed by people who do not have disabilities themselves, and I have a kind of funny example of that I got a call from a really big company about six months ago and they wanted to hire some autistic people, and they ran quite a large campaign and they had heard me talk and say 85% of autistic people are unemployed or underemployed. So they thought this was great. They were going to be inundated with CVs, and two weeks after the campaign they had not received a single application. So they rang me up. I had not run the campaign but I was nearly like it was fault *[laughter]*. So, I said; "Right, I will come out to you today and have a look." So, we sat down and the first thing was they did not actually give a job description. They said; "Are you autistic? We are hiring. Email this address" *[laughter]*. Now I think that is just rude but also everyone would need to know what the job description was, an autistic person needs a little bit more detail.

Seònaid: Yes, an autistic person needs it more than a non-autistic person *[laughter]*.

Adam: The visual in the ad was a person very stressed and it used the colour red which is a trigger colour for many autistic people *[laughter]*. So we made a few changes and they recruited 12 people. It is a concrete example of if you actually talk to the community before you go out to do things, you can do it correctly.

The second thing I think is important that links to the project we did in DCU around creating an autism friendly university. DCU University had 16,000 when we started the project. Only 40 students registered with the disabilities services as being autistic. So, we sent our survey to all students, and what was very interesting was 54% of autistic respondents had never disclosed the university that they were on the spectrum. The main two reasons were: I did not like how I was supported when I was at school or I am worried people want take me as seriously or think I did not get here on my own merits. What that really tells me is as we see more and more people age out education into the workplace, businesses need to be very proactive in their messaging. Cannot assume that people will come forward themselves or that they have had positive experiences. Some of this is do with what happened in education not even in the workplace, but we need businesses proactively leading this conversation and saying they want disabled talent.

Seònaid: Totally and I think they have to be, as you say, really, really specific about it. Maybe it is a positive action measure and maybe it is throwing all of the interview out the window just for applicants with disabilities, because when I worked on the Willing Able Mentoring Programme - when you ask people to disclose for a specific campaign especially during the recession when there were no jobs everybody was disabled then *[laughter]*. It is like if they change the parking to just be wheelchair, you know, just to paid parking, everyone gets a disability then *[laughter]*. So, it is cool when you are in queues in the airport, when you need some parking and when, you know, exactly as you say.

John: Yes, that is why my wife married me *[laughter]*.

Seònaid: Good parking yes *[laughter]*.

John: Parking and skipping passport queues what more do you want *[laughter]*?

Seònaid: There are so many different issues and I think that is one of the key things. We need people to identify themselves as people with disabilities because without data then we cannot actually create a strategy. We need to have a way to do it, and I think that what you have said is exactly the important thing. A lot of people out there might not want to identify as someone who is different. I know when I was in college I spent most of my time running away from the disability officer and he just chased me around campus for a couple of years until eventually I heard there were free laptops going and I was right in there *[laughter]*.

But I also think that we have to remember that education is so supported and there are so many stories of people with disabilities and belonging to minority groups that actually go back into closet when they go into the workplace, and the statistics are quite shocking. I know there is a huge amount out there. I cannot remember the exact name of the LGBT Plus Charity and the data collection. I will send it to you when I remember. But I think that is the important thing. We have got so many people with a disability probably in this firm, how do we get them to put their hands up and go; "Hey I am different." How do we encourage people to disclose?

What do you think John?

John: The reality is there is a fear out there.

Seònaid: From both sides.

John: From both sides there is a fear and it is not all the employer's fault like there are; I think it is important to say that. You might advertise for like 20,000 positions for people with disabilities, you might not be able to fill them, because the reality is there are broader socio-economic factors that are impacting here.

Like we run an ability programme where we look to try and get people into the employment market or employment ready and the reality is some of their challenges are far more basic in terms of the support that they have got. Their families tended to bring them up so they do not have the life skills experience. They are afraid to get a bus. They might not be able to get a bus. When they go to take a bus there might be someone with a pram who says; "I have got twins, I am not taking this pram apart no matter what you tell me to do." I get that, so it is just a small example but there are broader issues there in terms of life skills. Once people are getting ready, are ready to go to the employment market, then it is great that the other side ready to receive them with open arms are the employers who recognise the business benefit of taking them in. It is addressing those fears and just step by step address those fears.

Davinia: Completely. It is not something that is going to be achieved overnight. It is going to be a process and today is just about starting the conversation about disability and the more people talk about disability and have those courageous conversations then the more open and inclusive culture we are going to achieve at the firm. I know some millennials on my team at the moment and they have not been afraid to ask me about my disability and find out about it, by just simply asking me; "How can I help you? What barriers are you facing here every day?" and they have done everything they can to accommodate me. Just don't be afraid to ask!

Seònaid: Just do not be afraid to ask. I think we also have to remember sometimes the partial disclosure that happens, so like I always talk about my limbs because I have frame it, particularly with my

nieces and nephews, as me having a super power. I know John does not approve of me being super human [laughter] but it is cool I think. The trouble is then when I talk to my nephew with Asperger's actually he gets really annoyed because I am telling lies [laughter]. So you cannot win. I say I am a super hero, part Batman, I have got my mobility scooter in the back of the car which they drive all the time. I think it is really important that we sort of normalising the idea of being different and talking about it now, here. We are hoping that guys will come forward and take it and run with it. Because of course, this Disability Committee is your committee and we would love to be able to help you out in whatever way, because I think it is talking to you guys, and you guys coming together to come up with solutions for the organisation that is going to make all the difference.

One of the qualifications I hold is all about accommodating somebody who is returning to the workplace with a disability. It is the National Institute of Disability Management and Research I think, I cannot remember the end of the name. But the whole point about it ism it is a Canadian model, and it is because there are so many physically difficult jobs in Canada like logging, fishing and all of those things - you have a lot of people who are in wheelchairs or losing limbs, what they basically do is they get all of their colleagues, lock them in a room and ask them what they would want them to do if they acquired a disability. I think it is great. A lot of people are against locking people in a room thing [laughter] apparently. But what I think is so creative about that is that it is actually asking you guys what you think. What you want to do if you had a disability tomorrow and what do you think of when you think about the ideal candidate who is coming to the work in the firm? Do they have a disability? Possibly not and I think that is one of the big challenges here when we are talking about disability in the workplace is that you do not always see the disabled person as the ideal candidate, because you expect them to behave a certain way at interview and as we know, autism is just not going to behave that way. You are going to expect them to reach out and shake your right hand, but I have had people scream when they touch the cold of my prosthetic. So, I think it is really important that we look beyond all of that and remember that people with disabilities, apart from this crowd, are all creative problem solvers and really, really good at coming up with a solution. In particular when, you know, you guys booked the bionic woman but she is not even bionic. Bionic is off for repairs. Gone to places where I have never even been.

So I think the important things, we have talked about our embarrassing stories of disclosure but I wanted to mention about that idea about partial disclosure where there are some disabilities that I will talk about like the bionicness and I will not always talk about the things that are hidden which are not as pleasant but they might be a need to know basis. So a perfect example I have always found is that somebody might talk about their physical disability because it is obvious but we do not want to talk about the mental health issues. I think that is hugely important. All of my friends know that I use my disability to tell jokes all of the time. But when I talk to them about my mental health difficulties they all went; "Oh Jesus, do not tell anyone that." I kind of thought, well hang on a second, surely there are more people like me who have mental health difficulties or who are going through a really tough time than there are people who are missing three limbs. I am unique in Ireland. I think that is really important. So, what do you think the firm needs to be more inclusive? Do you think that the Disability Subcommittee should have a Disability Officer specific, so that somebody can actually ask those accommodation questions of? What do you think Adam?

Adam:

I think these are all good ideas and I think that; one of the, I think things that we have seen as really successful in the past as well, is you will have people like Davinia who are comfortable, are brave in coming forward and sharing own experiences. I think any mechanism that can put in place to allow people to confidentially say; "I have somebody who works in this firm. This is the direction of travel I would like to see the firm going." It is not possible for a lot of workplaces, where things stand at the moment, to have a team of people with disabilities leading this discussion, so you have a group of people often who are allies, but maybe really do not experience the barriers on a day-to-day basis. So creating a space in which people can feed back

without identifying I think is really, really important, because even if people are not ready to tell their stories yet, it gives you the pool of data to inform your work.

Seònaid: Data driven for sure.

Davinia: I agree. Deciding who to disclose to is as important as the decision to disclose itself. Just having someone that is accountable really and responsible for making sure the supports are in place, especially in a big organisation where the person with the disability might not know who to contact. Is it a HR function or is it an IT function to get my technology in place? To have one person to hold that responsibility and liaise with the relevant departments would certainly be helpful.

Seònaid: And maybe that is the direct manager. Maybe that is the direct manager. Is there any final tips you have for us John?

John: Do you know what, there is no one solution fits all here. As the guys articulated, it is what works for the company, but for me, for the accountability here, I think that there is leadership required. So, I do not think that the senior teams are the CEOs or the MDs, whoever they are, need to be standing on the top of the rooftops or like Citibank across the way - with a big poster on the front of their building, they are a sponsor of Paralympics Ireland so we are delighted that they have a massive poster [*laughter*] on the front of the building. I actually am. I would have loved that when I was competing but particularly if I was on it [*laughter*]. But apart from that it is the leadership. So you do not need to be on top of the building shouting from the rooftops but culturally, as leaders, if you want that to happen in your organisation. I think if that is part of who and what you are as leader, I think that will filter down and people would be a lot more comfortable with it.

Seònaid: For sure and I am sure the trust and confidentiality in that system that is important. I always think from my perspective, and I know it is probably working in HR, I always want to be able to answer the question. Sure, why would I bother. What is in it for me? And if you guys can answer that question, I think you have it cracked. I would love to invite you all to give a huge round of applause for our panel [*applause*], and I would love to spend the whole day here with you asking questions and telling funny stories but unfortunately we are going to be pulled off the stage by our hair if we go over time. I would love to open it up for just one or two questions. That is probably all we have time for. Does anyone have a burning question?

Okay we have messed with their brains lads [*laughter*]. Well you can always find us all on social media and through your own contacts and of course through Davinia. I mean, you know, I think she has been so brave today to be the one to stand up here, come out with her disability and encourage everyone to actually do the same. I wonder if we could just have a little round of applause [*applause*]. The last thing I just want to say is not just a huge thanks but also remember how you can change things, just by telling people about it. I always call it 'spread the love', where basically you are telling people that you are including disability. That this particular interesting talk happened and it started changing the way that you think about things. Make sure that today it just does not stop. That you do not leave whatever inclusive promises you have made to yourself in this room. Go out and spread the love lads. Thanks a million [*applause*].