

- Hey, and welcome to "PCTY Talks." I'm your host, Shari Simpson. During our time together, we'll stay close to the news and info you need to succeed as an HR pro. And together, we'll explore topics around HR thought leadership, compliance and real life HR situations we face every day. Joining me today on the podcast is Lesa Bradshaw. She is a diversity and disability inclusion expert. She's an international speaker and managing member of Bradshaw LeRoux Consulting. So Lesa, thanks so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

- Thank you so much for inviting me. It's really good to be back.

- So I'd love if we could start with you sharing a little bit about your background and personal story, and how you started your consulting company.

- Absolutely. So I started my business back in 1998. South Africa was transitioning out of the apartheid sort of era, diversity was quite high on the agenda. And for me as a young upstart in the industrial psychology space, my passion was around finding ways that we could tap in or identify diverse talent, so talent from diverse backgrounds and experiences. And how do we tap into that diverse talent and bring it into the economy. At the time the only thing I really had to do with disability, was that I happened to be a wheelchair user. And so that's kind of, you know, that was the sum total of my experience with disability. But what I was finding is, I was going to go and sort of sell my assessment services and my sort of industrial psychometry services to HR practitioners in organizations, and they were interested in what I had to say about the diverse talents that we were looking for. And then they sort of look at me and go, "You know, we've noticed that you're a disabled person and we have to find disabled person for our equity targets and we'd like to recruit them, do you know of anybody?" And I would say, "Well, generally we don't around in flocks and I can't just go back and grab you a few from the home, but what sort of talent are you looking for?" And very often the response would be, "Well, we've earmarked this position as suitable for the disabled." Or they would say, "Well, it doesn't really matter if you find us a disabled person we'll find them something to do." And that started to get me a bit twitchy because I was like, "Well, no, let's start the conversation with what talents are you looking for, and what potential are you looking for, and then let's go back and sort abilities and then we'll move into finding, well, what disables that talent and what can we do to enable them to perform." And that was sort of how I got into the disability conversation. And then, so we opened a recruitment division in 2004 that was designed to tap into talent with a disability and say, "You know, this is a good space for you to seek employment." And then we'll link you to those economic opportunities. We then realized that all the barriers in the workplace and in the economy were still there disabling talent with a disability. So we opened the consulting division that said, "Well,

let's work with the various stakeholders in the economy to try and identify some of these barriers and change the way we do business so that it can allow this diverse talent units to enter and add value.

- With all the changes that we're seeing in the diversity, equity and inclusion space, one of the big changes is this addition of a accessibility, I'm curious your perspective, why specifically disability inclusion is something that HR practitioners should be really in tune to right now, and understand the importance of?

- I think what's been very interesting is as I've been in this space the last 24 years, and we've been looking around diversity, I've always felt that disability was sort of the poor cousin of diversity. And the reason is because there's this perception, that disability only impacts a very small sector of our population. So let's focus more on the broader forms of diversity, like race and age and gender, and let's try and see if we can focus on that. And then disability, we'll kind of deal with that later. And so that's sort of what's been happening. So instead of including disability in those initial conversations where we started to broaden awareness around disability and its value to business, we kind of kept it as a separate topic. And only now are organizations realizing that, "Hang on a second, if we truly want a diverse organization and a diverse economy, disability actually affects a very large portion of us. In fact, 20% of our consumers are directly impacted in the decision making process by disability. So we've gone and missed out 1.85 billion people in this world that have a disability as a potential talent pool, and we've gone and forgotten about \$13 trillion worth of spend power, of consumers impacted by disability. And that just isn't very good, clever business sense, generally. So what businesses are starting to do is say, "Well, firstly, we're recognizing that we should have done this in the beginning, but we don't really know how to do this and we feel very awkward, and we're not sure if we're gonna offend, and we must have conditions perfect before we try this." Rather than just recognizing disability is, it's just diversity and it only seems diverse to us because it hasn't been normalized yet. So go back to the drawing board, lighten up and relax and go, "What talent do we want? What people are we looking for? What dynamics do we want in our organization?" And then, "How do we level the playing field so that we enable everybody to perform at their best?" And so I think for me, why disability inclusion has become a hot topic, is because we are realizing now that if we don't do an intentional drive to up its position in the boardroom agenda, it's not going to happen. It's not gonna happen organically. It needs intentional input. It needs intentional effort to raise awareness because the barriers are still there. So I think for me, it's requiring more intentional education, but in terms of how it gets applied and built into your business, it actually needs the same approach as we did when we were dealing with all the different types of encouraging diversity in our organization.

- I like that you mentioned this hesitation of, "Well, I don't wanna say the wrong thing, or I don't wanna look stupid or offend." And you know, the more we talk about DEIA, I keep coming back to that. It really is a journey, it's like, if you can come to it with a positive intent and seeking to understand and really to grow your business, like you said, with education and some other things, I think you can lean into that, right? I'm on a journey and I'm trying to understand.

- Yeah.

- You recently gave a really great presentation to our organization, and I really appreciated your perspective on what you called a journey to inclusion. I'd love if you could share more about kind of that model and that thought process.

- Okay. I think for me, it is a journey, because I think when it comes to disability inclusion, we know that any type of transformation, it doesn't generally happen with big grand gestures. It happens with little and often shifts that occur at every point in business. It happens with conversations around the coffee machine. It happens with a small adjustment to a policy. It happens with a product development or design that we do. And I think for me, what's so important is that if we break disability inclusion or the journey to becoming disability confident, down into manageable steps, people feel a little bit more like they can track and measure its priority and its progress. So for me, the starting point is to get leaders to be aware that they need to shift the narrative. Disability inclusion is not an HR exercise about fair play. It's a very good business move, and you need to understand the business case for building an inclusive economy. And a lot of the evidence is already there when we talk about the business case for a diverse employee base and a diverse population. So we need to shift the leadership thinking because once you do that and you shift the narrative to this is good business, then you start getting that support when you need to make changes organically throughout the organization. The second step is to say, "Well let's changing narrative. We're very used to understanding disability from a charity perspective and from a medical model perspective where we talk about, and we are raised to be very careful what we say, in case we offend somebody with a disability, or we are raised to perceive people with disabilities as a very vulnerable group of people that have it very hard, and we must be very careful not to upset them even further. Even in the adverts, when we look at advertisements for disability, we see them as a disability policy. "This could happen to you, make sure that you are insured." And it's got the fear factor. But, what we're not used to seeing is disability depicted in our general way of life. So in our clothing adverts, there's never really models with a disability just doing standard modeling. You never really have somebody models with a disability in a television advert where they're advertising a car. So we tend to keep disability as a separate thing. So when you start shifting the narrative and you start talking about we're all

disabled by something, and as a good employer, your job is to say, "What is disabling our people and what enabling steps or shifts do we need to do to enable people to perform at their best?" Disability becomes so much more normalized and it becomes good business practice. So, changing the narrative to... I have a cheeky thing where I go lighten up, it's just diversity, don't panic. Even when we've got one of my favorite stories is when we've got... If I get into an elevator and I've got a mother and a small child, and I see this look of horror across the mother's face and you can see they going, "Please don't embarrass me. Please don't say anything." And then without fail, your child will go, "Mommy, what's wrong with that lady? Why is she in a wheelchair?" And the parent just cringes. But what's so important is how do we respond? We go, "Shh." We shush them. We go, "You mustn't speak so loud," because we don't wanna offend the person. But what we're teaching our children or people around us is it's embarrassing to have a disability. It must be something that must be whispered. Why is it embarrassing to have a disability? It's just is like blonde, tall, short it's one part of what makes you a person. Then we say to them, "Shame, you see how lucky you are that you can walk. I don't ever wanna hear you complaining about walking long distances again, because at least you can walk." So now you go and make me unlucky. And so this perception of having a disability as something embarrassing and unlucky starts to build in our culture. So the moment we shift the narrative, the moment we start saying, "What do we need to do to enable all our people to do their best in the organization? How do we change the way we speak about disability that moves it towards, 'it's just people,' rather than, 'it's a group of people that we should pity?'" We start to relax a little bit, and that fear of offending does doesn't overwhelm us. And then you do a real evaluation, what are some of the real barriers that we've got to inclusion and how can we in the short, medium and long term, start to address those barriers in a way that is beneficial to everybody? I always laugh and say, I get quite excited when I go to a building and I see an evacuation route for somebody in a wheelchair, but so does the woman who's heavily pregnant that doesn't want to run down 13 flights of stairs in a fire or the sports star that's had an ankle injury, that's on crutches or the person that has panic attacks under pressure and has passed out and needs somebody to carry them out the building. So inclusion and barrier removal benefits everybody in the long run. So if we start breaking that down and then we start linking, "How do we build talent with a disability in a way that feeds into an in demand pipeline that we are looking for?" Then it becomes good business practice. And I always say that for me, is the journey to inclusion. It's about change your perceptions, change how you approach it, normalize it, and then enable that transition to happen in policy and in practice in your environment.

- You also talked, during that session, around kind of your definition of disability. And I'd love for you to share what you shared, because this is one of those takeaways that I was like, "Wow, I'd never

thought about it this way." I just think your perspective really kind of re-centered how we should be thinking about disability overall.

- Okay. Yeah, I think for me, first thing we've gotta realize is trying to define disability, it changes depending on what your purpose of definition is. So if you're a medical practitioner, your definition of disability would be something different to an HR practitioner who's looking at labor legislation. And that might be different to somebody who's determining whether you get social grants. So the definition of disability it's a varied concept and essentially is just a theoretical concept. In the workplace though, what it means is the moment somebody is considered to be somebody with a disability by definition, their rights kick in, in terms of the anti-discrimination rights. So their rights to have equitable treatment, the rights to be reasonably accommodated. Those kick in from a legal perspective. So there's a lot of concern by organizations into trying to just pin down and understand exactly what this definition is, because then they need to know if they're going to be in trouble or not and what they need to do and it kinda helps you to find the next step. For me, I think that what you need to understand is that disability exists on a line or a continuum. So you are never gonna get a 100% functioning human being in every type of functionality, right? Everyone's kind of has disabilities or impairments at some point. But in the workplace and in the labor context, your work environment context, if you have a disability, which is something that, it disables you because of the barriers, there are disabling barriers. So you have an impairment or a condition, and because of its nature, because of the barriers, it now disables you, then it would be considered a disability. So I'll give you a very small example. Let's just say that you have diabetes, and you can take medication once a day, which kind of regulates your sugars and you eat a little bit healthier and you do a bit of exercise and so the functional impact of diabetes is not impacting on you at any point, when it comes to competing with others to get employed, there is no barrier that stops you from being employed. However, on this continuum, let's just say that you now have diabetes, perhaps we have to inject you with insulin two or four times a day. You have to eat more often and more regularly. Your team needs to know if you do have a sugar low, what is it that they need to do, so there's a little bit of a safety concern or briefing that needs to take place with the team. So now you can understand that on the continuum, the impact of the disability is likely to disable you a little bit more in the workplace, because if an employer doesn't understand that dynamic, or if it's a policy that says, no, it wouldn't be safe for you to work in this environment because you might have a sugar low and hurt yourself, now there's a disabling factor. So now the conversation becomes well, "Is it reasonable to make an adjustment to the workplace or the nature of work to minimize or reduce that disabling factor to the point where you can now perform like everyone else?" So in that case, it might be you just do a bit of awareness training with the team to say, if this person has a sugar low, this is what you do. You kind of do a bit of a

safety briefing to say, if they do go a little bit floppy, or they like maybe lose a bit of consciousness, or they're starting to get a bit feint or distant, or they've dissociated feeling, then this is what they... They've got time to exit. So this is the protocol you'll follow. Then you mitigate the risk, you take the barrier away and that person can perform. And that's what reasonable accommodation is. That's what work place adjustments are all about. So I think for me, the definition is, firstly, it's gotta be a long term or recurring impairment. So you can't go and have a football injury and your ankle's out of action for a week or so and you gotta be on crutches and say, "Whoop, I have rights. I'm a person with a disability." You're not qualified as that in terms of the labor legislation. So it's gotta be here to stay. The same way as some people get depressed, they go through phases in life where they're depressed because well, they hate their job, or they're going through a messy divorce or, you know, life happens, but it's not classified as depression unless it's here to stay. So it's long term recurring, and it's likely to happen over multiple situations. So then it becomes a here to stay thing, but that's the first part. The second part is to understand it can be physical and/or mental. And by that it means that not all disabilities are visible. A lot, in fact most are non-visible. So it's things of when we say physical, it could mean mobility. It could be dexterity. It could mean height. When we talk about mental, it could be anything of the brain. So it could be to do with psychosocial, like depression or anxiety. It could be a learning disability in terms of how you learn, dyslexia, ADHD. These are all of the brain and that's what we mean. We don't mean the traditional mental as in Jack Nicholson's "One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest." All right. So it's a diverse thing. So it's of the body, of the brain. And then the third thing is it's gotta have some sort of disabling impact on your equal access to education or employment. And that's the disabling factor. Once you do that, you've got a strong case to say, "I'm a person with a disability," and that then kicks in my rights to protection and non-discrimination.

- You talked a little bit about barriers and really having a good understanding of what are the barriers that are causing that disability to be able to do the job. I'm curious as HR professionals are listening to this. What are some ways that they can start to proactively identify barriers? And it could be maybe even barriers entry into being recruited. Are there things that you've seen that are kind of staples that HR professionals should start to think about?

- Okay. So I think for me, the biggest thing that HR need to start off with is firstly, never assuming what the abilities of a person with a disability are, based on your understanding of their disability. So never match a disability to a job. Remember, it's always about saying, what is the functional demand of the role? What is the functional ability of this person or this applicant? And what is the disabling factor that might disable them to the point where they're not enabled to perform at their best and to add value to the role? So I think for

me, one of the biggest barriers to tackle is the attitudinal barriers. And it's shifting that narrative on disability. It's making sure that your line managers and your leaders are comfortable with the languaging of disability, that they feel relaxed around etiquettes and around what terminology to use. And also that we challenge their stereotypes around disability. Because, I think it's a real knee jerk reaction to decide what industry is suitable or what positions are suitable for the disabled. And we kind of understand the disabled as a homogenous group of individuals. And I mean, in South Africa, a lot of our industry is around mining and manufacturing, which are traditionally very labor intensive, hard and extreme conditions. And the perception is that disability is not even required in that area as an equity thing, because it's too hard. And I go, "Well, you've already got a lot of people with disabilities employed already. You just don't see it. It's not visible." And in fact, it's more dangerous to not disclose the disability because you are hiding potential risk factors that could be easily mitigated with an accommodative measure. So the first thing we want our people to understand is to become more comfortable with disability is a form of diversity, and those awareness sessions become key. Secondly, you need to have a look and see at how you are speaking about disability in HR. So how you deal with disclosure processes, how you are advertising and including talent with a disability, how you interview somebody, an applicant with a disability, and most importantly, whether you are walking the talk, so does your careers page reflect an inclusive and accessible way of tapping into talent with a disability? So those sort of shifts in narrative and the way we project our brand, the way we go out and reach talent and the way we support our existing talent, really I think the attitudinal barriers is a good starting point. My next step is to be aware of what environmental barriers exist. Because, very often you can't go and make your entire business wheelchair accessible over night. But very often accessibility is not about wheelchairs only. I was saying the other day, I think there's a statistic that only 5% of people with disabilities in the world actually use wheelchairs. So we kind of the poster children of disability, and we get all the great parkings, but actually it's a small percentage. So we need to kind of ship that as well and we need to say from our environment, what are the barriers that are disabling our people? And remember, it's not just gonna benefit somebody with a disability when you make lighting better, or when you make the insulation better, or when you have safer evacuation routes, it's gonna make it better for everybody. So, because for me, what's great about doing good accessibility audits, is we take stock and then we get a way of being able to capacitate our facilities managers, our operations managers, the people who are responsible for the design of our infrastructure, we educate them. So they don't keep making the same mistake. And then little and often you start to see things become different and barriers get removed. And then the last part is to have a look at your, rethink, your policies and your procedures. Never should you have a separate disability inclusion policy. Okay? It is part of your DNA,

it's part of your diversity equity and inclusion conversation. It's not a stepped conversation. So how do we look at our policies and make sure that we are enabling people? Yeah, and I think for me, if we can kind of look at those three groupings, I think that it really helps you kind of make intentional plans about how to tackle those from an HR perspective.

- I really love all three of those and I think it's such a great start to ground in thinking about those things and having those conversations with your leadership team and your internal HR people. As we wrap up our conversation, I'm curious, how have you seen Covid impact or change the landscape in this area?

- Well, I have to say, as much as Covid has, I mean, our first recognition, the first conversations that happened about disability when Covid first kicked in is the whole triage decision making in the medical world. So if you were a person with a disability, you were kind of at the very bottom of the, "You'll get treatments," decision making process. So there was a lot of human rights conversations around how the divide or the inequality of disability was more noticeable. But I wanna tell you that in the business sector, disability inclusion actually got a bit of a booster, and I'm gonna explain why. Firstly, I think what's happened is everybody's realized all of a sudden that anybody, their worlds can change in a heartbeat and they can all be disabled by something very quickly. So all of a sudden our transport, access to transport was restricted, okay, in lockdown. Now we know how frustrating it is when you don't have accessible transport. Well, welcome to the people with mobility impairments that ask just for accessible transport. And then it got a huge light on mental disabilities, or mental health, and how that if not supported, can translate to a disabling factor. And we suddenly started to realize that there were a lot of people out there in our organization that were struggling through trying to cope with mental health issues, but they were doing it on their own and they could kind of do it before Covid, but into lockdown when we were all isolated and our world became terribly uncertain and all that fear overwhelmed us, people's abilities to cope became compromised. So all of a sudden organizations have been recognizing something that we've been asking for, for years. An organization that is responsive to barriers to people's mental wellness is something that is going to be a good way of doing business. So for us, that are understanding people, we are finding that our applicants, for example, they're not so scared of telling an employer that they've got depression or anxiety because it's now been, people go, "Oh, I know about that." Whereas before Covid, it was a hush-hush, it was taboo because people looked down at it and there were stigmas. And the third benefit, I think, is that a lot of disabling factors come from our infrastructure and our working environment. And so often beforehand, we reach out to place somebody with a disability and an environment and we ask for a organization as a reasonable accommodation to adjust something in the environment. The

answer was, "Well, no, we can't do that because it's too expensive," or "It's not the way we do business," or "We don't have the IT structures to support that." While into Covid and suddenly the abilities of business to completely adapt the way they operate was showcased in a very good way. So what we've shown is reasonable accommodation and the ability to do it is very often a lack of will rather than a lack of ability. What we've learned is the need to be able to adapt our work environment to respond to the diverse needs of our people is actually a good business practice and not a bad business practice. And so here I sit and I'm presenting a podcast to you on the other side of the world, and I didn't have to try and face the numerous logistical nightmares of inaccessible aeroplanes, taxis, cars, hotels. I didn't have to do any of those barriers to deliver my value in a business world because this has become an acceptable way of engaging with our people. So for me, I think that I also would like to just end off about some of the key things that persons with disabilities who are succeeding in a world that excludes, two of the key factors you have to have as a person with the disability, is problem solving and flexibility. Now, I remember in lockdown, I've got a hoist that I use to get me in and out of bed and there I was dangling a meter from the ceiling when all of a sudden the motor stopped working and it was one o'clock in the morning and I was dangling from the ceiling and I was like, "Well, this is interesting problem solving." Now I have, as a person with a disability, I have a plan B, C and D for everything that I do. And so I had my technician on speed dial and there I was dangling from the ceiling and I phoned him and I said, "Listen, Mayday. We have a problem. We need you to come and disconnect me so I can get off the ceiling." And he was, "I'll be there in 10 minutes, but I'm not allowed out on the roads because laws, you can't travel at night." I said, "Well, sneak break the law and get to me. I need you." And then he got to my estate and the law, the policy of the estate was they were not going to let anybody into the estate without an authorization letter from the Covid committee to say that they are able to come and do work in your estate. That would've taken 48 hours. So can you see that all of a sudden these policies? So there I was on a WhatsApp video call with my technician, dangling from the ceiling, shining my phone up to the ceiling to say, "What buttons must I push? How do I disconnect so that it kind of lets me down." And there he was talking me through and I had my daughter with me and the two of us who now have become very good electronic engineering, I'll have you know, we managed to get me out of the situation. But there was always a plan, and my point is, when you take those skills of flexibility, adaptability, problem solving, and you put them in a workforce and you put them in a position where they're able to come up with new ways that your customers can experience issues, new ways to resolve barriers and problems, new ways to come up with innovative ways of getting things done, and resilience to keep trying in the face of setbacks and barriers, well, those are skills that any business nowadays really wants. And I think inclusion is about creating an enabling environment

where those individuals with a disability that bring to them such diverse value are able to demonstrate and showcase their value.

- Lesa, thank you so much for sharing that story. If I had been in that spot, I probably would still be on the ceiling to be totally honest.

- It's definitely not a way you want to get rescued, trust me.

- But this conversation has been wonderful and enlightening and I just thank you so much for taking a few minutes of your time, like you said, across the world to chat with me about disability inclusion. I appreciate it.

- Such a pleasure. Take care, and thank you very much again, for having me.

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