

Transcription: Work & Life: Cat Mitchell and Dan Holloway – Accessibility and Disability in the Workplace.

Rebecca: [00:00:00] Welcome to this week's Shelf Healing Work and Life, where we're going to chat with CatCatMitchell and Dan Holloway. All about the role of accessibility in the workplace and surrounding topics. I'll ask them to introduce themselves a little bit. So Cat, if you'd like to go first,

Cat: [00:00:22] My name is Cat Mitchell. I'm a lecturer in creative writing and publishing at a University of Derby.

Uh, before working there, I worked in publishing. Most of my time was spent at Penguin Random House UK in London, working in Marketing and Publicity and at the moment I'm doing some research into disability on the workplace.

Dan: [00:00:43] Hello, I'm Dan I am currently the administrator at the University of Oxford, I overlapped with Cat in the publishing world.

I'm the news editor for the Alliance of Independent Authors. I do. I've been doing a lot of disability, advocacy and activism in particular around the financial services sector for over a decade. I had sort of given up on publishing because I thought it was a lost cause. So it's great that there is work going on on accessibility there.

I also do a lot of work in the University of Oxford on accessibility in the workplace with slightly more success than people have in publishing but not much.

Rebecca: [00:01:18] As you can see this should be an excellent discussion panel, focusing on the role of accessibility in the workplace. I think we should probably start off by discussing what we mean by accessibility in the workplace and how that affects people.

Personally for me, I take both boxes of, I have a chronic life impacting condition and I have, I have a mental illness. So accessibility for me, it's quite important certain things are easily available for me. And that signposting to exits is very, very important and good maps and layouts of buildings is, is vital.

Basically. Otherwise I'm not going in a building. I'm very sorry. So that's just personally from my perspective, but in a more general way, accessibility in the workplace covers a whole host of, of different things.

Cat: [00:02:08] Yeah. And I think, yeah, same for me. I think there's kind of the physical and mental health conditions, all intersecting and making me and many people, you know, complex individuals who need a lot of different accommodations.

Um, so, you know, it's things like physical accessibility. So being able to access physical spaces actually get into spaces and use them in the same way other people would. Virtual or digital accessibility. So being able to access content, you know, captioned videos, alt texts on images, that kind of things that it's hard to kind of define accessibility actually in a really simple sentence, isn't it?

Because it just, it covers so many different aspects.

Dan: [00:02:48] So I think accessibility for me is about ensuring that we can, we can use things with about the same amount of energy it takes everyone else to use things.

Rebecca: [00:02:59] That was brilliant

Cat: [00:03:03] Yeah

Dan: [00:03:03] That's one of the things in terms of the workplace and how it's done. I think there is a tendency that you've both said to homogenize accessibility, so our events. So we were talking about this before hand our events page , how it's great. It has an accessibility thing on, you can see where the University of Oxford events are accessible or not.

It says, is this event accessible? Yes or no. And that is extraordinarily hard to navigate. And I think that's something that we'll probably be talking about to a lot and you have both alluded to , is navigation and how you, how you know, whether the accessibility record requirements you have matched the accessibility requirements that someone thinks they are giving.

And that's when the mismatch occurs that things become really distressing, because like you said, Rebecca, if you don't have what you need, you're, you don't want to go there. What you don't want is to turn up and find that what you thought was going to be the case there isn't.

Rebecca: [00:03:57] Yeah. There is nothing worse than needing to know where like bathrooms are and exits are and rocking up and having no idea where anything is because it makes you.

It makes already a stressful experience of maybe going somewhere to do presentations or job interviews, or just to meet people in a new way. And it makes life so much harder and it's so unnecessary. It will be so easy to somewhat, you know, or signposts. Yeah.

Cat: [00:04:27] Yeah. And it's, I think, you know what Dan was saying about, um, is this accessible yes or no speaks to a wider issue about how people view disability and how they view it quite narrowly.

And I think that isn't helped by things like, you know, toilet signs for disabled people, just having someone in a wheelchair as the symbol. And when you talk about disability in the workplace, people often say, oh there aren't disabled people here. Oh yeah. I'll, I'll kind of work place is accessible to disabled people because we've got around and because we've got a toilet that's accessible legally to people in wheelchairs and that's enough and you have to sort of say, well, disability is bigger than that.

It's not just people in wheel chairs it's not as visible disabilities. There are a range of disabilities that we have to think about

Rebecca: [00:05:09] One that I always noticed just because I had a friend who was hearing impaired. The amount of places that say they're accessible and then they don't have hearing loop systems.

So she'll, I can't hear anything because her hearing loop doesn't click into anything. And everyone's got so much tech around that if you try and find something that maybe they've got it, but they didn't say you can't do it. And it's just just it's it's dis- disappointing when people go, Oh yes, we're super accessible.

And like you say, it's because they had a ramp and they've gone. It's only, only disabled people or people in wheelchairs. And we've ticked that box.

Dan: [00:05:44] If an example, we, we had a conference, I speak about this a lot. Sorry, Wilson College, Oxford to name and shame. We, we held a conference for the future thinking network a couple of years ago at Wilson College, Oxford and I was coordinating a panel on Visions of Utopia and Disability.

So it was how visions of utopia eliminates disabled people from them. And we've got a great panel together. We were told we had this fabulous,

accessible brand new lecture theater. It did indeed have a wheelchair ramp. It had wheelchair access to everywhere apart from the stage because they couldn't actually conceive of someone in a wheelchair being a speaker, as opposed to a member of the audience.

It's and that's the kind of thing I think we see quite a lot. There's this imagining that even when it comes to running accessible events, it's all about how to make things work for the audience and not even considering that your keynote speaker might be disabled. It's it's extraordinary.

Rebecca: [00:06:48] I think that leads us nicely onto one of our points that we want to talk about how important it is to include the people it would affect in the decision making process, whether that's for creating new courses, whether that's for building new buildings, whether it's for just having a general sweep round in HR checking that you're accessible.

It only works. If the people who is going to affect are part of the decision-making process.

Cat: [00:07:13] Yeah, I agree. It's that kind of the disability activists, slogan, nothing about us without us. Like, we should always be involved in the conversation. Otherwise you just wouldn't know, you know, even being someone with a disability, I wouldn't feel confident saying to an employer just from my experience.

Oh, this is how you make a workplace accessible. I always tell them to go ask other people, ask other people with different disabilities because only then will you there'll be things that you just would never have thought about. So another example for an event I experienced that wasn't particularly accessible.

And again, it was around disability, which made it quite surprising, but it was an exhibition at, I think it was at the V&A for Frida Kahlo how art was on display. And I went there and you had a very specific time slot and I showed up. And the queue was massive. So even though I turned up at my time slot, that was kind of a 40 minute wait to get in no seating anywhere.

And it was a, you know, an exhibition about someone who'd had chronic pain and you'd have mobility issues. And there was no consideration of are people coming to, this might not want to queue for 40 minutes and you might've kind of warned them about that. Um, so yeah, I think that there's definitely a need to.

To ask people and to go to people and ask them what they need. And only then are you going to be fully accessible?

Rebecca: [00:08:31] Hmm. It's that idea of being comfortable, knowing that you don't know and therefore asking. And I think that's a big issue with, with people that the disabled community called the abled community in assuming that they know.

And that they can do a good job and not realizing that even within the disabled community, I wouldn't be advocating for someone in a wheelchair because I do not use a wheelchair. I can't possibly think of all the other things that need doing it. I've worked some of the paralorryriders I've worked with. I did advocate on their behalf during a competition when they had put the para stables for the horses, the furthest away from the lorry park.

And no one who was running these stables had thought. That was a really stupid idea because a lot of those para riders do a lot with the horses, but at a big stay away competition that last four days, maybe they're going to have to use their wheelchair more. Because they've used up a lot of their energy and actually them having to use their wheelchair means they can't get to the temporary stables on the grass.

And that means they can't see the horse. Whereas if the horses were closer, they could probably get there with their sticks or their walker, or maybe someone could push that wheelchair a bit to get that stable like 15 15 meters max from the lorry park, which is all surfaced. And it's just that, that lack of thinking.

You know where they're like, Oh, we put them in the temporary stables by the lorry park. Yeah. But you didn't put them in the actual stables by the lorry park. You put them really far away. But that's the only time that I was felt I could advocate for my rider who was in a wheelchair because she told me, and then I could walk the other side of the stables to talk to the people running the stables, because there was no way she could get there you know, I, I can, I can confidently advocate on my own behalf and on people with similar issues, but like you said, Cat even within the community. I you can't advocate for other people because there are things you might not even think of that are mportant. And I don't understand how people within the department running things think, especially if they don't have any conditions at all, how they feel

like they can adequately create an accessible space or job or anything without asking the people who have the disabilities. Yeah,

Dan: [00:10:44] I think, I think I I'd say two things to that the first of which is. It's probably something that, again, to use the, the abled community or the both things they don't like to hear. And the first is that I think there are a lot of people who want to think that they're good people, but who would actually in practice really just rather we

and, and have their fingers crossed every time they run something hoping that a disabled person doesn't show up because they would really rather not think about it. And they don't, that will make their lives easier. And I think this is, this comes back to the utopia thing because actually a lot of people's ideal lives will be made easier by us not being there.

So, and I think the second problem, and this is something that comes up in, in financial services when people say, why don't disabled people engage with us. Is a lot of people, if they do ask, they don't, they don't want to listen. So things don't happen. So we disabled people in general, we have, we have a lot fewer resources than most people because, because reasons, um, and then we're made to do an awful lot of labor to explain what we need.

Which is okay. But then when someone doesn't listen to that and nothing happens as a result of it, it's very hard. You get very cynical by two or three times of this happening then becomes why, why don't people engage with you? Because if you've said things in the past and no one's listened, then it's happened with the Council in Oxford as their opening back up from the first lock down last summer, they put together a working group with there, there were about 12 of us and representing disabilities of every nature. It was, it was really good. We have six sessions, two hours, each that's 12 hours each or 12 people, lots and lots and lots of suggestions. Literally none of them was put into action. So that's 12 hours of everyone's time that was given in good faith at great cost to no result. And I think that that's one, that's a real problem that has to be addressed is if you're going to ask you, then have to listen.

Rebecca: [00:12:51] And also I think the way in which people ask, I think a lot of the time, unless you have a very good, for example, HR department in a workplace and they'll say, well, what do you want? What do you need? Instead of like saying, this is what we can offer. And if there's something that maybe you need that we don't offer then let us know, you know, which I think is very

workplace dependent. There are some jobs where I know where it's like, this is what we can give you. This, this, this, this, this, this, this, this desk, which one would you like, or which, which multiples would you like? But I think the majority of workplaces are still, Oh, you need something.

What is it? Tell us. And it's like, that's, that's shifting all of the effort, like Dan said onto the disabled people. And often you don't know if you're going to put a lot of time and effort in, as Dan said, and then they're not going to give you anything or they're going to go, Oh, we can't give you that.

We can give you a nice chair. Right. So helpful. That's that's definitely what I wanted.

Cat: [00:13:52] Yeah.

Yeah. I mean, yeah, sorry. Yeah. Um, yeah, I was going to say something really similar, you know, so much about disability adjustments. There's kind of two sides to it. You know, often it requires the disabled person to go do all the work. So you have to go reach out to someone. You have to find the right person to email. You have to know what to ask and what to ask for that. Again, there's two aspects to it in a work place. I think so. First of all, You shouldn't assume that everyone with a disability needs the same kind of requirements and adjustments, that's sometimes an issue in itself. So there is a sense that you should ask for individuals.

What, what do you need for you specifically? But at the same time, as you say, Rebecca, that's challenging sometimes because you don't know what to ask, or you don't know what's on offer you don't know what might help you and you don't know what they can do for you. So it's something I think, you know, I University at Derby, they do quite well, uh, kind of wellbeing services and how they support students.

Students will go to them. If they have a disability or have any extra needs and the university will come up with a support plan for them. But a lot of the time we see the talk to me, they go, I don't know, what to ask for, I don't know what I need. I don't know what will help me, but the University has a list of things like, Oh, we can give you extra time on assignments.

If there's an exam, we can give you extra time. We can ask the lectures to not draw attention to it. If you need to walk around or leave the room, it's, it's that kind of stuff. And so. That's helpful too, to just have a list of things like this is

what we can offer for you. And you can kind of select it as well as saying, Oh, actually some things not on this list that I would also benefit.

Yeah.

Rebecca: [00:15:27] I think also that fear of asking for stuff, you go through your entire life feeling like you're putting people out and that you're already a burden and then you go, Oh my God, you asked me what I want. Well, really, I want these five things, but I'm going to ask for two, because I don't want you to feel like I'm putting you out, which is a terrible thing to feel.

And you shouldn't feel that way, but it's, it's, it's having an HR department or a wellbeing part of your university that says, yeah, you can have all of this, you know, pick and choose nothing is too much because I know for a lot of people that feeling of you, even though you're not that feeling that you're, you're putting people out and you're maybe a bit of an extra burden it's it's

Dan: [00:16:08] it becomes part of them. Part of our masking it's pretending we can get by with less than we can because of, because of it. And we're so used to being greeted with the eye roll or the or the sigh and it's that as an HR department, trust someone being asked for stuff. It's that first moment, the first two seconds, when you ask for something, you can never get that back.

If you, if you disclose something or say something to someone and their first reaction is to. To draw breath or to, to shrug or to did we, we, we, we all know the kind of signals that they give off that are almost unconscious signals, but the moment that happens, you can never get that back because you know what what's going on underneath what they really think.

Um, and so. You have to get someone in, in that kind of role whose first reaction, as you said, Rebecca is to say, yes, you can have all of it. What can we do? We want to give you, we want to give you everything you need, not what do we have to give you? So it's what, what can we give you? Not what do we have to give you? I think is.

Cat: [00:17:15] Yeah.

Rebecca: [00:17:16] Yeah. The phrasing is so vital, you know, because as Dan said there, you know, what can we give you implies that you're just going to give it to them. You know, whereas what do we have to is like, we don't want

to, and that, that just makes such change. I, I, I can't knock on doors. This is ridiculous.

I know it's ridiculous. And I tell people and people either go, that's silly. I'll have my door open when I meet them happens. Or they're just like, why. That seems really stupid. And you're like, as if I don't know that not being able to knock on doors is a really stupid thing to do. And I haven't spent my entire life trying to fix that, you know, it's, it's like, thank you people that go sure I'll just leave my door open, you know, or I'll come out at our meeting time and make sure that there's no closed doors. I know it's stupid. .

Dan: [00:18:00] But that comes back to, so the thing about using as few resources as possible, most people you shouldn't have to think 'thank you so much' to the person who leaves the door open, because it should, most people don't have to be infinitely grateful that they're able to access day-to-day life. It shouldn't, we shouldn't have to feel great every time someone does something that just makes life livable for us. And yet we do that's, it's really ingrained into us to be constantly grateful for justice. Being able to breathe almost.

Yeah.

Cat: [00:18:31] Great. And I think that's, that's kind of two things I want to say about what you guys have just said. So the festival, you know, making sure that things are accessible automatically as much as possible, obviously that isn't always possible because you know, everyone has very different needs, which is kind of.

Embedding it into events, venues, workplaces, just making it automatically accessible. So no one has to ask for it. No one has to say thank you because that's just how things are. And then what was that? I was going to say something else as well. Yeah. I was going to say it's sort of one thing, having accessibility adjustments and saying, Oh, the equality act with following the law, we're following all their requirements.

And then people at your workplace not having the right attitudes towards you, you know, or hearing lots of negative stereotypes about disability and not even the way people necessarily talk to you about your disability. Cause I think a lot of people wouldn't be explicitly, you know, negative to you to your face, but at sometimes hearing how they talk about other people has just the

same impact. So being in a meeting, you know, from personal experience where our manager said to me in confidence, you know, I don't tell anyone this, but yeah, it's really tough having this other employee because we have to make all these adjustments and I'm just sat there thinking.

Oh no you could be talking about me right now and my confidence levels just, you know, drop. So it's having that awareness of, it's not just the way people talk to you and about your specific conditions, but it's the way they talk about other people and disability in general as well

Rebecca: [00:20:01] and I think that's an interesting point. You know, saying it was difficult because of the disability. And I know a lot of people have been really pushing for more work from home opportunities for years saying the technology is there Zoom existed before the pandemic, everyone, you know, it existed. So did Microsoft Teams, I worked in Sweden in 2012 when we were doing video conferencing you know with Brazil, from Sweden, you know, that the technology was there. People saying it would be really helpful with my disability if I could maybe do a couple of days a week at home. Cause that would make my life so much easier. I would have fewer flare ups. If I had a bad day, I could just work from home and I can be just as productive from home as I could at the office, just with significantly fewer challenges.

And everyone's like, Oh no, no, it's really important. You have to be here in person. You have to do this. You have to do that. No, we can't give you an accessible bit of tech to have at home, so you can do stuff. And then suddenly the pandemic happens and all of a sudden, this is gonna upset people, the abled community. Suddenly insist on needing to have good work from home things they'll need a fancy chair at home, or they'll need a good microphone, or they're going to need an updated laptop so that it can have Zoom on. And suddenly nothing is too much. And that's brilliant that suddenly nothing is too much and everyone's got accessible software, but also. Why couldn't we have it before if we needed it, or we wanted it, like, it's a bit of a slap in the face and I'm just very worried that post pandemic it's all going to go away.

Dan: [00:21:30] Uh, it w it will all go away whilst people say, we now understand.

And the other one is the, is. People with the 20 pound uplift, to universal credit or in a, and that in itself, but also people saying, and we can't possibly be expected to live on this for all the years that they were never there on the

frontline with us when benefits were cut. It's it's really. It just shows that you were not thought about.

Cat: [00:22:03] Yeah. I say, I agree with that. It's, it's this kind of joy at finally everything opening up and as being able to do things digitally alongside that frustration and anger, that a lot of these things just weren't thought about and considered before, you know, like really having to fight. From working from home, uh, really having to fight for kind of being in digital meetings for instance.

So when I was in my previous job or a previous job, I was allowed some time working at home, but not on the days where we had big meetings and those big meetings are very early in the morning. So, you know, having to deal with a really busy commute and getting up very early. Um, but, but there was no adjustment for anyone wanting to dial into those meetings externally. I think other companies do that and have done that for a while, but certainly where I worked, I had to, there was no consideration of, well, how can we adjust that? You know, some people being there and passing some people being that digitally, can we make that work?

And they could, they just, they just didn't because they weren't used to it. So it's quite nice that workplace practices are changing because of the pandemic that, yeah. I also have this fear, that things are just going to completely go back to the way they were. And people are going to pretend that they sort of understand what disabled people are going through and what they need.

But yeah, we're not going to have the same kind of access that we have right now.

Rebecca: [00:23:19] I, I, I have a chronic illness that flares up quite frequently. It's very annoying, but it's incurable, you know, it's with me forever. So I frequently have a week where I can't like leave my house, let alone, get out of bed. And that's fine. That's normal for me. I have great sympathy with people who have significantly worse chronic conditions, where three out of the four weeks in a month, they can't leave that house. You know, I have a fairly light level you know, where I consider myself reasonably lucky in the way that in not being able to go and do stuff I'm only affected like a quarter of the time, as opposed to all of it.

And it's very frustrating seeing people very early on in the pandemic, I think after about a month. When people were saying, Oh, I can't, I can't live like this. You know, I can't go anywhere. It's been three weeks and I'm, I'm sitting there going, this is what people's lives are like, you know, on a day-to-day basis.

And it's got worse and worse. And then people suddenly went, Oh no, I really feel for those people with chronic conditions who can't go anywhere. And it's like, yes, but you're still planning for when you can leave your you're going, Oh, I feel for you. But only in this time, knowing full well that. It's temporary.

And that, that temporary nature has had such a devastating effect on so many people's mental health for good reason. Cause it's horrible being trapped in your house because you're ill and you can't move, let alone if you're not ill. And it's that, that sense of sort of entitlement to other people's experiences that you've only experienced passing through.

You know, it's like if you broke an arm and a leg and were in a wheelchair, Oh my God, accessibility is terrible because I can't get this wheelchair anywhere. And then six weeks later, you're out of the wheelchair. And you're like, Oh yes. When I was in my wheelchair, it was terrible. But now your life is fine, you know, it's, it's that sense of not realizing that this is people's lives.

A lot of people's lives. All of the time and that you're just passing through very briefly on other people's constant perennial existence. I think,

Dan: [00:25:17] I think we're seeing that now. And we started again last summer with people's unabashed joy at what they can now do. And it's everyone for whom well no, we can't because this, as you say, this is our life, it really feels, it's almost like a demonstration of that.

That the lack of understanding, it's like, yes, you were just passing through weren't you by, because then now off they're making their plans. They're delighted at all the things they can do again, that, that lots of people can't. Um, and I think to to bring it back to the workplace. One of the things I remember saying in meetings back in last February, March, was what's going to be much harder than what we think about at the start of this is, is how we deal with things.

As restrictions ease because that's when disabled people are going to be left behind. And the reaction was that what it always is at that point, which is yes, yes, yes. We, of course we won't forget. Of course we will take that into

account. And then there's almost an institutional forgetting. It's, there's a, he's a really problematic author, but there's a really wonderful Kundara book, 'The Book of Laughter and Forgetting', which is about institutional forgetting in Cold War Czechoslovakia and how, the way that these promises are made and they're made in all sincerity and then, and then they're just sort of, they disappear on the wind if you come back and say, but you didn't do what you said. It's Oh, it's just not there in people's heads. Of course, we, of course we do. We sense we take it seriously and we are taking, and yet I don't know any better way of putting it.

Other than that, as we come out of restrictions, the fact that people are being left behind and furlough has been a really good example of. Of how income gaps, for example, and accessibility gaps have been exacerbated. Um, the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute had an income gap survey last year, which showed what we know that if you've got anxiety or depression, you'll learn 68 p in the pound for people who don't.

And a lot of workplaces have made loads of stuff available to anyone who's on furlough. Or to anyone who has to work from home during the pandemic. Um, so there'd been all sorts of training opportunities, all sorts of acting up opportunities, but if you're disabled, you can't take those opportunities. So it's basically been an accelerator for abled people's CVs to run away from us. And to it mean that two, three years down the line, when everyone's applying for jobs, their CVs are going to look so much better than ours. So that's how income gaps and that's how long-term career differences get perpetuated.

Rebecca: [00:28:11] Yeah, it's it's again, I think it's that people not empathizing and thinking outside of themselves and thinking, this is a great idea. Does it cover everyone or do they just go, what a brilliant idea let's run with this instead of sort of thinking it all the way through. And again, back to the thing we said at the beginning. Including the people who it's going to affect in those decisions, because there's plenty of things that, that you could potentially have your disabled people participate in.

If there was so much adjustments that were made, if they took a little bit more time to sort it so that they could participate, that they haven't even considered. And then as that disabled person in that organization, are you going to feel the confident enough to speak up and say, I'd really like to do this, but you haven't made it accessible.

Especially in a time when they're like, we're pushing accessibility, everyone's working from home, we're doing all of this. People feel bad about asking for more. And I think that goes back to Dan's thing like you shouldn't be grateful for people just being decent human beings. You know, that should be a base

Dan: [00:29:16] and, and I think we, we we've, we've all had the answer during this don't, you know, there's a pandemic on .Emergency. So emergency times call for emergency measures. Therefore we have to ditch niceties. Accessibility has been seen as a nicety and because we're now in emergency times, we can get, we don't have to think about that.

It's as though people will think the equality act has been suspended because we're now in emergency times. And I know that. If Liz Truss had her way, it will be got rid of, and I'm not sure that I'm confident that we will have an equality act by the time of the next election, but we do at the moment. So yeah, we, it should be a matter of course still. Yeah.

Cat: [00:29:53] Yeah. So agreed. And I think, you know, back to what we were saying a little bit earlier about people having this experience of being shut inside and not being able to go out and being able to, you know, having limited interactions with other people, they now think they understand what it's like to have a disability and Rebecca you were saying about how it you know, it's a temporary thing. And it's a, it's a very different thing. When you know, this is your life forever. You have to adjust your life forever in this way. And that can be really difficult and that can have a lot of grief involved with it. But I think there's also something that people forget about going through the pandemic right now and being shut in at home is a really collective experience.

So people feel a lot more empathy for each other. You know, I understand this is a difficult time. I understand it's hard to be at home cause I'm feeling that too, but that empathy doesn't exist. And I think, well, that is something that I will struggle with. Empathy, not really existing after we moved back to normal back towards normal.

If that happens, not understanding that individuals are still going through that, even though collectively we're not anymore. And the other thing that gets missed a lot at the time, you know, people say, Oh, I understand what it's like now to be at home, blah, blah, blah. But with disability, that being kept at home and not being able to go out also as accompanied by sometimes a lot

of pain and a lot of like really awful things like, you know, feeling really unwell, not being able to do much in general.

And that's often forgotten in the conversation too, you know, it's not just that we can't go out as often or can't do things as often. It's also that we're in a lot of pain and that's a struggle that is forgotten about there

Rebecca: [00:31:23] too.

Yeah. And that I think comes into the workplace setups and accommodations that can be made. So like you say, can't, you know, the, the chance to work from home half of your week, it doesn't impact your productivity. Doesn't impact the quality of your work. It only impacts. Sort of people not thinking you're working and that already as, as a disabled person, people already think you're not going to be working as well as other people.

And it's like, I can work better from home because if I need to get out of bed, when I'm having a flare up, my desk is like three feet away. I can do that. I can't get in my car, drive to the station, get on a train and walk across London. I can't do that on a flare up day. So I'll have to use a sick day, which is fine, cause I'm fully for using sick days, but I'm going to need more sick days because I get flare ups or for a chronic condition.

That means I can't get out of bed, but I could probably get out of bed and get in my chair and work from home. So there's that strange sort of twistedness. For a lot of disabled people who could work more and more productively and better from home because they're not wasting their energy on a bad day, doing a load of traveling, getting somewhere.

Like you say, getting someone from eating really early in the morning, which for some people is so hard regardless of what kind of disability you've got, that can be ridiculously hard. Or if being out in public creates a lot of stress for you. You can do it, but it would be easier if you didn't have to, but you can.

And people saying you have to do this every single day because we prefer it is it's that kind of that attitude. I think that that's very stressful in a workplace setup where it would be so easy to say, yeah, just work from home three days a week. And it's not a problem. Right.

Cat: [00:33:13] And I think that's one really good thing from the pandemic is that people recognize working from home you can do more and it's not for

everyone. Some people don't feel as productive at home, but you're not messing about being lazy. You can actually be more productive because you don't have that commute. And I'm seeing a lot of people obviously talking about concentrating less during pandemic and not being able to work as much, which is you know, I think a very common thing, but for me I'm being so much more productive because I don't have to get up at a certain time. I don't have to use public transport. So I am kind of desperately trying to do as much work as I can. Now, knowing that in a few months time, things will go back to normal and I'm going to have to give a big chunk of energy towards traveling and getting up at certain times.

And I think that's another thing people forget about accessibility. It helps disabled people, but it also helps everyone. So it's that idea, you know, wide pavements and ramps helping wheelchair users, but also people with push chairs, or people have temporary illnesses and flexibility at work helps everyone.

You know, I think everyone works better at different times of the day. For instance, why do we have a nine to five still? Why do we need one? Put meetings if you need them right in the middle of the day. And otherwise, let people start to finish when they need to. Now maybe people have young children need to work maybe really early in the morning and not so much in the evenings.

Why aren't we at the place where we are all able to adjust our work around our lives? You know, it feels crazy that we're, that this aren't working and we're not adjusting our work-life balance properly still. I think everyone wants more of that and that's not just for disabled people.

Dan: [00:34:50] That sounds like a I'd really I'd like to ask Cat about publishing because that's feels like a, it feels like it's got a lot to say about that as an issue because one of the real problems with publishing in both America and in the UK before the pandemic was the fact that it was its problems are so intersectional. And one of those intersections is around class and geography. It was a big publishing in America, had to be in New York, publishing in the UK, had to be in London.

And if you even suggested change or remote working, you were told that publi publishing was just one of those industries that had to be like that because you have to do lunches. And that seemed literally to be the, the, the

rationale, um, is there is, there are just some industries that are like that because you have to do lunches and you have to do those things in person. And I love to know if Cat thinks that that is going to whole industries are going to change as a result of realizing that you don't have to, or whether you think they will actually become more entrenched.

Cat: [00:35:56] Oh, that's such a hard question. I think I hope they will change. Um, yeah, that, that kind of, um, assumption is definitely, really widespread. Certainly from my time working in publishing, it is all about networking. Who sees you, who knows what you're doing? Who knows what you're up to? It's all about for me, I was a publicist. So it was about taking journalists from lunches and breakfast, you know, but it's also for editors taking agents out for lunches.

So it's all about having these relationships. And I think historically that was never done, but actually really, unless you were talking to someone abroad, perhaps it's always kind of prioritized, it'd be in person interaction in terms of the future. I don't know. I think it always comes back to the people in power who are making the decisions and what they think is good for the company and their kind of limited view of the world.

Because I think certainly when I worked in publishing, I heard about senior people's priorities and opinions on things. And they were very against working from home. They didn't think it was good. They wanted a kind of a workplace office culture, and they were also very against having offices or having kind of quiet spaces you could go to. So we have these big, really open plan offices that are meant to be really collaborative, but they're incredibly noisy and there's a lot of like stimulation going on that that's not good for everyone. So I think it really requires people high up in senior positions to recognize that change is needed and that different working conditions are better for different people. And I just, I don't, I don't know exactly how we can put pressure on the people in power to make change.

Dan: [00:37:41] Yeah. And that that's something we we've had in Oxford it's communications that come out from senior people who are trying to sound empathetic show where they start with things that this is terrible. I'm so looking forward to when I can have six people in my garden or, um, things that show, they lead the kind of lifestyle where the problem with jobs like publishing and the problem with jobs like administration at universities is that

the places you work, you can't afford to be. So therefore they become. There becomes an economic class divide because you just can't afford to work in those places because the rent is too high and senior people don't have high rents or can afford to pay high rents. So those just aren't issues for them. And I don't think it even occurs to them. They know it's a problem on paper, but I think that's sort of a level of empathy that they still, they still lack.

And I think as you say, until, until we can put pressure on them to do the right thing, do the right thing without understanding it. I think this is something that we come across with disability activism that a lot is sometimes you have to believe us. You don't understand what we're saying. You think that what we're saying is absolutely ridiculous.

Like you were saying, Rebecca, with not being able to open the doors and I have this with, with not being able to use the telephone. We know it sounds ridiculous, but believe us, even though don't don't, don't ask us why constantly don't don't try and understand. Just accept.

Cat: [00:39:11] Yeah, that's so important. Isn't it? And just for me, it's, it's always as well that that stereotype of laziness, like saying you can't do something or that, you know, you're not physically capable of it. People just assuming that you're lazy and you're not willing to work hard when in fact you have to work really hard every day, just to do the same things that other people do. I find that really frustrating, but yeah, that kind of idea of. Really listening to disable people and respecting them. That's crucial.

Rebecca: [00:39:40] That kind of leads in nicely to the idea of accessible job applications, where, like you say, Cat, it's a lot of work for us, a lot of people to just do what everyone else does. Ordinarily, like Dan said, right at the beginning, when he defined accessibility in like eight words, it was amazing. The idea on a job application, a lot of them are now you have to fill out form online, as opposed to just sending someone your CV and a covering letter, which is quite easy because you've spent your time you've made your CV, you've done your covering letter. You email it to someone. Done. Now it's a lot of forms and you have to often create accounts to log in to these places with recruitment agencies in order to even send the stupid form, then you get to the form and you start filling out the form and it wants all your details.

You'd like this is already on my CV. This is, this is really annoying and you fill it out and you get through like the third page and there's suddenly. Declaring

disabilities. You're like, Oh, how fantastic. They're telling me to declare my disability and you click it. And it's a dropdown and you can pick, and it's not even a very long list. It's like eight things that you're allowed to have. And you can have one of those things. I have two of these things, and then you go, well, being really cynical, they're asking this because it's part of their inclusivity. You know, because they need to have a certain number of, of these people included as part of their workforce. And you go, well, is it going to do me better to do, I've got a chronic life impacting illness or do I go well, I've got a mental illness, which one's going to tick the box better that means I'm going to get through to the next phase. And then you sit there going, why am I having to pick between disabilities my own discipline in order to try and work the system, to get me an interview at which I'm going to have to tell them about the other one, because both of them impact my life and how I do my work.

And by that point I often give up because I'm like, if this is like the third page, what's the fourth page going to be, how many pages I have to fill out the stupid check boxes. I have to write all this stuff in order for them to probably not pay any attention to it. And probably just dumped my CV anyway, because I've missed a key word for them, or actually they filled their quota of disabled people and I'm a disabled person and we've already got our three people in our company we don't need anymore, but of all of them, I mean, I don't think that's what happens, but as a person who's filling out one of those forms, it kind of feels a bit like that with all the stupid drop-downs it's, it's just, it makes it so hard to even apply for a job, let alone declare a disability and.

It used to be much easier, you know, send your CV and covering that to this email address, which was much more, I personally think -I may be wrong, I feel that's more inclusive than having pages and pages of forms for people to fill out. Especially if digital literacy isn't high on your list of skills, and maybe you're applying for a job that doesn't require any digital literacy that's shutting you out of a whole number of people that would be amazing at your job, but you've made it impossible for them to apply. Which drives me mad.

Dan: [00:42:41] Literally about being able to produce a single PDF pack for the selection panel. And I think, yeah, disengagement is what you brought up there. A lot of us just disengage at that point because it's just too hard and that this is another of my pet beefs with, with recruiters when people want us, how can we do recruitment better?

I know what let's find all the disabled people in our organization and ask them what they found hard about recruitment and I try and say no that's not your constituency. Your constituency is all the people who didn't apply. Oh no, that's just too hard. And it's stop pretending you want to improve your recruitment process then, and admit that you don't care enough to try.

We'd have to find out what's stopping people applying, not from the people who already managed to get through the hoops somehow.

Cat: [00:43:31] Yeah, I think it's, it's really complex as well, because, you know, in the first time the sort of things we've been talking about about just making forms, accessible, making sure that the right kind of drop-downs, that's kind of the basic level, isn't it.

And then I think we get to another level where it's around kind of the wording and job apps even, and how off-putting that can be. I think, you know, when I worked at Penguin, we were starting work on that thinking about people from working class backgrounds, coming into the industry or people who weren't, you know, from London, et cetera.

And. They approach the job ad and the thing, think about how it relates to them, but it's kind of words like fast paced environment, high pressure words like that can be really off putting to people if they don't quite know what you mean by that. So I think, you know, thinking about the wording really carefully and how that might come across.

You know, sometimes it is a requirement and you have to include it because it's important. Um, and you have to sort of warn people. That's what this job includes is a very fast paced job but you have to think is that absolutely necessary to include, and there are other examples. For instance, they're needing to drive a car. That's often on a job advert as a, as a requirement, but there's no detail on where you're going to have drive. Like, why are you going to need a car? They just, sometimes it just sort of seems a bit arbitrary for me. Once I was applying for a digital marketing job. And then on the job ad, it said heavy lifting required and I thought, what?! And I found out later, anyway, I found out it was because they wanted to print leaflets and have someone to drive them to events so you have to drive and you have to be able to lift heavy boxes of leaflets but of course that shouldn't really be a requirement for a digital marketing job so that there was an idea there, but you just excluding less people because they're not going to be able to physically do that.

Or a job that I had once where they asked to kind of bring a laptop into the office cause they didn't have a computer available. I can't carry a laptop to an office on public transport. It's physically not possible for me. And so all these kinds of requirements. I think being really clear on what you actually really need, because you're going to put people off if you include that in a job ad and it's not actually that important

Dan: [00:45:42] and it goes with things like enthusiasm and team playing and things that will fit for near a divergent people would be really, really hard. And it was still until, until a couple of weeks ago, it was still on the Oxford University's training for recruitment panelists that they should pay really good attention to, to positive eye contact and a good handshake and things like this that are just

Laughs

Rebecca: [00:46:11] on such a ridiculous and arbitrary basis as well. At what point does eye contact mean you're going to be good at doing your job. Like,

Cat: [00:46:21] Yeah. Yeah.

Dan: [00:46:22] Laughs

Cat: [00:46:22] That's just so publishing as well. You know, like Dan was saying earlier about that kind of like meeting people even if you're not in a kind of public facing or people facing role, there is an expectation that you're still good at socializing and that you're good at talking to other people.

That's not always important for every role. And there is, I think just a general assumption in interviews that body language, eye contact, and being able to express enthusiasm and passion that old counts more than a lot of other things. I've seen interviews where the person who was enthusiastic got the job over the person who had better qualifications or had a kind of, you know, more appropriate history. That those things are really prioritized and that, that really disadvantages a lot of people.

Dan: [00:47:08] I think qualifications as well we need to be careful with. It's been the default for a long time too, to just say a certain grade of job you're required O Levels or GCSE is I should say shouldn't age myself, certain type of job you require an Undergraduate degree, a certain type of job of you require a Master's degree and until you're confident that that all groups are equally

represented in those qualifications. That's, it's like the dictionary definition of indirect discrimination to require qualifications that some people find harder to get than others, even though they might be able to do the actual job. And that's, that's what Cat said about what do you actually need this person to do? And can they do it? Not what proxies they might have for it.

Cat: [00:47:50] Yeah. And that also, it just makes me think about CV gaps, which drives me, just, argh! Asking people, why is there a gap in your CV? I just feel like let's get rid of that question and never ask anyone that ever again, because you will, you'll making them reveal something personal. And that, you know, if you, as the person answering that question says, Oh no, I'm not comfortable answering that. That does. That makes it look like it's something really bad. And then you don't know but then I have to disclose a disability or a time I was in hospital. And then that just gets very complicated. So I would personally just love to get rid of that question altogether. Just make it not an issue.

Dan: [00:48:29] I mean, we, we, we have, that's one of the few things at Oxford we, we, we have gotten rid of that. I hope certainly. Certainly anyway, where I am, the people who've had that people that had some, some rather askance looks for asking, but it does, you still get it in academia with publications and we've, we've all been through the REF recently and people being hired because they are because they are REFable because they're publications list and it's something I've come across is once you are in a post, they will, adjustments can be made for the fact that your, your publication list might not look perfect. But if you're going into an interview where the requirement is for your publications to be then used as a metric in the REF. You then again, you're having to disclose at an early stage that you might not be comfortable with why that might be in order to get something that if they were to just give you the job would be given to you as a matter of course. And that's the questions about when we disclose and when we're, we're able to give this personal information that, that you're not asking about anyone else, that that's what it comes back to again.

No one else in this interview is having to say intimate details about their personal medical history. And yet we are in order to gain the same access.

Rebecca: [00:49:46] the I mean, my, my normal day job, which is not very busy at the minute, because there's a pandemic. I work in the equestrian industry.

I'm a, I'm a freelance coach, rider, sometimes groom, if I can be bothered these days, which I can't cause I'm old now and it hurts.

But, uh, I find the equestrian industry it's very, very good on the accessibility front for people who are interested in horses, the amount of apprentices that I've taught that have had a variety of disabilities. That mean that they are actually really good at doing their job. Or maybe they're just a bit slower, but you know what, they're doing that job. It's fine. They're like, can you muck out? No, we'll teach you. You don't need any qualifications to the point that now, if people go to college and they have a college qualification for a horse job, a lot of people don't want them because they're not actually very good because it's mental as opposed to practical experience.

And they'd rather have the 17 year old apprentice who's learning on the job than the 17 year old who started college. Who's learning how to muck out stable from a textbook. And the idea that I've yet to see a job where having a disability impacts at all. The number of grooms that I know who don't ride because they've got a bad back. They've got bad hips that they don't ride there's like, that's fine. We'll just get a rider as well as a groom. It's like we love you for this job. We think you'd make a great Head Girl, be our Head Girl. Yeah. You don't ride doesn't matter. We can, if we can find another rider, you know, or just the fact that there's a variety of neurodivergent people who I've, I've worked with and who I have coached as apprentices who are so good at the job, you just have to know where their neurodivergency so that when you give tasks, you make sure that you're specific.

There's an amazing girl at a dressage yard who was fantastic if she knew exactly what she was doing. So you said, I want you to muck out this horse, this horse, this horse, and this horse, and do their waters and empty their feed buckets. And come get me if you have you finished before anyone else. And I've never seen such beautifully mucked out stables in my life at speed, you know, better, to be honest than a lot of the other girls who were kind of just dassing around because a lot of people do that when you're 16. I mean, if you don't have to why, but it's, it's just being told as someone going in as a cover of a Head Girl, That she's autistic and she's fantastic. Just make sure you give her really good instructions and really clear instructions. You won't have a single problem. And so I went sure this, this, this brilliant, no problems for the whole month that I covered there, she was fantastic to work with. And there's

literally no reason why she couldn't have that job, but if you move that into a supermarket role or a distribution role, how well is that going to go?

Cause everyone's going to go. Oh, neurodivergent Oh, that makes them hard to work with. Ooh. Whereas we're more focused on that horse is really difficult. You have to lead on the wrong side and you have to put this head collar on it otherwise it's really stupid. Horse people don't care. You know, like in a really positive kind of way, you're like, we're so used to dealing with difficult, weird horses that this one only eats out of a blue bucket because it's weird. It's fine. It needs to eat. It gets the blue bucket. You know, we, we, I feel like the equestrian industry has the mentality that accessibility and inclusivity you do it because why would you not do it? Which I, I want more in all the other roles, you know?

Dan: [00:53:03] It's really interesting that the banking industry as another one, that I would never have pegged for this, that there's actually really, really good at it. Not necessarily with their customers, but within their workforce. And you would never think that. And being, having sat on really senior committees where there are members of the medical community and members of the, the regulatory groups that includes companies like Wonga and the representative from Wonga shows more empathy for disabled people than the senior representative of the British Medical Association. No, this is just wrong. Somehow it plays with your head. Um, But, yeah, so you can find pockets of excellence in places you really don't expect it. And I think that that's something that we can take away and, and, and try and learn from.

Cat: [00:53:57] Yeah so it's more about kind of attitudes and what plays culture and adjusting, adjusting those, which can be a challenge when they're really widespread. And I think that is a problem in publishing really it's that, you know, having time and space to be able to sort of adjust things and do things a bit differently, just isn't that possible. When everyone is so busy and so stressed out. And so overworked working really, really long hours and exhausted, it's just, it's hard to then go to that person and say, Oh, I need you to take a bit of time and you know, adjust how you're doing things a little bit for this person and it's just, it doesn't feel possible to them. So this is the, I think there's lots of things around workplace culture in general that needs to change to, to help everyone, but especially disabled people.

Rebecca: [00:54:43] Yeah. We've, we've come to the end of our lovely time.

Cat: [00:54:46] Wow. That was fast.

Rebecca: [00:54:48] I know! I just looked at the time. This has been fabulous and thank you so much for coming on. It's been fabulous.

Dan: [00:54:58] Thank you

Rebecca: [00:55:00] Our time absolutely flew by when we recorded this. And we had so much to talk about before and after the recording that we've decided that there will be a part two of this later on in the year.

I hope you found it really interesting. And please chat with us on Twitter. I'll pop Cat, Dan, my own personal, as well as the, @ Shelf Healing Twitter accounts in links in the show notes where we would absolutely love to chat with you about this on Twitter this week next week, whenever you'd like Cat has got her really interesting research project on disability in publishing.

Dan is always doing fantastic advocacy work across his many platforms. We'd love to hear your thoughts about this such an important topic, that combination of accessibility and disability. I hope you've enjoyed listening to this episode. I hope it's been interesting and thought provoking. I'll be back in a couple of weeks with another Work and Life episode

So until then, thanks to you, Nicholas Patrick, from music and to Lukas Montgomery for our transcripts, I'll be back in two weeks.