



Episode #: 06 **Title:** Inclusion Lessons from an ex-Imagineer

Guest: Richard J. Streitz

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Debra: Hello, this is Debra, Ruh, and you're listening to Human Potential at Work. Today, I have a guest, and his name is Richard J. Streitz, and he is the Chief Operating Officer for Ruh Global Communications.

Richard, thank you so much for joining us today.

Richard: Thank you very much. It's great to be here, Debra.

Debra: So Richard, I know you joined my firm as my partner, about four or five months ago, even though we've worked together for years on various projects. And so, I want you to just take a few minutes to talk about your background and why you joined Ruh Global Communications.

Richard: Well, thank you. Yes, it certainly has been a number of years since working together, and it's wonderful now to be partnering with you on a day-to-day basis with your company. Yeah, my background is a little unusual and a little untraditional for, I think, most people that come into this space. Of course, as you know, my initial background was with the entertainment industry primarily, with live theater and some film production. And then from there, shortly after getting invited to join Walt Disney Imagineering, the think tank for the Walt Disney Company.

And it was really at that point where I started becoming very cognizant of the challenges and the design opportunities that exist, with creating built environments that really level a playing field in a way that all individuals can truly have the same sort of experience, regardless of their varying ability. It was through that process that I really started becoming very aware of the challenge that is, for many people who don't have the opportunity to visit many of the Disney parks, to which I had the good fortune to help design and create and construct. So it was through that process that I really started having a heightened awareness and a very fond notion of getting more and more involved.

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK Host - Debra Ruh

And so, through that process, I ultimately ended up working on some other projects where I pulled you into, which a big project in Costa Rica, a large development project out there, and through that I ended up being called back to you.

Debra: And the project that you're mentioning in Costa Rica, I was really fascinated by that project. It was a project that ultimately it didn't get funded, which was a shame because I know it took many, many years, but the entire project was going to be fully inclusive of all of us. It was going to make sure that the design included a design that worked for people of all abilities, people that are aging, people with disabilities, people of different descents, people that speak different languages. It was going to include everybody. It also wanted to make sure that the technology was accessible and wanted to make sure that there were employment opportunities for everybody, but real specifically, for people with disabilities. And there were all kind of entrepreneurial opportunities for people with disabilities, too.

I remember at the time I didn't really have at a term, but you almost were creating a smart city out there, because you were creating hotels. Could we really create a community, a city, a huge workforce, a small workforce, that really, truly includes people with disabilities as well as everybody else? Is that the future of work, Richard?

Richard: I believe so, and with the challenge that we had getting into that property, it was a large 2,200-acre land that was available to us, and as you know, we were creating truly a city. 2,200 homes, 7 full resorts, a theme park, a water park, commercial with restaurants and shopping. It was really designed to be a model, where we could really embrace the concept, which was just starting to become of its own, of universal design, incorporating all the principles and practices behind making truly a universal environment.

It was through that goal that was really driving the entire project. We were looking for that project in Costa Rica to be really the first truly built from the ground up, incorporating all of these universal design principles and practices.

We had a lot of big players involved that were behind. Anyone we talked to got really excited about the opportunity to be able to be part of it and to join it. Incorporating into that, one of the -- what was the technology? Technology played a huge, huge role in being able to allow way finding, for example, which was a huge, huge part of it, for blind individuals or mobility-challenged individuals, to be able to really, truly have a universal access throughout all the elements of the park, be it locomotion or travel and transport.

So we were incorporating a lot of new technology at the time. Now mind you, this was about six or seven years ago. Some of it is a little more commonplace now than it was back then, but nonetheless, the innovation of moving forward

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK Host - Debra Ruh

with trying to incorporate these built environments that were truly technologically advanced, providing opportunity for everyone that was visiting, whether it was individuals with disability themselves, or their caregivers, as well as the seniors, which of course is always very important.

Debra: Richard, let me ask you a question. One thing that I was fascinated with as we were working on this project, and a lot of the things that you learned being an imagineer, which by the way I would love to be an imagineer, I guess not everybody gets to be an imagineer, so I'm always very impressed that you actually built the Animal Kingdom and was it -- which parks were you involved with? Then I'm going to get back to my question.

Richard: The parks that I was involved with were the final phases of Studio Tours in Walt Disney World, Euro Disney over in Paris, then there was Animal Kingdom, which was back in Walt Disney World in Florida, and then the final project, the large project I worked with from the ground up, was in Tokyo with the Tokyo DisneySea Project.

Debra: That's so cool. We are big consumers of Disney theme parks. I remember my daughter, Sara Ruh, and my husband, Ed, one of their favorite rides, which by the way I will not do, is Tower of Terror, which I think you also were involved in creating, right?

Richard: Yes, that's correct. I was one of the original team members for that project, working not certainly by myself but with an incredibly talented group of individuals, of designers and engineers, and creating that project was a tremendous amount of fun, working with Otis Elevator, which helped devise the system, and really sort of pushing them to push themselves to be able to create that incredible ride experience.

Debra: Yeah, I'm a chicken with stuff like that. But my risk taking is being an entrepreneur, I figure. But okay, so the point I wanted to ask you about. I remember working with you on the project in Costa Rica, which I just thought about, was that you said that through the past experience of the large projects that you'd created, you have to think about inclusion from a really broad perspective. Mutli-generational. People want to travel with their children and with their parents and with their aunts and their uncles.

How do you really make sure that something with all those moving parts, which of course could also be a corporation, trying to make sure that people with disabilities are included in the workforce and that their customers have all the access they need, how in the world do you get your hands around something that is that big, with so many moving parts? Of course, I know part of it is going to be building it into the process, but how do you do that, Richard?

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK Host - Debra Ruh

Richard: Well, it is certainly a daunting challenge, when taken at face value. But one of the great things about working on a larger project and having the experience of doing that, and anyone who's worked on large projects, it takes a little bit at a time and you really take it one step. You break it down. In dealing with multi-generational environments when you have from a 5 year old to 105 year old, the key is to making, first of all, the material itself, the show material, having to do with the story. You work a story out that is attractive to everyone and has elements that can be related to all the various different generations that would be coming through and experiencing.

After the story, then comes the environment itself, where you really layer the experience. Everything from lighting and the film, if it's an entertainment piece, or if it's an environment with dialogue that there's actors involved, or the ride itself. That's sort of at one surface.

The next layer is sort of the sensory experience that can range anywhere from smell to the audio to the tactile, what you feel, A, when you're sitting in a vehicle, a ride vehicle, physically all around you, the senses on your back and on your rear and the back of your legs. Multi-sensory theaters now become what they refer to as 4 or 5D theaters, have become really, really important in a lot of themed environments.

It's because of adding all of those layers, now takes it beyond just to be able just to see something or to hear something. Given one of those senses being removed out of the equation, you still have three or four other senses that are still involved in the overall entertainment experience, and that's what really sort of levels the playing field and gets all those individuals, regardless of their age and/or ability, to really be engaged in the entertainment and show experience.

Debra: You know what, Richard, when you were telling that story, I remembered when my kids were little, we lived in Jacksonville, Florida at the time, and we went to Disney World, and we went to -- and I'm going to forget which ride it was -- the ants, the Bugs Life or something, and we quite frankly were shocked when all of a sudden it felt like bugs were crawling up our behinds, our backs and our legs. At first, the kids were sort of freaked out, but probably not more freaked out than me, but it was really incredible. We were shocked and then delighted by it, so I assume that's some of the things you're talking about.

Richard: Yes, exactly. It was A Bug's Life, which we have one of those attractions in almost all of the parks, I believe now, around the world. One of our more popular attractions. And I think specifically because of that. It really sort of appeals to all individuals, because of the sensory elements that are added to it. There's a back of the leg tickler, the rump bumps that are engaged in the seat, mechanisms in the seat themselves, there's air puffs, there's smells. And then the visuals, with the lighting and so forth, and then the animated film with the dialogue. All of those components together really create a very, very powerful experience, and again,

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK Host - Debra Ruh

immaterial of the fact that if you're missing one or two of those senses there's still plenty in the show environment to really make up for it and really make it an enjoyable experience.

Debra: So really, that's where the innovation is. We know that we're already designing smart cities, driverless cars, internet of things, robotics. You've been working on robotics for years. My book, *Uncovering Hidden Capital*, certainly talks about this from an employer's perspective. What does an employer need to do to really include people with disabilities in a meaningful way in the workforce? Disney is a good example of that. I remember interviewing Disney, and you can probably speak more to this, but Jay Cardinali, who was who I talked to about this, had told me that Disney really believes that their employees -- or excuse me, they don't have employees; they have cast members. And they don't have customers; they have guests, and all guests should get to experience the magical experience. And I'm speaking as a guest with that, but I always thought that was a cool part of Disney.

But one thing he told me was that it was important to Disney that their cast, or employees, really looked like their guests, or some of us call us customers. I thought that was -- well, it made a lot of sense to me. Who better to know what your guests need than cast members that speak different languages, might have different abilities, are different ages?

Do you want to talk to that? Because I think that's a powerful part of this conversation.

Richard: Familiarity is certainly always a very, very important part when you're dealing with the human condition and the human interracial experience. And so as a result, it is something of a hallmark that weaves throughout the entire Disney Corporation, and with all its various divisions, and specifically of course the theme park division.

That level of familiarity, when you walk up or approach someone and you realize that, A, they're from the same nationality or they speak the same language, there's a level of comfort with that. We naturally tend to be attracted to individuals who are very similar to ourselves. And that's not necessarily a negative thing and that's not meant to create a racist feeling or anything. It's just who we are as the human animal. We are just naturally attracted to things that are similar to us. We feel more comfortable.

So given that, Walt in his infinite wisdom many years ago, sort of realized and understood that, and as such, especially in our more international parks like the parks in Florida and the parks overseas that we have, that's very important that the individuals -- all the cast members need to speak a minimum of three different languages, usually the three most popular that are typical for that region, and hire

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK Host - Debra Ruh

multi-national individuals from all over the world, to really sort of help bridge that gap, and again, bring that level of comfort.

And this carries over, not just only in the themed environment, but this is some of the tools that I bring and share in this environment, when we're talking to some of the corporate organizations that we're dealing with. Some of the Fortune 100 and Fortune 500 companies, having this dialogue. It's important for them to understand, sort of, the level above just hiring people and filling job positions. That in creating a corporate culture that really creates an environment where these individuals can really be nurtured and grow, in a very organic way and a comfortable way that is natural and true to whatever the corporate environment is.

Debra: So Richard, you've worked with very, very large, obviously, projects, multi-national corporations. What do we do to truly, truly include people with disabilities. I often say that disabilities is just part of life. Just because you have a disability doesn't mean you're broken. We all have abilities; we all have disabilities. Some of us are born with it, like Sara, my daughter with Down Syndrome, but she's not broken. She might do things differently. It might take her longer to learn something. I will tell you, once she learns it though, she's got it. She's got it down.

But what do we do as employers or corporations, to really making sure that we're tapping into the abilities? And another thing that I think is important in these conversations are many people that -- especially people that acquire disabilities later in life, which is about 80 percent of the disability population, they've learned to become problem solvers, because often our world is not accessible. Many people have invisible disabilities, that maybe they're not talking about, and they need accommodations that would actually help them be more productive.

But what can we do to really change corporations, employers' minds, about really tapping into a more diverse workforce, not because of compliance but because you want to have a more talented workforce, and of course retain a talented workforce, too?

Richard: Exactly. I think a lot of it is through awareness and education. At a lot of the C offices of these organizations, as well as through their HR initially and then spread throughout the rest of the company with, again, awareness and training, I think it's important for there to be sort of a paradigm shift as to how organizations think about dealing with individuals with disabilities into their workforce. Because as you stated, I think oftentimes, as organizations are caught or companies are caught into the trap of really just satisfying an ADA checkbox that satisfies the legal requirement and they consider that to be done, what's more critical is to recognize the possibility of what an individual brings to the table, and look at it from almost an ability superpower that they have, that may be different from normal or able-bodied individuals.

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK Host - Debra Ruh

And so to that end, there are heightened senses which become very much fine-tuned and more suitable for a lot of work that can happen, than individuals who don't. So for example, individuals who may have impaired vision, have a much keener sense of not only feeling in a tactile sense, but also in hearing. And so those individuals have -- that heightened sense can be used and leveraged in a way that may make them more efficient for some jobs. Autistic individuals, oftentimes, their brain works in a way that may not necessarily be typical to what we call normal individuals, but in their thinking, they're oftentimes very precise with what they see and what they observe, and the ability to replicate consistently, really sort of makes them perfectly suited for doing Q/A type of positions, quality assurance positions, where they're looking at either a text, an engineering part or schematics, and being able to really identify, with an extremely high level of accuracy, really puts them perfect for those sorts of positions.

So I think it's a matter of just looking at individuals and looking at what skills or what superpowers they'd bring to the table, and leveraging that for the positions that become available in the workforce. And it's sort of changing that overall concept. Really a paradigm shift on how we think about bringing these individuals -- they really truly are the hidden capital, the hidden human capital that's sitting on the sidelines right now, that desperately wants to be part and an active part of society.

Debra: Yeah, and it's interesting, you use the word normal, and as a parent of a child with an intellectual disability, I always hated to think she wasn't normal, because she is normal. But I think it's very important for us to redefine what normal means, because a person that has autism, it doesn't mean that they're not normal, it just means that they use their brain differently. And quite honestly, that's a real value to society, and certainly to the workforce, as you noted.

I know there's some really, really interesting programs that corporations, multi-national corporations like SAP, AT&T in the United States, Freddie Mac in the United States, Compu-Aid, I believe, or Vodafone in Europe, they have done some really, really interesting programs, employing a lot of people with autism, in testing, quality assurance, quality control, programmers. They found that a lot of people with autism are natural, very talented at STEM, science, technology, engineering and math. Well, obviously those are the kinds of employees we really want.

So really getting outside of the box that we've all created as society, and really tapping into peoples' abilities, and I like what you were saying, their superpowers, because we all have superpowers. It's the things we love to do the most. Those are our hidden gifts. Sometimes apparent gifts. But I think we have a lot to really look forward to in the world, and I don't know if you want to add anything else. We're definitely going to talk to you more on this program, Richard, you're my business partner and I'm thrilled to have somebody with such a depth of

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK Host - Debra Ruh

knowledge that has actually done this and really been very successful in many major projects and corporations.

Richard: Well, thank you very much, Debra. It was great to be here, and I look forward to continuing this very important discussion, as we go forward.

Debra: Okay, well thank you so much, Richard. And remember, the only disability is not being able to see human potential. Thanks for joining us.