

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh



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Guest: Neil Milliken **Guest Title:** Founder / Co-Host / Head of Accessibility at Atos

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Debra: Hello, this is Debra Ruh, and you're listening to Human Potential at Work. I'm very excited about our guest today. He's a good friend of mine, and he also is my partner on AXSChat. We are featuring Neil Milliken today. He's joining us from the United Kingdom, so across our pond.

So Neil, welcome to the program.

Neil: Hi, Debra, thank you very much for having me. I'm delighted to be able to talk to you today. It's actually sunny here in the U.K., something that's quite unusual, so I'm celebrating that and celebrating being here, talking to you.

Debra: That's right, and you're very close to the sea, the ocean, so you can take a lovely walk on a clear day, by the seashore.

Neil: It's great for clearing the mind.

Debra: It really is. So as I mentioned, Neil is my partner and one of the co-hosts on AXSChat. We hold that every Tuesday at 3 p.m. Eastern Time and 8 p.m. GMT, or U.K. time, and we're one of the world's largest Tweet chats, and we chat about disability inclusion, accessibility and empowerment of people with disabilities, really focusing on abilities. Neil and I have been doing this with Antonio for two and-a-half years, and we just celebrated our billionth Tweet, so it's really exciting. We are the second to the largest global chat in the world, and we're talking about accessibility and disability inclusion. So we're pretty excited about that.

So I wanted to have Neil on the podcast, to really talk about his experience. We really want to talk about who he is as an individual, but also talk about his work in accessibility all over the world. So pretty stoked to have Neil Milliken on the program today.

So Neil, if you don't mind, what I'd like to start with is start with you learning as a child that you had dyslexia, and how did that impact your school and you growing up as a child, and into adulthood, having dyslexia?

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Neil: So my childhood was one of utter denial. I didn't know I was dyslexic. It was something that was in my family. I was a relatively bright student, but confounded people by always doing worse in exams than expected, was considered to be a daydreamer and a dilettante. I went to a good school and I ended up going to Oxford University, and that kind of helped me, actually, but it also helped mask my dyslexia because most of the stuff there, you had one-on-one tutorials. It was a lot of oral work. So effectively, you discussed stuff rather than writing, which played to my strengths. I like talking, as do a lot of people with dyslexia.

I spent a lot of time in denial about it. I really thought that it can't be me, because hey, I've got a degree in English Literature and I can write. But at the same time, there were things that I really struggled with and I didn't really understand why. It took a long time for me to actually think about it quite hard. I had a friend who was a member of the Adult Dyslexia Association in the U.K., Adult Dyslexia Organization, I should say, and he kept telling me, you're dyslexic. I kept going, no I'm not. But you're dyslexic. But where are my keys? My short-term memory is that of a goldfish. There are certain things that I just can't do. My sense of direction, for example, can get lost walking out of my front door.

So things did affect me, but I'd found coping strategies for a lot of stuff, so I guess I sort of muddled through.

Debra: And also, that's the way you were born, so why would you think it was any different from anybody else?

Neil: Well, that's the interesting thing, because I did know there was something different. I did know there was something different. I can remember back in childhood thinking, and having a conversation with my mother saying, I feel different, I can't explain it but people don't think like me. But I mean, I didn't really associate that with dyslexia, because at the time, growing up in the 70s and 80s, dyslexia, most people's perception of it was you can't read, you get your letters wrong, the wrong way around. The kids that were diagnosed with dyslexia in my junior school had terrible prospects. So why would you want to come and talk about it? Why would you want to associate yourself with that group, with that stigma? Which it was at that time.

Debra: Right, and still sometimes is.

Neil: Yeah, I spend my life talking about it, and I actually think that, you know, I talk about it in the same way that you would talk about the Gay Rights Movements, and we want to come out about being dyslexic and being neurodivergent, having a differently wired brain, because we have strengths as well as weaknesses. But it's not something that people have necessarily always talked about or felt

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comfortable about, and we still have a lot of people that are very uncomfortable talking about dyslexia.

So I am very open about being dyslexic now. I accepted my dyslexia after working for a company that was basically delivering solutions for people with dyslexia. And working there for nine years, it was a company in Cambridge called Iansyst, and they design I T systems for people with dyslexia. They provide services that were a big, and still are a big assistive technology supplier. It was too obvious to ignore, so I got myself diagnosed. It was a watershed moment for me. I felt much more comfortable in my own skin, because there had been things where I'd been failing, and I didn't understand why. I now understand where my strengths and weaknesses lie, and I play to my strengths.

And I think that that's something that I would encourage other people to do. So I think it was very cathartic, to actually go through the process. Quite scary at first, but actually cathartic. Basically, after the diagnosis, there were tears of relief, because the areas where I felt I'd failed, even though I'd been quite successfully academically and held down jobs, et cetera, areas where I felt I'd failed, it's not that I had an excuse but had an explanation as to why that was. And that means that I can do something about it and I can address things in my life and I can be comfortable in my own skin.

Debra: So Neil, let's delve into that a little bit more. So was there ever a time in your work life, where your dyslexia, whether you knew about it at the time or not, actually impacted your work performance?

Neil: Yes, yes, there was. So I was working for a company called William Hill, they're a betting company, they're book makers. It was a job I'd taken on really just to pay the rent. I'd sent up my own business running a record label and it wasn't paying the bills but I was passionate about it. And so I needed a job to pay the bills, and I got a job in the local book makers, and they said, well, you're bright. We should put you through the management course, which included bet settling, which is effectively advanced mathematics and algebra, and I kept flunking it. They kept putting me through. It was horrible. I couldn't settle the bets. I'd just get stuff the wrong way around.

Sequencing is my issue. Not so much the transposing of letters, but sequencing is all wrong. So they didn't understand and I didn't, really, at that point understand why I struggled so much. I knew I did struggle. So my potential career as a book maker fell at that hurdle, because of my dyslexia. I'm quite glad that I didn't end up progressing in that career, because I've fallen into what I believe is my calling, so these things happen for a reason. But yes, it stopped me being promoted.

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Debra: And so at the time, when that was happening, and it sort of reminds me of a time I went through something similar, and I remember my reaction to the struggles that I was having in the workforce was I just felt like I was stupid and it just confirmed that I must be stupid, and I sort of really -- it hit my self-esteem. How did you handle that? Especially at the time, did you know why this was happening?

Neil: No.

Debra: So that was before, okay.

Neil: So it was before, and yeah, that affected my self-esteem, it effected my mental health, and that's why I say understanding about dyslexia was cathartic. Because there had been these periods where I couldn't understand why I was failing, because I was working really hard at it, and other people were able to do stuff that I couldn't.

The thing is, I was doing the wrong thing, because there are things that I can do that other people find difficult. So I put myself, unwittingly, in a situation where I was putting myself under pressure, and because of my dyslexia I was making life really difficult for myself. But I didn't know that, and that has an effect on you.

Debra: It does. I agree. And so in that instance, how do you feel that management was? Did they understand what was going on? So did they try to work with you? I mean, tell us about that.

Neil: Oh, so they just were, first couple of times, they went, well, okay, we'll put you through the exam again. We think you could be a good manager. But after the couple of failings, they basically gave up on me. It's a big chain store of shops. I was a fairly lowly employee, there's a high turnover of staff, they're not going to invest too much time in lowly employees.

Debra: And bottom line, you were in the wrong job. So I think that's an important --

Neil: Oh, yeah, absolutely.

Debra: I think that's an important part of this conversation, human performance at work, because I actually have been in jobs that were not the right jobs for me, and I failed at them. I used to program for many years, and I got really good at it but I hated pretty much every second of it. It's just I'm more of a communicator. And so, I think sometimes when we're doing jobs that we're not being successful at, maybe it's because we're doing the wrong jobs. Sometimes we're not being successful because maybe we or our employer do not know how to accommodate us. As we talk about all the time on AXSChat, we have abilities and disabilities.

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And so obviously, you weren't supposed to be in that type of work, because the work you're doing now is impacting millions and millions of people.

I know I talk a little bit about that in my book, Tapping into Hidden Human Capital, but that's -- it's interesting because certainly every single employee matters, every single individual matters. And one thing I'd like you to dig into a little bit is why do you believe dyslexia can be an advantage?

Neil: I guess the advantage is that I have a very intuitive approach to stuff. I have a good long-term, strategic vision, and I get certain things really, really quickly. I can see patterns and I am able to, sort of, make judgements which tend to be strategically correct. Not always, everyone makes mistakes, but I'm able to see these things and able to piece things together, particularly with seeing patterns and connecting people and events and bringing stuff together. I've been quite successful at that, and generating ideas that are slightly off center, shall we say.

So I think one of our AXSChat guests said it's difficult to think outside of the box, not to think outside of the box if you live outside of the box, and to a certain extent we all do, with dyslexia or neurodivergent and not sort of these neuro-typical way of thinking. It's not hard for me to think differently, because that's who I am.

And that has certain advantages, and it does mean that you can be a bit more entrepreneurial, because you question, why are people doing things this way? Surely, they can see that doing something else would be better that way. And maybe some of it is dyslexia, maybe some of it is courage of your convictions and following yourself through, and maybe some of that is down to the fact that I really, truly believe in what I'm doing, so I'm prepared to be, if you like, brave to follow some of this stuff through. So I'm not too worried about going and doing stuff and asking for forgiveness later.

So for instance, I work for a very large I T outsourcing company. We 've got 100,000 employees, and we provide I T for government departments, European Space Agency, nuclear programs, we've got over 10,000 employees in the U.S., and we do all kinds of stuff. But when I started working, there was only me delivering accessibility. And so I've had to build a team of people and build a competency, and pretty much act like an entrepreneur, to try and push this. Because it's not something that the organization was familiar with, comfortable with or even necessarily wanted to give the time of day to at first.

But I believe really strongly in this, and I know you do too, and we believe that it's more than just about giving people a fair crack of the whip. We believe that society benefits when you do something that enables people to reach their full potential. It's not just the individual. There's a halo effect. And therefore, I feel quite driven to do this and I've worked pretty hard. You and I both know how

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much of a heavy lift AXSChat is. We put in extra hours outside of work. It's been glorious. It's been one of the best experiences of my life, just meeting so many wonderful people, but it's something that I absolutely feel driven to do and I feel driven to collaborate with people. So maybe we can talk a bit about collaboration.

Debra: Right, right, and I think also, what's so interesting about your story, you went undiagnosed, you went into some jobs that you actually failed at because of your dyslexia, not even realizing it. You had successes, despite not knowing you had dyslexia. I think there's so many angles.

Also, I think what's interesting is now you're working with a multi-billion Euro organization that has employees all over the world, and you are actually an employer of individuals and contractors with disabilities, and you have internships. I mean, you are just a success story. But even that's not enough. You want to make sure that you're advocating for others and really encouraging people to talk about how they are and what makes them unique.

And why is Neil's brain unique and why does Neil's brain add value to an organization like Atos? I think it's very powerful. Do you want to comment on that, on your brain?

Neil: On my brain. My muddled brain, my fuddled brain. Yes, so bits of it are good. Not all the bits that have to deal with the paperwork, I have to say, and time management is appalling, and all of these kinds of things. But yes, in connection to vision and being able to collaborate across organizations. I'm being able to portray the value of inclusiveness. I now have the buy-in. I've got the backing of the organization. I won that some time ago, and we're busy and steadily building greater and greater competence and momentum in the stuff that we're doing.

And I think we do some good stuff. So we provide, sort of, accessibility services to the BBC and to government departments and can be quite proud, and my team can be quite proud, of the work that they do. So we've got a bunch of people.

We're the first company to set up accessibility apprenticeship schemes. So training the next generation. Because actually, we're talking about vision. We're all getting older. Most accessibility professionals are over 45. That makes me a young one, but not by much. I'm only two years out of the average age. So what are we going to do when I get old and more bits start falling off and I need more assistive tech help and I'm retired, age 85 or whenever it is, when it will be. We need people to come into the profession.

So I had put together a business plan and managed to get approval, and we set up an apprenticeship scheme, and we've got a bunch of young people now that are trained up. It was a foundation degree scheme, government-backed, and they've

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had 18 months of training on coding and testing and use of assistive technology, and they're out there now doing work, as good as many of the contractors that I've employed that have had many years' experience. So they're doing great, and I think it's fantastic and I hope that we can bring more people on and infuse them about assistive tech. And you'll know at least one of them contributes regularly to AXSChat, Mark, who's brilliant.

Debra: Yes, he is brilliant. And you know what, Neil, I think a lot of our listeners know what you're talking about when you talk about accessibility, but do you mind answering two questions?

Neil: Sure.

Debra: Dig into the accessibility a little bit. Tell us your definition of accessibility, and also, these programs that you're talking about, you're calling them schemes, but are they including people with disabilities and what types of disabilities, for example?

Neil: Okay. So my definition of accessibility is relatively wide. I believe in inclusion. I believe in inclusive design, and it's enabling people to do stuff. Now, there are technical definitions of accessibility, and I'm a member of the W3C, as are you, Debra, and we work on some of the stuff, and some of it's around making stuff work with assistive technologies, particularly screen readers and so on. But some of it's about cognition.

When I deal with access, I'm talking about access to jobs, access to equality, access to having a good quality of life, a good social life. It's broader. Obviously, work's really important, because people design themselves by their job. I know you've talked about this on your broadcast before. The first thing you get asked is, what do you do?

So accessibility is about that, sort of, enabling people. And yes, when I talk about governments, again, these are national schemes for apprenticeships. So people do get employed with disabilities, and I've employed people with disabilities. I have people with disabilities on my staff currently, but not everyone on my team has a disability. The apprentices were recruited direct from school. We have a policy of we'll take the best candidate. So in the U.K., there's a scheme called two ticks, which means that if you meet the criteria for the job, the basic criteria for the job, and you declare that you have a disability, you'll always get an interview. I'm not afraid to interview anyone anyway. Shame on me, given my job, if I were to turn someone down for an interview based on that.

But in general, my criteria for employing people is do you have a passion for it. Are you really interested? Are you going to make a difference? And so I've tried to build a team around me that really cares, that wants to make a difference to the

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world. I think that's the most important thing. It's not a case of, oh, well I've got to have the rainbow nation and representation of everyone from each of these different groups. That will come over time, as we grow and the organization gets more mature at being able to deal with the issues of impairment and employment, and our society gets better at it.

But it's really -- I wanted to attract a bunch of individuals that were like-minded. Obviously have different views, but have the same kind of vision for wanting to change the world, and I really do believe that we can change the world, which is why I get involved with collaborative projects like AXSChat, working outside of my company, working across companies. I believe we build greater value. The value of doing this stuff is greater than the sum of its parts.

So I work with lots of organizations to try and do stuff that moves accessibility forward and makes companies more mindful of the things that they need to do, to stop excluding people.

Debra: Based on fill in the blank. Based on dyslexia, autism, you don't speak the right language, you don't believe in the right God, or yeah, fill in the blank.

Neil: Yeah, so many different aspects. I'm boiling the ocean, I know that, but someone's got to. I mean, if you don't try then you're definitely not going to do it.

Debra: Well, I think one thing that you said, Neil, that's really important, and I know a lot of your team members, I know Antonio and I know people that you've worked with, like Lena, who's at BBC who is autistic and how she's brilliant, brilliant, brilliant, and we have featured her on AXSChat, but innovation and creativity seems to be the real hallmark of your team. I like how as an employer, when you go to employ people, you focus on who's right for the team, where's their passion, will they be a good fit, and if they also have a disability that's a cherry on the top of the cake or on top of the icing. It's just an advantage to you, but you focus on building the right team.

I think sometimes, when we're talking about these topics, especially when we're talking about employment and retention of people with disabilities, I know that when I wrote my book, I wrote in there -- I think I've mentioned this on the program before, but I wrote in there, hiring qualified people with disabilities. I kept saying qualified. I would put the word qualified there. And an editor said, "Why are you saying qualified people with disabilities? That's unnecessary to add that word, qualified." And I said, "Well, unfortunately, it is necessary to add it, because I know often employers are told you need to hire people with disabilities, and the word qualified never comes up," because really, people with disabilities are like everybody else. They're people. Everybody has abilities.

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Just like your story, Neil, you were good at what you really like doing. You were really good at it. And something that you weren't good at, you weren't very good at doing it because it's not something that speaks to you.

Neil: And I hated it.

Debra: Right. You hated it because you're not good at it, and now you're really good at what you're doing and you're leading a huge, huge team. I just think that is such a powerful story, and it's a story of inclusion, but it's a story of abilities and it's a story of having the right team, qualified to do the best job that you can do for your clients and the rest of the organization.

So Neil, what's your best piece of advice about how organizations can bring out the full potential of people in the workforce, and in the workplace, I should say?

Neil: It's to actually listen to their employees. Don't assume that you know what your employee needs. Dialogue is really important. That said, the dialogue has got to be two ways. We all work in enterprise environments, and I think it's important that people understand that what they have at home might not necessarily work in the working environment, especially in really large companies where everything is done differently. Security is a concern. You've got various different controls. You've got all kinds of stuff going on that you don't have when you install assistive technology on your home computer.

So when you're talking about what's a reasonable adjustment or accommodation, then it might be somewhat different than if you were talking about that for someone that's self-employed, just because of the nature of the way that stuff is delivered. That said, it's a two-way street. We need to be listening to the needs of our employees, understanding what it is that enables them to be effective.

And then also playing that back into the business and making the business understand and our customers also understand that we're not -- this is not a cost to the business. This is actually going to save them money. It's going to enable people to be more effective. It's going to increase productivity. It's going to reduce absenteeism, sickness. It's going to reduce the knock-on effects, because the other thing is if someone with a disability goes off sick, not only does the business have the impact of them being off sick, but there's an impact on another human being as well, and that's the person that's covering.

So by not putting in place these kind of adjustments and dealing with it strategically, you're actually impacting real human beings, and having a significant knock-on impact to the effectiveness of the business. And it's making those kind of cases to employers, that I think actually gets them to sit up and take notice. That and doing it in a way that is done in the language of business. So if you're going to talk to senior executives, don't shout at them. Don't give them the

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rights-based stuff. Don't come with the whole, I'm entitled to this, because it doesn't work. Much as I believe in peoples' human rights and civil rights, and I do, I believe disability equality is absolutely a civil right, the language that we use for it isn't the language of business and it's not the thing that actually gets businesses on side. The language on productivity, of employee well-being, of the -- speak the language that the executives are speaking. If we address them in the language that they understand, if we address them in the, it's good for their bottom line, that's also how you get it there.

And I think we do have those conversations about risk as well, there's regulation out there, there is a risk that by failing to meet your statutory requirements you will incur the company penalties, but that's not what I focus on. I focus on the upside, and I think I always try and focus on the upside of what we're doing. I find that it's much more powerful. You win people over.

So my advice is listen to people, talk the language of the people that you need to be addressing, hopefully find an executive sponsor, because the higher up in the organization you can go and the more senior executive sponsor you can get, the quicker you can effect change within an organization.

Debra: You know what, Neil? I think your story is really powerful. A person that really struggled, didn't understand why, realized he had dyslexia and you really turned a lot of what some people would perceive as weakness, into strengths. You're leading a huge team in the United Kingdom. You have global impact. I just love your story, because it's so empowering, and it goes on to prove that the only disability is not being able to see the human potential. So thank you so much, Neil.

Neil: Thank you, Debra, it's been a pleasure, as always.