

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh



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Guest: Axel Leblois Guest Title: CEO

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Debra: Hello, this is Debra Ruh, and you're listening to Human Potential at Work. Today, my guest is a very good friend of mine, and I consider him a mentor. His name is Axel Leblois, and he has a very distinguished career. He also is the CEO of G3iCT, and now IAAP, and I'll let him talk a little bit about that as well.

But Axel, welcome to the program.

Axel: Thank you very much, Debra.

Debra: So Axel, on the show, we talk about really tapping into human potential, in the broadest sense of the term, and your career has always fascinated me because I know your career has always been about social good and really making a difference in society. You were CEO of multiple corporations, and then you retired and you created a non-profit that has had amazing success, when it comes to making sure that people with disabilities around the world are included.

So I'd really like our listeners to learn more about who Axel is and why you chose this journey. So do you mind just telling them a little bit about who you are and the journey you went on with your career, all the way up to where we are now?

Axel: Well, thank you so much, Debra. In life, you have to look at how to best leverage your experience and make sure that the time you spent in this world is well spent. So yes, I did spend many years in the information technology industry, and for the most part in the 1980s and 1990s, which makes me feel like a dinosaur, actually. I was involved in worldwide publishing activities and worldwide markets activities in the technology field.

During that period of time, we really witnessed an incredible change around the world, as information technology was reaching out to new countries, new markets, new types of populations. And of course, in the early part of this century, you saw the fantastic boom of the mobile telephone and the impact it has

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all around the world, in providing a way for virtually every single human being on the planet to communicate and access information.

So during that kind of almost lifetime experience, as I was already running around the world, opening new companies and new publications, new market research centers or running large organizations that were producing information technology goods and services, it really dawned on me that the pervasive effect of information technology was, in a way, an extraordinarily positive thing, but when it came to places where some segment of the population were not being able to benefit from it, it created what is normally know as a deep digital divide.

And that has profound implication on how people live, the opportunities they have in life for education, work and employment and economic opportunities and many other aspects of life, from health to civil rights. So that's the background of my career, if you will.

When I retired, the realization that while the whole world was embracing technology, there was still a population of about one billion people that could not use technology because of disabilities. That really rang a bell that was kind of a calling for me, and I jumped at the opportunity to launch G3iCT, Global Initiative for Inclusive Information Connection Technologies.

Debra: So Axel, I know that you live in Atlanta, Georgia, but your accent doesn't sound Southern to me. So where's that accent coming from?

Axel: I'm very surprised. I thought you were thinking I'm from the South. So as you may guess, I was born in Europe, in France, and I lived there until 1986. And at that point in time, the U.S. company I was working for as head of their European affiliates, asked me to come to the U.S. to run the U.S. company. So that's how I happen to have, late in my life, relatively late in my midlife, if you will, the opportunity to change country and circumstances. But you know, one does not necessarily give up easily his or her accent from birth, so that's what it is.

Debra: That's right, and now you have dual citizenship, right? You're a U.S. citizen and a French citizen, correct?

Axel: I do, and that gives me the privilege to have a headache each time I vote.

Debra: That's right, that's right. Always a headache when we vote. Well, so one thing that we talk about in the community, in the industries we have disability inclusion, and when we're talking about this from the perspective of accessibility, web accessibility and built environment, I often hear people say, what do we need to do to get the C-suite involved, the board of directors?

As a former CEO of multiple large corporations all over the world, what do we need to do to get the C-suite interested in making sure that all of us can use

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technology and all of us can fully participate in the workforce and as consumers and everything else that needs to be done? Speaking from somebody that was a CEO for many years, what do you think we should be doing different than we are now, Axel?

Axel: Well, rather than answering your question in a fairly theoretical fashion, I will try to answer your question from a practical angle, based on what I've seen working. So effectively, there are quite a few situations and examples of companies where the CEO or the C-level executives have taken leadership in implementing accessibility strategies for their products and services, and also for their workplace accommodation.

From my limited experience, but still for quite a few years, I have seen difference in areas. Of course, the most well-known scenario is a company that is suddenly realizing they have a major legal challenge on their plates. And that comes up when people suddenly realize because they have an inaccessible website or inaccessible electronic document or inaccessible any kind of public spaces, they are liable to those customers or workers who live with disabilities. And that definitely has been a major trigger for C-level attention on accessibility issues.

Quite honestly, I don't like it because in effect, it's like a defensive attitude. It's all about compliance and how you want to avoid liability, not to proactively try to do the right thing. But it is really clear today that in many places, progress has been made because of top-level executives realizing through their legal counsel or chief compliance officers that they have to comply with laws and regulations regarding accessibility. So that certainly is a major avenue for change, but again, it's not my preferred avenue, by far.

So the second aspect which I've seen working quite a bit is those companies where C-level executives and especially in the marketing area, realize that one billion people living with disabilities, and say for instance in the U.S., 54 to 57 million persons, is a huge segment of the market. And that in certain services, you just can't ignore those customers, because they form a core part of your potential marketplace.

That is certainly the case, for instance, for everything that has to do with air transportation, with the hospitality industry or for the most part, financial services industry. But many other industries also depend upon on these EBook publishers or Ecommerce websites. They really need to address to the needs of persons with disabilities, and especially as you look at the aging of the population.

So there are companies who have done good things in that space, that have proactively sought to address their user interfaces, their websites, their processes, to the needs of customers with disabilities.

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So I can cite a number of companies, but certainly for instance, one example, and I don't mean to do any advertising here, but if you look at the big mobile service provider like AT&T or Orange or AT&T Docomo in Japan, those three companies have done quite a bit. Let me give you some examples. AT&T realized they had to really train their employees for disability awareness and understanding of accessibility issues. They went on to train 160,000 employees with an exam on disability awareness. Quite an extraordinary accomplishment. And certainly as a result, the company's very much aware at all levels of disability and accessibility imperatives.

Similarly in Europe, a company like Orange, also a mobile service provider and telecom provider, has had for many, many years, a very proactive policy to target actually, persons with disabilities, and senior citizens, with products that are universally designed or adapted to their specific needs. And that has, of course, paid off in a big way.

And similarly in Japan, AT&T Docomo in the mobile space was probably the pioneer. They launched that favorite product line called Waku-Waku, or easy phone to use, which had an extraordinary success. I think they acquired more than 20 million additional subscribers just with those accessible product lines, to give you a sense of the magnitude of the success. But in places like Turkey, you will find folks like TurkCell, who is the leading mobile service provider. They provide audio transcription for blind persons in movie theaters, on their mobile phones. Something that very few providers have ever done elsewhere.

So you see, there are many, many examples of companies doing the right thing and being very successful at it. So that is what we would like to push. So the realization here is that the notion that you have to do accessibility as an obligation, is not going to be optimal. What you need to have is the realization that you need to satisfy the needs of customers with disabilities and senior citizens. That is what actually drives the best approach to the issue, and that is how companies are actually successful, not only at doing the good thing, the right thing, but also really developing a sound and very successful business case out of it.

Debra: I agree. Now, on this program we really try to applaud the organizations, the corporations, that are making a difference. So you named a couple of companies that are best practices, but most of them were in the telecommunications industry. Can you give us some other examples of corporations that are doing this that are not in the telecommunications field?

Axel: Yes, of course. I can give you a few examples. For instance, in the financial services industry. I think you would find that large organizations such as Barclays Bank in the U.K. or Credit Suisse in Switzerland, Scotiabank in Canada

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or Wells Fargo here in the U.S., or TD Bank, all have had some significant focus on accessibility for financial services.

And in that space, if you will, it has been kind of a mixed thing. On one hand, you had lawsuits very early on, against those banks which were using inaccessible ATMs. I think that triggered a lot of attention in the banking industry and really got a wide movement towards making sure that ATMs are accessible.

But then there are many more aspects, like the accessible website, the accessible account, electronic documents, electronic records. But also, the customer service itself on the telephone. So you see that today, in the financial services industry, there is a mix of regulatory pressure but also a clear understanding that with the aging of the population and the size of the population of persons with disabilities, banks have to pay attention to accessibility. But even more importantly, to make sure that they proactively offer services that are usable, friendly and of course accessible to persons with disabilities, and seniors.

So it's kind of a holistic approach. It's just not you're making sure that technically this is accessible; it's a whole chain that has to be kind of universally designed. It has to be from advertising to marketing to customer service to actually the service itself. So it cannot be done in isolation, just because you want that to be technically accessible. You need to have a real global approach to making things from A to Z, accessible and friendly for persons with disabilities, and seniors.

Debra: Right, and you bring up such a good point when you talk about making things accessible. Certainly for people with disabilities and people that are aging and acquiring disabilities, because I've talked about this on the phone before, only 20 percent of the population are born with a disability, like my daughter. Most people acquire disabilities as we live our lives. So as things are more accessible, it makes that product, that service, that solution, more usable to everyone, including people without disabilities as well.

I really want to talk a little bit more about G3iCT, that you created. And I know that you run a conference, an annual conference, called the M-Enabling Summit, with a partner, E.J. Krause. A lot of times on this program, we talk about disabilities and empowerment and everything we're doing. There's a lot of moving parts, and it's not just about the U.S. or about one other country; it's really a global conversation.

I like how you bring all the stakeholders in. so we know that you could bring in the corporation and C-suites, because that's what you did for most of your career, but you're also really good about making sure that disability persons organizations are included, the United Nations, the different governments, all the different stakeholders. Why do you think it's so important to do that?

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Axel: Well, thank you for the question. It's a really critical question. So just as a background, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, while it may not be a huge impact in the U.S. because of past legislation already in place in the U.S., but the convention, which is kind of abbreviated at CRPD, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, has had over the past few years a huge impact worldwide.

So from zero countries having ever ratified an international treaty on disability, you now have 166 countries around the world which have signed and ratified a text that is very specific about what needs to be done, to protect the rights of persons with disabilities in their respective jurisdictions. That convention, which is the reason why we started G3iCT, includes this position that is realized on the obligation for the convention to have accessible information communication technologies across the board, in their jurisdictions.

So that entails having accessible television, accessible mobile phone, accessible computers, accessible software, accessible digital interfaces in any kind of kiosk situation, accessible electronic document, accessible online and so on and so forth. It's a huge undertaking, because technology today is pervasive. It touches everything in life. So when you look at what countries have to do nowadays, it is nearly impossible to make any kind of progress unless they are a multi-stakeholder corporation.

And here is why. If you just talk to a government and tell them, look, you have got to develop this type of policy and program. Yeah, most of the time they understand and they'll do it. But then there is no implementation, there is nobody that puts pressure on timelines and variables and the monitoring process. So for that, you need to bring in the national disability movement and the advocates, to make sure they are part of the conversation, and they can actually be part of the government's policymaking and policy monitoring process. I think that is actually the best way to ensure that the momentum that we can create overseas in international markets, keep growing and growing.

But even if you do that, then there is a huge challenge of the actual relationship with the different entities, which are the main source of accessibility or inaccessibility of services and products. So bringing in the private sector and all the entities who are responsible for information technology-based products and services, is critical.

So for instance, you can decide that you need to have accessible television in the country. In fact, quite a few countries have gone through that process. They took legislation, they took steps to impose regulations on captioning, on audio description and all that kind of good stuff. However, when the broadcasting industry was not involved in the policymaking process, at least from a constitutive

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standpoint, then quite often some of these rules were unrealistic with unrealistic timelines, which caused those policies to fail.

So in our opinion, wherever we see an alternative to move forward with some new policies and programs, we always, always, always say, look, you need to have government representatives, persons with disabilities and the private sector sitting at the same table. Otherwise, you may end up having either no momentum for the implementation or no basic technical knowledge to make sure it can happen. So that's why it is so important.

Here in the U.S., for those of your listeners who are in North America, I must say, there is quite a good process when new laws and regulations are implemented, to actually involve the private sector in a very thorough, constitutive process, before rule making occurs. And it's the same and increasing in a number of countries, which is good.

But Debra, that is the core of it. Even in corporations today, the most successful initiatives and programs are involving persons with disabilities, within those corporations. You see corporations constituting council of persons with disabilities to provide advice and guidance, feedback, and that is really where I think the key to success resides, is getting persons with disabilities involved, getting the private sector involved and making sure the government does not decide to do things without consulting the key stakeholders.

Debra: Right, right, I agree, and I see that often, when stakeholders are not included in the conversation, we don't see as much success. So I think one thing I've always agree with you on is that all the stakeholders need to be at the table, including of course, disability persons organizations and also people that are representing the aging people as well, that are so heavily impacted by these issues.

Tell us more about IAAP and how that's working with G3iCT. I don't know if I should call it a merger, but tell us more about IAAP.

Axel: Sure. Well, so for 10 years now, we have worked with the international community and here in the U.S., promoting the basic disposition of IT accessibility around the world. And I think we have had some fairly good success, in terms of raising the awareness of those obligations, raising the awareness of the solutions that exist out there, and triggering in many places, the adoption of policies and programs to promote IT accessibility.

However, we also see that in many places, while there are good intents to make this happen, unfortunately, implementation is not happening really very well, because the local organizations do not have the expertise and knowhow in IT accessibility to actually make the solution available to persons with disabilities, and seniors.

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So for instance, web accessibility is a big, big concern today, and it affects not only persons with visual impairment but all types of potential impairment when using a website: physical or cognitive or audio. So web accessibility, given the convenience of the web, is extraordinarily critical for many entities: government and big corporation and universities and large organizations and the non-profit sector.

However, in order to produce an accessible website, you need to have web developers who understand the web accessibility standards and how to implement those guidelines in their work. And so for that, we need to have trained professionals and making sure that those trained professionals have indeed the competencies they need.

And so last summer, we had the good fortune of discussing with the International Association of Accessibility Professionals, which was formed about three years ago, to precisely train and certify IT personnel and end users in producing accessible websites, accessible content and so on and so forth. And so we realized that this was very complimentary of what we did for the past decade, since it would actually allow us to provide the services to companies and government to actually train and certify their technical people and employees, on producing accessible content and services.

So last summer, we decided to join forces. We actually technically acquired IAAP and all of their certification and training programs, and so we are now in a position to promote solutions for government and enterprises who want to ensure that their personnel is properly trained in producing accessible content and services. So for us, a wonderful opportunity, certainly complimentary to our mission. I think for IAAP, the global network that Gi3CT built over the years will also accelerate its growth in many, many countries, and that is extraordinarily exciting for all of us who have been advocating IT accessibility for so many years.

Debra: I remember when I heard that G3iCT had acquired IAAP. I was really excited about that, because as we show on this program, this is a multi-dimensional, complicated issue. A lot of times, of course we're addressing it from the United States and Europe is handling it another way and Turkey and Africa. Everybody is doing it differently. And we need to have more structure.

And when a corporation hires a company or individuals with disabilities that are "accessibility experts" we need to make sure that we understand what that means and that people are being certified. Otherwise, it becomes sort of a buyer beware, which we've had some of those issues. We've had corporations, for example, in the United States that have spent so much money trying to make sure they were fully accessible, and then they're sued because they're not accessible at all.

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So there's still a lot of work, and I'm not saying it's just individuals posing to be accessibility experts, but I'm just saying it's complicated, which is why I was always really an advocate, a very, very positive advocate, for IAAP, and I was really glad when you acquired it, because I know that G3iCT looks at this from the lens of what is best for the world. Let's not recreate this in every single country; let's all work together to make sure everybody, people with disabilities, people that are aging, and everybody has access to technology, so that we can all really tap into our abilities.

So I do want to mention that G3iCT is the publisher of my book, Tapping Into Hidden Human Capital, and I'm very proud of that. We worked really hard to get that book out. And Axel, I could talk to you for hours and hours, but tell our listeners how they can learn more about G3iCT and IAAP.

Axel: Thank you, Debra. First of all, we are also very pleased and very proud of having you being published by our organization, with the latest book you wrote, which I think is a very interesting contrarian book, which actually shows how profitable and how beneficial it is for businesses to hire persons with disabilities in their workforce. So kudos for turning around the issue into a products sold and kind of contrarian view, which is much needed and actually a very sound approach to the whole opportunity to hire persons with disabilities in businesses.

Anyway, to answer your question, Debra, I think the best for our listeners is really to go to our respective websites. IAAP has a complete website with all the details on what it does. You need to go to a search engine and type in "IAAP Accessibility" so that you don't get to another organization that has the same IAAP abbreviation. But if you type "IAAP accessibility" you should get right away to the website of IAAP.

G3iCT.org is also the website you can consult. We have tons of resources on that website, many technical reports, case studies, also a toolkit for policymakers and a number of model policies, freely available, for accessible television, accessible mobile phone, accessible web, accessible public access point and accessibility in public procurement. Also, with UNESCO we have a model policy for inclusive ICTs in education. So all those resources are out there, free, and we really enjoy when people come and visit and take as much as they want. It's why we're here.

Debra: I agree, and I know you are getting into smart cities and helping frame the IOT and the wearables and the 3D printing and all the new technology. And also, I really recommend corporations get involved with G3iCT. Sponsor what they're doing. Get involved in the conferences. Let them know you're willing to speak. We need more corporations, employers and other entities heavily involved in this conversation, because obviously the world works better when we all can participate.

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So Axel, thank you so much for your time today. We really appreciate the work you're doing. You're making a big difference in the world. Thank you.

Axel: Thank you, Debra, thank you very much.

Debra: Thank you again for watching Human Potential at Work With Debra Ruh. If you'd like to know more about my work, you can visit us at www.RuhGlobal.com. I'm available to speak, to do training, to do strategic consulting, and I would really be honored to work with you. You can also visit my speaking website, which is www.DebraRuh.com. You can find both of my books on Amazon and other channels. Thank you again for listening, bye-bye.