

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh



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Guest: Jenny Lay-Flurrie **Guest Title:** Chief Accessibility Officer

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Debra: Hello, this is Debra Ruh, and you're listening to Human Potential at Work. I'm excited to feature my guest today. Her name is Jenny Lay-Flurrie, and she is the chief accessibility officer with Microsoft.

Welcome to the program, Jenny.

Jenny: Thank you. It's great to be here.

Debra: Yes. I'm very excited, and I really am looking forward to really exploring your journey as a female, a technologist and a person that was born in the United Kingdom that now lives in the United States, and also a person that defines yourself as profoundly deaf. So I'm really looking forward to this conversation, so thanks again for joining us.

So Jenny, tell us a little bit about your life. How did you get from the United Kingdom over to the United States?

Jenny: It's a long, winding story. Basically, I was born in the middle of England, a place called Birmingham, about 15 miles outside of Birmingham. My upbringing was very suburban and very normal. Parents were both teachers. Went to normal comprehensive school, and went on to study music at a university in the UK. Music was always my passion. I came out of Music College, which was a lot of fun, needing to find a job because clearly I was a very starving musician and needed to pay things called rent.

And so I ended up getting a job at the Daily Mirror, which is a newspaper in the UK, a very high-quality newspaper in the UK, on their IT help desk. It literally was one of those, I picked a bunch of ads out of a newspaper and it was the one that had the great building. It was one of those big, tall buildings, and that's where I wanted to work. I wanted to look at something, overlooking London. And really, that started my passion with IT.

There wasn't a lot, I would say, of IT in my music degree. But what I found was that I just absolutely loved it. I loved the problem solving, I loved figuring out --

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just helping people with their challenges with the different tech. So that's really the start of my career in the IT industry.

Wind forward 20 years, not to reveal my age, I went through the boom and bust period with IT, ended up at T-Mobile for a time, and then 12 years ago landed in London at Microsoft London. By then, I was leading teams, doing technical support across lots of different products and having a blast with that. Different languages, very complex. Europe is a big landscape. And that's really where I started.

And then 10 years ago, I moved over to the U.S., and then 6 years ago went full time on accessibility. Really, this was never -- I couldn't imagine myself doing the job that I do today, 20, 30 years ago. It was never the intent. It wasn't a kind of well thought-out plan, but it's definitely -- the job I have today is just I wake up every morning excited, ready to go, ready to do something that's really going to live into -- not to be cheesy -- but the mission of our company, which is to empower people and organizations to achieve more. And in this space with disability, there's no better time with technology being where it is, to do that, and no better job to do that. So yeah, I absolutely love what I do today.

Debra: And I can identify with that, because I love my work, too. I think, wow, I'm not sure what I did right but I'm so excited to get up and go to work every day. So I can identify with that.

I don't know if a lot of people know what a chief accessibility officer is. Do you mind telling us a little bit about what that is?

Jenny: Yeah, my journey into this one has been a fascinating learning journey for me. As someone who's deaf, coming into the company, really had to learn a lot about my own deafness and how to survive with that in the company and how to thrive with that in the company. That got me interested in the community, and Microsoft has a big, broad community of people with disabilities, and because I'm nosey or curious, depending on your lens, I joined every community that I could find, and I found that accessibility was one of those red threads that just went between all of the groups. Every group was talking about it in some way, and it just got me curious about what this thing is.

And really, it's how technology can empower people, and there's lots of different ways that that happens in everyday life. We all pinch and zoom. We magnify things, if we want to see a certain spot on a map. Closed captioning on a television. I mean, it's the very simplest notion. Even door handles came out of accessibility.

And so when I turned into full time on accessibility a few years ago and then in January I became the CAO, it was really about how we could lean into that, in a much bigger way. So how could we, across the breadth of everything that we do

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at Microsoft, ensure that we have products, services, websites that are accessible to folks with disabilities, both internal and external. So our employees are as big a customer as our customers themselves. And also make sure that we've got a culture that sustains that. So that means for us, we're a very nerdy group of people, I have a big focus on training, on readiness, on making sure that people have the tools they need to do the job and the information they need to know what accessibility is. How do I take a piece of HTML code and make that accessible?

At the other end, that we also make sure that we have people within the company that really get their space. And ultimately, that means that the experts are people from the disability community, in the most part. Not always. But people with disabilities, parents, advocates. People who get this, can help us build products that have that empathy. They're inclusive, they're designed for humanity, which includes disability. So we have a big effort on inclusive hiring, and innovation, because at the end of the day that's what motivates 100,000 nerds, is looking to the future and figure out what crazy amazing thing is going to change the way that the world works.

So yeah, there's a lot of span. So I work cross-company. I have a great team of amazing people. So it's not just me; there's a gang of us. And the goal of it is to really live into that mission.

Debra:

I have been a fan of Microsoft for many years, because when I created my company TechAccess, inspired by my daughter with Down Syndrome, I wouldn't have been able to have that particular social model without Microsoft. And so let me ground that a little bit. What I mean by that is most of the employees at the time that worked for my company, TechAccess, which was in business from 2001 until 2011, most of my employees tele-worked, and we would not have been able to tele-work if we did not have the Microsoft Office and some of the tele-work, Skype and some of the tools and the chat features and stuff. Over 80 percent of the technologists that worked for my company were people with different types of disabilities, which added a lot of great value to my clients.

And so I often would say that even though I've worked a lot with Microsoft, but Microsoft -- I was trying to think about this before the call. I don't believe Microsoft has ever paid me. I don't think we've had a paying relationship, but I've sat on so many panels and marketing efforts and advocacy efforts with Microsoft employees all over the world. So I'm a very big fan of Microsoft, because a lot of companies talk about social impact but I actually see Microsoft having social impact, which is why I was thrilled when they announced that you were going to be the chief accessibility officer. I'm a very big fan of women in technology. And on top of it, since you are a person that is profoundly deaf, I thought, that is so interesting.

And so one thing that I know the listeners would really like to understand, right now we're having a conversation and how does this work when you're a person

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that's profoundly deaf? As we both know, technology makes a difference, but do you mind telling us a little bit about that journey, and also, have you found that being profoundly deaf has brought you unexpected gifts along your journey?

Jenny: Yeah, for sure. I always think of my deafness as being definitely a journey, and it's been a journey that has lasted most of my life. I grew up in a household where deafness was a common thing. I wasn't the only family member with it. My dad definitely has the, he hears dinner but doesn't hear dishes kind of deafness. But really, mine I acquired young and in a very mild form. It was ear infections and measles and a few things that derived it.

But what has happened since then is that it slowly, slowly, slowly and incrementally declined. So yes, I have pretty good speech and that's attributed a lot to different things, but including my music degree ironically, because it did teach me a lot about intonation and how to actually listen to yourself. So in some ways, I'm very deceptive with my deafness. My deafness is now at the point where I don't hear speech. I lost that a few years ago. I am reliant very much on the visual world.

And so from a technology perspective, that means I rely on technology. I also rely on beautiful people like my ASL interpreter sitting in front of me, who also happens to be British. And so I say I walk around with an entourage. But there's been challenges and then there's been perks that have come out of it. And sometimes being honest you see the challenges, and other times you see the beauty.

For me, what I've realized over the years is that it's definitely given me the ability to see things in a different way. I'm very visual. That means my eyes get tired. It does mean, though, that when I'm in a room I'm often seeing a lot about the body language that others miss. I use a lot of different means to give me what's really going on in a room. Eyebrow tweaks are often the most valuable tool for me. And depending on the country, people are very visual or very not, right? So some countries I actually have to rely on my interpreter and my technology than in others.

So I've had to go through this process of really just understanding what I could use, whether it was hearing aids or different adaptive devices, whereas now I very much lean into the visual environment. So really just figuring out what I need for each of those meetings. I try not to wake people up if I'm speaking to folks in Europe. So that's when I use captioning, whether it's real time or the stuff that you get using stenographers on the phone, and let's say when I'm doing calls in the evening with Asia.

But it really does work. The things that I have learned and the times when I've seen it more as an obstacle is when I felt that I didn't have what I needed to be successful. But ultimately, the only person that could change that was me. And it

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took me really standing up and saying, actually, I need this to be successful. And others around me, I have a few friends that very blissfully will slap me around the face with a wet fish, and tell me that I'm being silly. And really, just by not advocating for myself, I was the only one who was going to lose out in that conversation.

So there are definitely moments in my career where I've had to stand up and say, actually, no I can't do that, or no, I do need that extra ticket for a baseball game because I need my interpreter there, and kind of put your foot out a little bit. Because people aren't generally used to this. It's different, and they look at you and see you as one thing, and disability can be invisible. In fact, the majority of it is. So Microsoft has made it easy on me. All of my accommodations are paid. My manager never sees how much I cost, which is a great thing because I'm beautifully worth it, but I wouldn't want her to see that. I want to be considered for the work that I do, not what it costs to get there. And so yes, it's been a learning journey and I really fundamentally believe that, and you have to lean in to that journey at different moments as you go through it.

Debra: Jenny, I know that a lot of the work that you're doing is going to -- I know you're going to really appreciate my next question, because you and I are both doing this. How, though, can we help society understand that persons with disabilities can add value to society? And all aspects of society, from education to employment to every other aspect of society. I believe a lot of the work that you're doing right now is proving that, but what else do you think that we can do?

Jenny: Ultimately, I love that disability is called a minority. A minority, when it's over a billion people, it's somewhat of a silly term, in my view. You've got over a billion people in the world with disabilities. The numbers vary, depending on what statistics you look at. That's huge, huge. And yet, you have an unemployment rate that's double that, of people without disabilities, and in some segments it's over 80 percent of people, like autism, are not in the workplace or are out of work.

There's so much that we can do to make a difference there. And when I say we, I mean everyone. There's definitely a part that we want to play, and in Microsoft and one of my goals is that we do play a part in that. But this is a societal shift. One of the things that we've learned with the autism hiring, which is a specific program that we have to hire folks with autism into the company, is that by really thinking about this segment as talent, because that's what it is, and adapting the way that you interview and hire people, you end up bringing in talent that you wouldn't necessarily have thought of previously in your team and in your group. And it brings such diversity of thinking, and what I called mad skills, mad being a good term, but mad skills into the team.

We hired, it's small, but we've hired 23 folks in the last year into different parts of the company. And then when you chat with the hiring managers and we ask

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them, what did it take, what have you had to do, they say honestly not a lot. Often, from an accommodations perspective, it's noise cancelling headphones and an extra screen. It's not a lot to accommodate these guys in the workplace, but the benefits are actually being felt across all of the teams. Because the number one thing that matters to these hiring classes that we brought in is clear expectations on the job. Well, don't we all want that? I mean, we all want to know what success looks like when you're in employment.

And so what they're doing is giving these guys clear expectations on the job, but then the rest of the team are also getting it, too. So the benefits from this are just huge. I'll transparently share, 17 of that 23 had previously applied to Microsoft and not got in, and that was because the way that we were interviewing folks didn't reflect the talent that was in front of us. We were interviewing them, we were giving them straight black and white questions. Now, that's one example, one example, and now we just bring folks in for an academy and we give them tasks and off they go. We're able to see the skills we have in front of us, by really understanding the talent and what they can produce, whether it's an online shop or whatever it might be.

So if you think about that and you magnify that, you think about what technology can do. If Office 365 are great for folks who are blind and how that could be empowering in the workplace, how it could show up for an individual who wants to be able to get the next job and is able to use technology to help them to do that, you are able to change some of the core dynamics of society, which is often around employment.

So I'm excited at what we are able to achieve in the next few years. There's a lot to do, though, and I don't want to understate that. It's a huge shift that we've got to make.

Debra: I agree. Like everything else, when I believe you're doing something to help a segment of the population, a minority, a billion people really, and it benefits all of us. As you were talking, I was thinking about clear expectations. In my career, I was in the banking industry for many years, and I always found it so confusing working for managers that did not give me clear expectations. I would get so confused about, well, do you want this? Okay. And I had a manager that did that one time. He would ask me to do something, I would do it, I'd bring it back to him, he would say, no, no, that's not right, but he wouldn't give me any feedback. And I would go back and forth, back and forth, and I found him so frustrating.

I also thought it was interesting as you were bringing up the example of the people that you were interviewing, that Microsoft was interviewing, with autism. I remember one time I was interviewed by a very large credit card company and they really wanted me because I had this great background and I just really brought a lot to the table. But during the interview process, they had me do an algebra test. And wow, I just really do not remember algebra. I just don't

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remember it. So I like to tell people God took that test, because I had no idea. I just had not been exposed to algebra in so many years, and so I didn't even know where to begin to take this test. And I didn't understand at the time, why being the director of a corporate university required me to know algebra. And so I just remember thinking, that did not make a lot of sense.

Then also, as you're talking, isn't this the future of work, what's happening? Because diversity, you want diversity in the workforce. You also want people that use their brains differently. I'm a very outgoing, energetic problem solver, I've confessed not always good at algebra, but I bring a lot to the table. But sometimes you really need somebody that's fantastic at algebra, and you need somebody like you that's a musician and bringing all these unique abilities to the workforce, because we are all going to be able to do a much better job for our customers and for our fellow employees.

I've always admired Microsoft. I really admired the work Rob Sinclair was doing. And I'm really a big fan of Microsoft because once again, when I went to Turkey, there was a Microsoft engineer sitting at a table with me. When I went to Egypt, there were two gentlemen -- the gentleman in Turkey was blind, but when I was speaking in Egypt there was a gentleman that was blind and a gentleman that had autism, there with me. So it's just interesting that this is not just a U.S. effort, not just a UK effort, but Microsoft is really committed to this in ways that I'm not seeing from other companies.

Just the things that Microsoft does with the ads, the Super Bowl ads and things like that, and the efforts that Microsoft has made to assure full inclusion and all of your programs and efforts. I would never say Microsoft is perfect, because I think we're all learning together, but do you mind talking a little bit more about why does Microsoft care about us? Us, being everyone in society. And why are you working so hard to make sure that all of your customers and all of your employees have real access to technology?

Jenny: We've had a long history, I would say, with accessibility at Microsoft. I mean, we're dating back nearly 20 years at this point, just in terms of our level of commitment to different pieces of technology. And I think really in the last few years, there's been a new swell that's really changed, and clearly, Debra, you know a lot about this. I think there's two ways to really look at some of the drivers behind that. One is that you have a very strong employee base of people with disabilities at Microsoft. We have a very strong community. It's now 12 groups. It's grown dramatically over the last eight, nine years. When I joined, it was six, way back when I was trying to figure out if there was anybody else who was deaf at Microsoft.

Now, some of the new groups are around ALS, PTSD, traumatic brain injury, Parkinson's. I mean, we've got some amazing communities beginning to spring up. Our biggest community remains parents of kids with autism, and one of our

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most active communities as well. And really just empowering that community, which is what's happened over time, to have a loud voice, whether it's about a communication that's come out or a building or a website, to say hey, this video wasn't captioned, and get that to the right people. And start to see that community as the experts that they are, and show disability as a strength for the company.

So when you have a product that you're doing and you want to make sure that it's accessible to customers, the best place to test that or dog food that, which is our term for it, is within the community. And so actually I would say our VIP community, which is visually impaired persons, at Microsoft, is one of the most sought-after groups because whether you're launching PowerPoint or you're launching Sway or Skype, whatever it might be, you want to test that product. You want to get real users to be using it, and that group gets, I can't tell you how many different pings a day, asking them to look at this latest piece of tech.

So you've got a very empowered community, and before Satya became CEO, he was the sponsor of that community. So that was just a great opportunity for us, and it was very humbling to really see his passion and energy really just grow over time with that.

And so you've got that piece, and then you've also got the technology itself and what we can do with technology. And so over time, as that piece has grown, narrator is core and a screen reader that's built into Windows, and several other pieces in the ease of access center, just built into the core of our Windows devices, you've got this beautiful energy of technologists and passionate people across the span of different roles at Microsoft, wanting to live into the mission that the CEO created, of empowering people and organizations to achieve more.

So the re-energization, I would say, of accessibility in the last year, a little longer, has really been about leaning into that. You've got a grassroots effort, you've got a tops-down effort, you've got this beautiful magic that happens in the middle. And what's happening is, Office 365 is the most accessible Office 365 we've ever put out. Windows came out with a great series of releases over the summer, and we just announced on Friday our 2017 roadmap, what's coming up next year in both our Windows and Office portfolios. And that includes some great software. We're putting out our first piece on braille, for example.

So there's a lot of energy around this, and the connective tissue around this, and it encompasses everything from hardcore engineering and development on our product, right the way through to hiring, innovation, training, because ultimately accessibility is, if you're new to it, it's an engineering discipline. You've got to learn what it is and how to use it, how to lean into it. How to pick the best tools that are going to help you figure out color contrast. And so there's a lot of energy around training.

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And also making sure that our really big sales force knows what they're talking about, when it comes to our products. But I do think it's that beautiful recipe that's come together, to give us a bunch of programs that we're now driving forward. And we are far from perfect, but we're excited to see where we can go with this.

Debra: And we don't know what perfect means. I mean, technology and communications is changing so rapidly. Societies are changing so rapidly. So I think one reason why I admire Microsoft is because you see this as certainly a competitive advantage and part of your corporate social responsibility and social impact, but you really see it as a technology advantage, to get the best talent. And that, I really, really would like to see a lot more corporations emulate the efforts that Microsoft is making, because I just see Microsoft really heavily in these conversations. And I don't really see it as much in others.

And I know there's another, and I won't mention their name, but there's another very well-known global technology company and they just hold everything so tightly to their chest. They don't want to be copied, and I get competitive advantage, but I think many things I admire about Microsoft is you really are willing to share what you're learning. I know when I created my company TechAccess years ago, we actually learned a lot about accessibility from the programs that were out for free, on the Microsoft website. There was information for educators and for employers and for accessibility of all different types. Even products that Microsoft had not created. And so Microsoft is an educator in so many of these different areas. And I just assume that it's part of who Microsoft is. It seems to be really blended into your DNA.

So tell us more about -- I mean, I've had some experience of the Microsoft global efforts, with inclusion, accessibility, CSR and social impact, but why? Why does Microsoft care? And by the way, thank you all for caring.

Jenny: Well, bless you. It takes a village, by the way. It's not one group, one company, one organization. I do think it's how we partner and collaborate together. Microsoft is a global company, and clearly our efforts are not just going to be in the U.S. In fact, some of the bigger opportunities, in some ways, are outside of the U.S.

It was fun for me as I built out this team, my new team coming in this year, to actually pull our first headcount outside of the U.S. It's not just because I'm British and he's in the UK, but we did hire someone called Hector Minto, outside of the UK, and also Meagan Lawrence here in the U.S., that are really about evangelism, which means educating folks on what we got and learning what else we could do. So we're beginning to balance ourselves a little bit more globally, at the moment.

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But I do think that, again, that partnership is what matters. Internally, that means that there's a big partnership with our other teams that are focused on some of these efforts, whether it's our civic tech community or it's the philanthropy. There's an amazing website, <http://www.Microsoft.com/philanthropy>, where charities and 501(c)(3)s. There are amazing authors available, if you're looking at products like Office 365 and Cloud, that are at a significantly reduced price that you can apply for on those sites.

There's also education and employment programs that some of those teams are running, and we're working together on some of those. And charities that we partner with outside of the U.S. And really, it comes back to the core pillars of what we're driving. We're looking at products and we're looking at accessibility of those products. We're also looking at that inclusive hiring. How can we help organizations that really want to look at hiring programs, innovation and education? And those are really the core principles across everything that we're looking at. And so partnerships with organizations, companies and non-profits across those spans, are what we're passionate about.

There's the great partnership that we have with D3ICT, looking at inclusive cities at the moment, which has been fascinating. They were in Barcelona just a couple of weeks ago, and London, and there's five cities that they're looking at. We're partnering with an organization in Mexico on accessible websites. There's even great partnerships in parts of Africa that we're looking at, with pieces of technology.

So I think we're scratching the surface, candidly. There's a lot more we can and hopefully will be doing in the future.

Debra: And I think there's so much, as you've expressed, I think there's so much to be excited about. I just really think there's so much more that we'll be able to learn from the efforts that you're making all over the world. The partnerships, the different stakeholders you're including, the communities that practice, the hackathons. It's just really, really exciting to sit back and watch what's happening at Microsoft.

I do my part bragging about Microsoft all the time, because part of it, I want to reward Microsoft for what you're doing, but I also want to encourage other corporate leaders to really join these conversations, because this is the future of work. This is about meeting all of our societal goals and making sure that we can really focus on abilities as opposed to saying, "Well, Jenny's not going to add any value, she's profoundly deaf," when you prove every single day that's not true.

Jenny, I know that we are at the end of the show, but do you mind telling -- you did mention one website, but is there a website that our listeners can go to, to learn more about the work that Microsoft's doing, even though I think in a way,

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it's very broad at Microsoft, so you don't just go to one link. It seems to be part of your DNA.

Jenny: Yeah. Well, we are trying to get -- one of the pieces of feedback is, help me to understand everything going on. I've had that from a few organizations. Like, I can't keep up. Which is actually a really big problem for us. We've now launched a new website, which is Microsoft.com/accessibility. There's a news portal on there, if you want to check out what's going on there, and seeing some of the blogs and everything coming through. That's where all the product information is, broken out by product area but also by disability. And role models, and the hiring program is linked off there. So it really is a one-stop shop.

The other one, if you specifically are interested in the inclusive hiring, is Microsoft.com/InclusiveHiring. In fact, one of my favorite videos is up there. We call it our sizzle reel, if you want to check that out. And that's both close-captioned and audio described. But yes, we've got a couple of sites. We're launching new content on there all the time. So if you don't see what you're looking for, please give us the feedback and let us know what you want. In fact, feedback is the number one thing that I look for every day. And so if you're checking out Windows, if you're checking out Office, if you want to know what's coming up, check out the blogs that are up there.

But if you are using these products and you want help, don't hesitate to call our disability answer desk. It's a support environment specifically for people with disabilities using Microsoft products. And also, if you've seen something that you've got a gap or you want to see a certain feature from us going forward, pop that in the user voice, which is our forum, which my team look through every single day. We want to know what you want from us going forward. That will help us as we look at future roadmaps and figure out what's coming up towards the end of 2017 and 2018.

Debra: And Jenny, before I let you go, can people follow you on social media, and if so, which I know they can, what is your social media handle on Twitter and Facebook?

Jenny: Absolutely. Twitter is where I post the most, which is -- no laughing -- Jenny Lay Fluffy. That's a longer story, which we are not going into today. But yeah, Twitter is the best place to find me.

Debra: Okay, great. Well, Jenny, thank you for what you're doing to really make a difference in the world. I'm really proud to feature you on the program. Thank you.

Jenny: Right back at you, my dear. Take care.

Debra: Thank you.

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