

# HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh



**Episode #: 39**    **Title:** Social Attitudes towards PwD's – What needs to Change

**Guest:** Stephane Leblois    **Guest Title:** Disability Advocate / Millennial

**Date:** January 18, 2017    **Guest Company:** N/A

---

Debra: Hello. This is Debra Ruh, and you're listening to Human Potential at Work. Today, I have my producer and friend, Doug Foresta, joining me to co-host the program.

Doug, you want to say hello?

Doug: Hi. Great to be here. Thank you, Debra.

Debra: Yeah, always enjoy when Doug joins me.

Our featured guest is Stephane Leblois, who is a good friend of mine and we've been friends for years. I really wanted Stephane to be on the program because Stephane is a millennial that is in the field of inclusion of people with disabilities, and Stephane is a global citizen.

Stephane, I'm not sure if you were born in France? I know --

Stephane: I was born in the U.S. actually, but --

Debra: Okay.

Stephane: -- but raised by French parents, as it were.

Debra: Right, right, right. So I'm really looking forward to having a conversation about not only Stephane's work, but Stephane's generation. And I was excited to have Doug join us because we have three generations on the program now. I'm a baby boomer, Doug is a Gen X and Stephane is a millennial.

And I want to talk today about social impact and certainly how social impact, by including persons with disabilities in society, why that's so powerful, and how all these changing times that we're in are, you know, impacting all the different generations.

# HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh

So Stephane, welcome to the program.

Stephane: And thank you for having me. It's an honor to be on the program and to chat with you guys today. You know, being in our field is always an interesting experience and I feel like in light of recent events it's going to become even more interesting as time goes on. So I'm very glad to be here and I'm excited to talk about all these things.

Debra: Yes. And for my listeners, because of course we are -- it is December 2016 when we're doing this interview, so as many of you are very well aware of, we've had some interesting political times in the United States and interesting political times happening all over the world. And so it's exciting.

But Stephane, what Doug and I are going to do is we're going to go back and forth. So I'll do a question and then Doug will, and we can all jump in and interview and just have a conversation because I think the topic is very, very powerful.

So Stephane, I'm going to start. And do you mind telling the audience a little bit more about you and your journey?

Stephane: Sure. So I currently work at the Arc of the United States. We're an organization that provides both -- well, we're a chapter organization. We have 600-plus chapters across the U.S., and we provide support services and advocacy services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

I currently work on the program side of the organization, but I'm looking to get back to policy work, which is really where my interest lies. So I've been working, prior to my -- prior to joining The Arc, I had worked in the disability rights field for, you know, the past four or five years, and I've worked in any -- in all types of, I guess, sectors within the larger field, so I've working in accessibility issues, I've worked in rights and advocacy and inclusive higher ed. So I've kind of -- and employment as well, so I've kind of run a pretty interesting gamut.

And yeah, it's -- and prior to that I had like a -- I guess a communications background, communications training so I did -- worked for a couple of different PR firms here in DC. And so that's really, you know -- using that training, I was able to provide a bunch of value added for a lot of disability rights organizations that I worked for subsequently.

So what I can say about the disability field is that it's very interesting. The challenges are numerous and they're diverse, and so it's never -- every day is very different at the job. So yeah, but I'm really glad to be here and to kind of talk about my experience and all that good stuff.

Debra: And we're excited to have you. Doug?

# HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh

Doug: Yes. Yes, it's great to -- you know, thank you so much for coming on the program. One of the things that's interesting to me is we do have three different generations, and so it's interesting like -- one of the things I'm wondering about is the narrative about disability for millennials versus Gen X versus boomers, right?

For example, we know -- I know in the mental health field, for example, or even in developmental disabilities, the word imbecile and moron were clinical terms that people used to use in the 30s and 40s and even into the 50s. And you know, obviously that's really horrible, but I'm really curious about the question about -- has the narrative about what it means to be a person with a disability kind of changed over generations? And I don't know the answer to that.

Stephane: So you know, it's interesting. My answer is going to be nuanced here because I live in the DC bubble, and having worked in this field for so long and interacting mostly with folks in my field, I would say that my vision is a little bit distorted, but I'll try to answer as best as I can.

I think the first -- I will say that overall there are encouraging signs that there is more dialogue around disability and mental illness specifically, but you know, by and large there's still a lot of way to go. There's still a long way to go.

Doug: Yeah.

Stephane: Excuse me, I wouldn't say that -- it all really started with kind of the evolution and the move away from a medicalized view of disability towards more of a social view, a social model of disability. So prior to really the world -- the global independent living movement that kind of started in the 60s and 70s and really picked up in the 80s and due to the passage of the ADA and then the CRPD, prior to all those things, as you were saying, people with disabilities were viewed as kind of like a medical case, right?

So a disability was entirely -- rested entirely on an individual's capacity or not to perform a task or to participate in society. Now, the prevailing model of disability has gone away from that and more towards a social view, which is it's -- the onus is on society to essentially adapt to somebody's physical or intellectual capabilities.

And while the rhetoric among policymakers and among rights advocates is that -- is the fact that society needs to be better at including people with disabilities, in practice it's a little bit different and I think we see -- we still see a lot of vestiges of the old school way of thinking. Like, I hear the R word used still for people with Down syndrome or even people with autism. There are still problematic portrayals of people with disabilities in TV and cinema. I feel like kids these days still don't quite get it.

# HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh

And only -- if people finally realized that people with disabilities are perfectly capable of participating adequately in society -- like, when people reach that realization it's much, much later in life. I think the problem really lies in how our kids are taught and what kids think is okay from an early age.

So it starts really in the classroom. Special education in most public schools is still very much segregated and it's still very underfunded. So kids with disabilities still aren't really given a proper shot to be fully included and among their peers.

Doug: You know, it's really interesting too -- well, of course, we throw out the word disabilities, and of course that covers such a wide range of things. You know, there's, right, obviously cognitive disabilities and there's physical disabilities.

One of the things that I wonder about is, and curious about your reflection on this, Debra, and of course Stephane -- is the role that technology is playing in -- I actually, later this afternoon, I'll be teaching a class to my students and many of them have accommodations, and one of the accommodations is -- I have a woman in the class who is deaf and I have -- I wear a little clip-on thing that goes right to her -- she has a little -- it's not a cochlear implant, but she is going to get a cochlear implant. But it basically amplifies my voice, but just to her, not to anyone else.

And I've had other things that I've done and worn and, you know, things like that, and that would not have been possible in -- it just wouldn't have been possible in the past. And so I do wonder, too, the role of technology in increasing accessibility. And Debra, I think you might have had a company around that.

Debra: Yeah.

Doug: The question about, with these new technologies, do you think that that also is going to change what it even means to have a disability?

Stephane: 100 percent. And sorry, Debra, you were going to say something.

Debra: No, no, no. No, no, Stephane, you go. And Stephane, also you can bring this up or I can. I want you to bring G3ict a little bit into this conversation because of the efforts they're making globally with that particular question.

Stephane: Sure.

Debra: Go ahead.

Stephane: So I mean, I think the role that technology has is huge and will continue to grow and more innovation is -- as innovation moves forward within the field of accessible ICT. And I would definitely be remiss to not mention my folks in

# HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh

It's not only about being partly -- I don't want to use the word responsible, but were definitely hugely influential in my desire to enter this field.

It has been a standard bearer or one of many standard bearers in the field of ICT accessibility and continue to push the idea forward among both products and services developers, such as the big multinational corporations, to policymakers. They've been very influential in pushing the idea forward that people with disabilities not only can use these technologies to improve their quality of life, but also represent a huge market segment for technology companies, and that as of a few years ago was completely ignored.

But technology has a huge role to play in all sectors of community and life engagement for people with disabilities. And I think that my generation has a very crucial role to play in innovation. And so what you're seeing in Silicon Valley and also to a certain extent on the east coast and abroad, is a lot of folks my age and younger starting tech companies and designing apps and designing devices that are really cool and really interesting, like VR devices and apps that -- apps like Uber and things of that nature; things that are really kind of like seismically shifting the way we do things as human beings.

And so I think if we can somehow get that group of people to be more conscious and more aware of designing their -- of people with disabilities, they will improve their design and change their design to be more universally -- to fit more along the universal design principles and be more user-friendly to people with disabilities, thus, helping -- thus making their services and product more accessible to the one billion people with disabilities living across the world. So I think my generation and definitely technology have a huge role to play there.

Debra: I agree and it's interesting -- I love technology. My dad -- I'm in my late 50s -- and my dad was a technologist before a lot of people knew about computers, and so I, like you, was raised in a household of really caring about technology, but also how do we make an impact on society. And so I am so hopeful about the technology and I think what's fascinating about the history, and this continues to happen with technology, is that many times when we are creating a technology or an assistive technology or something to accommodate an individual with a disability, a lot of times that innovation can be applied and positively impact the rest of society.

We have captioning. Captioning was created certainly for people that are deaf and hard of hearing, but all of society -- a lot of society is using captioning now. We created text to speech and speech to text. IBM actually created that and it was created for individuals that were quadriplegic. And then the engineers at IBM said, whoa, this is really cool. We could actually put this technology in our cars, in our phones.

# HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh

And then you go to the phones and you look at VoiceOver on Apple. And voice-over is being used pretty much by your generation, because it really makes my phone more accessible to me. So it isn't just about an individual with disabilities; it's about all of us.

I also want to go back just for a second and talk about The Arc. My family of course, you know, Sara has Down syndrome and I had an episode about that the other day -- I'm not allowed to say that in front of her. But she has a disability and we were approached by The Arc when we first moved to Virginia. And at the time, the name of the organization was The Association of Retarded Citizens.

And so I moved from Florida. We were -- I was born in Florida, my kids were born in Florida, and I moved to Virginia. And they approached me and they said, you have a daughter with a disability and do you want to get involved, and I was like, I'm sorry, but I don't like your name. I find your name offensive. And I didn't say it in a mean way, and she said, I hear you -- and this was a long time ago -- I hear what you're saying, but we've actually done quite a bit of study and we found that with our name, being at the time Association of Retarded Citizens -- I believe that was what it was.

Is that correct, Stephane? I think --

Stephane: It could be correct, but to be honest, that was before my time.

Debra: Yeah, yeah. I believe that's what it was. And because it's a very old, amazing organization, you know, it's not perfect but it's done a lot of good in its tenure.

And so she said, though, that they had done some studies at the time -- and I'm telling you this was like, gosh, 20 years ago. And they found that when they tried to use a different name, their donations went down. And I thought, okay, all right. And I just thought that was such a grounded answer and so I started getting involved with my Virginia-based chapter here in Virginia, and a few years later, they actually did change their name to The Arc.

And as Stephane mentioned, they have 600-plus agencies attached to it, affiliates, and it's -- we are trying to change. And you know, Sara being in special education, and she's 29 now, same as Stephane -- Stephane has a birthday in a couple weeks. So she's been out of school for a few years but a lot of the time, even though, air quotes, we had inclusive education, we didn't really. It really was -- there was a lot of babysitting going on, and I'm not trying to slam my school system because I think they were doing the best they could.

I think the promise of technology and the promise of what's happening with all of the generations, I think we still have a lot of growing to do, but one thing that I saw -- I was really worried as a mother about Sara being bullied when she went into middle school. I was just -- one of the things I worried about. And what was

# HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh

interesting is she never got bullied, per say. She probably -- she very rarely got bullied.

Now, her brother, who doesn't have a disability, got bullied because, you know, kids in middle school, a lot of times they bully each other. But she seemed to be off limits and I thought -- and I started noticing young people like you, Stephane, and I found that they often were very protective of her. I'm not saying that happened across the board to everybody, but I saw a lot of real beauty coming from your generation.

So I think we still obviously have a long way to go. Sometimes I think it's discouraging how far we have to go, but I'm always -- I have to be hopeful because that's who I am.

But before we started the show, Stephane, you and Doug were talking about Doug's background and I just thought you brought up such a good point. So I was wondering if you wouldn't mind, you know, asking Doug a few questions because I really liked the perspective you talked about before we started the program.

Stephane: Sure. So I mean -- so basically what Doug and I had touched briefly on is, I guess, Doug's background or his training as a therapist and then working -- in turn working in the social work sector. And so I kind of wanted to ask a couple questions.

The first being, so in your experience in social work, like, what -- who all populated -- or who all was -- who were your coworkers in the sense where like, what were their backgrounds? And for somebody who is trying to get in to social work, is it -- do you need a specific training, do you need a specific educational background or how did you -- and how did you get into it? All right, so I guess it's two questions really.

Doug: Well, you're getting me on my soap box about social work education because I do actually still teach. You know, I teach at the undergraduate and graduate level in the BSW and MSW program.

So one of the problems we have is a lot of people call themselves social workers, but they're not, in fact, social workers. They're not professionally trained. And social work becomes a title that's given to people that really have no training at all. And you know, good intentions don't produce good results. If I said to you, would you like to go see a lawyer? He didn't go to law school, but he really, really likes law. You know?

Stephane: Yeah.

Doug: Would you want that person working for you if you needed a lawyer? Probably not, right? Even if they're like, but I really love the law and I love helping people.

# HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh

You're like, well, that's wonderful, but you're not competent because you don't have training.

So you know, the answer about who I worked with, I mean I worked with many people that called themselves social workers, but had a bachelor's in sociology or criminal justice or other fields and did not have actual, formal social work training.

So I teach bachelor's in social work level and also master's in social work and a social worker -- I know of no other field where you could call yourself -- I can't call myself a physician's assistant just because I like to call myself that, right? I have to have training and licensed as a physician's assistant, or even a nursing assistant. I can't call myself a CNA unless I've gone for training.

So one of the issues and one of the problems is that I did work with many people who called themselves social workers, but in fact, really were -- maybe you could call them even service workers, but didn't really have a lot of background or education or training in social work or in human services for that matter.

Debra: So Doug, I have a question about that then. So give me some examples about why that would matter. And I'm not trying to be cheeky, but to help me understand why that would matter.

Doug: Okay. I could give you so many examples. So I used to manage -- I was a manager of two group homes, independent living homes. They weren't independent living, they were fully staffed, but -- and I had one individual, really sweet guy, he had autism, and it was the weekend and I tried not to work seven days a week, although I mostly found myself working seven days a week. And I had, like, the lead staff member in charge, and he decided it was -- this individual, let's call him Steve, right?

So Steve had autism, pretty severe. He had some pretty severe behaviors that he could exhibit if he was upset and it was -- his mother passed away several years ago and on the anniversary of his mother's death, they thought it would be a good idea to drive him to Boston to see the house where his mother used to live, but no longer lived because she passed away, where a new family lived. And to take him there and show him the house so he would understand that he needs to move on from his grief. Now, that would be a bad idea for somebody without autism.

Debra: Yeah, right. Right.

Doug: Right? Like, that's just an insensitive, stupid thing to do, but for Steve, he ended up -- the door was open, the front door was open, but the glass -- there was a glass pane in front of the door and he ran right through the glass pane into this person's house and I had to go get him from the police department where they were

# HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh

holding him because they didn't know what to do with him, in handcuffs in a cell. So that's why it matters.

Debra: That's a really good example. It's a terrible example.

Doug: Yeah.

Stephane: And that's actually -- and let me make a shameless plug for some of the work that we're doing specifically in the field of criminal justice and disability. That's a huge -- there's a lot of dialogue happening within the disability community and even outside of it related to, I guess, the way people with disabilities are treated in custody and then eventually tried, and kind of the access to justice that people with disabilities have in the States.

You know, for example, I believe Eric Garner, the gentlemen in New York who was choked to death had at least, one disability that I know of but, again was kind of immediately surrounded by police and treated in such a way that nobody should be treated, but definitely not somebody with a disability should be treated and eventually he died from it.

Debra: Yeah, and it was the terrible story --

Stephane: Go ahead.

Debra: There was a terrible story in Maryland about the man with Down Syndrome that wanted to watch the movie again and he wouldn't leave and his case worker or his assistant had left for a minute and he wouldn't leave and he got belligerent. They called the police and the police didn't mean to kill him, but as they were getting him down to the ground, they accidentally killed him.

Stephane: Right.

Debra: And he just wanted to watch the movie again and wouldn't have hurt anybody, but you know -- anyway, go ahead, Stephane, I'm sorry.

Stephane: And it's very -- coming from a disability's perspective, I have a clear lean on, you know, where -- how people should be better trained and how policies should be in place to prevent that kind of abuse. But on the other side for the police and social law enforcement and for fire departments across the U.S., it's also very -- it's a tough call for them.

Debra: Right.

Stephane: I mean, like in the case of Steve for example, like, how can one -- if I'm an officer who is responding to that call, my immediate thought is okay, well, this person just committed a breaking and entering, so I should arrest him and, you know, not

# HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh

really question whether that person -- what the person's motives were or whether that person has a disability or why they, in fact, ran through that glass door and into this person's house.

So it's kind of a tough call, but The Arc is doing a lot of work in providing that type of, kind of, awareness raising and training for police departments across the U.S., to essentially have folks ask that question when they're making an arrest or when they're questioning somebody. It's like, okay so what are -- is this person exhibiting any signs of maybe having an intellectual or developmental disability? Like, what is happening? Being aware of the different signs or different kind of behaviors that would indicate that that person does have that kind of disability, and if they do, how to kind of tailor their approach, because that could save a lot of lives and a lot of hardship.

In Steven's case, I'm sure he was terrified and I'm sure that his remaining family was pretty upset by what happened.

Doug: Yeah, and you know they're -- I mean, on the flipside of it, I remember taking him to Toys R Us because he wanted -- he was obsessed with the Malibu Barbie dream plane and he just --

Debra: Me too.

Doug: You know, we talked about --

Stephane: Who wasn't?

Doug: -- what's developmentally appropriate and everything, but he loved -- he would draw -- he was a really good artist. He actually ended up getting an exhibit in New York City. He's a really good artist and so he liked drawing pictures of them, so I would get them for him because he liked to draw them. But I took him to Toys R Us and he wanted the Malibu -- he wanted this plane that was like 400 dollars, you know? And trying to explain to him that you can't have a 400-dollar plane right now, and that didn't go over well so he took it and he ran out the store with it, you know?

So I'm running after him and then the Toys R Us employee is running after me because he thinks that we both are like -- are cohorts in this spree. He doesn't know that I'm chasing after him to return the thing, he thinks we're both, like, running out of the -- you know, we've committed this --

Stephane: Great plane heist, yeah.

Doug: And the police were really good about it. You know, the police in the mall stopped him and calmed him down and we got him a less expensive thing and they were very, very good. So you know, I don't want to say that there aren't

# HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh

police officers in law enforcement that aren't sensitive to understanding needs of disabilities, and you don't need a degree in social work to do that.

The problem is that -- the problem that I experienced in working in -- part of it was the wages that are paid to direct service, and so you're not able a lot of times to get really quality people, and then there's such turnover. So it's more about -- you know, it's not the case that you need to have a degree in social work in order to work with people with disabilities, but I think you just need at least the motivation and the ability to educate yourself or be open to having some education about how to best work with individuals with disabilities.

Debra: I agree.

Stephane: Right.

Debra: I agree. I know that we're almost out of time, but, Stephane, I'd like to ask you one more question.

Stephane: Sure.

Debra: One thing that I've always been drawn to you, but -- and the reason why is because you just seemed to really, really care about making a positive social impact. And I don't know if it's the people that I'm just naturally around, but I see so many millennials that I'm around, really wanting to make a difference, and it might be just where I happen to be playing, but it seems like your generation really does care about social impact and social good.

And I was just wondering if you wouldn't mind addressing that from your perspective.

Stephane: So that's a great question, and to a certain extent I agree with you, and I think it begins with I guess access to information. I think that the fact that we are constantly surrounded, bombarded, by information is really something that kind of started with the rise of the internet. And my generation was one of the first generations to actually grow up with the internet in the house and access to information like that. And so I think that fundamentally shifted the way we think about things and the way we, you know -- what things we care about.

I remember I had -- I had just completed a master's degree at UMass Boston and as one of my electives, I chose to take a nonprofit management course, and in that course, we had an entire session dedicated to the study of motivation. So like what -- you know, what motivates people, what can a manager do to incentivize or not their -- I guess, their staff to perform better. And it turns gone are the days where money was the sole motivator and the sole way of incentivizing people to do a better job. A lot of people these days -- and there have been plenty of studies done, and I think Harvard Business Review published several articles on this.

# HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh

These days it's much more about believing in the product or believing in the cause, that really drives people to perform better.

See, a lot of people in my generation and younger really are drawn to different places of work or different careers based on the impact or the perceived impact they can have, and about what are the -- what is the social value of what they're doing.

So it's really -- and I attribute that sentiment or that kind of -- the new way of motivating oneself to the fact that we have access to information and we're able to, with the opening of the information channels like that, you kind of like -- your consciousness expands and your ability to think about different things expands. And so that's why I think we're just motivated differently.

Debra: Yeah, great answer. Great answer. Well, I know we're out of time. Doug, thank you for joining and, Stephane, thank you for joining. I think the audience can see why we invited Stephane to be on the program. Young man, about to turn 30 years old that you're going to hear a lot from because he's very dedicated to making a big difference in the world.

So before we end the program, Stephane, I know that we talked about G3ict and I just want to give the URL for that, which is [www.G3ict.org](http://www.G3ict.org) and, Stephane, do you mind giving The Arc's website too so that people can -- if they are not familiar with it they can check out the amazing work being done by The Arc?

Stephane: Sure. The website for The Arc is [www.thearc.org](http://www.thearc.org). And you'll find all the information related to our programs, as well as our advocacy services, and you can even -- I think there are a couple links where you can find your local chapter in the event that you have a friend or family member, or yourself, advocate yourself, that's looking for support services.

So thank you so much, Debra, and Doug, for having me on the program and I look forward to continuing to listen to your podcast.

Debra: Thank you.

Doug: Thank you.

Debra: And Stephane, one more thing. If somebody wants to follow you on social media, do you mind giving your social media handles?

Stephane: Sure. So my Twitter account, and you'll have to forgive me I'm not super active on Twitter, is @Sclblois, and I'm also on Facebook and on LinkedIn; just look up my name. I think there's maybe two of us in the world so we're definitely a rare breed. But yeah, please feel free to drop me a line or ask me a question.

# HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - **Debra Ruh**

Debra: Okay, Stephane, thank you so much, and Doug, thanks for joining the program today.

Hello. Thank you for listening to Human Potential at Work. If you're interested in exploring a conversation about my work, I would love for you to visit me on my website at [www.RuhGlobal.com](http://www.RuhGlobal.com) or you can follow me on most social media platforms at Debra Ruh. I'm available to speak, to provide strategic consulting and certainly to talk to any brand about the social impact you're having as a brand influencer. Thank you so much for your time and for helping me make a difference in the world.