



## Episode 26 – Disability inclusion in the workplace (Part 2): Narratives, reasonable adjustments, and the business case for accessibility, with Samantha Renke

**Ellie:**

Before we share today's episode, we wanted to give our listeners a quick content warning. We'll be discussing some challenging themes relating to disability discrimination, which some listeners might find distressing. With that in mind, we would advise listener discretion as to whether you feel comfortable listening to this episode.

Hi and welcome to the Work Couch Podcast, your fortnightly deep dive into all things employment. Brought to you by the award-winning employment team at law firm RPC, we discuss the whole spectrum of employment law with the emphasis firmly on people.

My name is Ellie Gelder and I'm a senior editor in the employment equality and engagement team here at RPC and I will be your host as we explore the constantly evolving and consistently challenging world of employment law and all the curveballs that it brings to businesses today. We hope by the end of this podcast that you'll feel better prepared to respond to these people challenges in a practical, commercial and inclusive way.

At this time of year, we're marking a number of disability awareness dates, including Disability [History Month](#), which started on the 14th of November, the theme of which this year is disability, livelihood and employment. And we also look forward to [International Day of Persons with Disabilities](#) on the 3rd of December.

So today, in the second part of our three-part Disability Inclusion at Work mini-series, we are exploring the narrative around disability, the financial pressures facing the disability community, making reasonable adjustments for employees with disabilities, and why disability inclusion should be a priority for the C-suite and business leaders.

And joining me to share her own experiences and insights, I am thrilled to welcome back Samantha Renke -actress, broadcaster, writer, and disability rights campaigner.

Sam, thank you so much for joining us again today!

**Samantha:**

Pleasure to be back again!

**Ellie:**

Sam, in part 1 last time we talked about what disability and ableism means and the consequential marginalisation of people with disabilities. Do you think the way in which disability is presented in the media, while often well-meaning, is actually perpetuating that marginalisation?

**Samantha:**

Yeah, so we have something called inspiration porn and yes, porn, I use that word. And it was coined by an activist with the same condition as me actually, Stella Young. She sadly is no longer with us. She did a Ted talk, you can Google it on YouTube. I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much. But essentially she coined this term inspiration porn to identify how disabled people are constantly objectified in society. So we can look at objectification in terms of, you know, objects of inspiration. So, my goodness, you know, aren't they amazing? They, you know, got up and walked for the first time. Or aren't those Paralympians amazing? You know, they're pushing their bodies. Or on the other side, you know, we can be objectified as, they're benefits scroungers. They are a drain on society because they're asking for help. I actually thought about this the other day because I'm an animal lover. And I was just like, how can we go from loving babies who are completely, completely dependent, aren't they? Babies, they can't do anything. Even animals, like they're so dependent. And sometimes, you know, I am dependent on other people because of disability and because of ableism. But in society, me asking for help is seen as a burden rather than, you know what, let's just help someone who needs help, like a baby.

**Samantha:** But I just, you know, the transition from being a disabled child in particular to a disabled adult is so shocking because of this objectification. You know, we go from the cute children in need, let's help these vulnerable kids to, my God, what, you want your home adapted? You want to work from home, do you? You want a ramp putting in, you know, that real hostility. So inspiration porn essentially identifies that disabled people often objectified either to use disabled people as a scapegoat, as we often see in politics, or to make non-disabled people feel good about themselves. So before I became a public figure and before people recognised me, strangers would come up to me in the street and say, what I would say, let's call them ableist microaggressions, guess. You go, my goodness, you're so inspirational. And never really understood how to approach that and I just used to, you know, I was quite a polite child and teenager and I'd be like, thank you. And then as I started to unpack it, I was like, well, hang on a minute. I might be a horrible person. I'm a Capricorn. I can be vicious at times, like, you know what I mean?

You know, but what you, but essentially what those people were doing were they're looking at my situation as a physically disabled woman in a chair or a teenager in a chair saying gosh, if I were like that I don't know whether I would cope or saying that I recognise that your life must be challenging. Whether they recognise that because of harmful stereotypes or misinformation or whether they truly recognise that you know what, it must be quite difficult because I can, you know, I walk past a building site every day and they've locked off the drop curbs. Whatever that is, but instead of actually becoming a true ally, instead of going, hang on a minute, your life must be challenging, how can I help? How can I remove those barriers? How can I support you? How can I not make you feel like a problem? they say, you inspire me and then walk away and they probably have a conversation with a partner at night and go, do you know what, darling, you know that argument we had the other day, let bygones be bygones because actually I saw this poor child in a wheelchair today and at least we're not like that, at least our children are fit and healthy. first of all, disabled lives are not a tragedy. We don't want to be objectified. Why are we not actually challenging the law, challenging the Equality Act because it's not fit for purpose, why aren't we challenging that or supporting people in a more tangible, constructive way?

**Ellie:** I think that's a really interesting insight and I've learned a lot from you explaining that. And also employers and colleagues, they also need to bear in mind the huge financial pressure on many people with disabilities. And I know you've talked a lot about this. So can you just give us an insight into some of those pressures that people are contending with? Which I guess may also impact their wellbeing.

**Samantha:** Yeah, I think whenever we're talking about barriers, you know, and when whenever I go into a firm, you know, to kind of look at how we can ensure that they're disabled and neurodivergent staff members have a you know, an equal an equal, working experience, you know, whenever I do that, I kind of tell people, you know, it's not about just when they go into your office space.

Not about, yeah, that's a big part of it. So, ensuring that there's step-free access, ensuring that there's quiet rooms, ensuring that there's accessible bathrooms, ensuring that internally there is staff training and so on and so on. But we have to look at it in a holistic way because as you rightly said, being disabled costs a lot of money and I think there's again a real misconception that the government just pays for a lot of the things that disabled people need. I believe on average, the charity Scope did a research, believe on average disabled people on average spend close to a thousand pounds, so think it's nine hundred and seventy four pounds. I think it went up during the pandemic and during the cost-of-living crisis, but let's say a thousand pounds. And what does that look like? So, for example, for me, I would have to pay for additional support. I would have to pay for clothes to be altered because there are actually, I know that I this in your, when I did the talk, that we have the largest spending power of the disability community, which is worth eight trillion globally, the purple pound, but there's actually more clothes lines out there for dogs and cats than there are for disabled people.

**Ellie:** Let's move on now to making reasonable adjustments for a colleague with a disability, and the relevant factors that employers need to be aware of that may be behind a person's request for adjustments.

**Samantha:** So I give a scenario. So say if you're welcoming someone into your office space and they've asked for a reasonable adjustment and that might be a start a late late starting time and why is that is that because they're lazy no because actually you know having a disability would mean there's a lot of barriers that that would potentially interrupt your ability to get to work on time for me for example if my support person doesn't turn up to work and that happens quite a lot. We undervalue, we underpay support staff and that means that you don't necessarily always get the best people for the job. If I for example have a pain spike the night before and I have to take pain meds that might mean in the morning I am lethargic or I'm dizzy or even I can experience nausea in the morning because of the pain meds so I need to incorporate that. When I lived in London, one of my first jobs was volunteering. I really struggled getting a paid job because of the barriers that we're going to talk about, a lot of the kind of attitudes that I wouldn't be able to do the job. But I started volunteering at a wonderful charity. But I used to have to get the bus. And the amount of times

where the wheelchair space was taken up, the amount of times where bus drivers would refuse to stop and get the ramp out. You know, so all these things that you have to factor, you know, going on the underground, it's less going to be out of service. You know, all these things that you have to bear in mind. So, you know, I sometimes work with organisations and there can be a little bit of hostility when someone comes in and goes, right, I want to work a little bit later, you know, and maybe someone's like, well, I've got kids, I wish I could work a little bit later.

And I get that, I understand that. think what we have to understand is we all have our battles to fight. And so long as an employer allows reasonable adjustments to be available for everybody and not just make it a disability thing, I think this is the right way to go. So, you know, everyone should have access to flexible working hours. Everyone should have the opportunity to, you know, if need, if need is, know, to kind of have that flexibility or you know, have notes ahead of meetings, you know, so there's, so what is often packaged up as special treatment actually should be just universal policies within all workplaces. And I think, again, this really harbours a negative, harmful view on disability that disabled people are asking for above and beyond. This is why I really, this is why I really, don't like euphemisms like special, special toilets, but what's so special about going to the toilet what's so special about wanting to access my local GP service or what's so special about me wanting to go to work like my peers you know there's nothing special so stop again putting the onus medical model you're the problem.

A lot of the abuse that I've had online is this kind of, well, you get special treatment. I really don't see it like that. There's no special about it. It's just understanding that individual needs and giving us other options because our bodies, our minds, our ability to function in a disabling world doesn't always work or benefit us.

And for years and years and years, we've tried to mould ourselves to fit into your world, but now we're saying, actually, that's detrimental to my health and my mental health, my physical health. If you want me to perform, if you want me to be the best person that I can be and be an asset to your company, to your school, to your university, then you have to understand that we cannot rise up to what your standards are. Maybe you can rise up to my standards.

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**Ellie:** Yeah and just looking at disability through the intersectional lens now, you wrote an article last year on the assumptions that some people make about your ability to have a family which really highlighted that sort of extra layer of prejudice that you encounter as a disabled woman.

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**Samantha:** Yeah, it's been quite journey for me. And I think I kind of like offloaded a lot again when I wrote the book, it was very cathartic for me, but I kind of made the point that, you know, I was never I'd never been asked by a family or friend if I was dating anyone. And I've never been asked if I wanted to have children. And it was only until I kind of had a little bit of a meltdown. And I mean it like I had a mental health crisis, you know. And I was like, you know, why are constantly infantilising me? Why aren't you helping me get to my dream of becoming a mother? Or why don't you take an interest? Because you're your own unconscious bias that, you know, just because I'm disabled, I shouldn't or wouldn't want the same things as other non-disabled women. And that was quite heartbreaking for me. I don't think people come into these situations with malice. I don't think they come into them... wanting to hurt but let's talk about the fascination with disability and language and one of my biggest questions is what language can we, we don't want to insult, we don't want to upset and maybe I need to ask this, what makes you think or tell me of an interaction that you've had that makes you so paranoid and so fearful to get it wrong because most disabled people that I know and that sounds really cliché but because of work that I do I do know a lot of disabled people. I do engage with my community a lot and I would say 98% of us wouldn't care. if you said the wrong word or would be quite open to having conversations with you and wouldn't be, you know, annoyed about that. All we want is to be treated as you would treat any other human being, you know, give us that respect. I kind of, find it really interesting how is it, maybe I'm going to run a tangent here, this fearfulness of not treating disabled people as you just would anyone else because of fear of making a mistake, saying the wrong thing. So for example, you know, not inviting a disabled person to your birthday party because you're worried about access, you know, at your house, something like that. I always say, you know, not getting to know that individual as a human being and identifying that we've all got the same kind of problems in our lives is actually further marginalising us. Is it because you have a genuine, you've either had a really bad experience where a disabled person called you out and was like, how dare you? And that might have happened because not all disabled people are angelic human beings, we're human beings at the end of the day, or is it because staying in ignorance is actually quite easy? Does that make sense? Like being apathetic towards undoing your own biases, it's easier, isn't it? Maybe you need to say the wrong thing. Maybe you need to, maybe you, maybe you need to put yourself in a bit of an uncomfortable place and recognise that disabled people are just people at the end of the day and have that conversation. Or is it because you prefer just to be an ignorant and kind of, and kind of make out that you're being the nicer person by just not saying the...you know, not saying the wrong thing, you're taking the moral high ground. And I think how that links in with intersectionality is we often place the disability ahead of the person. And I know in the UK, because we believe in the social model quite strongly, we would often refer to ourselves as disabled person with a capital D, because essentially, you know, a lot of disabled people go, if you get rid of the

word disabled, or if you start...you know, using euphemisms like, handicapable, differently abled and all this, are we not eliminating the barriers that we face? If you stop saying, well, disability is dirty word, let's not use it. Maybe we need to say it even louder because we live in a disabling world. And I know that across the globe, person with a disability is more preferred because there is that emphasis on the individual and that is because we've gone away from understanding a disability through the welfare lens in favour of a more humanistic lens. Less about what medical terminology and more about individual needs. So understanding that disabled people, even if they've got the same condition, they'll have different lived experiences and giving them agency and giving them autonomy ultimately.

**Ellie:** And I mentioned in my intro, Sam, that disability inclusion at work is, or it should be, a key priority for all businesses. So can you explain why the C-suite, why business leaders need to prioritise making their workplaces, their products and their services accessible for everyone?

**Samantha:** Well, I mean, not only because we live in a capitalist consumer society, so that's one of the main reasons. We've got the largest untapped market, 8 trillion globally. So if that doesn't get you jumping and thinking about our needs as a consumer, a lot of Fortune 500 companies, they've absolutely grabbed the purple pound. They're like, we love disabled people. But we are the fastest growing underserved or minority group out there but having a disability does impact us all, we've got an aging population you know and that's going to cause quite a big shift in how many disabled people there are globally you know and there's so many different factors like we are recognising stigma around disability, we're recognising different conditions and we're recognising also the impact of mental health concerns and how that actually under the definition of the Equality Act that is, know, you like myself, I battle with anxiety. I also battle PTSD from past trauma, sexual assault and also past medical traumas. And I would say in many ways that can impact my ability to do things more so than my physical disability on many, many levels. So essentially, you know, we will all experience disability, whether you identify with that term, disabled disability or not, you know, you're lawyers, so you will always refer to well, are you protected under this definition under the law?

So whether that individual even identifies with being neurodivergent or being disabled, you know, lot of deaf people don't identify with being disabled because they see deafness as a completely different part of their identity and a culture, a rich culture, and they don't see that in any way associated with disability. But I guess under the Equality Act, if you were hard of hearing or deaf, then you would be protected under...Equality Act, know, so it's really again, it's really subjective. Of course it is, but I think it's really important because we're not going anywhere., one in five households have a connection to someone who is disabled. And actually, if you if you discriminate against us that has a ripple effect, because let's look at it on a human level. We are humans. are, you know, sisters, brothers, lovers, teachers, parents, you know we are all those things. if you discriminate against that individual, you discriminate against their immediate network, their external network, you know, so creating a more equitable world benefits everyone and for Americans act for disabled people. One of their biggest kind of uncoverings is a term called curb cut effect. So essentially what they found was, you know, like drop curbs, as we call them in the UK, know, drop curbs were invented for people with mobility issues or wheelchair users. What they found is they benefited everyone in society almost. They benefited parents and caregivers with push chairs.

They benefited people who were on bikes or on skateboards. They benefited delivery guys or girls. So this little kind small implementation that was specifically for disabled people actually had a really positive impact on the wider society. We could see that with, have you got assistant technology at home? Has anyone got an Alexa? Have you got a Google Hub? You know, that technology initially was designed for disabled people in mind. But then, but then it became, you know, kind of a universal product. You know, the electric toothbrush is another example. So I think we need to understand that disabled people are great thinkers. are innovators. But we aren't often given the level playing field. So I just think there's such an untapped market out there of talent and wealth of talent and thinkers and game changers and trailblazers. And I think it's an unjust world still where we're not affording them that level playing field. Having a diverse workforce is the only way that you're going to have, you know, the highest productivity ultimately, because that, we reflect the demographic of the world. And also, if you were to follow me around in one day, even if I wasn't doing anything extraordinary, you'd be like, my goodness, I didn't think about that. Or, my goodness, gosh yeah, that was clever how you did that. Or, you know? And I just think, even me just pottering around my home, if someone were to follow me, I'm sure someone could make a lot of money out of some of the things that I do, just how I am a problem solver.

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- Ellie:** Yeah, exactly. It's going back to the innovation and diversity of thought that we always say when we're diversity of thought, giving everybody that opportunity to contribute and that ultimately will future-proof your business.
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- Samantha:** That's the term. Divert your thought. There you go. Thank you.
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- Ellie:** So I think you've provided us with so many compelling reasons for businesses to really drive forward disability inclusion. And thank you for sharing your invaluable insights into the lived experience as well, Sam. It's been really fascinating. And I'm thrilled to say you're going to be joining us again in part three. So we'll be looking at how employers can actually implement genuine accessibility at work. We really look forward to picking up the conversation then, Sam.
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- Samantha:** Thank you again for having me.
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- Ellie:** We hope you'll join us again next time in the concluding part of this mini-series. In the meantime, for anyone listening who would like further information or support, a great place to start is [Scope's website](#), which has lots of brilliant resources for people who are facing some of the challenges that Sam's talked about today. Also, [Disability Rights UK](#) and just informal chat, solidarity with your online communities is a great place to start.
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- Ellie:** If you would like to revisit anything we discussed today, you can access transcripts of every episode of The Work Couch podcast by going to our website: [www.rpclegal.com/theworkcouch](http://www.rpclegal.com/theworkcouch). Or, if you have questions for me or Sam or perhaps suggestions of topics you would like us to cover on a future episode of The Work Couch, please get in touch by emailing us at [theworkcouch@rpclegal.com](mailto:theworkcouch@rpclegal.com).  
Thank you all for listening and we'll see you next time .



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