Transcript for S12 E7 - Harnessing inclusion for a better society with Ryan Curtis-Johnson

Jen Sproul (00:42)

Hello everybody and welcome to another episode of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I am Jen Sproul, Chief Executive of IoIC and as always joined by my co-hosts Cathryn Barnard and Dominic Walters. I'm really pleased to introduce today's podcast. I think it's a really important and also very practical and a real opportunity for internal communication to make such a difference in this space where we're to be really talking about harnessing inclusion for a better society.

And to help us with that conversation, we're really, really thrilled to be joined by Ryan Curtis-Johnson, who is Chief Communication Officer at the Valuable 500. So Ryan, welcome and thank you for having us. Did you want to give a description of yourself?

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (01:26)

Yeah, thank you for having me and hello to everyone. So yeah, my name is Ryan Curtis-Johnson. I'm a white male. I'm wearing black rimmed glasses. I've got naturally blonde highlighted hair. If you believe that, you'll believe anything. I'm wearing a beige velvet jacket over a black roll-neck. I'm sat down and in behind me is just my kitchen where there is some flowers on a worktop surface.

Jen Sproul (01:48)

Thank you, well, and to follow that, shall add my description as well. So I am a white female with dodgy blonde highlights to cover the grey with wearing a white jumper with a striped collar sat down as well in an office with just a white wall behind me. And I'm also wearing browned rimmed glasses. Dominic, can ask you to do the same?

Dominic Walters (02:07)

Hello, I'm Dominic Walters. I'm a white male at the wrong side of 55 with receding hair, dark glasses and what I like to think is a stylish beard but actually looks like a mess on my face. I'm in the same room as Jen so I have the same background which is a white wall in office.

Jen Sproul (02:24)

Cat can I ask you to do the same as well please?

Cathryn Barnard (02:28)

Yes absolutely but I feel like I've just entered Comedy Central. Dominic always makes me laugh which is not a good thing. So I'm Cat Barnard and I am a white female riffing the highlight thing. I too use highlights to touch up the grey and I today am wearing a multi-colour stripe jumper and I'm sat in my home office and on the back wall is a painting of a street in Paris.

Jen Sproul (02:59)

Brilliant. Thank you everybody. So Ryan, as I say, is, Ryan and I, we've known each other, I think it's coming on for, could be eight, nine years or so by now. I think we met, didn't we, when we met during sort of the production side of internal communication, worked together on a number of projects back in the day, particularly for IoIC Conference as it was.

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (03:10)

Yeah, I think it is. It is.

Jen Sproul (03:22)

And Ryan, obviously I'm going to come on and ask you little bit about the Valuable 500 in a minute during then, but I think that one thing is every time we've met and you've hosted so many fantastic panel discussions at the IoIC Festival, and this passion to highlight how we can make a difference by building better inclusion in the workplaces and with that the opportunity the internal communications have to make sure there is more inclusion.

Ryan, I know we've always had so much passion for this topic wherever we've met, but can I ask over to you really to kick us off to explain a little bit more about the Valuable 500 and what's its purpose and kind of what you're really focused in on.

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (03:57)

Yeah, totally, 100%. Well, thank you for having me and it's always great to catch up with old friends and new friends. The Valuable 500 is quite a unique organisation. We are a charity. We are the largest global CEO network. I say that we're second to the UN, so we're happy to be second to that. Now, that all started in 2020 when Caroline Casey, our founder, who is registered blind, went about, she describes herself as a troublemaker and activist, but wanted to end the CEO silence when it came to disability inclusion in business. So Valuable 500 set upon the hard task of getting 500 CEOs to commit to end disability exclusion. And that was achieved. And she did that at the World Economic Forum and with the support of Paul Polman, who was then CEO of Unilever, who is still our chair of our advisory board. And

we also have Jeff Dodds as our chair of the foundation board. And we're led by Katy Talikowska, who's our CEO. And we're really trying to, you know, we understand that this is tricky for businesses to navigate, but we want to bring connection and collaboration with both businesses and organisations.

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (05:10)

But also with the disability community and disabled talent to kind of end that kind of silence, but also as well, educate, provide insight, share knowledge, but also as well improve on three key areas, which are our objectives, which is all inclusive leadership, inclusive reporting, and also inclusive representation. They're are three synchronised collective actions.

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (05:37)

To give a real quick summary of what synchronised collective action is, it's like a murmuration. If we imagine birds of prey or fish in the sea, it's all moving in the same direction to the same destination, but you can be at different parts of that journey. So not anyone is leading the way. You might be leading in some ways, but you could be in the middle or at the back or only just starting. But the key is you are part of that journey and you are starting that. And that's our key mission as we run our first accountability summit in Tokyo on the 3rd of December this year, which is Sync 25. And that will be our first accountability summit where we'll come together as a business in Tokyo to be accountable.

Jen Sproul (06:18)

Ryan, that's fantastic. And there is just so much going on there. And I like the way you clearly described everything. And it is that those three areas of inclusive leadership, reporting and representation. And it's really important as well, and the aims that set up. Do you think we're having enough conversation about disability? Have you seen that change?

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (06:36)

I think it's one where it's two camps. There's that nervousness, there's that worry about saying the wrong thing, getting it wrong, not doing anything. If I keep quiet, we'll get good at it first, then we'll start talking about it. And I get it, it is hard to navigate. And there is no magic wand to making it right. But the key is if you say nothing and do nothing, you are really not being inclusive. And I think what we've seen over the years, not just taking disability inclusion, but other minority groups that have been penalised or left outside of conversations in boardrooms or collateral or representation, it's no longer good enough. And so when we look from a workforce, a cultural side, it's so important to be having these conversations, to be accountable.

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (07:31)

But for a lot of businesses, it's uncomfortable. There's a fear factor to it. There's fear of getting it wrong, the fear of not doing enough. And so they're conversations that we probably have on a regular basis. And then we have conversations with people that are really doing it and they're owning it and they're owning their mistakes and they're owning accountability. And that's progression. But I think it's a really tricky one. And then when you take in the global regional side, it's really different in different parts of the world. So we have to also take that, that not one model fits all. And that's why it has to be really personalised to the organisation. But let's learn from each other and understand the strengths within an organisation. And personally, for me, internal comms people have such an important role in this, in messaging and building and hearing and listening and the touch feel elements to understanding a culture within an organisation and they have the ear of the top as well.

Jen Sproul (08:28)

Absolutely.

Dom Walters (08:28)

Ryan, one of the things we'd like to do in these podcasts is to give practical advice to communication practitioners. And so it'd be interesting to go back over how anybody, I suppose, makes a case for inclusion as something that should be on a business leader's agenda. Particularly, as I guess I get the feel, I'm interested you'll take on this as well, that it's one of those issues that people have said this is important. It's got lots of influential people behind it. It's acquired a momentum. And I think as often happens, we're now at the point where people are starting to critique it, question it, maybe you start to see a bit of reaction against DEI and that sort of thing. So I guess two questions. One is, what's your take on that sort of stage? And secondly, let's go back over why inclusion is such an important business issue.

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (09:10)

Totally. I think there's two sides to it. We've got to think about in every organisation, every business, there's the business case and there's just the morally human right thing to do. And so actually sometimes they will fight each other in that and actually they shouldn't because we know morally it's the right thing to do. And what we always say and what I always say with various different organisations, businesses, corporates that we talk to is what's good for business is good for society.

And what's right for society often is right for business. So they actually work hand in hand and work very closely together. But if we wait for legislation, policies and all of these sort of things, we'll be waiting a very long time because of the time it takes to get those through. So business have a great opportunity to really focus on this and really be able to make changes. Now, I think to go back to the point that you made.

We're seeing lots of stuff in the news where DE &I is being cancelled. It's being sort of taken down a priority list. We're seeing teams being made redundant, et cetera. And we're seeing a pushback. I think we're at a point now where as consumers, when we look at the audiences, the public, they're no longer silenced. They have a voice and they're not afraid to use it anymore. And so businesses no longer really have that opportunity to be able to live in non-glass houses where they can project out one thing and then internally do something very differently. So these organisations, I think, that we are seeing and cancelling that will see a knock on effect. And we've already seen that with some of these organisations where people are already saying, I'm coming off platforms or there's a strike against it or there's an increase in recruitment issues and it will cost the business in the long term.

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (10:58)

But I think, as always, in all of these different things, there is no model that fits all of it. And I think sometimes it's a progressive thing and it's a, is it a headline spin? Is it trying to be different? And there's lots of different things happening in the world with new leadership coming into play in certain countries that actually is that beneficial to be a bit more progressive in that because of that leadership that's coming in and that will support them financially with more backing or support, who knows?

We're not privy to those conversations. But I would definitely say that there are so many organisations that are not making a big noise about it and singing and dancing and shouting about it, who are doing wonderful things and actually being more progressive because they're sharing free resource. So it doesn't matter if their competitors come along and want to download their neurodivergency plan or strategy or strategic approach, they're offering it free of charge for everyone to come and download.

That's where we see collaborative approach and inclusiveness because it's you take away the competitiveness of business. It's not about that. It's about this is right morally and the human element. We're dealing with humans when it comes to this.

Dom Walters (12:07)

Also, it would be very interesting just to go back over some of the production benefits of inclusion because you've spoken brilliantly about the reputational aspect of it and say, if you don't do this, you're going to get a backlash against. But I guess going back even further than that, there are some very fundamental business principles at stake here about using your resources effectively, I put it bluntly.

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (12:29)

Yeah, yeah, 100%.

Dom Walters (12:30)

Let me take your take on that. Why is that so important? Why is inclusion so important when it comes to that side of managing your business?

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (12:36)

I think it's really important because if you really want to do inclusion right and you align yourself to a really simple one, most businesses and organisations align themselves to the Sustainable Development Growth Goals, which is done by the UN. If we break them down, and I have spent a lot of time looking at them, SDG 10 is about people and inequalities. So if you as an organisation are saying, we follow the Sustainable Development Growth Goals of the UN and we are aligned to that, yet you are then not taking inclusion and accessibility seriously, then you're actually not following any of those SDGs. So it's really important to understand and again, there is a level of ignorance when it comes to thinking about inclusion and accessibility. So when we're thinking about how we're putting our communications out, how we're doing our town halls, are we providing captions, is there alt text on the imagery, is the text and the design an inclusive design with the colour in the overlap of layer and text? Now these are all extra layers added and businesses will often say, well, that comes at a cost. It will come at more of a cost if you are penalising someone who cannot consume that content that you are trying to provide or they cannot read that information, especially if it's an important notice. And to kind of remind us without a sort of shuddering of that issue that we had during covid where we were having briefings from our government and there was no live, captions, but there was also no one sign language, no British sign language provided, yet in Scotland and Wales there was.

So we can really see how was someone supposed to understand those messages. So we can see the importance of it. So I think for me, it's about business is so good about making risks of what they invest in, what they align to. This is just another thing where it's even more risk if you're not doing it. And why wouldn't you? Why would you want to say, I don't want this person to be able to consume it? It's about best practice.

Dom Walters (14:34)

And I'll pass over to Cat in a second, but I think also looking at it from a point of view of the IoIC being a professional body saying the job of communicators is to help people make

sense of stuff, then we should be at the forefront of inclusion for that number of other reasons, but not least because of that reason.

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (14:49)

Absolutely. And surely it doesn't just make our roles as communicators and especially in internal communicators even more important for it. And you actually level up on skill set because if you are ignorant, it's human, if it doesn't affect you, you're not aware of it. And so, I live and breathe this not only in personal life with two children who are neurodivergent, I'm neurodivergent myself. But in a business side and speaking with different organisations is in everything we do. And that's best practice now. That's just embedded in. Make it part of the DNA, as you would a risk assessment, as you would about crisis communications, as you would about HR when onboarding someone or exiting someone. There are so many processes in place that we do and it just feels like this, and we're all guilty of it, has been missed. And I find it fundamentally, quite hard to get my head around sometimes as to why we've missed it.

Cathryn Barnard (15:48)

And I would just like to chime in. There's a big, big elephant in the room of risk here, which is that in the global north, the number of people of working age is slowly shrinking due to falling birth rates and people living for longer and needing health care and social care as they progress into their 70s, 80s, 90s. So to exclude people with disability from the workplace is kind of a own goal because actually that restricts your access to people who could contribute value to your organisation even further. And then the other thing that I just find really interesting is, and I do think it is really interesting that the headlines that dominate are myopically overly focused on the big American social media platforms and I'm going to just put my head above the parapet and say, it's interesting to read that somebody like Mark Zuckerberg is rowing back on DE &I when in actual fact, one could argue, well, to what extent did he ever embrace it given the extent to which the company is made up of white middle-class, well-educated men? There's a question there.

But my point is on the topic of hybrid, how many people were employed during a period where exec teams had perhaps more of an open-minded approach to flexible working who are now being told, oh no, you've got to come back into the office when that was never part of the social contract that underpinned the employment contract.

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (17:45)

That one will always be the one that shocks me the most in the sense of to build any culture and to be fully inclusive, having people physically in a room is not the way around it because it doesn't fit for everyone. Yes, for some people, and don't get me wrong, I am a firm

believer that human contact is really important, but we need to show inclusivity with that and what inclusion looks like and flexibility and reasonable adjustments and accommodation.

I take you back again and I've shuddered you back there twice now. This will be the second time. When Covid hit in 2020, within 20 days, businesses turned digital. Now, these were businesses that said you couldn't work from home. When we think about the finance industry and all of those, within 20 days, we turned. So people who had been fighting for reasonable adjustment and accessible, recommended flexibility. Within 20 days when a pandemic hit us, it was done.

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (18:43)

And so to tell me now that this is something that can't be done makes no sense because what does that mean when we have another pandemic if we do and I don't wish that upon any of us? How will that work again? Do I think the balance is right? No.

What is that down to? Is that down to ignorance? Is it fully understanding from a senior level? Are there people, again, I come back to it when we look at inclusivity, is there representation around the table of the decision makers? So the people making these decisions. Is there disability, disabled talent around that table that can then give that knowledge and that expertise? Are they really analysing, I think what Dom was saying as well, we've got this sort of is it fashionable? And I hate utilising that word. Is it a fashionable thing to do? Whatever other people are doing, we'll jump on the bandwagon. We'll start saying we're doing this really, really well. We'll start saying we're cutting back on it and we'll go down that road. But actually, I don't think it's progressive at all because actually what you end up doing is backtracking. So actually, you're not building a culture, you're damaging a culture. And so then we go full circle back round and you'll be then unpicking and wasting a lot of money that you would have done in doing this progressive approach that actually hasn't led to anything any further. I think I agree with you, Cathryn. I think it's a really hard one where businesses are trying to take control, but there's no real kind of representation. And it's not just in business that we see that. It's also in governments. Where is those people that have the knowledge and the expertise? Are we listening to that? Are we building that cultural trust? What are we doing with the data as well? That's another part. Internal comms people will often have to do a lot of work with surveying and everything like that to gather data. That's lovely. But what do you do with that data? And so then does that if that data was taken in or if the role was, if the role of internal comms was really taken to that top, top level. And that's where probably you see a lot of these organisations that are thriving where internal comms or the comms person is on that C-suite is around that board table, that is able to really input to say, this will fundamentally not help us, or this will not work, or this is what we're hearing. And it's a little bit more, we kind of try and go too fast. And we're all guilty of that in life anyway. It's an often thing we come up against, especially when it comes to disability inclusion.

Cathryn Barnard (21:07)

I want to ask you a question about something where you've referenced it a couple of times already in this conversation, but we can probably all attest that we have seen a rise and rise in the number of neurodivergent diagnoses in the last five or so years. And part of that obviously is down to better diagnostics, undoubtedly and better access to diagnostic measurements. And then, there will be other causal factors. But in essence, what I'm curious about, and from my point of view, and you will be far better informed on this than I will, I see the diagnoses being kind of age agnostic. So obviously more children are being diagnosed, but in equal measure, more people of working age are receiving a diagnosis as well. And so the question that I have for you is why is this important? What does it actually mean for business?

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (22:11)

I think it's so important. I think how it comes back to in my own being neurodivergent myself and having two children, probably when I was younger, there was a negative stigma attached to giving that sort of label to a child. They were known as the naughty child. Labels play such a huge part. And I think there's actually a confidence thing where people are proud to own their disability, whether it's neurodivergency or any of their disability, no longer shall they sit in the shadows, no longer shall they be forgotten. And more importantly, the world has been built and it's not accessible to all. So I think why is it important is it's about understanding the strengths and the ways in which that provides, not just looking at neurodivergency, but in particularly when you look at people with disabilities.

They are less likely to take sick days. They are more creative. Now, the reason for that is because they have to live in a world that has been designed that isn't accessible to them. So they find solutions to things that are more quicker than others. Now, I'm not saying that people without disabilities are not able to do that too. I want to caveat that. But what we understand is we have to play and understand the strengths of individuals.

And if we are trying to put people into boxes all the time of what we expect and what we need, and we're not going to be flexible because we see in our own biased attitude of what something should be, we're never really going to have a workforce that's going to be open, which will build on a culture, which will thrive a business because of the next generation of workforce that's coming into our organisations. So I think, not to give my age away, but if I had done it starting in my career straight away, would it have supported me? Probably not, because the conversations are not where they are now. But for the next generation of employees coming through an organisation, they will not come into your organisation quietly. They have zero loyalty. They will agree to that. They want to know that what you're saying, you keep to.

And so with neurodivergency as a whole, it's playing on the strengths and understanding. And you find a lot of people with neurodivergency, especially in ADHD, a lot of people who are doctors, in some ways in communications as well. One of my things that I always find is in crisis, I actually am able to stay calmer. Where I think that is just because I am quite good to kind of adjust quite quickly because I will just sort of know the process of how it needs to work and kind of go through that checklist. And you know, I've got friends who are paramedics who also have ADHD. Following something is really easy regardless of how intense because your mind is racing at that speed of time as well. And I look at my children in an educational system that is not been amended or looked at for many, many years. It's archaic. It's not flexible to the fact of how it can better suit an individual to thrive. So I sometimes think it's about just understanding, like, if we put things in place, what we are saying is this is not how it has to be for every single individual. And there are people who are not diagnosed who would appeal to having some of the reasonable adjustments or accommodations that can happen for someone with neurodivergency or just generally from an accessibility side, the way in which they consume something.

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (25:37)

So I think when we're looking at those sort of questions of like, how does it benefit a business? If a business embraces it, a business thrives because you attract more talent that you may have potentially been biased towards. So it's about encouraging and opening the doors to more, a pool of talent that is often forgotten about. And disabled talent is something that organisations need to do that.

It's about, again, coming back to what Dom was saying, thinking about all the bits. When you're putting a recruitment process in place and you're putting a job up, is it inclusive? Is it accessible? Do you show accessibility in it? Are you reasonably adjusting your way of onboarding people? Is all of that, I mean, that's where internal comms has such an vital part to play because they can be having those conversations about, I know we're doing it internally, but are we doing it on all the external factors as well?

Cathryn Barnard (26:33)

I agree wholeheartedly with that and when I look at the changing world of work and trends that are going to substantially impact how we work in the future, one thing is absolutely clear for me and it is that we have long passed a point of acceptance where we can lazily apply one size fits all thinking. I think the marketing world has caught up with that quite successfully. Micro segmentation of potential audiences now seems to be more and more of a thing, but I'm not necessarily sure. I think it is emergent, but I don't necessarily see HR as a mainstream having caught up with that. And I think, as an enabler of internal conversations and dialogue, internal communication is expertly placed and to perhaps go beyond its more traditional roles and responsibilities to walk hand in hand with the recruitment teams or the HR teams that may be dealing with, growing networks and alumni networks in the community and so on. And the other thing that when you were talking, I just wanted to flag

is that when organisations can embrace plurality of perspective, they become infinitely better positioned to solve the wicked problems, the ones that are really, really dicey and tricky and complex because the more, first and foremost, the more brain power you have looking at a problem and trying to figure out its borders and boundaries or what have you, that's great. But when you include into the cohort of problem solvers, people who approach problem solving differently because their entire life circumstance has required them to navigate the world differently in a way, because the world isn't built for those people. What a missed opportunity.

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (28:39)

Increasingly more and more important that. what's beautiful as well, and these are some of your members and I wasn't preempted to say this, but look at someone like Lloyds Banking Group. They have just created a whole sort of blueprint for disability and neuro inclusion, and they're sharing it with everyone. They don't see that they should keep that to themselves. So any organisation can go onto their website, download it and take it for themselves to make sure that they can implement it within their own organisation. That to me is beautiful. Why hold on to that? That completely shows inclusivity and inclusion and you can learn from others. And that's what I think is really important when we're doing these sort of things, is that you see best practice in it being shared.

Jen Sproul (29:22)

Icouldn't agree more, and I think that's the thing, isn't it? Sharing and talking about it. And there's so many illuminating conversations that you've brought, that we've had. And we've talked to and touched on it, there's so much practical work that internal communicators can do. This can be like, this is something where there are many challenges in the world, but you can play such a proactive, practical piece of this puzzle, which is far reaching and I recognise the conversation that you were just having. I have a lot of neurodivergence in my family. I have, high levels of autism in my nieces and my nephews who are very young right now who are going to find navigating that world in difficulty with work very hard and in different ways as well. They're all three on the spectrum, but highly, but all differently on the spectrum. It's a very individualistic space to be in.

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (30:15)

It totally is, but we're all different. Take disability out as individuals. We don't all like the same things. We don't all eat the same things. We don't all wear the same things. So disability is not a kind of dirty word or a word or a thing that we should be scared of. We should embrace it and see what does this bring to us as an organisation? How can we learn and grow from it rather than gosh, we just don't know what to do. We'll just bury our heads

in the sands. We won't do anything. We'll stay quiet. And then that's when mistakes happen and people turn away from it. So I think, it's such important conversations.

Jen Sproul (30:53)

It is. And as you say as well, it is something that is really critical for the future of our society, of our economy, of our businesses. This is if you want to have more tax and more growth and you want more people contributing and less on here, this business is one greater skills or better advantages. All of this combination comes to it. But going back a step as well, we were talking earlier on about, this isn't about being fashionable. Right? Isn't it? It's about, there shouldn't be something that makes us stand out from the crowd or as a tool. It should be something that's just inherent in our behaviour, in our way. And changing that grassroots, inherency, where it's a natural rhythm, not something I have to do. It takes time, and all of that takes time. And I know that you and I have also spoken about just simply in events, it's like, we're not going to ask people what they want to be included. We're just going to make them accessible. It shouldn't be a question of it, it should be as inherently in design as a fundamental piece. So I guess my question being is with that in mind, you talked about Lloyds Banking as well, is that role modelling on that sharing piece. Are there some really good examples have you seen where businesses are just building it into the DNA as an inclusive workplace and how they're doing that?

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (32:09)

Yeah, definitely. Well, look, I could probably name loads of valuable 500 companies, which I think is always great and important to do. When you look at someone like Nationwide, for example, the way in which they do their customer experience within their rooms, they've got flashcards that like people who are coming, that's another piece of communication that's been created that's accessible. They've also worked really well on the banking because look when we look at people with disabilities, we shouldn't be thinking of them as any different to any other human. They have the same problems, they get emotional, they have the same heartbreak, they have the same, they're no different to anybody else's. So it's more about, like you were saying there, Jen, how you kind of really consider it within your process. So I think Nationwide do some really great things. There's also been some really nice things that have occurred with Sanofi we work with and they've done a nice sort of strategic approach to their accessibility both in physical form and digital form and they've created a whole approach which they've shared with other organisations. We look at products and services, we can look at L'Oreal, they've created some great things when it comes to an adaptive, they worked with Google. That's what I love, partnership, two different sectors coming together to find a solution. So they worked as an appter which was like a lipstick product to help people with hand tremors.

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (33:29)

So why would you not allow someone who has hand tremors to be able to have that experience to apply lipstick? And that is a product that was produced and that was worked really well and has been a real huge success. Taking into consideration accessibility functions, we look at that from Skyscanner have worked on great things from a website, consistency and wording and what they do. Airbnb have done the same with their various bits and pieces. And then we're really proud to have worked with lots of organisations on some of our white papers, which I know you're going to share with some of your members, on when it comes to self-ID, within a workplace. I mean, that gets a lot of kind of mixed reaction to it. But we worked really closely on that with Deloitte and Google and kind of looked at that and we've created like the resource guide, which is kind of an opportunity to come back as a reference point, but also a piece which is now a playbook where it shows best practice. It gives you tools. It actually shows you real examples of where it's been implemented, taking into consideration different laws. And look, very similar to GDPR when that came around, everyone was scared. We've got the European Accessibility one that's coming in this June, which is happening in Europe. It will apply to us or any organisation that works on that from a consumer side on accessibility, the EAA Act. And that's a really important one where communicators need to be on board with that. We've got that looks like from their websites and the consumer side of things, and especially if they're selling services. So there's no time to wait around because I think how GDPR did it scared everyone. Everyone got their CRMs, what they did with their data. And this is the same with this. There will be legal action taken if you're not compliant to the EAA. And that's an important factor. So I think it's about being on a journey and whether you're just starting on it or not, just doing something. And the fashionable comment is something, our founder and our CEO say this, we're not after the a la carte. You cannot say, I will focus on this this year, because we didn't do it last year. We know it's hard to do all of them, but real inclusion is all. It includes everyone. So you cannot then be selective on which ones you see as a priority.

Dominic Walters (35:45)

Absolutely. So, Ryan, as you're talking here, I'm thinking about it from point of view of communication practice. And really, it's reinforced to me that everything you're saying resonates with what we all see to be basic communication practice. Knowing your audience is a key one, isn't it? And you've got to understand all the aspects of your audience, not just what they're thinking, but also the issues they have to contend with, I suppose. We talk a lot about the need of having conversation. You said that right at the start, which is, I think, paraphrasing; don't be afraid of getting things wrong to the point where you don't have the conversation. If you don't have the conversation, you're not going to go anywhere. I think that's come through very strongly. The importance of clarity. Now, we talk about clarity often around the language we use, but it's not just that, is it? It's about the way we use that language. It's about how we put the message across. And the final thing is around connection. Because, as we know, words are nothing, really, unless they have some

meaning, and you have established meaning by making things relevant. So it's reinforced to me that the vital role that we play as internal communicators in ensuring that organisations are more inclusive. But it'd be great to get your take on that and what you see as the role internal communicators can take. And in particular, I guess, building what you've just been saying about Sanofi and Nationwide, et cetera, what you've actually seen work. There are several questions in one there, sorry.

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (36:56)

Yeah, no worries at all. I'm happy to take them. I think communicators have such an important role and I would see it rather than a burden or a thing of, this is something else we need to add. It's an upskill. If you've not considered it, take it now. Think about your alt text. When you're sending an email, it's not just about sending an email. Can everybody access that email? And that is considered for internal comms people when you think of back in the day, like, we used to work with some brands that had people working in factories or working on off site and on the road. And how was that person going to consume it? There was always that worry of how would I get that message out? It's that worry again, but is it accessible to all? So are you thinking about the language you're using? Are you thinking about the way in which they can download or they read or they watch whatever that looks like? And are you thinking about how much text is there as well, and can you do it differently? And it's about being, and this is the hardest one I feel that people struggle with, consistent. You cannot just do it because the CEO has now decided they're gonna do it on all their town halls, and then when you have all your other meetings or your other smaller offerings, we don't do it. So you need to be consistent. And I think the key to it is you need to be, we're gonna do this. We're going to make it as Jen was saying, like the IoIC do with your events. This is just how we do it now. It's best practice. We're not even going to think about it when we go to putting this into play. These are the things that we do as a checklist because they would be the things that you checklist against if you were signing any contract. So no one's going to go into something if you don't do a checklist of contractually what you are going to do. So in some ways make that personal contract, that commitment to it and consistently keep to it and challenge it if you see it not being done. Because otherwise, if you show inconsistency, the messaging is getting lost, it's mixed and it's not going to work. And I think the best practice where I've seen it is where people have trained. Look at people like Microsoft. They train all of their staff, regardless of their role on accessibility. That's beautiful. Even if that role is not important to your role that you're delivering on. They believe everyone should have to understand what that looks like because that gives a better understanding. And I think there's a good example of where regardless of what your role is in an organisation, it's about making sure you give that knowledge and training to everybody. And I think training is so important. You have to invest in it.

Jen Sproul (39:28)

I just want to pick up on that, Ryan, just from an IoIC perspective, because I should say this as well, is that last year we launched four members free accessibility training, and we'll try and do some more again this year. Again, because we think it's something that's going to be really, really helpful. Just on those practical points around font, design, colour, readers.

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (39:44)

The things that we take for granted, this sounds like I'm giving brand people bad reps or like ad agency or the creatives, but you can get so carried away with creative. Yes, it may look lovely. It may feel lovely and the colours may be beautiful, but actually it's not accessible. It's more damaging.

Dominic Walters (40:04)

It's also true that one of the most powerful things you can say to a senior leader is, if you don't do this, your message won't get through, won't make sense of it, they won't understand your focus.

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (40:15)

That's always the hardest thing for internal comms people is how can you get that message to go through? Well, here's a really good example where people won't engage with it because they will see that you're not doing it. And so they'll just disengage, I'm not saying this prioritises over other things. The message is really important, but accessibility and inclusion is really important. And looking the whole design representation, do people see themselves in your organisation?

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (40:42)

Because you look at that from an external perspective, but can people see that internally? Do I see myself at the leadership level? Do I see myself within this organisation? If they can't, they're not going to stay.

Dominic Walters (40:54)

That's a really good point, that triggers, isn't it? Because we know that people instantly get triggered and if they see things like that, they give themselves permission not to listen. Or they say, is not designed for me. So again, it's a very basic communication principle to overcome that.

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (41:07)

Yeah, totally. And also as well, if we're communicators, let's not forget the message you're actually sending to them then is, I don't care. Now that wasn't the message he was after, but they worked that out for you. You gave them that one free of charge. But do you know what I mean? I think it's so important to understand the kind of repercussions that come by not doing this that will bubble within your internal comms or your internal culture which you don't want because then that only bubbles for so long until it gets to a point where it's not acceptable.

Cathryn Barnard (41:41)

I think it's such an important word to perhaps kind of wrap the conversation up on. And also I will say, in the conversations that we've had so far this year, the word care has come up consistently and I can't help but feel, we're in uncharted territories. Nobody knows which way is up, which way is down at the moment. We've got geopolitical tensions, we've got economic uncertainty, we've got the climate crisis, we've got social unrest, we've got God knows what's gonna happen in the United States in the next four years as of Monday. And actually care is the antidote, isn't it? Care, if we can apply care in our workplaces and show people that we genuinely, authentically care about their wellbeing and their ability to contribute, that is going to make the world of difference, I feel personally. I think that is going to be the antidote to the challenges ahead.

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (42:52)

And I think when you look at the cycle of even when we started this conversation, with the waiting lists that we see in the demand in just even trying to get assessed for any sort of neurodivergency or disability or support or any of those sort of things, just trying to deal with that in life is hard when the structure isn't there externally in society. So that's where business, again, has such a great opportunity here not to make good of all the wrongs that happening into society but to sort of become a bubble for their teams and their safe space to really care and look after all minorities that may be feeling slightly neglected in a world where they're not really being portrayed in the best way.

Cathryn Barnard (43:41)

100 % and because yeah, you've just prompted something and it's not singularly about an individual's perceived disabilities. It's also about those who care for individuals. So to your exact point about waiting lists for let's say neurodivergence diagnoses, there's a 30 % absence rate from UK schools at the moment, which there might be a small cohort where, I

don't know, we want to pin the kind of right wing, no hope are labels on, but there's an awful lot of people at the moment who have had to bring their children out of educational settings because those children aren't being looked after per their needs. And I can't help but feel for all the working parents that are now trying to juggle homeschooling, whatever that even is, because I don't know whether you've looked into it, Ryan, but the parameters for it seem quite loose to me. But homeschooling and managing, bringing home a monthly salary, how on earth do you manage to do that?

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (44.53)

But I think that is such a vital point. But again, look at what everything we say in this communication and we're not doing it on purpose, but it's the way in which it's reflected in the media, in the news. It's all negative, down, negative. Where is the celebration of these individuals who are bright, intelligent, creative, fantastic, appealing, doing wonderful things. There's wonderful things that these individuals can do, but because of the negative stereotype that is attached to disability as a whole, not just taking into neurodivergency or all of those things. In school settings, they're problem children. They are the problem. There's not a reasonable adjustment, but that is where communicators, again, we've come back to say, what is this for internal communicators, to change the narrative. Let's celebrate these individuals. Let's celebrate being different. Let's celebrate the fact that we can bring a culmination of lots of different people and the way in which they take information, do things, and let's celebrate that rather than the outside noise. I think, Jen, we were probably talking about this about nine years ago, the noise banging outside and how do you reduce it internally? Yeah.

Jen Sproul (46:11)

Just get back to it. And also don't let it weigh you or stop you in here, you just block it and go, what am I trying to achieve? I want my information to be understood, accessible, cared, included. Am I doing that in my everyday work to the best of my ability?

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (46:24)

Yeah. And what can you as an employer for Cathryn, that person that is homeschooling, that is trying to work a job, what are you doing to support that individual with flexibility? Have you communicated to them? Do they know? Do they know that they can work flexible, compressed hours? Have you put that into play? Have you re-looked at that? I mean, then it goes into a world of kind of going into it in detail, but that's where inclusivity is. It's when you see the likes of these great companies that are saying, right, this is what we're now doing for our employees.

Cathryn Barnard (46:54)

So million dollar question as we close off. What one thing would you hope that an internal communicator would take from today's conversation if they could get started or wherever they are? I don't even know whether that's possible because we've already just acknowledged that people will be on very different pathways and some might not have started and some might be quite advanced but is there such a thing as one thing would you hope?

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (47:27)

I don't think there is. I wish there was, but I don't think there is. But I think I always would bring it back to the human element. Morally, it's the right thing to do. So if you are really in an organisation and you have the opportunity and you have a voice and you can use that to elevate it for people that feel like they maybe don't have a voice and you can create that and make change, what's one thing you can do? What's that fire in your belly that's going to make that change? And don't stop because everyone needs an ally, regardless of whether you're part of a minority group or not. So become an ally of this and go and speak to the employee resource groups, go and speak to that community and go and get under the bonnet of those cars or the problems and start unpacking them. Don't just keep shutting it down, just start unpacking them and say, you know what, we've got a lot of work to do here, but let's start. It's not something that is going to be fixed overnight. It's a long journey, but be on the journey and be committed to it. That's the key, I think.

Jen Sproul (48:34)

Ryan, thank you so much. And I think that is a perfect way to close. I think in this conversation, I know we have, impressed the business importance, the moral importance, but we've also impressed the practical ways and opportunities and how we can play such a pivotal role as a professional community. So Ryan, thank you so much for your time. We will keep sharing those resources and keep hoping more we can do that and keep having the conversation.

Ryan Curtis-Johnson (48:59)

No, thank you for having the conversation and thank you for continuing to do what you're doing as well because that's changing it as well. So thank you.