

Intro: Hello and thanks for tuning into a brand-new episode of Engage, a podcast brought to you by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations hosted by Zach Cutler, CEO of Propel. Our guests are going to explore accessibility and the role PR and communications professionals have in ensuring clients and employer communications are accessible and inclusive. Joining Zach and sharing their insights and experiences is Sarah Brown Fraser, marketing and communications manager at Activity Alliance. Rachel Miller, founder of All Things IC and Jarrod Williams, communications manager at Bromford.

Zach: All right, great to be here. My name is Zach Cutler. I'm the founder and CEO of Propel. I was interested to join this podcast about accessibility because accessibility, diversity and inclusion are a few of the core values of Propel. And they're near and dear to my heart because I have a physical disability. So I wear leg braces to help me walk, something I've had since childhood, since I was born. And so I believe running a business is an opportunity to have a platform that gets a lot of good things done in addition to making profit. So obviously business is for profit, but it's not just about profit. And this is one of the things that we are proud to be doing at Propel. And so, yeah, that's why I am excited to be on this podcast. Handing over to Sarah. Do you want to share a little bit about your background?

Sarah: Yeah, sure. I'm Sarah and I lead on the marketing and communications for a charity called Activity Alliance. My central role is obviously the charity's brand awareness and everything that involves marketing and communications. We actually found about ten years ago that actually sport and leisure wasn't that great at inclusive communications. So I started sort of making it my mission to really make sport and leisure a more accessible and inclusive place. In terms of communications, I also have lived experience. I'm a wheelchair user, but obviously as a professional in the industry, I really think that sometimes we really fail disabled people, especially in the industry. So it's been my mission for the last ten years and I hope it sort of progresses in terms of sport and leisure and every other sector going Rachel.

Rachel: Hi, I'm Rachel Miller. I'm the founder of All Things IC, and I'm always interested in how we get the right information to the right people at the right time to help them do their jobs in terms of internal communication perspective and accessibility for me has two strings related to that by one, which is how do we make sure that we get the right

permission to the right people at the right time to help them do their jobs and amplify their voices back? But then also, as someone with lived experience of hearing loss and hearing difficulty, it's great to have amazing content, but it's no good if your employees can't access it for whatever reason, if they can't understand it from a neurological perspective or they have visual impairments or hearing impairments. So there's two sides for me when thinking about accessibility and the wonderful world of internal communication. Can we make sure that we can communicate well with our employees in terms of giving them access to the information they need? And then also once it's out there, once the content is created, is it in the right format, in the right way for our people to really be able to understand what's going on?

Zach: Okay, great. And how about you, Jarrod? Why is accessibility important issue to you?

Jarrod: So, I work for a not-for-profit housing association, and so I think primarily our customer base is diverse and has a range of different people. And very much as Rachel has said, the idea of getting the right information to the right people, the right time, in the right way is incredibly important. And ultimately, that's our job to communicate things effectively. And if we can't communicate to those different people in a different way in a universal way, then we are failing at our responsibility, failing at our role, and our organisation is ultimately failing them. So I think it's a big part of our brand in our organisation. But I just think being able to work in an accessible way to make sure people can get the information they need in the right way, that things are usable. I haven't got lift experience, but I see every day and what we do. And so for us, we just find that important.

Zach: What people are events been your biggest influence in evolving your thinking about accessibility, Sarah?

Sarah: Oh, I mean, if I go back to why I became more interested in this kind of area of inclusive communications, I was at an employment conference once. It was all about disabled people and employing more disabled people. And disabled people were part of the audience they were being talked about and none of the information was accessible. So, it really was a frustrating moment when a vision paired person stood up and said, you're talking about me, but I can't read anything you have giving me. So at that

moment, I thought, not on my watch, not on my watch. Am I going to allow that to happen in the communications that I deliver and that my team delivers? And for me, good communications is inclusive is accessible. So actually, if we are going to really do honour to our trade, we have to make sure that we think more about our communications and who they reach and who they don't reach. So in terms of events, it's been really eye opening in the last two years in terms of lockdown, the first few months I was inundated with requests of how do I make my online events inclusive and accessible to all these people we could reach?

And there is always a pound sign involved as well, which is great news for a lot of businesses. But actually in terms of communications. If we want to reach more people, then actually our events and information that we're putting out should be more inclusive anyway. So that was my eye opener, but I think ever since I've done that, I've been really interested in that field.

Zach: Very interesting. And same question to you, Jarrod, what people or events have been your biggest influence in evolving your thinking about this issue?

Jarrod: So I think it would be completely open and honest and transparent to say that one of the things that really brought it to the fore of our organisation and I know we'll probably touch on it is when the public sector accessibility regulations in 2019 were kind of first being discussed. And although there's kind of hot debate on whether or not we kind of legally as an organisation follows, I think it just helped bring it to the fore in kind of consciousness of comms consciousness of organisations. Accessibility was maybe something that was being ignored, left on the side-lines, and it was really something we should be talking about. So I think that made the discussion of accessibility mainstream. It made it, yes, a legal discussion, and it's disappointing that that was the catalyst. It had to be a legal discussion, but ultimately, it's just had nothing but positive repercussions. So that kind of introduction of those regulations, I don't think can be underestimated. And I think ultimately as well, kind of being ethical practitioners. We've already mentioned this is about engaging in all our audiences and by not thinking about accessibility, we are marginalising people, we're discriminating people.

We'll say some people. We don't want you to have access to this, we don't want you to have information. So those things have really influenced me. I'd say particular events.

Many years ago, we did large events with our colleagues. We had one colleague who was as hard of hearing, and so we had to do extra effort, if you will, more than any other colleagues, to make sure that that person could engage with what we were doing. And that included hiring sign language interpreters to be on stage, making sure every video we produced had subtitles that were on an iPad. And the effort to do that was ultimately quite large, but it made my whole team think about the importance of how that one person, if we didn't do all that, could really engage in the day and really understand kind of the message we're trying to put across, I still think now. So an event happened to me quite recently, a discussion I had with a quite a senior leader in our organisation who wants to send out an internal email. They basically designed their own content and sent it to us and said, There you go, I'm doing a job for you. Put that in.

Rachel: Oh, we love that, don't we, Jarrod?

Jarrod: I'm not needed anymore, thank you very much. What they produced was not accessible and that was flagged by loads of members of my team. And when we engaged that person to say, look, thank you for all your efforts, but we're going to redesign this and do it in an accessible way, their response was actually, well, how many people in this organisation are actually disabled? Do you really need to do this? Because unless you give me the numbers, I can't see the benefit. And that shocked me slightly because we were really positive around accessibility for our customers. So externally facing making sure we were being accessible. But it was such strange thing then when it talks about our colleagues, it's like we forgot it because these were internally, they can make do. And if there is anyone, I'm sure they'll flag it rather than making it part of kind of our every day. And so I think from that point on, I mean, that brought it alive to my team and we've done nothing but make sure accessibility is kind of by default. And we champion at the start of every kind of discussion with a colleague in the business from that point on.

Zach: Yeah, that's really interesting. Also, if you think about from a practicality standpoint, there's a billion people in the world with some kind of disability. And just from a purely economic standpoint, unleashing all of the talent pool of people that have a disability is a tremendous economic force. And not having the basic accessibility requirements that would allow a lot of those people to be productive in job environments. And whatnot is, aside from being the right thing to do, it's just purely the

smart thing to do. And I think that that's very important to remember. Rachel, do you have any thoughts about sort of what the importance is of opening up different platforms, different communications, to be more accessible?

Rachel: So I think you're right. In terms of the numbers, they're quite shocking. So we know one in eight people globally have some form of disability and therefore they struggle to access content and communication. And if we are relying on our people through the lens I look through as an internal communicator, if we know that our employees are struggling to access content and communication, then it is impacting their ability to do their jobs well and to thrive in their work. So from a human perspective, it's the right thing to do is to focus on accessibility, but also commercially as well. If we're not creating the conditions for employees to thrive, we're not helping them in terms of giving accessible content or even being able to understand and recognise the different disabilities that exist inside our organisations. It's not just visual or hearing, it's mobility, it's cognitive, it's speech, it's neural. You have to plan for that. It's the right thing to do. And from a commercial perspective, it's an important thing to do, as well as from the employee engagement side and being ethical in the way that we're treating our people.

Zach: Yeah, that's a great point. I believe that the world is being increasingly democratised in every sense of the word, in terms of the power being broken down from central structures into that power going into the hands of everyday people, everyday workers. And that's one of the benefits that we've seen from the pandemic is the great equaliser of putting a lot of that power back in the hands of workers and away from the central hands of the executives, so that people can be the owner of their own schedule, they can be the owner of their commute of their work life balance. Sarah, do you have any thoughts about how the pandemic may affect accessibility? Has it helped advance things more quickly? Any thoughts around that?

Sarah: Yeah, it's an interesting time when we hit into lockdown, especially, and everyone went online. It kind of exasperated the barriers that already exist for many people out there. So actually there's still a world of people who are digitally excluded, so we can talk disability, but actually there is poverty that affects that as well. So we really need to think about communications about people, not just disabled people. So Microsoft does a lot of work in terms of talking about permanent, temporary, and

situational barriers to communication. So at some point in all of our lives we will have some barriers in our communication. And that could have been during lockdown where we couldn't afford the data for the communications that we were being sent or we must be incentive digitally rather than direct mail. So I think there's a lot of work done in terms of thinking about people, in terms of permanence. So if you think about hearing loss, for example, Rachel might talk about better than me, but hearing loss permanence, you might have someone who is permanently deaf, but temporarily might have tinnitus or situational. They might not actually be able to hear something in a loud swimming pool, for example.

So thinking about communications and the barriers that you create is not just about someone being disabled. We've got to think about our audiences as people and what they might not be able to affect or reach in that situation. So when we take the disability element out, actually we think a lot positively more about actually all the audiences that we reach or don't reach from a pandemic perspective.

Rachel: As somebody who lip reads constantly, I didn't receive a hearing aid until June 2020, and I remember going out, we were in lockdown. And I remember as I constantly rely on lip reading to help me listen. I didn't realise how bad my hearing impairment had got and then not being able to have access to people's mouths. When I went to the grocery store or to the chemist, I came home in absolute floods of tears and said to my husband, I can't communicate because it was noisy outside and I struggle with this background noise. And that tool to help me communicate had been completely removed and I've never felt so frustrated as a professional communicator and my inability to be able to communicate because I couldn't hear since having a hearing aid unlocked my world. But it's right that people wear masks, I believe, but unless they see through, which often they're not. The Pandemic has made for people who are there are over 400 million people in the world with severe hearing loss. So this is not small numbers, and the Pandemic has impacted us in huge numbers of ways. Even now, I'm trying to lip read on the screen and squares are tiny.

The way that we're having to communicate in that digital world now has meant without subtitles. I've logged into conferences and had to log out if the audio is not great, or Clubhouse, for example, that's not accessible for people at all. So all of these great

digital platforms that have been launched and championed during the Pandemic actually have excluded a heck of a lot of people as well.

Zach: Yeah, that's a great point, because the Pandemic, it may have helped certain people with mobility impairments, but hurt certain people with hearing impairments or other impairments. So how do we get creative about pushing forward accessibility?

Jarrold: I suppose accessibility is more a creative challenge rather than a challenge to people's creativity. It means that we need to think better and think earlier about how we do things. So we've talked a lot about use the word inclusivity quite a lot in this conversation. It's the idea of maybe just above accessibility inclusivity. And I think parallel to that, we talk about universality as well, the idea that we shouldn't be designing for. I think, as you mentioned, Sarah, whether someone's got a situational challenge or there is a temporary or permanent accessibility need, actually, we need to design for absolutely everyone in every circumstance we can. So no one is feeling neglected. I know, Rachel, you use that early one in eight. I think I tend to use one in five or so on. I've got 20% of the UK has some form of disability, and that doesn't include kind of temporary disability. And then when you think about things as well, like the UK reading age being an average of nine, I think it's the most recent update stat might be a new one, but kind of average reading age of nine, it goes beyond just kind of what's the colour contrast or does it have a transcript?

It's also how we write things. In my time, I think the challenge is real. I think I've seen it taken on in quite a positive way. Lots of organisations need to do far more and have far better ways of how they follow a process. But kind of the idea of trying to make something universal to everyone that can be useful to everyone is important. It's a challenge in terms of how do we keep something looking ultimately pretty? How do we make language, the written text sound engaging? But none of those things mean they have to become boring, or it just has to be black and white. And it just has to have basic words. We can still create compelling stories. We can still tell compelling stories just in a way that's universal. You mentioned also, Sarah, about kind of the idea of situational point of view as well. It's like a video with subtitles. It's great for someone who needs those subtitles because of their disability. But also ultimately it's great because someone who is in a very noisy environment can engage in your content still. And I think we just need to start from there.

Sarah: And Zach, I think the key to the answer to your question is there needs to be more of us with lived experience actually helping the creativity of these products and platforms. So I'm always shocked about the low representation of people with lived experience actually working in the industry. So if we do more monitoring and actually helping people develop these products and services, it's a win-win for everybody because actually people have been involved in codesigning those. So we've nipped the problem in the bud quite early on. But I'm always shocked, actually, how PR, comms and marketing does not have enough disabled people working in it.

Yeah.

A lot of the stuff we keep turning back to tends to be let's talk about digital. Let's talk about websites. Because like I said, that's the bit that's been championed, maybe during the pandemic and with the regulations, but it's far more than that. And so one thing we can take from people who focus on accessibility in a digital sense is the amount of user research, user testing they do. So it's your points there. It's not just as well for those places where maybe they haven't recruited kind of maybe as inclusive as they like. That doesn't mean they can't still do that. They can't still reach out to their customers, reach out to their colleagues and make sure they engage those people with lived experience to share their chance, to share their frustrations, send cheque and test things with them. So it ultimately has some of that lived experience influencing it.

Rachel: It might also be that we're not putting our hands up. I've had hearing loss since birth and it's got progressively worse as I've got older. I've been blogging about internal comms for 12 years, and it wasn't actually for 13 years, but 12 years in was I put my hand up and said I've got hearing loss and I have hearing impairment and started writing about it and blogging about it and trying to encourage my clients to learn more about it. And I realised that there wasn't a deliberate act not to talk about it. I just hadn't understood that the power actually of being open and say, you know what, I'm a communicator who really struggles to communicate and I teach and mentor and consult with internal communicators constantly. But I really struggle. So it may well be that there's lots of us who are hidden, who are working in PR and comms, but we haven't thought to share our experiences or we haven't thought to think about how we could help other people by being honest and showing up and pointing people towards advice

and guidance to help them. And I certainly count myself as one of those people until a year ago where I just wasn't talking about the fact I have hearing loss because it was just life.

I didn't realise that it would be useful for other people to read about it.

Zach: Yeah. I also think it's really important that venture capital is opened up to more accessible thinking and giving funding to more entrepreneurs with disabilities. I mean, if you look at CrunchBase, which is sort of the go to site for venture capital rounds, and which companies got funding, there's tonnes of diversity investments that every VC wants to show off and there's a million categories, but there's no category for disability, zero category for it, which absolutely makes no sense. And if you can have more funding going to more founders and entrepreneurs with disabilities, they will create more tools and more companies that really push the issue forward. So I think that that's a really important thing as well.

Jarrold: At that point. I think that there is some really interesting work that could be done there in the world of ESG. So at my organisation Bromford, we have ESG backed loans and investment that comes with the criteria around various things that could be diversity of the organisation. As an example, it could be a challenge that there needs to be more, like you say, financed backing to ensure the organisation is making a commitment to accessibility from the very base level of, does it meet work AG 2.1, AA or above, as kind of a thing you can measure through to do they have a strategy to how to make sure that they embed inclusivity in the culture of the organisation. So I think with the growth of ESG, you might find that more finance can be linked to this challenge.

Zach: Yeah, absolutely. I believe I'm one of the only tech founders in the world with a physical disability that's been backed by a top venture capital firm, and that makes me very sad. That doesn't make me happy, it makes me both. But the issue needs to be moved forward. So I couldn't agree more. My last question for each of you is, what's next? What more can be done? What can be done differently to change the culture and the attitude toward accessibility? Sarah, why don't you start us off?

Sarah: Well, as well as getting more people involved and more people with lived experience and actually, allyship is a huge thing, especially in 2022, actually, you don't

have to be disabled to talk about us and actually back us and make sure that we are represented wholly. I think what's next is we think about communications and marketing in a different way that actually we don't just think pound signs and all it's going to cost me in terms of accessibility, we think actually we think inclusion first so more people can actually have access to the communications that we put out. Inclusion first would be my sort of mantra.

Zach: Rachel, what's next? What can be done to improve accessibility?

Rachel: I think it's a mindset shift for me. It's not an HR thing, it's not a Con thing, it's a business thing. We need to focus on a business level in terms of how do we create accessible content and amplify the voices of our employees. And part of that for me is education, certainly so giving them toolkits templates, advice and guidance and we're fortunate. There's a heck of a lot out of there, but you need to then turn it into action. So how do we embed that education inside our organisations and people that we work with in terms of here's what we can do today to help make sure that we are being super accessible as an organisation and then set yourself some targets. So what will it look like in 12 months time? What are we trying to do? And listening to colleagues with lived experience is certainly one of my recommendations of how to move that conversation forward from just a sense of this would probably be a really good thing to do to then turn it into action and go, right, what is next? What are we going to do differently as a result? What are we going to start, stop, continue to help us really truly focus on accessibility?

Zach: And Jarrod, what's next? What can be done to improve attitude and culture toward accessibility?

Jarrod: I kind of think echoing everything that's just been said, accessible by default is where we should start, where we should begin. Everything needs to be inclusive first. As has been mentioned, I think most if I'm honest, I think when I talk to a lot of communication teams, they get it, they kind of understand it certainly in the public sector and certainly I start to see more non-profits and private sector get on board. In fact, some private sector organisations seem to be fantastic at really championing inclusivity and accessibility in their communication work. But I think this is going beyond the idea of comms team, making communication accessible. Digital team make website accessible. It's been mentioned marketing. There's one step, but also how is every

other colleague in the organisation doing this? How many times do people send an email out that is confusing? It's jargonistic, it's got generally poor formatting, simple things like that. Helping people understand the impact of a small change will help us introduce it. I mean real basic example, certainly not a lived experience as we've discussed, but by nature of being short sighted, I have very slight red and green colour blind that means that when someone uses red or green whiteboard pens, just in that circumstance, I can't read what's on the board just because it's just too faint for me.

Things like that, no one will ever know unless I have those conversations, unless I talk about that and tell them. So I think we just need to share that. We need to become champions. We need to make sure it's part of our everyday discussions and then we help people who aren't kind of on the front line if you will understand their impact.

Rachel: I always write in green, I'm not going to use green. I didn't know that. Thank you for that. I will switch to black.

Zach: And just my last point, I think as we're advancing into Web 3.0 or the Metaverse or whatever you want to call it, there should be a huge focus on accessibility from the beginning and setting standards because I know that when the Internet was created, there was a lot of it was sort of the wild west and everyone was a cowboy or cowgirl doing whatever they wanted. And there weren't those standard stuff from the beginning. So as we develop into the next version of the web, that should be a central thing for sure. So in terms of tools and resources, what recommendations do you guys have?
Jarrod?

Jarrod: Yeah, I think there are lots of tools, lots of resources out there right now. I mean, if you just Google accessibility, particularly from Gov.UK, you'll get loads of pages from the government communication service and Government digital Service that explain what accessibility is and how you can do things like better social media campaigns. I mean, government communication service do have a great page on making better social content in terms of social. There's a Facebook group I'd really recommend. I didn't long join it. It's set up by someone called Alex Heinrich. It's called Accessible Social and it's basically communicators, just discussing great ways of making content more accessible, sharing webinars. I know there's a company called Text Help that I've got some free webinars and a digital accessibility boot camp coming up in terms of kind

of tools, what I would say we mentioned Microsoft earlier and actually Microsoft are massive Champions, I think of inclusivity and accessibility and even to the simplest of using Microsoft Word right now does a great job of calling out things that are impact from an accessibility point of view. I'd say inclusivity as well. It spots places where your language maybe isn't as inclusive as it should be rather than just accessibility.

And I think if you are working in the digital space and you use Google Chrome, there are many extensions you can get for Google Chrome from the simple things like screen reader software. So you can experience what someone using a screen reader is experiencing from what your emojis actually sound like when someone reads them back. Things like that through to places that detect the colours on your site and various other elements like that. So I can share some probably in the show notes some of the links to ones I use, but there are some great Chrome extensions out there to really help you understand how digital accessibility can be improved.

Zach: Sarah, what tools and resources do you recommend?

Sarah: So I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't plug our own organisations work that we've done in this field. So if you go to Activityalliance.org ukCOMMUNICATIONS, we've done a lot of resources and fact sheets uninclusivecommunications. So just go to that page and you'll be able to download these for free.

Zach: And Rachel?

Rachel: There's two that I've discovered recently that I've been using. So the first is [communication access.co.uk](http://communicationaccess.co.uk) and it's free training and in 45 minutes you learn a heck of a lot about accessibility and the importance of career communication. And as part of doing that training, it's funded by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists and a whole bunch of charities and you can become accredited as an individual or as an organisation and you can reaccredit yourself every 12 months, which I think is really nice. It's not just here's a tick box, here's a certificate, it's committing to accessibility training. So it's [communication access](http://communicationaccess.co.uk) and also [Communication Masses](http://CommunicationMasses) which is a brilliant website full of resources which as a professional communicator I find really super helpful. So those two are great for me.

Zach: And I have to recommend Propelmypr.com which is my company and I recommend it because we are the only PR software that has built accessibility features. We have a screen reader, we have contrast adjustment, we have Dyslexia friendly text and many other features that help vision impaired and other individuals with disabilities. All of that said, thank you guys very much. I think this was an excellent, excellent show and keep up the great work.

Outro: Thanks for listening to this conversation, exploring accessibility. We'll include links to all the tools and resources referenced by our guests in the show notes and if you have any tips or advice that has enabled you to make sure or your communications are accessible then please keep the conversation going and share them on Twitter using the hashtag CIPR Engage.