



ADA Live! EPISODE 15: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE PROMISE OF TECHNOLOGY

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Presenters: John Robinson, Our Ability

Host: Celestia Ohrazda, Southeast ADA Center

VOICE OVER ANNOUNCER: Blog Talk Radio. (Music) Welcome to WADA ADA Live! Talk Radio, brought to you by Southeast ADA Center, your leader for information, training and guidance on the Americans with Disabilities Act. And here's your host.

CELESTIA OHRAZDA: Good afternoon and welcome to WADA, ADA Live! On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University and the ADA National Network we are excited to welcome our Internet radio audience to the 15th installment of WADA ADA Live! My name is Celestia Ohrazda, Information Technology consultant for the Southeast ADA Center and today's host. The topic of today's show is "Sustainable Development: The Promise of Technology." I would like to introduce today John Robinson, the managing partner and CEO of Our Ability. Our Ability is a company owned and operated by people with disabilities to support people with disabilities. Our Ability is a USBLN Disability Owned Business Enterprise specializing in diversity inclusion, messaging, disability etiquette and video production.

John Robinson is a motivational inspirational speaker and in the past six years, John has been from Italy to Australia discussing the obstacles he has overcome. Welcome, John.

JOHN ROBINSON: Thank you very much. It's an honor to be here.

CELESTIA OHRAZDA: Today is December 3rd. It's also International Day of Disabled Persons. This year's theme is "Sustainable Development: The Promise of Technology." For the past 22 years, the annual observance of the International Day of Disabled Persons aims to promote an understanding of disability issues and mobilize support for the dignity, rights and well-being of persons with disabilities. It also seeks to increase

awareness of things to be derived from the integration of persons with disabilities in every aspect of political, social, economic and cultural life.

John, it is wonderful to have you as our guest speaker today. Before we get started with our discussion about sustainable development and the role technology plays, would you tell our listening audience about Our Ability and some of the projects and activities you are engaged in.

JOHN ROBINSON: Sure, Celestia. I'm proud to do that. Our Ability is an organization that supports employment endeavors for people with disabilities. We're proud to do this. We never meant to get into this business. But here we are. And we're happy to do it. What we have been doing for the past five years is, let's say, three things.

The first thing we do is we speak publicly. So, I get to ask -- I get to be asked to do keynote speeches, workshops. I get into the high schools, junior high schools, Fortune 100 companies. I get to tell my story specifically. Make people laugh, make people cry, all of which is to help begin that conversation of a better understanding around engaging people with disabilities. So keynote speaking is how this all began.

From that -- sort of two or three things that have come out of that. The first thing is we do a lot of messaging around other people with disabilities. We do this through video production. We do this through the written word. We're helping schools and businesses to be able to communicate about and to individuals with disabilities.

And so we get hired to produce video stories for internal or external use on their own employees with disabilities or in the outreach to people with disabilities so that organizations can show and speak to our own community. We're proud of the work we're doing. That work is growing and it's engaging and we're excited about that.

So the next thing out of that work that Our Ability is doing is building a network of mentoring towards employment for people with disabilities. So what does that network look like? We have a web portal called Our Ability Connect, which we're partnering with some large organizations around the country. That web portal, Our Ability Connect, is a place for individuals with disabilities to up load their resume, their profile. It's not a resume as a PDF so to speak or a Word document. But it's a social media resume much like a LinkedIn where it takes you three minutes if you're an individual with a disability, you put your profile up there, and then you're seen. Who are you seen by? You're seen by the hundreds of businesses that we work with that are searching our database.

And so that's the next layer of that. We're working with businesses every day to build internal and external messaging, to work on disability sensitivity and etiquette. But then

most importantly, to recruit. We're helping businesses search this database that we have created to find candidates for employment. We have a jobs board that's part of that which is ourability.jobs -- online. But it's all about making that bridge between the individual with the disability and the business and on that bridge it's not just a platform, it's a foundation. It's a walkway, it's a roadway -- meaning it's not just a bridge, it's let's find a place where people can upload who they are. Let's find a jobs board. Let's find a way to communicate with one another and let's find messaging. And that's what Our Ability is all about. Specifically, we're online because I couldn't afford a television station to do this all with. I wanted to do this with an online community, so our web site is ourability.com and off of that you'll find our "connect" page which is connect.ourability.com. Again, connect.ourability.com and also there's a jobs board ourability.jobs so it's all about how do we talk amongst ourselves with businesses and talk about employment.

CELESTIA OHRAZDA: John, it sounds like your organization is providing wonderful outreach opportunities utilizing recent technologies. Today's topic is "Sustainable Development: The Promise of Technology". Can you explain what is meant by sustainable development as it applies to people with disabilities?

JOHN ROBINSON: Well, I think sustainable development is a great buzzword today. It's -- it applies to all people, which is I think obvious to all of us, but certainly near and dear to our heart are people with disabilities. Including myself. Sustainable development means a lot of things. But to me, specifically, it means we need to improve our whole self and to be able to sustain our whole selves in our environment.

And that can take on many forms. But in the things that we care about at Our Ability, we specifically take a look at employment and education. If we cannot have sustainable employment, then we're not serving our community to its full advantage.

Everything that we do at Our Ability is to mentor, connect and inspire people with disabilities towards a better outcome of education and employment. The reason we do that is because if you could go back to myself 25 years ago, at 21 years of age, the things that I was worried about were utilizing my education, finding a meaningful job, raising a family, finding a life partner. And all of that relationship angst you realize is strengthened with a better education and employment foundation under you.

So it begins -- for me it begins and ends with employment. So everything we want to do with Our Ability is to create a sustainable environment where individuals with disabilities can have better employment outcomes. So that they can have better lifestyles, so they can have independent living. So that they can hopefully have a better financial stability under them and they can build those relationships in their lives around them.

I think we all understand that people with disabilities are more likely on a percentage basis to be under employed or unemployed. And certainly people with disabilities on a percentage basis are under the poverty level. And so, to me, it begins and ends with building avenues towards employment that can be sustainable for all individuals with disabilities.

CELESTIA OHRAZDA: And what are some of these obstacles and challenges to creating these sustainable environments that support these avenues?

JOHN ROBINSON: Well, you know, that's a very good question and I think that's a lifetime answer right there. I think all of us understand that you know people with disabilities are faced with obstacles all of the time. You know when I do -- when I do public speaking, whether it be the school systems or to businesses or to disability advocacy groups, I joke about that I'm talking about overcoming obstacles every step of the way. And obstacles are varied.

If you think about it in economic terms there are micro obstacles and macro obstacles. So for me, obstacles specifically were making sure I got my education. Making sure that I learned how to be a person with a disability in the community. Making sure I learned how to dress myself, how to drive, how to fulfill that educational promise. So I had obstacles that I had to go through. Some of which were because of my disability. Some of which were societal. But I had to overcome those obstacles specifically in my world. All of us as people with disabilities have to do that, as well. So we're -- we all need to look at the micro obstacles that we go through our lives specifically to us that we have to overcome. One of the biggest obstacles that we as individuals face is learning how to interact with an able-bodied world. How do we engage with a non-accessible environment as far as buildings and ramps and roadways and whatever. But also, how do we engage with people for the first time. I think we all have friends around us that understand how to deal with us as people with disabilities that know us well. But what about those people that don't know us well? So, making a first impression, meeting somebody for the first time becomes an obstacle that an individual has to go through and we have to teach ourselves on how to deal with these obstacles on a one-on-one basis.

You know, then, on a macro level -- what can we do in society that cannot only help ourselves but more importantly help others that are following behind us? So what can we do from a societal standpoint such as what Section 503 is doing with the Federal Government and setting better parameters and hiring people with disabilities. What can we do in the school environment then to help begin the conversation on disability sensitivity and etiquette, to really talk about how to engage with people with disabilities? How do we engage with people who are different?

And, you know, what can we do as a company to better facilitate all of that? Whether it be our online portal for people with disabilities to upload their resume. Whether it's the jobs board. Whether it be getting our services out there on training people around disability etiquette and sensitivity.

So long-winded. But there are obstacles that we all individually have to deal with and we need to know how to teach ourselves in dealing with those one-on-one. And then there are societal obstacles that we're trying to make sure that we can form a better path for those that follow behind us.

CELESTIA OHRAZDA: Great, John. Also a great lead-in to the next question here. In which ways can technology be used in the most effective way to enable persons with disabilities to participate in all aspects of society?

JOHN ROBINSON: Well, you know, technology is a great equalizer. And it's something that I learned along the way growing up, even 30 years ago. In high school teachers of mine would say you really should learn the computer because it's going to become a great equalizer for you. I don't think I truly understood what they meant. Thankfully, I listened. Technology has become a great equalizer for those of us with mobility issues, visual impairments, hearing impairments, whatever, because we can use the computer and in this service oriented economy in a way that maybe 100 years ago we certainly couldn't have in a manufacturing economy. So technology, if we can harness that as individuals with disabilities, can help us find employment. Can help us with our education. Can help us interact with others either that are disabled or that are in an able-bodied environment or whatever.

So technology becomes a great equalizer. We have seen it with something like Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook. You look at the percentages -- more people with disabilities -- it's more in line I should say, with able-bodied people. There are very few barriers to entry. So Twitter becomes a great place for people with disabilities to engage with each other, and so let's use that technology.

You know, we with -- those of us with Our Ability specifically are using technology to enhance our mission. You know we're building Our Ability Connect right now, which is that portal for people with disabilities to be able to upload their resume. It takes all of three minutes. You get your information up there in a very clean, very social engaging environment and then on the other end we're helping businesses search that database. So that, you know, if we have 10,000 people with disabilities in our database, and XYZ corporation is looking to hire somebody, use us. And that's where we're there to help.

So technology is definitely becoming a great equalizer. It will continue to be so. But let's figure out ways that we can use it for good. Not just -- not to diminish, you know,

maybe an Instagram where you're putting up funny photos or whatever. That's great. But let's also use it for good so we can help educate and employ ourselves so we collectively can be more empowered as individuals with disabilities.

CELESTIA OHRAZDA: Before we address some of these technological challenges, let's pause for a word from our sponsors. ADA Live! listeners, if you have any questions you want our guest speaker to answer please submit your questions via the ADA Live! online forum which is found at www.adalive.org.

VOICE OVER ANNOUNCER: The ADA Center is your leader in providing information, training and guidance on the Americans with Disabilities Act and disability access tailored to the needs of business, government and individuals at local, state and regional levels. The Southeast ADA Center, located in Atlanta, Georgia, is a member of the ADA National Network and serves eight states in the Southeast region. For answers to your ADA questions, contact the Southeast ADA Center at 1-800-949-4232.

CELESTIA OHRAZDA: Welcome back to ADA Live! We are discussing sustainable development and the promise of technology with John Robinson from Our Ability. John, there are certainly challenges to using technology. What are some of these challenges and how can we address them?

JOHN ROBINSON: Well I think there are certainly challenges to using technology for all of us. There isn't -- while we try very hard to find some universal adaptations for all of us, it's still a work in progress no matter how we look at it. Part of that is because disability is different across the board. Two people with disabilities are obviously not the same. Two amputees are obviously not the same. So part of the obstacles in using technology -- or challenges in using technology is because we are all different.

One of the things that's great about people with disabilities is we traditionally are wonderful problem solvers. We have had to problem solve every step along the way no matter what we're doing. Whether we have a physical disability or an invisible disability, we have learned how to problem solve.

And so that helps us in challenging us to use technology better. Maybe something isn't working exactly right. But more times than not we are really good at trying to solve the problem. So we might be the solution in trying to figure out how that technology is better for all of us.

An example, we have been, as I mentioned, building Connect. Some of the solutions that we got out of the beta test came from individuals with disabilities that challenged us to say why doesn't it do this? How can we use this better? And it's because we have realized that those of us with disabilities have become great problem solvers. We take

a look at a problem differently. And so we have -- we probably have the solution inside of us.

So what can we do to use technology better? I think the best way to do it is to first start to use it anyway. Figure out what works, what doesn't work. Embrace it. And then instead of get frustrated that it may not work exactly the way we want it to, how can we better adapt it to ourselves and figure out a better solution. And then engage with either the software manufacturer, the hardware manufacturer, focus groups, help boards online, whatever it is, how can we better engage with this technology so that we can make this technology better.

You know, in my case, because we're the ones building our technology, that's great. But many times I've engaged with a community online to make something else better and I'll get a note back that says, "Thank you very much. We hadn't thought about that." So the best challenge in using technology and the best way to challenge ourselves to use technology better is to use it. And to, you know, break it and fix it and figure out how we can continue to do that. Because its not going away. And it is on average a better solution for all of us. So let's figure out how to better engage it for the betterment of everybody.

CELESTIA OHRAZDA: Excellent, John. You've touched a little bit on this next question here. But when we talk about technology and problem solving, can you tell us what works and what are some good practices and policies that assist persons with disabilities by using technology?

JOHN ROBINSON: Well I think -- right, I think I touched on that, but the best thing is to use it. You know, something from our case where we are the business owner, we want people to use it and try it and use it successfully and break it a little bit and come back to us with some enhancements.

You know, if you look at a Facebook as an example, it wasn't what it is today. It wasn't that way starting out. And it shouldn't be. You know the best use of technology is when the community that's using it can fix it for better. So we need to figure out what works. And certainly as people with disabilities, most of the technology that we're using is designed to assist us.

So the best way to figure out what works better is having people with disabilities use it, use it for what works, use it for what doesn't work. Write that down, figure out why didn't it work, what can we do to make it better? And how can we make it better over the longer period of time? You know, the way I look at it -- and this comes back from the video production work that we have done for years and years -- based on my previous experience in broadcasting, you know, to me a video is a living document. A video isn't

something you produce and then you're done. A video is something that can be changed over time. New interviews can be put in, new graphics can be put on, the music can be added, and technology is the same thing. We don't make something and then leave it there and then be done with it. We want to find the 2.0, 3.0 versions of this that have taken the criticisms from users in the past, the likes from users in the past. Enhance the likes, fix the criticisms and see if we can make a better product.

You know, nine times out of ten we will make a better product based on using that technology. What are the good practices? What are the policies that work? And how do we fix what doesn't work? And so that comes back to two things. Individuals with disabilities that are users become good problem solvers. Use those problem solving skills to solve the problem for what doesn't work. And, those of us in the world of technology that are trying to make it better for all of the users, put our listening skills on and see – okay, what are we really saying? How can we really help and let's try to fix that problem together.

CELESTIA OHRAZDA: Your organization, Our Ability, promotes awareness of successes by individuals with disabilities. Would you talk a bit about the different factors that create an accessible work environment?

JOHN ROBINSON: Absolutely. I think that the best way to have an accessible work environment begins with being open. So what does that mean? You want to create an open environment to have somebody be willing to disclose their disability. An open environment means -- as I just mentioned in the previous answer -- good listening skills, good communication skills. Let the individual -- either that's an existing employee know or somebody that's applying -- know that if you want to self-identify anything about your whole self, a lot of the companies that we work with are using the term, “bring your whole self to work,” have individuals understand that we are here for you to disclose whatever it is you need to disclose. So creating an open environment for that is key. One of the ways you can do that is by having internal messaging with other employees who have disclosed whatever it is that they want to disclose be “out and about” about it so that other people can do that. So what we try to do is promote an open environment so that in this case individuals with disabilities are willing to disclose their disability. And more times than not they are doing that because they just want to be like minded with other people inside that organization.

In some cases it's about accessibility and it's about accommodation. So if I have epilepsy, diabetes, if I have post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury or if I have a visible disability like myself, I'm an amputee. I want to be able to disclose all of that. I want to -- willing to disclose it I also want to disclose it to an organization that's willing to hear it so I can ask for an accommodation. So what we -- we try very hard to help

Corporate America create an internal open environment so that people with disabilities will disclose if they are applying or if they are existing employees. And then on the other side of it, we help the businesses not only recruit but external message so they can find candidates that are people with disabilities that want to work in that organization.

We're proud of that. It's work that is necessary right now in an inclusive environment. It's work that, quite frankly, I needed 25 years ago. You know, I wish that I had -- that NBC or CBS or Universal Studios would have had this kind of work 25 years ago so when I walked in, those hiring managers were used to seeing me, were not afraid of seeing me, and we could get right to the matter of what's my education what's my ability rather than focused just on the disability. So we're proud to do that work. And we need to do it. For our own well-being but also for those businesses out there that want to be inclusive.

CELESTIA OHRAZDA: Thank you, John. ADA Live! listeners, if you have any questions you want our guest speaker to answer, please submit your questions via the ADA Live! online forum, which is found at www.adalive.org. Now we'll have a word from our sponsor.

VOICE OVER ANNOUNCER: Our Ability Connect is an exciting new online portal for individuals with disabilities to upload their digital profile. We are taking a complex problem of employing individuals with disabilities, providing a simple solution such as Our Ability Connect. Once you build your profile, you'll be able to search businesses who are searching for you. Corporate America is working with us to build their employment rolls. Why not with you? For more information sign onto [connect dot our ability dot com](http://connect.ourability.com) or visit www.ourability.com. At Our Ability we mentor, connect and inspire individuals with disabilities towards employment.

CELESTIA OHRAZDA: Welcome back to the show. John, our next question, what measures can stakeholders such as governments, the private sector, academia and people with disabilities take to create and support accessible work environments.

JOHN ROBINSON: Well, the measures they can take is to continue on this continuum that we're on i.e. you know the Government has -- the Federal Government has taken the lead recently with Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act and VEVRAA. What we can do as citizens is continue to support the work that the Government has done in asking the Federal contractors and subcontractors to continue to build an inclusive workforce for people with disabilities. It's been a good thing.

I know that it's a process for the Federal contractors and subcontractors, but it's a good process. We want to -- we all want to have our business near the community that we

serve. And you know, if one in five people have a disability in one way shape or form, that means no matter what product or service you're providing you have people with disabilities that are in that family. So let's make sure that we support those businesses that want to support an inclusive hiring practice.

In the private sector, we should ask the businesses that we work with the same thing. They don't necessarily have to be Federal contractors. I just had a conversation this morning with a non-Federal contractor, a mid-size employer that wants to build an inclusive hiring practice around people with disabilities. So I thought that was fantastic that they have taken the lead from the government, from their Federal contractors, and decided, you know what, we don't have to do this but it's the right thing to do. So in the private sector, let's support that in small and mid-size businesses.

You know, with academia, I think that the thing that we at Our Ability are really pushing academia to do is to look at a couple of things. One, to build disability sensitivity education into what you do. It's needed for a variety of reasons. It's needed specifically around having people with disabilities inside the classroom, inside higher education. And if you understand people with disabilities at a better level, then it's going to be better for all that have an inclusive education environment.

The other reason in academia is because in a lot of the cases there's bullying. There's misunderstanding around difference, and I'll use the word difference instead of disability because it's not just people with disabilities. But if we can talk about what does it mean to be a child with spina bifida, cerebral palsy, amputee in a wheelchair, whatever it is -- then maybe we can lessen some of the bullying instances. And maybe we can also take a look at Asperger's and autism and have a better understanding of those students who are different. And so, maybe instead of having students that lash out and are angry we have students that are caring and understanding. So academia is a key place to understand what can all of us do to have a better knowledge around people with disabilities.

You know, all of it, as I said at the very beginning, leads to our work, which is work and employment. And if we have a better understanding inside the government, inside the private sector, inside academia, inside society in general, then we will have better employment outcomes for people with disabilities. The unemployment rate for people with disabilities is too high. It's 15% according to the government. Four out of five people have left the workforce. So the real unemployment rate for people with disabilities is around 70%. So imagine what we can do with our economy if that unemployment rate were 30% instead of 70. We could do some great things. So that's what this is about.

CELESTIA OHRAZDA: John, thank you so much for providing this enlightened perspective. As we get ready to wrap up today's session, is there anything else you would like to make sure to share with our listeners about sustainable development and the promise of technology?

JOHN ROBINSON: I think the best way to leave this conversation is to understand that disability can touch or will touch all of us to some degree. As we age, throughout our lives. As our medical advancements get better. As we have more soldiers coming back from service. As we have a rise in the instance of Asperger's and autism. The instance of disability will increase. We all -- I think we all fundamentally understand that. And so what can we do as a society to be better understanding of all differences, which is inclusive of people with disabilities, what we can do to be better is to understand those differences, is to teach ourselves. Ask our government, our schools, our businesses to be better prepared in that understanding. And we at Our Ability, we care very deeply about that, as I said at the beginning. We care because the poverty -- those people with disabilities living under the poverty rate are too high. The unemployment rate is too high. What can we do? We can try to find better outcomes. So we're trying very hard to not only engage the individual with a disability to increase their education and employment outcomes but help those businesses to reach out to people with disabilities for better employees. If we can do that as an organization, we're serving our mission. We're helping others serve their dreams and that's what this is all about.

CELESTIA OHRAZDA: John, I want to thank you for joining us today. We really appreciate all the information and look forward to learning more.

I would also like to thank our ADA Live! listening audience. The Southeast ADA Center is very grateful for your support and participation in the WADA ADA Live! broadcasts. Remember, you may submit questions about any of our ADA Live! topics by going to www.adalive.org. Our resource section is also available and if you have questions about the Americans with Disabilities Act, please contact your regional ADA Center at 1-800-949-4232. Again, that number is 1-800-949-4232. All calls are free and confidential. Be sure to join us next month on the first Wednesday, January 7th, for the next episode of WADA ADA Live!

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