



contentgroup

TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

Work with Purpose

EPISODE #48

STEPPING TOWARDS A MORE INCLUSIVE APS

Hosted by David Pembroke, Founder and Chief Executive Officer,
contentgroup

TRANSCRIPT

David Pembroke:

Hello, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian Public Service. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. I begin today's podcast by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we meet today, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging, and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of this city and region.

David Pembroke:

Today on Work with Purpose, we talk inclusion with a particular focus on people with a disability. For individuals, teams, and organisations, to survive in the face of the increasing complexity in disruption that we all face, we need to draw on the talent around us that matches the world we operate in. But to thrive, we must unlock the potential of that talent and draw on the richness of its diversity and perspective.

David Pembroke:

Joining me for today's discussion are a couple of the Australian Public Service's rising stars, Cain Beckett, Assistant Secretary - Policy Projects and Taskforces at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and Catherine Seaberg, an Assistant Commissioner at the Australian Public Service Commission with responsibility for inclusion. Welcome to you both.

Catherine Seaberg:

Thank you.

Cain Beckett:

Thanks for having us.

David Pembroke:

Cain, if I might begin with you, you've had quite the career so far with wonderful diversity of roles in the corporate, not-for-profit, and public sectors solving some of Australia's most wicked problems, including the setting up of the NDIS, running the Canberra Office of the Disability Royal Commission, being involved with the Cerebral Palsy Alliance for over 13 years, and indeed, you are a co-founder of the Attitude Foundation, which is a wonderful organisation with that mission to normalise the portrayal of people with a disability in the media.

David Pembroke:

Now, I won't mention the fact that you also speak five languages and were once world ranked in archery, but in your views, for someone with a disability, which is cerebral palsy, how would you assess the current state of play? I'd ask you that more broadly, not just to focus on the APS. We'll come to that, but how is Australia going at the moment managing inclusion and particularly, managing the needs, and demands, and the opportunities for people with a disability?

Cain Beckett:

I think that APS and the other sectors of the economy are really reflective of the broader community attitudes to disability at the moment. I think Australia would like to think it's doing pretty well, we're pretty enlightened,

we've come a long way. Whilst it's true we've made good progress, I think most people would be shocked by the amount of discrimination and the disparity between disability and employment more broadly. So I think even some things like the Royal Commission being underway at the moment is very helpful for raising the profile and raising awareness. It's only through that awareness that we can make a difference.

David Pembroke:

So when you mentioned the word "discrimination," what are some of the more typical, more common forms of discrimination that people with a disability face?

Cain Beckett:

One of my good friends describes in various ways... One of the things that the disability community talks about is the biggest problem with disability is everybody else. Particularly, in terms of discrimination, what we describe as the soft bigotry of low expectations, particularly in employment. I think it goes much broader than that, and it's quite ubiquitous. I've talked about with Catherine before in some other forums everything from overt discrimination and discrimination in employment that means that I, for example, am more likely to apply for jobs where I know the person that's doing the hiring just to avoid some of those issues to more serious, but also, hilarious things where I've talked about with my partner, for example, the fact that I should carry proof that my children are my own when I walk around the shopping centre because you can see people think that I've stolen them from somewhere or something like that. So it's quite common and almost everyday occurrence, and people with disabilities, unfortunately, we learned to deal with that and get around it as best we can.

David Pembroke:

How can it be overcome though? It seems that... Yeah. Is it so deeply entrenched that it is something that people with a disability are going to have to live with despite everyone's best efforts?

Cain Beckett:

One of the things we're talking a lot about at the moment is that the problems and challenges are very much like those which we've tackled and are tackling with gender diversity. So I would describe, for example, that we're about 60 years behind the debate on gender diversity. So if we can learn from some of the things we've done in that space to improve outcomes and to get better results, then maybe we'll get there a little bit more quickly. But I think even within the APS, it's quite pleasing at the moment that there are some trends and things that give us some hope, I guess. We're starting to realise, for example, in terms of employment, that it's less about the employees and more about the employers. So building capabilities in hiring managers and building disability confidence, for example. Catherine can probably talk more about that.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Well, I'll come to you, Catherine, because this challenge of inclusion was addressed by the APS in the Disability Employment Strategy, which was released last year. What are some of those key areas that Cain refers to where progress is being made in the APS?

Catherine Seaberg:

Look, when I reflect on what Cain said, and how raw and how powerful some of his reflections are, I guess I really want to start by saying how fortunate we are to have people in the APS like Cain, who are so willing to share their experiences in a really honest way. I guess when I reflect on the things that Cain has said and I think about the Disability Employment Strategy, things that really stand out for me, which are focuses in the strategy, are access to employment. So how do we actually make it easier for people with a disability to join

the APS? But the really strong takeout for me is, what do we do to actually improve those employment pathways?

Catherine Seaberg:

So it's all well and good to get people in the door, but as Cain said, if we have low expectations, if people don't feel included, if they don't have the opportunities that others have, and really importantly, and I'm glad that Cain picked up on this, is the focus in the strategy on having managers and leaders who can support development of people with a disability and a culture in the APS that's inclusive. Really, if we don't have those things, then as a service, we failed. What I would like to see from the strategy, the outcome is that really profound change in disability employment in the APS, and I really think that there's such value in the personal stories that people like Cain share because that helps us all to have a better APS. So yeah, I think the strategy has the answers maybe, but the proof is in how we implement and how we deliver.

David Pembroke:

Where do you see the barriers to this transformation of the culture so there is that leadership, there is that understanding, and there is that movement away from, as Cain very powerfully talks about, that soft bigotry of low expectations? How do you change that?

Catherine Seaberg:

Yeah. So look, I think there's enormous goodwill in the APS, and I do think that people want to do the right thing, but I think where we perhaps need to do a lot more is around that manager capability and leadership. So we have the opportunity, I guess, to really increase disability awareness, increase the ability of our managers to support more inclusive recruitment practices. For me, I guess it's really about that, that leadership and manager capability.

David Pembroke:

Cain, would you agree that that's a good place to start?

Cain Beckett:

Yeah, absolutely. I think those attitudes not just in the workplace, but in the broader community. That was obviously one of the reasons why we founded the Attitude Foundation because it is the key to unlocking so much of the other change. I think also just a recognition that we are on that same journey as some of the other diversity challenges and that it's not that different. So how do we leverage some of those learnings so that we can get there a little bit quicker? All the same things that we talk about in other spaces, such as more people with disabilities in leadership roles.

Catherine Seaberg:

Yeah.

Cain Beckett:

There's been a discussion last week at the Royal Commission about people with disability on boards. All of those sorts of... the same things that we've learned slowly over time. How do we implement them in the same space?

David Pembroke:

What would you say though is the barriers to those being implemented? Because if we know what needs to be done, why isn't it happening faster?

Cain Beckett:

To be honest, I think it's in much the same way as the broader question. I've sort of given up, I guess, appealing to people's sense of social justice and ethics. After 40 years, I've probably realised that that's going to take too long. So I'm not appealing to people to do the right thing. I'm appealing to them to think about inclusion because it's actually in their best interests. Inclusive teams perform better, and we're better employees, and so on and so on. I think the broader social justice questions take longer and I'm impatient.

Catherine Seaberg:

Yeah and I think I totally agree with you, Cain, because I think what we haven't sold well enough in the APS is almost that business case around why we need a diverse and inclusive APS, why we're missing out on a whole pool of talent, why our services could be better if we more reflected the community that we serve. So I think there's definitely the social justice element, but I think where we haven't been strong enough today is around the real benefits for the APS.

David Pembroke:

Cain, you have worked in the not-for-profit. You've worked in the corporate sector. You've worked in the public sector as well. Are there examples either in the private sector or overseas where changes have been made that have had big impacts that could perhaps be adopted inside the APS?

Cain Beckett:

Sure, and I think the APS is not further ahead or behind than any other sector there. They're pretty much the same. Particularly when you start to realise that people with disabilities make up 15% of the population and that even within the family unit, there might be... in most families, someone with a disability. Some of the employers, particularly in larger employers that need large workforces, have started to realise that by being exclusive, they really are diminishing the pool of talent available to them. So I think there's good examples, particularly in the private sector, of those organisations where it's taken a little bit of leadership and perhaps strong support from a particular CEO or leadership team, but it's really made quite a difference, and you can even see some examples of that in particular teams around that APS.

David Pembroke:

So, Catherine, how will the APS or the Public Service Commission in particular measure its progress around the disability strategy?

Catherine Seaberg:

Yeah, that's a really good question, David. To be honest, it's something that we've struggled with, and it is something that we're really focused on at the moment. So we know that we have data from our HR systems. We have data from our employee census that gives us an idea of how our staff are feeling and how they perceive things, but we haven't really done enough to really show what we're achieving, and I guess... So that's a real focus for my team at the moment where we're moving much more to a model with health checks for agencies, so much more... a mix of qualitative and quantitative data, but very much getting agencies to tell the story about what they're doing, giving examples of success, sharing those stories across the APS, encouraging agencies to leverage the work that they're doing, and really trying to paint that much more rich story about how well we're doing or how, or where we need to improve. But yeah, the qualitative side of things is probably something we haven't done well and something that we're going to be much more focused on through collecting stories.

David Pembroke:

So, Cain, there was a focus in part of this discussion a little bit earlier talking about the managers and the leaders, and perhaps changing their views such that progress can be made faster. But what advice, or guidance, or wisdom would you share with the audience, people who are perhaps not in those roles, but are working alongside people? What can your general person who's working in the APS do to make a more inclusive, more accessible public service?

Cain Beckett:

Your question reminds me of a discussion I had about 10 years ago in the boardroom of one of Australia's largest employers, and I was there with the Discrimination Commissioner. We were talking to the executive team, and the CEO famously asked, "What can we do to improve employment of people with disabilities?" The rather prophetic response was, "The next management role you have, hire someone with a disability." So I think in some ways, it is as simple as that. We have to just act.

Cain Beckett:

In terms of your question though around what can everybody do, even just understanding that one of the key barriers here is lack of understanding and fear of the unknown perhaps on both sides. So even just being willing to engage and talk with your employees, I guarantee you've got people with disabilities in your teams even if you don't know. So being willing to engage, and have a conversation, and break down some of those communication barriers is probably a good first step.

David Pembroke:

Is there any advice that you do have for people about stepping forward into what they may perceive to be a difficult conversation where they, I don't know, they may feel uncomfortable, not wanting to talk about it? Pretty much like when we started this podcast, I asked whether or not you would like to identify and talk about it because, again, I wasn't quite sure whether or not you'd like to talk about it or not.

Cain Beckett:

Yeah. Being willing to identify and even for people with disabilities, being willing to share is difficult. In my case, I can't hide the fact that I have a disability. It's quite obvious. I've got a very aesthetic looking walk, but just being willing to open, and being open, and share is, on both sides, is a good starting point. I think that's also key to some of the strategies that Catherine was talking about. We discuss quite regularly, for example, that the number of people in the APS with a disability is probably about double those that choose to identify as having a disability. So even just making it safe to identify is a good step.

David Pembroke:

Catherine, is that part of the plan or part of the strategy as well is to encourage conversation?

Catherine Seaberg:

Yeah. Look, absolutely, and disability disclosure is certainly a challenge. It disturbs me that people may not identify as having a disability because they feel it's not safe or in their best interest to do so. So I think those conversations are really important. David, if I could share a quick story as an example. So I have a little group in the commission, and we work on diversity and inclusion issues. What my team identified was that even though they're a pretty diverse bunch, they didn't really have enough... They weren't talking enough to people with lived experience.

Catherine Seaberg:

So we started a regular little ask anything session where we got some very generous speaker or we get some very generous speakers to come in, and sit down with my team, and have an honest conversation about their experiences in the APS, and the speaker shares what we as a team can do better to support the APS to be more inclusive. We were really lucky that Cain... Cain was actually our first speaker. Look, I can honestly say that the input, and that conversation, and subsequent conversations have been quite profound. Cain, I can share with you that your name gets mentioned frequently in my team, and the insights that you shared are regularly discussed. That honest conversation is just so valuable.

David Pembroke:

Catherine, can you share with us some of the observations or some of the questions that were highlighted that people took value from and still talk about today?

Catherine Seaberg:

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Please, Cain, feel free to jump in if I am misquoting you, but Cain talked about some of this, some similar things that he's raised already today, but the things I think that really resonated were the experiences Cain shared about discrimination that he'd faced in the APS, which I think was quite eyeopening for us. Particularly, given Cain is a senior member of the APS. I think perhaps my team didn't expect to see instances of discrimination at senior levels. I would also say that they were really, really moved by the things Cain said about feeling the need to prove yourself all the time, to be better, to do things better than others to prove your worth and your value. Those things have really impacted on my team.

David Pembroke:

So, Cain, just moving on, obviously, advocacy has been a key part of your career dating back to the founding of the Attitude Foundation, your involvement in the Cerebral Palsy Alliance. Is it true that STEPtember was another of your ideas, and that being the Cerebral Palsy Alliance Fundraiser, which is on at the moment where people have got to take 10,000 steps a day for the month of September? Is that true to say, that that was your idea?

Cain Beckett:

Cerebral Palsy Alliance was the founding organisation. I was on the board at the time. So I was one of a number of people that started it, I guess you could say. What I think is really important is the strategy behind it, the need for greater research into cerebral palsy in particular as a disability. When I was born, I guess the general expectation was that cerebral palsy was the result of trauma at birth. So as it was an accident, there wasn't much you could do about it. STEPtember and the funding that that has enabled has meant that we could start a research foundation that focuses on understanding it better.

Cain Beckett:

One of the early things the foundation really was key to learning was that actually, 95% of cerebral palsy is not trauma at birth and therefore can be prevented. So even that's a great example, just taking the time to actually understand it a little bit better rather than just make assumptions I think is a good example for disability in general. I'm very hopeful that the research team will win the Nobel Prize one day, and I think they're amazing team of people. They do great things, and I have no doubt that they'll be successful at some point.

David Pembroke:

Will you be pleased to know that at contentgroup, we have two teams, equal teams fighting to the death throughout STEPtember? It's a very simple, clever idea. It must have succeeded beyond those original discussions that you had.

Cain Beckett:

Yeah. It's amazing how much it's been taken up around the world. I joked with the fundraising team that when we started, there was a... We used a couple of post-it notes on the window, which we created numbers out of to track how much the fundraising was. I joked with them that they're going to need some more post-it notes from Officeworks at the current rate. It's going really well. It's such a great thing to see. Teams all around the world. I've had contact from people in England and America and so on that have all got teams. It's just taken off and it's something that everyone can get involved in, which is really good.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Well, there's that great saying, "There's genius in simplicity," and I think it's captured, certainly captured the imagination of our team at contentgroup. What about you, Catherine? Are you stepping for STEPtember?

Catherine Seaberg:

I am absolutely stepping for STEPtember. It's a challenge in lockdown, I must say, but so far so good. I've managed my 10,000 every day in September so far. Fingers crossed, we'll get to the end.

David Pembroke:

So where to from here then, Catherine, for you? If we have this conversation, and I think we should come back and have this conversation in another 12 months, what can we commit to that we can reflect on that there's been progress?

Catherine Seaberg:

Yeah. Thanks. Thanks, David. That's really a good question. So things that I would really like to see that hopefully will drive progress in the next 12 months is... So we have a target in the strategy of 7% employment people with disability by 2025. I would like to see us getting closer to that target. I would like to see... There are a few things in the strategy that I really would like us to deliver on. So we talk about having disability contact offices, and some agencies have already got those up and running. I'd like to see those more widely rolled out across the APS.

Catherine Seaberg:

I'd like to see our survey results and our HR system, the level of disability disclosure in those be more greatly aligned. So what I mean by that? We have our census results, and they're anonymous. In the anonymous survey, we have about double the number of people who disclose that they have a disability than those who are recorded on our formal HR systems. That's telling us something about people's willingness. So I'd like to see a narrowing of that gap. So they're probably some of the things that I would love to see in the next 12 months.

David Pembroke:

Okay. Well, we'll come back in September of next year, and we will see how things are going because, again, well, they're nice and measurable, but they're things that we can see.

Catherine Seaberg:

Yeah. That's right.

David Pembroke:

Perhaps we can have another conversation at that point about how do we get to 7% faster.

Catherine Seaberg:

Yeah.

David Pembroke:

What about for you, Cain? 12 months' time, we're on the...

Cain Beckett:

Yeah.

David Pembroke:

We're going to do another podcast. We're going to do Work with Purpose again. What would you like to see that's changed in that 12 months?

Cain Beckett:

I like all of Catherine's points. The key one for me in the short-term I think would be more people with disabilities in leadership roles, A, because that makes all of the other barriers and issues that much easier to deal with. My team, for example, has about four times the average people with disabilities than the APS, and that's, that's not because I'm specifically focused on it. That's just the nature of the beast. So getting people in those leadership roles I think makes everything else easier, and I think that's really key. So all of those hiring, hiring leaders out there, when you're thinking about particularly your EL2 and your SES Band 1 roles, try and get a little bit more diversity.

David Pembroke:

Excellent. Well, I think we can put those down and let's come back in 12 months' time. I think another one we can add to it is perhaps even more widespread uptake of STEPTember across the APS. I certainly know contentgroup will be back and I'll even put a IPAA on the hook for STEPTember next year as well. But again, it might be something that we can promote through Work with Purpose, leading up to STEPTember, to...

Cain Beckett:

Thanks, David.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. I think that could...

Cain Beckett:

I'll race you.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. That could work really well I think, and see if we can get those numbers up and see if we can find more resources to fund that very, very important research. So thank you so much Cain Beckett for coming on to Work with Purpose today and also, Catherine Seaberg from the Australian Public Service Commission. Thank you for joining me on Work with Purpose. A big thank you as always to you, the audience, for tuning in once again to hear the great stories of the wonderful and talented people of the Australian Public Service. What a great mission that Cain and Catherine spoke about today about improving the numbers of people with a disability in important roles inside the Australian Public Service.

David Pembroke:

I think it's something that we can all work together to improve those numbers. In terms of Work with Purpose, to support the program, if you do see the social media promotion, a like or a share never goes astray and a review. How we like reviews. So if you do have time to do a review, it does help the program to be found. Thanks again to the great team at IPAA for their ongoing support for Work with Purpose and also, to the Australian Public Service Commission. Thanks also to the team at contentgroup for putting this together. That's it for another episode of Work with Purpose. We'll be back at the same time in a fortnight. But for the moment, it's bye for now.

Voiceover:

Work with purpose is a production of contentgroup in partnership with the Institute of Public Administration Australia and with the support of the Australian Public Service Commission.