Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode: Challenging ableism in the workplace through restorative entrepreneurship

Speakers: Professor Nick Williams and Dr Lee Wainwright

[00:00:00] **Nick:** Hello everybody. Welcome to the Research and Innovation Podcast. I'm Nick Williams. I'm a professor of entrepreneurship at Leeds University Business School, and I'm joined today by my colleague, Lee Wainwright, who is a lecturer in entrepreneurship studies, also at Leeds. And we're here to talk about a recent book chapter that Lee published in the Routledge Companion to Disability and Work.

So hello, Lee. Welcome.

[00:00:28] **Lee:** Hi Nick. Thanks for having me.

[00:00:30] **Nick:** So if you could start by just giving us an overview of the book - what it tries to do, what its key aims and objectives are - that would be great.

[00:00:38] **Lee:** Sure. So the Routledge Companion to Disability and Work is a curated collection of different perspectives which examine the multifaceted nature of disability within professional environments, and the volume's central aims are kind of twofold. So first, it investigates how organisations can both challenge and perpetuate ableist notions of productivity, performance, and employee worth.

And secondly, it explores how disabled individuals navigate workplace structures and the broader social context that influence them. And Ableism in this sense, what do we mean by that? It refers to the implicit or the explicit privileging of bodies and minds that are deemed "able" by societal norms and as a result, individuals with disabilities are often judged against a narrow standard, which rarely accounts for the full range of human diversity.

And the book's various chapters provide critical insights and some practical recommendations about disability, employment relations, equity policies, and emerging debates around the inclusion and sometimes exclusion of differently abled people. And I think this is really pertinent because we live in a time where disability, intersectionality and other issues of social justice resonates strongly in the public sphere.

And this book comes at a time when certain world leaders challenge or reduce support for workplace diversity and inclusion programs, which I think makes the conversation around disability and work all the more urgent.

[00:02:09] **Nick:** Okay, great. So your chapter is entitled Disability and Restoration Work. So if you could just give us an overview of what you've tried to do in that chapter and we'll come back to some of those topical issues, as we go through the conversation.

[00:02:22] **Lee:** Sure. So my chapter builds on the framework of what I refer to as restorative entrepreneuring, and this is a concept that I developed in collaboration with Professor Pablo Munoz.

And we introduced this notion to examine how groups who are at risk of marginalization might maybe leverage entrepreneurial processes to try and reclaim both economic and social standing within their communities. And people considered “at risk” include those who are homeless, have maybe substance issues, drug addiction issues. Maybe they've been newly released from prison. It could be asylum seekers, and it's often those people who are overlooked, including those with disabilities.

And what unites these groups is not only their potential exclusion from mainstream economic activity, but also their vulnerability to societal stigma. And to maybe institutional gatekeeping.

And so restorative entrepreneur identifies the multi-layered ways in which individuals can reintegrate themselves into social and institutional networks. And so we kind of define restorative entrepreneur in the literature as a set of entrepreneurial practices supported by broader systems that empowers individuals to reconstruct identity, self-worth, and social belonging, which accumulates in progressively autonomous and rehabilitative life projects.

So what's this mean in the context of disability? Well, my chapter examines how disabled people can draw upon entrepreneurial approaches, broadly thought about to gain or regain a measure of autonomy in the workplace, whether someone is self-employed or embedded in a traditional organization, the strategies that encourage self-directed decision making, social capital development and identity reconstruction, which can mitigate the harms of marginalization.

[00:04:22] **Nick:** Okay, so what sparked your interest in this then Lee? What made you go down this path in terms of this research?

[00:04:29] **Lee:** So my motivation comes from an interest in how societies, especially those that we tend to think of as neoliberal economic systems, how they treat individuals judged to have limited economic worth.

And we often see an unspoken, yet pervasive logic that places a premium on perceived productivity, which align social value with measured output. And so as a result, those who don't conform to productive norms kind of in inverted commas, which are themselves derived from ableist ideas, are marginalized and stigmatized, and it's easy to see why individuals with disabilities can be viewed as having lesser economic potential.

So my research critiques that assumption by focusing on how disabled people's talents, experiences, and alternative forms of contribution can be uplifted rather than marginalized. And I find it really problematic and troubling that individuals with disabilities can end up in

the same symbolic category as people who've been in prison or other at-risk groups, even though the causes and the context of their marginalization differ, you know, vastly.

Yet the parallel arises because society at large creates these artificial boundaries of inclusion and exclusion based on criteria that ultimately serve able-bodied norms. And so investigating these boundaries gives us a way to highlight how just illogical and harmful, these ableist approaches can be while also trying to propose some sort of pragmatic alternatives.

And then where does the workplace come into this? Well, it's either a place of empowerment, and it can also be a place that marginalizes, so that's where my interest kind of comes into this.

[00:06:20] **Nick:** And you mentioned there about your work on criminality in prison entrepreneurs, which links to this book chapter and you talk about some parallels between criminals and the marginalization of disabled people in the chapter. So, what does that mean? How does that parallel between the two things - what does it tell us about exclusion in this regard?

[00:06:43] **Lee:** So on the surface it might appear surprising to kind of align the experiences of people who've been in prison with people who live with disabilities, but there's a fundamental point of convergence. So both these groups are treated as threats to the normative social order.

And in the case of those who've committed crimes, society responds by putting them in prison, institutional separation, and we take away, we remove the perceived risk. But for people with disabilities, the threat to people of society is a bit more subtle and I use “threat” kind of as a loaded term. Because often people who are deemed to be not disabled find that those with disabilities challenge this normative definition of the ideal worker or the standard human body and mind. So some sort of concept of “normal”.

And although the threat is neither violenct nor deliberate, it just disrupts the comfort of enabler society that wishes to see itself as normal. Which is to say that we don't look at people with disabilities as a threat in the sense of those people who are going to cause, you know, physical harm - someone who's aggressive or violent might do. But research seems to tell us that on a more deeper psychological level, we don't wanna see ourselves as aligned with anyone who's deemed to be “other”. And so, because we don't wanna be seen as other, we create an othering process to try and separate people out.

And this is where we put people with disabilities because we judge people with disabilities to be somewhat less than fully human, than people who are deemed as normal, you know, whatever that means. And so those who are deemed as normal, we don't wanna be grouped with anything other than, you know, what we conceive to be fully human or fully accepted within society. And so people unconsciously distance themselves from those who are different and thus we effectively “other” disabled individuals.

And it's awful because this phenomenon perpetuates exclusion. Even in context where there's no overt legislation demanding it, and it's particularly insidious because it's rarely confronted head on.

Instead, it's normalized through just everyday practices. Everything from how we design buildings to how we talk about productivity metrics, and so both disabled people and ex-offenders encounter systematic barriers, which is fuelled by fear, misunderstanding, and some sorts of desire to maintain normative standards.

[00:09:19] **Nick:** And despite, I suppose, a lot of legislation around this in terms of trying to move away from that othering, as you mentioned, why do you think those views persist or that kind of attitude or perception of othering persists.

[00:09:36] **Lee:** So I guess it, it persists because we do rely upon judging on people, you know, by their levels of productivity. And those levels of productivity are judged against ableist norms. So people who are seen to be fully abled, what they're capable of doing are judged by the standards of normalcy. You know, the types of achievements that they can. And gain within the workplace and in society.

But what that means is that we don't recognize the wide variety of different abilities that people have and that people are capable of, and the different types of talents that people have if we constantly set standards against ableist norms. So people who are fully bodily abled, i.e. maybe not in a wheelchair, not needing physical support, people who are functioning at some sort of normal and inverted commas, a normal cognitive level. And if everything is benchmarked against these ableist conceptions of normalcy, then anyone who's not judged, judged as normal, who's got different abilities are never gonna be judged to achieve the same level of productivity.

[00:10:40] **Nick:** Yeah. And I suppose as well, if we bring that down to the workplace level and think about the fact that all workplaces, you know, say that they're fair, they have policies in place to try and make them fair, but you make the point in the chapter about the fact that these sort of HR policies, performance reviews and other things can actually exclude people or penalize disabled employees.

So could you give us an example or maybe two of how that might work, how that does exclude those people?

[00:11:12] **Lee:** Okay. So let's consider, let's think about standardized productivity metrics in the workplace. So things such as billable hours, mandatory targets or the expectation of maybe extended availability beyond, kind of, the contractual work hours.

So these measures are usually calibrated around the hypothetical able-bodied norm, and so we can exclude those who may require flexible schedules, maybe special technology, or even just additional rest and recovery periods. So a disabled individual might, for instance,

have less stamina for prolonged on-site work or need more frequent breaks due to chronic pain.

And although they can complete the same tasks and you know, often do it quite [00:12:00] effectively, they are deemed as less productive by a narrow one-size-fits-all measure. And HR departments sometimes embed these ableist assumptions into performance reviews. An employee with mobility impairments who arrives later may receive lower rating simply because they haven't shown up as early as colleagues.

Though their overall quality of work, you know, was on par or maybe superior. And then management can claim that the metrics are the metrics which then deflect responsibility onto the bureaucratic processes rather than confronting the structural biases behind those processes. And this dynamic can inadvertently encourage the cycle of discouragement with disabled employees internalizing negative performance reviews.

That might be more so a reflection of ableist metrics than of genuine kind of capability gaps.

[00:12:52] **Nick:** Yeah, because you also link that to this concept of what you call "benevolent marginalization" as well. So, could you just explain what you mean by that? And, and also linking to what you were just talking about is how does that undermine a disabled individual within the workplace? How does it undermine their sense of identity, their self-worth in terms of how they feel about their productivity?

[00:13:13] **Lee:** Sure. Okay. So "benevolent marginalization" refers to a subtle, quite insidious practice of enforcing difference under the guise of compassion or accommodation. So for instance, suppose an organization allows a disabled employee to work fewer hours or delegate certain tasks to other colleagues. And although this might be framed as a benevolent concession, it can actually reinforce the notion that the individual is a burden.

And so refuels what I would refer to as internalized stigma, and when this occurs, the individual might become, you know, kind of inordinately grateful for basic accommodations, accommodations which they're legally and ethically entitled to as well. And then this gratitude can mask a deeper problem because the entire framework judges worth and competency in ableist ways.

The disabled person may come to believe that their presence is some sort of imposition causing them to hesitate before voicing any further additional concerns or requesting any further future adjustments. And over time, these experiences can erode self-esteem and encourage acceptance of a lesser role in the organizational hierarchy.

And so, in essence, benevolent marginalization, it grants minimal allowances, but sustains an inequitable system, a system in which employees with disabilities still feel beholden, stigmatized, or even guilty for not meeting these arbitrarily defined norms.

[00:14:47] **Nick:** And that internalization of blame or stigma, that obviously has consequences in terms of day-to-day work, but what are some of the sort of more long-term consequences for people who are internalizing that blame in terms of maybe, in the workplace, their long-term opportunities, their wellbeing. So how does it impact them in the long-term?

[00:15:10] **Lee:** Yeah, so the longer-term effects can be really profound. If you consistently receive signals, you know, whether explicit or implicit, that you are somehow less than colleagues, then you may begin to, you know, cut short your ambitions. You might feel unworthy of promotions or professional development opportunities.

People might opt out of leadership tracks or highly visible projects because they have been conditioned to believe that they're just not on the same level as their non-disabled peers. And then this internalized narrative often intersects with mental health, leading to elevated stress, anxiety, or you know, depression.

And then this person's professional identity and sense of personhood can become entangled in the feeling of being perpetually accommodated. So you feel like you are a guest in the workplace rather than some sort of legitimate contributor. And so the result has not merely slowed career progress, but a diminished overall quality of life.

And in organizational terms, this is also a loss because we fail to harness the diverse talents and perspectives of employees with disabilities. With the more inclusive approach these people could flourish, bring their unique strengths and insights into the workplace.

[00:16:29] **Nick:** Ok, and you talk, obviously the core focus of your chapter is about restoration and you talk about restoration as well as emancipation in the workplace. So could you just tell us a little bit more about that link between restoration and emancipation, what you mean by emancipation in this sense and how a workplace can become a site for that emancipation, hopefully over time.

[00:16:56] **Lee:** Okay. So in broad terms, emancipation involves overcoming social, political, or psychological constraints that prevents individuals from exercising their full autonomy and potential.

In the workplace, emancipation can happen on both a micro and a macro scale. So a macro level might be a shift in institutional policies or maybe national legislation that then affords disabled individuals heightened levels of protection or broader avenues for advancement.

On a micro level however, it can involve small scale actions such as people with disabilities reorganizing their roles and work to align with their specific talents or negotiating performance metrics more suited to their skill sets.

In these type of scenarios, individuals might cultivate a sense of ownership and self-determination, and, you know, they're trying to effectively loosen the grip of institutionalized ableism.

And so I call this process restorative because it's attempting to reestablish disabled employees' rightful place in the same social and professional ecosystem, which has tried to marginalize them and through consistent collective efforts from building networks of similarly situated individuals to leveraging maybe managerial support these workers can reconfigure their relationships to power structures within the organization. And that reconfiguration in turn can serve as a powerful form of emancipation, even in, you know, or rather even if the broader ableist culture still remains.

[00:18:45] **Nick:** And you mentioned there about Donald Trump rolling back on these diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives and he's had some executive orders to get rid of them. And those sort of policies can often be a platform for building solidarity in the workplace between people, different groups.

So in the absence of those policies, if they're removed, how do you think disabled employees, their allies can organize themselves effectively. Is that possible in the face of this sort of institutional or government change?

[00:19:08] **Lee:** So it's, it is definitely more challenging without institutionalized support, but it's not impossible. So one thing that you could do, a key strategy is around grassroots or collective action within the organization.

So for instance, employees might form alliances or resource groups dedicated to disability advocacy, ensuring that they share information about best practices and emerging legal developments. And the same can manifest in subtle but impactful ways. Employees might exploit loopholes in existing policy to continue employing maybe adaptive technology or they could refuse overtime collectively. And so management revisits, you know, whatever the certain discriminatory performance measures are.

And such micro political forms of resistance, they do require a sense of unity across multiple ranks in the organization. And often that unity is built around a collective moral commitment to inclusive values.

So it takes multi kind of actor and within the organization, multi-stakeholder engagement. And beyond the organization - external social movements can also offer a powerful platform. If you think about the Me Too movement, that showcased how a single cause could gain global traction when individuals of influence amplified it.

And we often see this in research. It takes someone who is sometimes outside of the social issue, often referred to as "a hero", to give voice to it. And so similarly, a prominent figure or group with the capacity to attract media attention, might champion disability rights,

pressuring organizations and policymakers to listen to the public sentiments, even if official statutes, you know, being a bit weaker.

So for people with disabilities, achieving a strong level of descent, however, is often very difficult. And one reason is that society tends to regard disabled people as not normal, and that perception leads to systemic disempowerment. So in contrast to the Me Too movements, you know, perpetuators of sexual misconduct with typically influential and powerful men, whose status made it clear why a massive collective push was needed to hold them accountable. Whereas for disabled people, being heard requires an equally significant public shift in public consciousness, but they start from a more disadvantaged position. And in my chapter, for example, I discussed how the UK government proposed cutting costs by removing staff train and ticket officers, to rely so solely upon automated ticket machines.

And this policy would have severely affected many disabled passengers who require in-person assistance and guidance. But because society tends to follow ableist norms, you know, where the immediate concern is how the changes affect most people, no one initially considered how essential staff assistance can be for people, maybe with limited mobility and or cognitive impairments.

And so essentially there was not even a strong pushback. The issue was broadly overlooked and it creates, nor rather, it kind of means that creating effective descent against such oversight can be really challenging. And this is where the idea of a restorative entrepreneurial approach connecting different societal levels and layers might help.

And it could offer a framework for generating a more powerful, collective voice capable of challenging and changing ableist perspectives.

[00:22:36] **Nick:** That's great Lee. Thanks. So, if we take all that together and think about some practical recommendations, you know, for managers that want to balance inclusivity, want to balance productivity, what are some small but meaningful steps that they can take in order to do that?

[00:22:52] **Lee:** Well, managers can start by reframing what productivity actually means. So instead of defaulting to rigid metrics like total hours clocked, they can focus on project milestones, creative output, maybe team contributions or client feedback. And this shift encourages assessment of genuine work quality rather than just conformity to what hadpreviously been these, these kind of schedules designed for able-bodied employees.

And for recruitments recruitment processes can also be revisited. So hiring panels ought to question whether the traditional job descriptions, whether they unwittingly exclude, you know, broad groups of capable applicants. Offering flexible or hybrid working, for example, can open up positions to people with diverse needs. And within teams, how we allocate tasks can be really invaluable.

So instead of requiring each team member to perform identical functions, managers really should consider the unique aptitude of each individual. So certain tasks, you know, might be able to be redistributed in a manner that allows disabled employees to contribute more effectively. And this isn't a matter of lowering standards or granting favours, rather, that it's more so about trying to leverage people's fullest range of capabilities to achieve organizational goals.

And furthermore, managers should be cultivating an environment in which requesting accommodations is normalized rather than stigmatized. Regular staff training on disability awareness, technology, and inclusive practices can help colleagues to understand how to support each other's different needs.

And finally, I'd say by building strong feedback loops where employees can safely voice concerns and suggestions, then, you know, management can ensure a continuous improvement of inclusivity.

[00:24:39] **Nick:** Thanks, Lee. That's been a great conversation. You've spoken with great passion about this, obviously important topic. So thank you for your time. We mentioned the title of the chapter and the title of the book at the outset, but it will be available in the episode show notes, if you wish to access it, but thanks a lot, Lee, that was a great conversation, really interesting research and good luck with how you take it forward.

[00:25:57] **Lee:** Cheers, Nick. Thanks a lot.

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