

Embracing difference ... disability

By Paul Havranek

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Over the past 15 years, I have written notes on the talent aspects of the infrastructure sector, often following the catalyst of a dinner that we have hosted in our offices as well as expressing views on areas of interest. I was hoping to use this format to write about a very personal topic that I feel has been neglected in the business world generally. By explicitly bringing it to your attention, I hope it may be something that you will become even more aware of when thinking about the talent priorities in your organisations, as well as the wider infrastructure fund and business community.

It is now over ten years since I had a sports accident (in February 2011), which resulted in a neck injury, a dissected carotid artery, and a subsequent massive stroke. I was unlucky to have the accident, but I was very lucky to be close to friends who helped me to St Thomas' Hospital in London and thus survive the incident. I was also lucky that I was able to return to work and continue recuperating in a safe environment, as a partner of our firm and leading our global infrastructure practice.

At the time of the accident, I had been with my firm for five years and they knew me well. I am very fortunate to have been well supported and able to contribute positively since my stroke. In contrast, many disabled individuals are never given the opportunity to be supported in a stimulating business environment. In my experience, this environment is as critical for a successful recovery as other traditional rehabilitation strategies.

'Out of the blue' ... a personal story

Rehabilitation is not just about medical environments—the work environment, if carefully thought through, can provide a safe place to flourish and recover.

As I reflect on my recovery since the accident happened 'out of the blue', I am very aware that a large part of my recovery was due to being able to continue working in a dynamic environment. Clearly, medical and rehabilitation experts helped hugely throughout my recovery as well as a loving and positive spouse.

When away from the office, continuity of communication is important, and this requires individual action over and above corporate rhetoric.

Nevertheless, being in a supportive work environment was critical – that support manifested itself in terms of a managing partner of my office, Andrew Roscoe, who took it upon himself to ensure there was constant two-way communication between the firm and I, when in hospital, the rehabilitation clinic and at home – in that way, through his efforts, and others, the firm did not forget me or vice versa, despite being away from the office for nearly a year. Continuity of interaction was important for both sides.

Positive and realistic goal setting is very important.

Also, when I was at my lowest and recovery to a 'normal' working life was deemed extremely unlikely by the health professionals, Andrew was at his most assertive and positive in terms of giving my wife and I hope of me, not only returning to work, but enabling me to enter a formal partnership promotion process. This was *the* pivotal point of my mental recovery—the realisation that a goal that I had before the accident could still be achieved.

A practical return strategy is vital.

Once back in the firm, everything was done to ensure I had the support I needed; for example, empathetic one-on-one assistants who could help with additional tasks such as accompanying me to meetings. Physical adjustments were made to my office, including providing a larger office so I could host meetings without having to walk long distances. Colleagues helped me in many ways, such as being willing to accompany me so that I was still able to travel internationally.

Appraisal and reward structures are critical to allow a 'safe' environment for personal recovery.

Knowing that personal revenue targets, typical of advisory firms, were never central to my appraisal in the Egon Zehnder lockstep, tenure-based partnership allowed me to develop at my own pace with no perceived 'corporate' pressure. That said, an individual with disabilities needs to be open and approachable in the inevitably delicate iterative discussion on the journey back into full-time work, assuming that is realistically achievable. However, a corporate culture of trust and care is necessary for those discussions to be able to take place at all.

Collectively, all these things made the difference in enabling me to enjoy an effective and successful return to work.

A phased reintroduction is necessary.

Although most aspects of my personality remained untouched by the brain injury, there was inevitable permanent brain damage and resultant initial vulnerability that required increasing levels of social interaction to mollify. After a few years of working and slowly increasing the levels of interaction, these initial issues have disappeared.

One of the biggest challenges during the early stages of my recovery was one of reduced confidence and rehabilitation approaches that were well intentioned I found to be less helpful and too passive. I was able to build up my confidence by being forced 'onto a stage' through work to the extent that my role of interviewing candidates and engaging with clients provided the stimuli to build back confidence. It helped to visit clients in their offices as this allowed me, at an early stage of my reintegration into work, to feel

comfortable in unfamiliar surroundings. Over and above that, colleagues were very amenable to help execute assignments together and provide support generally.

A balancing act needs to be achieved.

A constant dilemma over the past ten years has been one of my trying to pretend that nothing has changed, when the reality is that I have permanent brain damage. This initially manifested itself in fatigue, reduced tolerance to noise and crowds, and overall frustration often while trying to hide this from those with whom I was interacting. Over time, however, and I'm sure as a result of being in a social work environment, this has been effectively overcome.

Building rest into the day has been an important strategy.

Following the advice of neuro-specialists, it was relatively easy to incorporate rest into the course of a day. My stamina has improved significantly as a result. Clearly, I cannot run at the pace I did before the accident but I can still achieve productive and enjoyable days. Structure and an empathetic work environment were essential to achieving this.

As the brain changes, so does one's assessment of people.

Although I think my personality has remained relatively consistent from before the accident, there have been some marked changes, as well as a few subtler ones. For example, I have become more nuanced and 'softer' when taking a view on people and making decisions generally. I tend to be less quick 'to judge a book by its cover'. This is an important point—to have individuals with disabilities within an organisation can help provide different insights and perspectives.

Social integration is the aim.

We are social animals as the recent COVID-19 lockdown has shown! For disabled people who are unable to operate in a work environment, the lack of social interaction is not only restricted to that peculiar situation—it is a constant issue. There must therefore be a virtuous cycle that can be achieved if only opportunities of interaction and engagement in the workplace were more available.

Technology can play a crucial role.

There have been some positive revelations. For example, the use of dictation technology has given me complete freedom to write and I could not work without this amazing software technology.

Various UK statistics

Nearly 20% of working-age adults in the UK are disabled.

There are **14.1 million disabled people in the UK** according to government figures (2018 to 2019); 8% of children and 19% of working-age adults are classified disabled. 4.1 million disabled people are in work, but disabled people are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as non-disabled people.¹ A higher proportion of working-age disabled people are in poverty compared to working-age, non-disabled people.

Disabled people believe there is growing prejudice against them.

In 2000, 37% of disabled people and 34% of non-disabled people felt there was a lot of prejudice around disability. The gap increased by 2017, with 32% of disabled people and 22% of non-disabled people feeling there is a lot of prejudice against disabled people.²

Approximately 100,000 people a year have strokes in the UK and there are currently estimated to be **1.2 million stroke survivors in the UK**. Over a third of strokes happen to middle-aged adults (aged 40 to 69).

Conclusion

The workplace is an essential human environment.

Being at work, doing something one enjoys, is not only a strong part of personal identity but also provides an environment for recovery and a feeling of being able to contribute. It can also have benefits to the employer and the wider team.

The disability label covers a broad spectrum of situations.

Disability is a term that I have personally found difficult to identify with and be classified by. However, it is a reality. Learning to talk about disability is a way of learning to live with it.

There is a broader societal benefit to embracing disability in the workplace.

There are millions of disabled people not working in the UK—yet each has a particular story and unique abilities to contribute. With bespoke care and adaptation, I hope that the corporate world would employ more disabled individuals and benefit from their contribution. The personal rewards of this to the disabled community could be extraordinary. It could also have a positive societal impact, reducing government dependency, among other things.

¹Labour force survey, 2020

²Scope survey, Disability perception gap (2018)

Please don't let disability lose its importance within a broadening diversity agenda.

Diversity is a complex and multi-layered topic that changes over time. As ideas and attitudes change, it is easy to forget the enormous breadth of diversity embracing every nuance of society. Please don't forget physical disability in your organisations' diversity discussions, whether at board or executive level, in the infrastructure sector, or more broadly in the workplace.

Don't forget the 'forgotten three' topics of diversity.

My colleague, Satyajee Thakur, who has studied diversity and inclusion in the UK widely, said in his recent [report \(2021\)](#), "The topic of gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation are finally beginning to get the attention and focus they deserve but, on the other hand, the topics of socio-economic disadvantage, age discrimination and disability, though equally statistically and morally relevant, receive nowhere near the attention they deserve."

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