

# Talking purple

## Building disability confidence Kate Nash

I've spent most of my career campaigning for legislative change for disabled employees and supporting the business community to remove the barriers that exist to enable people to get in, and get on, at work.

Increasingly, I'm hearing a lot about being 'disability confident', and in July 2013, the Government launched a two-year disability confident campaign. The germ of the idea came from the Business Disability Forum's President's Group dinner, which was hosted by Fujitsu in January 2013 and attended by the then Secretary of State and Minister of Disabled People. In essence, the idea is to engage with UK employers who want to champion the skills of disabled people.

We know there are macro barriers to disabled people getting on at work, but at PurpleSpace we've noticed the need that individuals have to build inner confidence and resilience, especially those people who are newly diagnosed with a health condition or disability. What does individual confidence mean to us? How do we stay confident at work? How do we ask for the adjustments we need? How can networking help? Answers to these questions can seem so far away for someone who has had their world turned upside down when they have experienced, sometimes suddenly, a disability or health condition they would prefer not to have.

This year PurpleSpace is launching its own campaign, called #ourdisabilityconfidence, bringing together the learning from many hundreds of disabled employees. Here are some of the steps we will be exploring, which you may find helpful in your work with both your clients and organisations:

### Be who you are

Life takes on a new twist when you acquire a disability or if you have sustained a life-changing accident or injury. And there is nothing that can prepare you for it. It can take years to learn how to be your new self; so why not start to be who you are now?

### Notice the soft, insidious touch of low expectation...

...And then ignore it and/or go round it and/or confront it. But whatever you do, don't absorb it. Colleagues who haven't experienced disability or ill health might sometimes underestimate your skill set, your ambition or the creative way you work to deliver your pound of flesh – notice the different ways that pity arrives at your door – but don't let it in and live inside you.

### 'Workplace adjustments' are not a favour

The concept of workplace adjustments has been around since 1995 – it simply means that there is a legal duty for employers to make adjustments in order that you can do your job. Some employers will refer to them as 'reasonable adjustments'. Yes, the adjustment has to be reasonable, taking things like cost and convenience into consideration, but do not fall into the trap of thinking that an adjustment is a favour. We don't think of maternity leave as a favour, right?

### Shout it loud and shout it proud

Sharing personal information can help to educate those around us; however, it's not everyone's cup of tea to do so. Remember, offering something of our personal story, when shared in the right way, can sometimes lead to a more informed and supportive relationship with your colleagues and manager. If they don't know what you need, how can they help? Unconscious fear in those around us is derived from a lack of understanding. Help your colleagues to understand you or to get over their 'adjustment envy'! Your adjustments should help you to be effective and successful in your job.

### Be selective about the battles you choose to have

Sometimes a little forgiveness helps us more than the other person. In general, offence is rarely intended when it comes to the words we use in daily conversation. We can slap people down verbally, or we can choose to be

kind. You don't have to swallow things said that are just plain wrong – but develop the skills to help you suggest that people use alternative terms or descriptions when they talk about disabled people.

### Develop your inner confidence collaboratively

When your circumstances change, your own confidence can be challenged, and talking to others in your network is likely to be helpful. Everyone's confidence with different aspects of disability and impairment can vary – but find the time to invest in your own development. Disability and impairment are not normally experiences that we invite into our lives. Take the time you need to succeed with your new 'you' and develop your inner confidence collaboratively.

When I look back to my early 20s, I recall how hard it was to bring my authentic self to work. At PurpleSpace we actively encourage networking and sharing ideas to help others do that faster and smarter. Look out for #ourdisabilityconfidence and do pass on the learning we've gleaned from having conversations with employees about disability at work.



**Kate Nash OBE** created PurpleSpace, the UK's only leadership development and networking hub for disabled employee network leaders and employees. Kate has helped over 300 organisations learn how to stimulate real conversations about disability at work through the power of employee networks, and PurpleSpace continues this work.  
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