



ID, Empowered by Accenture – Keynote – Changing Perceptions

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

[00:22 - 29:35] Adam Pearson: Good morning, everybody. Hope you're all doing well on this fabulous, fabulous Friday. My name is Adam Pearson. I am a presenter, actor, campaigner, disability rights activist and celebrity mastermind champion, all of which are on my CV, the trophy is kicking around here somewhere, I don't have time to go and get it onwards and upwards. And I am here today to discuss the importance of identity. Very often, when we talk about diversity, inclusion and representation, we do it in a way that is overly technical. And what, I understand and fully believe in the importance of metrics and numerics and the hitting and setting of targets. I also believe the issue runs so much deeper than that.

And the concept of inclusion and identity in reality are absolutely utterly inseparable. And so to better understand the concept of identity, there's a lot of things going on and a lot of things we need to understand. And the concept of identity can be boiled down to a few questions. Who am I? Who are you? Who are we? And why does that matter?

And the first question, who am I, is possibly one of the largest questions of human existence. I could spend the whole day discussing that one question. Though, unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on how much you like me and who you are, I've only gotten half an hour slot on to back all of this. So shall we start in, here we go.

The quest to find out who we are as people and where that pitch in for wide society is a really big one to me growing up as a disabled person. I didn't really know, I think in order for us to find out who we are, we tend to look for people who are like us and the wider world around us be that in school and work or in the media.

And I as a child of the 80s, early 90s didn't really have that. I went through a phase of thinking that disabled people weren't allowed on TV, simply because, I didn't really see any of them. And so from that early, early age, I made it a real point to strive for that. And I had that element of disability advocacy instilled in me. I had a very, very good friend of mine that said, if you find out what upsets you or what

annoys you, you're very often let that steal naturally, what advocacy you should be involved with. And if you find out where your misery lays, if you find out where your ministry lies, so that's how I fell into advocacy.

And identity is all about finding out what were your soul and your skill set make up along with your protected characteristic. And so I want to help us have that conversation. And not only embrace our own identities, but also embrace other people's. And we praise that everyone's different get used to it. It's something that we've almost forgotten. We've gotten very good at saying it. And we've gotten very good at printing it on coffee cups, on posters and saying it in meetings. But when the rubber hits the road, how well are we doing at it? What are our thought process is, out of those thought processes, then go forward and inform our actions? And what steps can we all take as individuals to help make the world around us be it inside of work, outside of work, in our private lives on welfare, equal understanding and compassionate place?

Not because you came to an event and Adam Pearson said that it's the right thing to do. Not because someone today said something that changed what you saw. I think in events like today, I have zero interest in changing what you think. I'm highly interested in potentially changing how you think. But not with all that being said, let's crack on and talk about unconscious bias.

Again, it's a term, we've all heard a lot and I'm sure that we're overly familiar with. And for those that aren't, unconscious thought is something that we all do. I don't want to sit here and frame it that it makes us bad people. All it is, is the snap decisions that we make about people based upon our own lived experiences and how we've interacted with the world around us up until that point. And they come in all

sorts of forms, you have things like vicinity rights, which means that we naturally gravitate to people who are I like us, so we identify with, or who have similar hobbies and interest to us and the people that we would just naturally mix with, as a result of that.

So examples as a Crystal Palace supporter, if I go to Charlton Park, once all this apparent resistance is over, I would actually be surrounded by Crystal Palace fans and therefore I'll be talking to Crystal Palace and therefore a lot of my friends in the outside world will be Crystal Palace fans.

And I'm also a huge wrestling fan, so it just so happens on Twitter a lot of the people I interact with are either wrestling fans or computer gaming fans. Therefore, I just naturally lean that way. I haven't gone out of my way to shun Arsenal fans, or people who aren't wrestling fans, or people who aren't computer gaming fans. That's just how my social landscape is. However, does that mean that when I meet someone who isn't a Crystal Palace fan or wrestling fan or gaming fan, if I meet someone who I don't have affinity with, who I don't identify with, I should instantly write them off, or instantly have some kind of fear, anxiety or losing towards them, absolutely not.

When it's getting to that point where when you meet someone you don't identify with or have affinity with, but you give them the same respect and opportunity to identify with them as you can. And very often, particularly when it comes to the disability, there's a real barrier there. And there's a real disconnect there. And right, so bear in mind, disabilities are unique in terms of its protected characteristic. And it isn't mutually exclusive. And Lost Voice Guy, the comedian won Britain's Got Talent and a good friend of mine voices it vastly: there are two types of people in this world.

There are people who are disabled and there are people who will be disabled and anyone at any point, let be in an accident or have something happened to them. And in an incident, life has changed forever. And in that moment, where does the concept of identity fit in? What have you built your identity upon? And so does your world still work? Now that you've acquired a disability, cases and point. Should you been in an accident, skiing, tripping over at home, driving and even temporarily just have to use a wheelchair?

Now how accessible is the world around you? Can you still get to work? Can you still get to your desk? Can you still get around your office or your home? And how all your colleagues and your friends, but also the world around you treat you now? Wouldn't it be the same as before? Or would it be different? How have people fallen into the common trap, where they have affiliated disability with inability, ever taken one's physical visible or positive invisible characteristic and use them as a shorthand by which to make judgments about what you can and can't do and what you can and can't achieve.

And again, it all starts off as unconscious bias. None of it starts out as prejudice or discriminatory behavior or an assault on one's identity. However, if it's left unaddressed, actually it can spiral into those kinds of thought patterns, those kind of feelings and those kind of emotions, which is really important. And it applies not exactly disability, it can apply to any of the areas of diversity or protected characteristics. It's really important that we all start to master the art of having really difficult conversations.

I am often the most visible guy in a room. I've been to many job interviews, at many workshops, spoken at many conferences, but ones like this, I love doing the TED Talk, be it school assemblies, or as soon as

I walk into the room, all eyes are on me and everyone is trying to figure out what on earth is going on here. And everyone starts saying in their heads and people introduce themselves, you shake hands. And when you're in that environment a lot, you can get a really good read on people that they're like, at least 10 questions that they want to ask but they're very much afraid of asking them.

And I think we live in a world now that is rightly to one degree very politically correct. However, there is a double-edged sword with political correctness where everyone is in a handful like they're walking on eggshells. And the idea -- everyone is afraid to say the wrong thing for fear of being cancelled or being held to this what could be dealing with an unreasonable standard of acceptability. And so therefore, everyone spends a lot of time sitting in awkward silence and nobody addresses the proverbial elephant in the room. And unless we get really, really good at having these difficult conversations are about important issues such as disability, race, transgender, religion sexuality -- the big station point right now in a way for the tragic death of Sarah Everard, the idea of kind of sexual harassment how far is too far.

And on that note, if you have to ask the question how far is too far? You've probably already gone too far at some point. And so we really need to almost embrace that awkwardness and I suppose get used to it and I often when I go into big companies like -- I'm going into Sony next week. If I've made a whole room full of people feel uncomfortable talking about disability I have done my job because conversations like the ones we're going to have today good on some base level make us still uncomfortable, wrestling with our own identity is uncomfortable also have to have. Wrestling with other people's and trying to figure out where all this can coincide reconcile and work together is a

painful uncomfortable process to have to go through. That doesn't mean however that it isn't a worthwhile one. And so, what I'm hoping to unconnect with the rest of this talk is to get us all into a position where we can push through that discomfort and have these difficult conversations.

So point one and everything I will say is weighted from a disability perspective certainly because I'm disabled that's my area of expertise and all the other people today who have other areas of expertise that I don't who are far better equipped to talk to those things than I am. So if I do overlook changes, it's not because I think they're not important, it's just because I am not as well equipped with other people you'll be hearing from today who discuss those things.

So point one, there's no such thing as a stupid question, I alluded to earlier that often we sit in awkward silence and no one wants to be the guy to ask the question for fear of offending someone. And I'm very hard to offend. I'm at the age now, I'm 36, a grown up, I've been through a secondary school playground and I've been through a lot of rock clubs pubs in Croydon. There's nothing anyone can say to me that I either haven't heard before or that's going to cause me to go home and cry and cry myself to sleep.

So if you're worried about offending me, no, never going to happen. But also, I think I'd rather someone try and have a conversation an important one about disability and get it wrong. And then myself or someone else be able to lovingly correct them and steer them in the right direction then everyone sit in abject silence and acute anxiety, because if we if we don't talk to each other and discuss these things we won't be able to meet each other's needs. You won't be able to know what reasonable adjustments need to be made for a disabled employee unless you ask them and unless you say what we

jokingly call in the community the 'D' word because disability isn't a dirty word and I'm also already aware that I have a disability, so it's not going to be strung on me.

But also unless we have these conversations as to how to better improve the environment or for in this case disabled people, we're not going to give them the opportunity to meet their potential and be the best them that they can be. And that's another thing with our, Identity, we need to give people the freedom to be who they are and give other people that exact same opportunity and level of respect. The case in point and it's one of my favorite movies and I don't know how many of you have seen, I know if you haven't go and check it out because it's amazing, Erin Brockovich.

Erin Brockovich works in a law firm, leaving my character and she would be deemed and I believe the technical term for when this, the external is fair and attract; just kind of you know very low economic class, in a law firm paper pushing. However, she then got involved in one of the biggest legal battles in the film and because ultimately people took a chance on her and gave her the platform to be her best self. She won one of the big legal battle in the film.

And I want us all to think of how many Erin Brockovichs do we have in the world around us? How many Erin Brockovichs do we have in our workplaces? Is there an Erin Brockovich in your company or in your team who all they need is one conversation, one opportunity or one adjustment can be made? And they could not only better their lives forever but also better your companies, better your teams and better the world around them forever.

I often say that disabled people don't want a handout, all they really need is a hand up and when you make these snap decisions

without question them, you can ultimately you can lose out on a lot of amazing people, amazing talent and amazing opportunities.

And to give you a few examples there. If you were to -- for example not engage with someone, not hire someone or not want someone as part of your team or social circle based on the fact that they may or may not be on your season spectrum then congratulations you've either not hired or not made friends with Bill Gates, Steve Jobs or the guy that invented Pokemon. And if I found out that I had lost an opportunity to be friends with the guy that made Pokemon based on one bad decision I made as a result of unconscious bias, 96-year-old Adam would literally be devastated.

I'm sorry talk about catching these thought processes before they happen, again, as I said Earlier, this doesn't make us bad people, unconscious bias just makes us productive to our environment and even I do it. Even I have moments where I watch how we made a Chelsea big brother and if you listen carefully while it's on, you could probably hear me rolling my eyes from Croydon. So again, it doesn't make us bad people, it's just a case of how quickly time we recognize we're doing it. How quickly can we challenge it in our own heads and then how quickly can we reconcile with those beliefs.

So that one understand on unconscious bias, recognize on unconscious bias and then the hardest step is to challenge our own unconscious bias. When we have those very natural sleeping thoughts and we catch them before they become hardwired and eventually evolve into prejudice and think why am I thinking this? Is this true? And if someone I knew, knew I thought this, what would they think. And so and this is a big ask. The thought I'm about to give you when it

comes to changing unconscious bias is a big one, but it's an important one and if what I'm about to say makes you scared and it's uncomfortable, it absolutely should but again push through it, go through it talk to someone who you wouldn't normally, hanging out with people who aren't like you. If you want to know more about the disabled experience for example find someone -- even if it's a random person go find someone who is from that community and say hey I have a lot of questions and can I buy you coffee and can we have a chat? If you want to know more about racism, find someone who isn't the same who is from that community and have the chat as I said earlier. Master the art of difficult conversations and then by having these conversations you can cultivate relationships that are also mutually beneficial.

Conversations like this when they work well upon as I said mutually beneficial, think of it lastly. I have a relationship with my bank and that relationship involves me, not only me taking out money from the bank, in order to take money out from a bank you also have to deposit it into it and we all should be getting to a point where we're having conversations where not only can we withdraw from people's experiences but we can also deposit things into their lives as well. And then, that becomes a really beautiful thing and it takes these conversations of diversity, inclusivity and representation also being as I said earlier just these numbers driven overly clinical and very sanitary things and it makes them human, because when you talk about diversity, you talk about people and when you talk about people you talk about humanity and that involves so much more than just our protected characteristics there's a very old Richard Dawkins quote on identity. That alludes to the fact that we only are defined by, is our DNA. And DNA is music and we simply dance to it.

And I find that not only highly accurate or something might be heartbreaking, the idea that all -- any of us are, is on genetic coding and nothing else is highly one-dimensional, highly logical and as I said heartbreaking. So know who you are, know who someone else is, sit down talk to them, get to know them. And if you do those two things well, the third question who are we?

Naturally falls into place, if we can get to a point where we can all understand who we are not on a kind of surface kind of white, Christian male, not white, Christian male but also what makes each other tick? What are we into? And it's through these and it's through these conversations that we will ultimately find out that we all have so much more in common than then we think we do. One of the pubs, I used to drink and employed in the Ship. It's a great pub. It's the definition of a diver. It's a pirate theme heavy metal pub. It is everything right and wrong with the world all at once.

One of the guys I used to see there a lot was like a really tall guy, dreadlocks, long beard, packed shoes from like head to toe. And first I went in and saw him like my unconscious bias instantly kicked in and I was like that is probably a neo-Nazi. But then one time, I accidentally found myself talking to him and now his name is Rob. He's now one of -- become one of my best friends. And again, with most massive gaming fans, massive wrestling fans, he grew up in Britain and in New York City, I've done a lot of work in Britain and New York City. And it turns out we know a lot of the same people, his favorite restaurant in Brooklyn, is my favorite restaurant in Brooklyn and it just goes to show that if you take the time and sit down to talk to someone who you don't know and give their humanity the same level of credence and respect that you would not only give your own but give that of someone who you already like.

You can make this world a better place and I think that is ultimately the implicit duty of every human. Neil deGrasse Tyson, amazing man, great thinker, again, go and check out some of his stuff on YouTube not while I'm talking or explaining after all this. Amazing. He says that every human should be could fear leaving the world in the same state as when they arrived in it. And that's what days like today are all about, I'm not here to change, you change what you think, if someone has goes away from the session going I need to talk to a disabled person because Adam Pearson said I do. Then I apologize, I failed you.

However, if you regret thinking, I want to go and talk to a disabled person because I want to think about disability differently, then I have done my done my job. And I think all of us should be able to say things that leave a legacy whereby it changes how people think, how they behave, what they forget that we said it.

Events like this very often can become teaching by authority rather than teaching by compassion and teaching by understanding. So who am I, who are you, who are we and why does it matter? Because once we get to know ourselves, once we get to know other people and once we get to know each other everything else becomes plain sailing. Once we get to a point where we can embrace our own identities other people's, the differences that lie between us evaporates and the world becomes fairer, the world becomes kinder and in a society that is currently slowly lacking, the world becomes more compassionate and fairer.

And in closing this past year has been a really strange one. And it's why conversations like this need to be happening now more than ever. So that when the world finally does open up again, when we can hug our family, hug our friends and have face-to-face conversations with people we know and

people we like that we also mostly are paradigm with people we don't know, people we might not like and people who we have yet to come across.

And that brings me to the end of my talk thank you very much for having me. I hope what I've said has at least resonated with you on some level or met the basic criteria of sense and we are now going to throw over and do 10 minutes of Q&A, if anyone has any questions, thoughts, comments, feedback, I'd be very much willing to keep having this conversation -- keep having these conversations and thank you very much for having me. Let's do this.

[29:39 - 29:41] Melanie: Hello Adam.

[29:42 - 29:42] Adam Pearson: Hello.

[29:43 - 30:53] Melanie: Hello. My name is Melanie. And I will be helping moderate some of the questions that have come through during your talk. But, first off, thank you so much for sharing with us. There are so many questions, so I know we have 10 minutes. I'm going to keep it tight, keep it brief, so I can let you take the room and explain some things for us.

So one of the first questions that has come through and so earlier in your session you said that you either are disabled or will be disabled, so that hit like a punch. And it goes right to the question because people are uncomfortable, they're uncomfortable in terms of how to use the word disability, how to describe someone how to say -- is it okay to say that you are disabled or I am disabled? Is it okay to refer to someone in the third person is disabled? Or do you say person with a disability? So could you because you've gone kind of both ways in your talk. And so could you break it down for us like what is okay to use that's not offensive?

[30:54 - 31:54] Adam Pearson: Yeah. Well, I think what was important. I also think we need to pay equal credence and intention behind someone's words. And when I describe myself, I say disabled person, because for me if I say a person with a disability, it puts the aspect of disability on the back burner and goes, oh that doesn't really matter. While it's for me, it's an essential part of who I am. And but I appreciate it's also different strokes for different folks. So whilst I'm happy with disabled person other people might not be and that sign and I think the intentions behind the words are far more important than the actual words themselves but I want to get to a point where people can just use the word disability and not feel anxious about it. Very often it's considered like a bad word or a swear word or a dirty word but disability isn't a dirty word.

[31:56 - 32:15] Melanie: Okay. Thank you so much. I'm hoping that will help. Thank you, Aisha for that question. And then, Paul has a question for us. So can you give us any tips on how to approach situations where you feel someone has been unfairly treated due to biases and perceptions. So this speaks right to the heart of ableism.

[32:16 - 33:29] Adam Pearson: Not absolutely and the way you approach it very much depends on the level because that there are levels to this because I'm trying to advise as I said it's like it innate and sort of everyone does it. But then, when it goes all the way to outright discrimination, you don't handle both of those in the same way. So if it's not like not necessarily innocent but kind of innocuous and lower level you just pull someone to one side and say, I can't help but notice you, you acted in this way or you said this or you wrote something like this. Looking like here's how that should be interpreted. I'm not saying you did that deliberately, I'm just saying that's how it

could look and maybe have a little bit of a sink and go and have a word with yourself or read around this -- read around this a bit more. But then, when it gets to something like a high-level that's when you come down hard and come down like a ton of bricks. And for that high-level stuff that's a very simple three-step process. Think BS, For BS, Stay in BS.

[33:35 - 34:09] Melanie: Thank you. Thank you so much that was nice and easy for all us to remember. So thank you so much for that. Another question, and this go quite frankly your courage and your strength and quite frankly your resilience. It's awe-inspiring because I know that it's tough when people say horrible things about you and I still -- I haven't mastered of kind of being able to reflect it off. And so a little bit more about how you've learned to overcome some of the perceptions that have been made about you?

[34:11 - 35:55] Adam Pearson: I think when you overcome something you need to challenge it and disprove it. And so when I meet -- for example when I meet someone new for the first time, obviously going to be taken aback and saying oh my word what is going on here, what happened? And then, all these thoughts going to go through the head. I want you know what the vices are, you can develop really quick ways to disprove them like straight off the bat. So I'm a big fan of kind of left foot forward, firm handshake, eye contact, how is it going?

Communication is also really important and in my opinion I think stand-up comedy is the purest form of communication on face of the earth. So if you want to learn how to communicate really well, watch people who are amazing at doing it, go away and watch a lot of stand-up comedy, go away and watch a lot of TED talks and learn your story well and learn to tell it well to everyone. And again

communication is meeting people where they are as opposed to where you wish they were. So don't go in yelling trying to change the world all the time, cultivate relationships, do things slowly, do things softly and do things kindly and compassionately. So yeah, go away watch standup comedy, it's a good excuse, go away and watch the long form guys, do watch guys like Stuart Lee, watch guys like Chris Rock, and watch guys like Michael McIntyre, those are my guys who I watch and learned from, and again, as I said Neil deGrasse Tyson as well amazing communicator.

[35:56 - 36:21] Melanie: Okay. So you get it right from here guys. So you get the tips. Watch comedians -- stand-up comedians in terms of how they navigate some of those difficult -- typically difficult topics. So a few questions are coming in like a wild storm, okay. So Amanda has a question, as a child with the disability how was school for you and how did you tackle bullying? So how did your parents cope and support you for our parents in the room?

[36:22 - 38:11] Adam Pearson: Ah, school. Yeah, I know we all know what the answer to this question is. So particularly secondary school, high school. High school playgrounds are purely Darwinian. If you want to see Darwin's theory in perfect motion, go to any high school playground up and down the country. And I handled it really badly, partly because I'm a -- I was a man, I don't talk about emotions. I feel, I use words and fists. And yeah and I think we learned from our mistakes and I learned how to get things right by getting things wrong like the 36-year-old grown lost man that sits here today isn't the same one that was in the high school playground. And as I said I grew up watching stand-up comedy and I'm very smart and very witty and I just wind up blowing people up in the

playground. And then, I'd be the one that got in trouble.

So whereas now if I could go back and have a word with like 14-year-old Pearson, I'd be like no none of this matters you will never see these people again after these five years. And the people that matter don't mind and the people that mind don't matter. And the greatest three -- four best words in the English language to be able to say, I told you so. So, rather than try and win the battle in the playground, win the war in life and don't let a small group of narrow-minded people steal your life, ruin your joy or question your beliefs.

[38:13 - 38:31] Melanie: Thank you. Because by any measure you are winning the war with life and actually it brings me to the question from Sam who says Adam, I really appreciate the direct and open way you were talking about identity and disability. But how have you used your disability to help you excel.

[38:34 - 39:58] Adam Pearson: Well, that's a really good question because often eventually because psychology being a thing. One of the questions, I get asked is, if you could take a pill and not be disabled would you do it? And my answer is always empathically no because, a) when we talk about disability, I would like to say people will acquire a disability and people thought about going that way from being non-disabled to disable. But imagine how much of a mindless going from disable to non-disable would be. This does a lot of heavy lifting to my lack of personality. And I think I get away with a lot of skullduggery but also it's opened more doors on its toes. If I didn't have my disability I wouldn't be here talking to you right now. I wouldn't have gotten to work with Scarlett Johansson, I wouldn't have gotten to work with Jess Weixler, I'm consulting on a film right now where I get to talk to people like Frank Brandon Cooper for example. So, no, it's opened more doors than it's closed

and it's all about finding those opportunities to change the world and make the world fairer kind of bit by bit. This is all baby steps equality doesn't happen overnight, it isn't easy but nothing worth doing ever happened easily or we'd all do it.

[40:01 - 40:29] Melanie: And on that note, I just want to take the time to thank you on behalf of our audience here. There are so many other questions of the story we can get to them all, Adam, your talk was incredible and it certainly opened my eyes and made me just feel a little bit more comfortable and it just showed me so much that there is still for me to learn and I can see -- I hope we're going to be sending all of the compliments over to you. Thank you so much. We really do appreciate you sharing with us today.

[40:31 - 40:32] Adam Pearson: End time, namaste.

[40:34 - 40:57] Melanie: And just want to close off this session, so you guys have a five minute comfort break and then in five minutes we're going to be returning with Adam Pearson, but then also with our round table panel, are you sitting uncomfortably with Adam Pearson, Paris Lise and Gavin Young. So, we'll see you in five minutes comfort break starting again at 10 AM. Bye everyone.

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