



VAAHINI CONNECT PODCAST | SEASON 2 | EPISODE 4 WHY ACCESSIBILITY IS ANOTHER NAME FOR DIGNITY: INCLUSION FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITY IS A TANGIBLE REALITY

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

Welcome to the Accenture Vaahini Connect podcast. In Season Two, 'Meet the luminaries', we bring to you the unique stories of women luminaries who share how we can all play a role in furthering big goals that impact societies.

Whether you are a salaried employee, an entrepreneur, a student, or just someone looking for a way to contribute to society, in each episode, we hope to bring to you inspiring stories and effective ways on how each one of us in our powers can make this world a better place for all.

I'm Savitha Nanjappa, Success Coach, Founder of Success with Savitha & your Podcast Host.

In this episode, meet serial entrepreneur with a passion for technology and disability, Shilpi Kapoor. She is the founder of BarrierBreak and 247 Accessible Documents that focus on digital accessibility; with a team of 240+ plus accessibility experts and 65% of them having a disability, she has grown this to scale.

An accessibility evangelist, Shilpi is looking for ways to make digital accessibility a priority. She has been recognized as one of the top 15 Women Transforming India by Niti Aayog 2019 and is one of the top 20 most powerful women in business in India for the year 2017 by Business Today magazine. Her belief in inclusion goes beyond with Newz Hook which is India's premier media site focusing on disability, inclusion, and accessibility. Having started in India, she wants to take this globally so we can change attitudes towards people with disabilities. An Ashoka Fellow and the recipient of "NCPEDP- Shell Helen Keller award 2008" -- Non-disabled role model supporter of increased employment opportunities for people with disabilities, she has successfully built a sustainable business model in disability products and services.

Tune in as I speak to Shilpi on how technology can be leveraged to empower people with disabilities to perform and operate independently in workspaces and how workplaces can break ableist assumptions



by enhancing inclusion for persons with disabilities through deliberate accessibility to technology.

Savitha: Hi, and welcome to the Vaahini Connect podcast. And it is my absolute honor to have you in this conversation today. Welcome aboard.

Shilpi: Thank you, Savitha. Thank you for having me.

Savitha: I'm looking forward to our conversation. And without much ado, like they say, I'm going to dive in right to our first question. And that is No.1 - BarrierBreak has been instrumental in transforming the lives and livelihood of people with disabilities – we know that 65% of your team are people with disabilities, and you've literally set an example by walking the talk. Do tell us, what inspired you to address and initiate progressive changes in this direction? What brought you here?

Shilpi: Well, that is a very loaded question. But I'll try and give you a very short form answer of that. So I was a young student out of college, landed up in an internet chatroom, and learned how to hack. I got hired by an American firm based out of India, as a white-hat hacker ensuring that their servers were safe. Worked with the person who hired me in that chat room for about two years. One day, he and I were on the same shift. And I caught the hacker, and he didn't -- that had very rarely happened. He taught me everything I knew about hacking. I asked him, you know, what happened? And, he was so sweet; he told me, "The only reason you could beat me today was because my technology was not doing well. I haven't told you, but I'm paralyzed and have been for all of the period you knew me. I use a sip and puff device, which is, you know, controlling your computer with your breath and a mouse pointer. And that's it. And that's the only reason you could beat me to it."

And here I was sitting dumbfounded with this expression as in "Disabled? Paralyzed? Are you sure? I've never ever felt that about you."

I think that was the tipping point for me. That's when he told me, "I've known you for two years, why not have the technology for disabled people?"

I went on to start the first-ever computer training center in the country for the visually impaired, and then soon realized I didn't want to be a charity, because everybody I met basically said, "Oh, you're teaching the blind? Okay, we can give you some money or we'll give you computers."

But it was not because they wanted to, because it was a charitable angle. When I went back and said, 'Can you give them employment?', nobody would say yes. So, I was like, 'Okay, something's wrong. I'm trying to do good here but this good is not taking us very far, because now I'm creating people that have hope, but in that hope, they don't have opportunities. So, what's the point of hope?' So that's really the genesis of BarrierBreak as you see it today.

BarrierBreak is founded on three principles. The first is that we will employ people with disabilities, which is why, you know, the number that we have. The second is that we will help companies to make their technology accessible; we very clearly said, we won't go out and create new technology. There was so much technology out there in the world, which was inaccessible to the disabled; we'd help organizations to make that happen. And the third, we said that we will not be a charity, right, and we would be a For-Profit social enterprise, which is where we're at. And so, you know, that was really that set us up. I think, for me, the biggest thing when I walk into the organization every day is, seeing people with disabilities interacting with everybody else - there's no difference amongst them. Right? It makes me smile that nearly 90% of our business is international. And it is people from India who are delivering on this promise.

It is kind of seamless inside BarrierBreak -- when we meet, we don't ask people about their disability, we don't talk about it, it's just that they use assistive technology, some of them might be using sign language or other solutions. But it isn't asked like it is something different. It's just part of who they are. So that's how we started. That's why we're here.

Savitha: Amazing! That's really touching my heart to hear you say that. And I want to ask you, what are



some examples of ableist assumptions, or microaggressions in the workplace that have been normalized or overlooked for a long time, while we have this story, while we have this success that you're seeing, and it's become so normal for you at work? What are you seeing, like I said, as microaggressions? What can colleagues who are allies do to identify and change this? So there are two parts to the question.

Shilpi: I think the reason we have microaggressions, or we have ableist assumptions, is because we don't interact with people with disabilities in day-to-day life. There is the assumption that they don't exist in society. So, when we interview people, we ask them these questions "Have you ever worked with a person with disability? Have you ever studied with a person with disability?" 98% of the time, the answer's no. Because, people haven't really interacted with them. They don't know how to interact with them. They actually look at them as different, which they aren't. And somewhere that word differently-abled, also adds to that story of oh, they're different. Right? Now, what I tell people when they join very quickly is that 'they are just like you and me, that there's really no difference'. They work the same, they look the same. They sleep the same, the shop the same; they also own a living, and they have families. Everything is the same. It's just that they might do something slightly different. But that is not who they are; that difference is not who they are. So, I think the reason that you see microaggressions is because we haven't really interacted with persons with disabilities. We don't know how to. So one simple example that you see is that you have somebody who's like, let's say, a wheelchair user, and they have somebody who is behind them, who is their support for their caregiver. And suddenly you would have people talking to the caregiver and not to the wheelchair user. Now, that's a very simple microaggression.

Something as simple as that makes somebody feel "Why are you just sidelining me? I am the person who came to meet you. Why are you speaking to my caregiver?" You see simple things that people don't realize, right? So, if you have one of your employees or one of your staff or colleagues, who is a person

with visual impairment, now the simple way is, how do you support them to walk, right? If they have to go to the restroom, and you find something pulling them or dragging them along, rather than just giving them an elbow, be able to walk them through, get on to the restroom or wherever they have to go. Now, these are simple things that we have to learn, right?

I find the best way for people to learn is not necessarily to put them through sensitization but to have them interact with each other and learn from each other. So, I always tell people, if you're afraid that -- you know, we have people that we hire every month -- you've never interacted with people with disabilities. So as much as we are such an organization, which is inclusive, it's not that we don't have microaggressions, or you know ableist assumptions, because when new people come, we can do a training, we can tell them not to use certain terminology. But at the end of the day, the best way that you learn is when you are in the midst of it -- it's not about this session that you've had that supports your knowledge. But finally, it's about how you are doing this on a day-to-day basis, and how you're interacting with people. So, it's about overcoming that fear, right? Like, over the years, I have learned sign language, but I'm not great at it. I'm very honest about it -- I have a lot of deaf employees; but I have team members who have learned sign language from them, and are signing beautifully. So, when I hold a training, and suppose our sign language interpreter is not at work that day, I will just ask one of them to interpret for me. And they will. Now, we didn't tell them to go and get certified in it. We didn't tell them to learn sign language, it just happened because they are truly a part of the team. I think that's what I wish our education system provides, because, if we did this interaction in school in college, by the time you came to the workplace, we wouldn't be this awkward when you met a person with a disability.

I remember there was this time that we were hiring our first autistic person and this was back in 2009. I remember the first time when this person joined the organization and we had some deaf employees. And the deaf employees turned around, saw him, and



said something about mental retardation -- and he's actually not. So we had to sit everybody down and say, "You know what, there are people with different kinds of challenges. This is you, and you need sign language; this is him, he needs a different way for us to communicate." And funnily, they've actually become the best of friends, that entire group. I think that's what I love about BarrierBreak. And that's the way I think we should overcome some of these things, by allowing people to make their mistakes, but educating them on how to shift the attitude, rather than directing that. Give them that understanding so that they can truly be inclusive.

Savitha: That brings me to my next question, what are some fundamental changes that the average workplace can do to become more inclusive, be it in terms of policy or technology to empower people with disabilities at work? You've already touched upon some of this, would you like to share more on this.

Shilpi: I think the first thing that people or organizations do is employ people with disabilities. It doesn't have to be 100 people. It starts with one or two to start sowing the seed. But then when you're bringing those people, be able to have conversations with them, and build solutions around what they need. So I think that's the first thing I tell people.

The second is that when you build policy, you need to remember that the policy is there to support the people with disabilities and not vice versa. Sometimes I see certain policies that are so hardcoded that we don't understand that people with disabilities are on a spectrum and have different requirements -- it's not always that easy. For example, I have some deaf employees who don't use sign language at all right, they literally have instructions, but they never learned sign language and they don't want to learn. But most policies will tell you that if you have deaf representation in your organization, they need to provide sign language experts -- but that isn't always true.

Lastly, when it comes to technology, a large percentage of the technology in organizations is inaccessible. We all have technology that is legacy. We all have new technology that we're buying,

which is inaccessible. So, it's important to have that as a part of our process. IT needs to get involved early on in the dialogue, especially in the world where everything is digital for all of us. If it's an afterthought, you will never be able to deliver on your commitment. I think that's something that we need to be careful about and implement as they get on this journey.

Savitha: Absolutely. Thank you for sharing that. Because I think what you've shared so far has been not just an educative conversation for every one of us. And I think I'm, you know, I'm an ally. But it's been really insightful. And I think these are, this is advice that is actually something that we can implement, execute immediately. And for that, I thank you for sharing with us today. Thank you for joining us today and being so generous with your time. And it was a pleasure to have you here.

Shilpi: Thanks, Savitha. It's lovely to be here. And thanks to you for doing this. I think it's a topic that very few people would focus on. So really appreciate that.

Thank you for listening to this episode. Remember, we may not turn into changemakers overnight. But all of us hold the power to lead small, incremental changes that can eventually make the world a more equal and fairer place. You can join the Accenture Vaahini network, a networking forum for women professionals, enabled by Accenture. The link to join is in the description of this episode. Also, don't forget to send in your feedback and thoughts to us.

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