

[music playing]

[Narelle] Hello,

and welcome to
this week's episode

of The Digital Access Show.

This week's slightly different.

I want to go back to basics
with digital accessibility,

and talk about why...

we should implement digital
accessibility in the community.

And to do that,
I've brought along a man,

Thomas Trout,

who owns a number of businesses...

in the disability sector,

Disbranded being one of them,

And Tom will,

Tommy, as I call him,
will tell you a bit more.

But it is really important
to understand the why...

of digital accessibility
and the impacts it can have.

Tommy, thank you
for being on the show.

[Tommy] The pleasure
is all mine, Narelle Gatti.

Thank you for having me.

[Narelle] You're welcome. Tommy,
Tell us a little bit about yourself.

I met you at the wonderful
TechAbility conference,

where you were the moderator.

[Tommy] Yeah, we were,
our double act was...

reminded people of
Abbott and Costello

but we got there and we educated
and inspired a few folks.

But otherwise, I'm...

a, I'm the last guy in the
world that would have,

and should have
started a business,

let alone several, when here
I am, failing upwards as ever.

But my...

I've been, my entire background
is in community services.

Been working in it,
one guise or another,

since I was about 16 years old.

Now I'm shocked they've
said that was 21 years ago,

being 37 and still going

strong with passion for it. And,

at the moment,

I spend most of my time between
studying at university in a...

biomedical science
pre-med program there,

but also working in two
businesses that I currently run.

One is Disbranded,

a creative agency
for the disability sector,

on a mission to build
iconic disability brands,

and also Inclusive-AF,
which is a, ...

an organisation or business that
supports the health and fitness,

allied health and
fitness industry,

or industries,
to become more inclusive.

So we do things like education,

consultancy,
accessibility audits,

etc, etc.

And yeah.

I play around with supporting
different disability startups,

and any other mischief
I can get into, really.

[Narelle] Awesome.

So Tommy,

one of the things that

when I first met you
that really interested me.

You were talking about
the history of disability.

[Tommy] Yes.

[Narelle] And...

why...

from your point of view,

that people need to understand
the history of disability

to understand what's
happening now?

[Tommy] Yeah. So
effectively, what happened is,

after I left a company

that I sold, WeFlex,

a lot of people in the fitness
industry were reaching out,

even the health industry,
and they were like, Oh,

we'd love to have you to come in
and talk to us about disability,

disability inclusion and
disability accessibility.

And what I found is, is
that it was very difficult to...

kind of make sense of a lot of
things that we know today,

without kind of harking back to...

historical precedent, where
people were coming from.

And I would spend almost a
third of my time talking about...

legislation from
the 80s and 90s,

institutionalisation,
and all of that.

And so, me and my brother,
my brother Jack,

being on the spectrum, and

both of us being quite
nerdy history fans,

we just decided to deep dive it
and create a course out of it.

So, we made a course called,

"A Brief History of Disability
in Colonial Australia,"

where we really look
at the treatment of,

and the systemic
environment around...

people with disabilities from...

early settlers in
colonial times.

So, the first institutions
that were ever invented,

the original binary,

where we broke people up
in between lunatics and idiots.

So idiots being intellectual
or learning disability,

and lunatics being
people with mental health...

conditions.

They were kind of
just lumped in together.

And they were also
treated and housed together,

and it was in the 30s that

they started breaking them out...

separately.

So lunatics over here,
idiots over there.

You know, the history itself,
I could talk for hours on,

it's deeply fascinating,

but also, it really
does start to colour in...

some of the language
that we use today.

I mean, people use the
word handicap for disability,

and people were surprised
to hear that that term...

one of the origins
for that term...

is that most with

disability were beggars,

and had a cap in their hand,

begging for money.

There was also, in Victorian
England, before settlement,

they passed legislation,

to allow people with
disabilities to live in stables,

to keep them out of the rain.

Yeah.

But they would
beg during the day,

That's what the term was,
handicap, cap in hand.

[Narelle] Hang on here. Now,
I'm getting really fascinated.

So where did

people with deafness,

where did people with
blindness, vision impairments,

which camp did they fall into?

[Tommy] Additionally,

the way that we
supported disability,

before any real
institutional support,

was either your
family were able to...

provide for you,

but don't think for a
second you were really

going to contribute anything
meaningful to the house.

You were kept
away like a secret.

One of the reasons

why is because,

religiously speaking,

19th century,

if your child had a disability,

many saw that as an omen

from God that you were unlucky,

or cursed or forgotten by God.

So, family shame if anyone

was born with any disability.

And if you could, you

could look after them.

If you didn't, you would give them

to the church to look after.

So that's where a lot of

charities are church-based,

and educational

things are as well.

And when you get a
little bit further along,

they would have
institutional care.

Some were ran by the government,

institutions, but some were run
by benevolent ladies societies,

in the mid 20th century.

So in the 30s, 40s and 50s,

we had community groups
that would, you know,

provide that type of support
to people who are deaf,

hard of hearing,
or blind, low vision.

But it was grim,

and you, yourself, would not have been

in control of your destiny at all.

[Narelle] A bit scary.

[Tommy] Very.

And what's
interesting is that, we...

A lot of the care that
would come about,

people would leave their homes,

and enter into either public
or private institutional care,

but the quality of their care
would almost plummet immediately,

because the second someone isn't
caring for you in your home,

but instead in a separate home,

a very creepy dynamic
emerges, and a lot of people,

especially if they believe
that you are lesser than,

you become a glorified pet
that they have to look after,

but also can neglect and abuse...

at will as well.

So there's testimonials
from politicians...

all throughout the 20th
century, talking about...

how it's basically, a different

kind of hell inside
some of these homes.

Absolute depravity
in institutional care,

and it was the work of a
brilliant man named John Roarty.

[Narelle] Yup.

[Tommy] Very much a
man with physical disability,

but had full faculties.

And...

But he was a smart lad,

but he wasn't allowed
to steer his own wheelchair,

without an attendant
forcing him to do it for him.

And he somehow managed
to get his little manifesto out...

to mainstream media, and
he called it "Captives of care."

Excellent name for
a manifesto in a book.

And the media started reporting
on the abuses of institutional care,

on people with disabilities.

And he, yep.

He became a real leader and
advocate and spokesperson for it.

And you saw a real tilt
towards de-institutionalisation,

in the sort of 50s and 60s.

And he is a significantly
big reason why.

It's sad, most people
don't know his name.

Even people with disabilities
don't know his name.

And he has done,
he did an awful lot for them.

So we want to pay homage and
respect to characters like that,

who did amazing work for people.

[Narelle] And I've got to
admit, I'd never heard of him,

when you said the name
and told me about him,

and I've tried to
do a bit of research.

Just, it's fascinating.

So, when you look at that,

and then you suddenly
say, well, hang on.

Now we're bringing
digital accessibility into it.

What does digital accessibility
give people with disability?

[Tommy] Yeah. So,

I guess linking the
two themes together is,

historically, the world has not,

and was not built for
people with disabilities.

The internet is no different...

from physical
architecture, right?

There's no digital
wheelchair ramp, so to speak,

for people with disability
to access the internet.

And so, what you've got
is the internet was built,

and websites and
everything was built

a certain way without that in mind,

and we're now
trying to retroactively...

fit and make things work.

But whilst that's easy to do,

what isn't easy to do is
to change the perspectives

and opinions of people...

who do not value accessibility,

or see it either as a box
that needs to be ticked.

Something that is too hard,

or, quote, unquote,
they're not my target market,

so I'm not fussed.

And that's sort of
where we're at, is...

trying to make the argument
that there are a lot reasons...

why you shouldn't bring digital

accessibility into business,

and not all of
them are charitable.

Many of them are commercial...

business cases for inclusion.

[Narelle] What do you see as
the biggest commercial reasons?

[Tommy] Well, so it's
called the purple dollar.

The purple dollar is...

this collective spending
power of people with disability,

and globally, it's about
13 trillion dollars.

-[Narelle] Wow.

-[Tommy] Yeah.

That's the purple dollar.

[Narelle] Wow.

[Tommy] Wrap your
head around that.

Even in Australia, the NDIS is,
it's ultimately net positive.

It's a great thing,

And it's a 36 billion
dollar scheme

that supports over
600,000 Australians.

Like...

you can't tell me there's
no business case to...

lock into that
opportunity as well.

But also, one third of
every household in Australia...

has someone with

a disability there.

There are a lot more disabled

consumers than most
people appreciate.

And so, all you
were doing is just...

opening up your doors
to more people digitally.

When more and more
businesses are ran digitally,

more shop fronts are digital.

All you're doing is opening
up your doors to them,

and making them feel
welcome and to feel included.

And if you put effort
into digital accessibility,

it often shows,

it's often quite deliberate.

People know that
you're doing it,

and they are much
more interested in...

checking out your wares and giving
you their business if they can.

[Narelle] So what
about on the other side,

for the person with
disability themselves?

What else does it does, other
than the commercial side?

What else does it give
a person with disability,

other than being able to
read the information obviously?

[Tommy] Look, you
know, it's always good to...

What, what, one of the
great things about the

NDIS scheme was
that it was really ...

adamant about it
creating consumer forces...

in the disability sector,

and not the charity block-funded
model of take it or leave it.

It was around,

you've got funding, you
spend it how you see fit.

You know, with limited
controls, and that's...

endless debate around how
much control there should be.

And you know, that's
the freedom versus risk...

argument that will
always be made.

But some of the
disability though,

you know, if they are mindful
enough to put accessibility...

into their digital presence,

then they are probably going to
continue that line of thought...

throughout their
services and products.

So, if they're catering
to you in the marketing,

they hopefully catering to you
in the execution or delivery of...

whatever it is your purchasing.

It's a good look.

It does build trust.

It builds hope, which is great,

and yeah, hopefully it leads
to a good customer experience.

[Narelle] I actually
like the i, the wording hope,

because I know for me,

it's that mental well being,
it's the emotional well being.

Leading on from that,

you get that physical
sense of well being, that...

you don't have to rely on
someone else all the time.

And all I can say is,

like, even at the
TechAbility conference,

and Brian Duff from TechAbility
and I were talking about it,

The fact I couldn't get
off the floor by myself,

because the way the
lift buttons were set up.

I couldn't get myself a cuppa.

Even when I was
going to do the speech,

I was very reliant on having
you standing beside me,

to work the
computers and things.

Because even though I
can work the computers,

it was the setup, wasn't it?

The environment that we
were working in that day.

[Tommy] And again, you know,
even new buildings like that.

The accessibility standards
around building is limited,

and it's very structural.

It is building buildings themselves.

So, it looks more
at door frames,

and heights and widths and...

where things
need to be laid out.

But it doesn't regulate a lot
of what is inside the building.

It doesn't regulate screens,

and, you know, accessible...

technology... like that,

which is frustrating,

because you can have a...

really accessible

entry into a building,

and then you're kind of right

back to where you started.

And it's like,

inaccessible again,

which can be frustrating.

[Narelle] Yeah.

[Tommy] You know, it's, it's, I'm

always mindful about not...

telling people

with disabilities,

Oh, make sure they know

your needs and complain a lot.

But I couldn't imagine

having to do that every day...

my entire life.

That would be soul destroying.

So I'm empathetic,

and I'm, you know,

all I can, sort of...

all I can do, is do my

best to incorporate...

inclusivity and accessibility.

But as a broader

society, we are...

making improvements, sure,

but have a long way to go.

[Narelle] So what do you think the

next steps for society should be,

for Australian society,

for Australian business?

[Tommy] Look, I think what's

great is that the NDIS has...

funded a lot more interest...

in meeting the needs of
people with disabilities.

So that's a good thing.

I think we can start to look at...

the accessibility standards
in a building sense to...

relate to other facets within it.

I think, you know,

as far as I'm concerned,

you know, stairs and elevators,
they are health and safety.

They're part of the health
and safety apparatus,

and they should be...

incorporated into things that
have to be fully accessible,

for obvious reasons,

because, you know,

you don't want someone having

to navigate 20 flights of stairs

in a Sydney CBD skyscraper,

because the elevator, they
don't know how to work it.

It's just, it's a real safety issue.

And for you, you had no way.

If you were on your
own on the 20th floor,

you couldn't operate the lift.

The stairs aren't a
feasible option for you,

to go down 20 flights of it.

You know?

And so, that's the issue.

I think what we need to
do is, yeah, extend those.

We need to look at...

better literacy around what the
WCAG standards of disability,

digital accessibility is,
because I think...

most people don't
know what they are.

No one knows
what they stand for.

And, you know,

there's a very...

We need to move beyond
the tick box, effectively.

People with disability

are not a check box,

and shouldn't be
treated as such,

or their needs should
be treated as such.

[Narelle] What are some
takeaways that you could give...

to anyone listening?

The business.

Being an NDIS provider?

[Tommy] So I immediately have...

not empathy, but I have,

I acknowledge and appreciate
that it can be an incredibly...

overwhelming topic,

and like any new
thing you're learning,

the first...

few steps for your learning
journey

is really a plummet off a cliff,

when you realise consciously
how much you don't know.

And how much you've got to do,

and how much work
there is ahead of you,

and how overwhelming it
is, and how, in many ways,

being able to meet the
needs of every single person...

with a disability is
borderline impossible,

when you think about how broad...

disability is,

how broad the
manifestations are.

But also, you know,
let's not forget...

they're people too with
their own preferences,

and personalities, and it
can seem so overwhelming.

I don't know where to start.

I'm not getting sued right now,

and I'm just going to keep...

kind of trying to sneak
along the surface,

without getting any attention,

and kick that can down the
road as much as possible.

My advice would be

is to consider that,

whilst you could get away with
that, and most businesses do,

think of it more in
the lens of opportunity,

because if no one's
really tackling it,

obviously the first few
that really tried really care.

There's potentially
less competition,

with the purple dollar,
and that opportunity.

And also, one thing I've learnt,

and one thing that I'm sure

you'll be able to
comment on this too, is,

often the...

What I hear a lot from different
industries that I work in,

is they say,

Oh, we don't want to
do the wrong thing.

We don't want to get yelled
at. We don't want to get sued.

They're so political.

People with disabilities
are so political.

It's always this.

It's always that.

And one, if you
learn the history,

you understand why
it's like that, but secondly,

what I've learned
is that the disability,

at least my experience has been,

if you are trying,

you are upfront,

you are transparent

about what you're up to,

what you've achieved,

what you're not achieving,

circular feedback.

There's actually an awful

lot of grace and mercy...

in the disability community

for businesses trying

to do the right thing.

Where you'll run into

headaches is one,

saying I'm accessible,

when you're not.

Like, you know, just because
there's a wheelchair ramp in

and out doesn't
make you accessible.

Or saying you're accessible
on a website they can't read,

or can barely read is
not accessible either.

And so, it's not a binary.

Accessibility, it's, you know,

there's no box you tick that
makes you perfectly accessible,

nor is it a gradient,

because I can be very
accessible to some people,

and very inaccessible to others.

Even on my website,

I can have a website that's very

accessible for

someone with low vision,

but not accessible

for anyone who's deaf.

And so, or less

accessible for anyone

who's deaf if it's video-based.

And so,

it's not a gradient either.

Because being great

at one and zero another,

it doesn't equal 50,

because you're 50 for neither.

Instead, you gotta think

of it almost through like a...

different badges, right?

So, okay, what are the needs
of people who have low vision?

Work that out.

Solve that. Okay, great,

Now, that whole
market is open to you.

Those people are catered for.

And tell them, look, we're
trying our best to do that.

Give us feedback.

Then you pick the next one,

and you work on that,

and you could do it that way.

And if you're transparent,
open, open to feedback.

You know, people understand

what you're trying to achieve.

You know, if you're transparent about
the fact it's a steep learning curve...

for an able-bodied, neurotypical
person to figure out,

there's plenty of
grace there to be found.

If you're just like, we're
accessible when you're not,

then you're going to face it,
and so you should, effectively.

[Narelle] What about for
the person with disability?

What takeaway can you give them?

[Tommy] I think the...

I think it's important that we,
when we can and if we can,

we reward or promote businesses

that are digitally accessible.

I think.

You want, because
it does cost money.

It can cost a lot of money,

and...

it's not on you to
pay for it, obviously.

But if they have done it,
if they've done a good job,

or if you can tell that they're
trying and making good progress,

then if you want to
give them business,

obviously do it, but try
and promote it as well.

I think it's important
that we highlight,

engage and celebrate businesses
that are digitally accessible,

and make that the new
standard, the new expectation.

And make sure also that
other people can find them.

If you promote a business
that's digitally accessible,

someone who needs it
might find it thanks to you,

and then be able to
engage that as well.

I think that's a big one.

And you know,
if you've got the energy,

talk to them about what your
needs are that aren't being met.

But it's also, you know,

again, I wouldn't tell
people with disability...

to do that all the time, because
that would be exhausting,

and I don't know if I could,
so why should I ask it?

[Narelle] Yeah. Good point.

Tommy, thank you.

I think, I'm still blown away
by that amount of money.

Thirteen trillion
dollars. Like, even the...

The NDIS itself. What is it?
80 billion? 60 billion?

Fifty-six billion dollars.

[Tommy] Divided across...

Spread it across 600,000 people.

Obviously, that's
not pure funding.

That's everything around it.
But on top of that,

we have about, you know,

if I'm gonna make a
business case for providers,

you're looking at
potentially, at the moment,

there's estimated to be
about 160,000 providers,

in the NDIS,

and 600,000 participants,

which means that, it's four...

participants per provider...

averaged out.

But that also means,

I don't know if there's a
more saturated market...

in the country or the world,

than four customers
per business,

in any national business.

And so, if you want
to access a lot of them,

or if you want to have a
competitive advantage,

most NDIS providers
are not digitally accessible,

and you can really make a statement
by making yourself accessible...

to them.

[Narelle] Yeah. That's it.

Spot on, Tommy

Tommy, how can people
stay in contact with you

if they want to keep
talking about conversation?

Or find out more about...

your companies and what you do?

[Tommy] Sure. Always more
than welcome to reach out to me.

I'm on mostly LinkedIn,

and Instagram at
just Tommy Trout.

There's not many of us.

[Narelle] No.

[Tommy] It's a good
name in that regard.

Tommy Trout is actually the name
of the singing fish from the wall.

[Narelle] It is too! Oh my gosh.

[Tommy] If you Google me,
you get a wall of singing fish,

which is like...

a force field of folk
to keep me hidden.

But on LinkedIn, feel free to
reach out to me, Tommy Trout.

Two businesses are Disbranded,

and also Inclusive-AF.

Feel free to engage
with them directly as well.

And yeah, you know, I can talk
underwater about this stuff.

I find it very interesting.

[Narelle] Thanks, Tommy.

Thanks so much for your time.

I like everything. Every time I...

talk to someone,

I learn so much,

and even the

institutional aspects,

and the history of disabilities.

Fascinating stuff.

So look,

if you like what we do, please

like, share, subscribe, review.

Give us feedback, whether

it's good or bad or ugly.

It really is...

The more information we

get, the more that we can,

you know, fine tune

what we're doing,

and provide you with the
information that you're after.

So we'll see you next time
on The Digital Access Show.

Have a good week. Bye, bye.

[music playing]