

[Music] [Narelle] Hi and welcome to our latest Digital Access Show. Today, I have Brendan Somerville with us. Brendan is working with Spinal Life and his role in Spinal Life is to help employers bring on board people with disability. What you don't know, and you can't see I'll let Brendan tell you himself. However, thanks Brendan, thanks for your time today. [Brendan] Yeah, thank you for the invitation, Narelle. Looking forward to having a chat. [Narelle] Well, I've been looking forward to this one for a while because employing people with disability is a passion of mine. I don't see the barriers, but I know others do. Brendan, tell me a bit about yourself and your role at Spinal Life. [Brendan] Okay, so a little bit about myself is, I'm a Cauca, Caucasian male in, who uses the wheelchair. So, I have a disability of spinal bifida and hydrocephalus, which basically means that I was born with a portion of my lower spine that wasn't formed properly and it caused nerve damage to my spine when I was born. And, therefore, I have difficulty with walking and a whole host of, a lot of things that we won't talk mention here. [Narelle] No, please don't. [Brendan] But, yeah. And, and so yeah, I love going out you know, outdoors camping and I love, you know, advocating for people in terms of the employment side of things, which is why I'm working with Spinal Life Australia at the moment. So last year, I met Narelle doing this same project in the Mortone Bay Region and because we had good results last year, we've been extended to the Sunshine Coast and Wide Bay, now. [Narelle] That was fantastic. [Brendan] Yeah, and so the program has been funded by the Department of Tourism, Innovation and Sport this year. And it's all about mentoring small businesses about how to become more inclusive to their customers with disabilities and also to help those businesses in the tourism industry specifically, on the Sunshine Coast and Wide Bay to think about people with disabilities as additional talent pools when they're struggling to fill their roles. Yeah. [Narelle] What drew you to do this? It's definitely a little bit out of the norm. What, what was it that drew you to do this, Brendan? What attracted you? [Brendan] So personally it was my, my personal experience with long-term unemployment. And then also, one day when I was doing traineeship in business administration, just trying to find a skill set that would give me the broadest opportunity possible. So everybody needs an admin officer. Yeah, and I came across some resumes and I was helping one of the recruitment consultants at a group training organization to shortlist for some apprenticeships. And it just, a lightbulb went off in mind about the way that people were presenting themselves on paper. You know, using qualitative outcomes to demonstrate their value to an employer as opposed to just, you know, words on a piece of paper that say if they're done these certificates and, you know, worked here for this long kind of thing. It was really impressive. And so then, that spurred me on to do a Bachelor's Degree in Human Resource Management. And I was hoping that I could use those skills either as an employee or in a small business operations which I did, to help businesses to become again more inclusive by improving their recruitment practices and opening their minds to the possibility of, you know, the value of employing a person with disability to do roles from entry level admin roles to, you know, management and governance roles. [Narelle] That's actually quite interesting because you started off with talking about the fact that you were long-term unemployed. What were the barriers that you were having? Why, you know, considering that you, you know, you've got education, you've all presented. I must say, I assume that because I can't see. Are you well presented? [Brendan] I'm wearing my uniform, that's for sure. Yes. [Narelle] Fantastic. So, you know what I'm saying, [Brendan] Brushed my hair this morning. [Narelle] Oh jeez, that's even better. That's even better. Did you clean your shoes? [Brendan] Did

I clean my shoes? Well, I try to keep them fairly clean, and I mean, I don't really use them. They're, they're on, but they last, they last for a very long time when you're in a wheelchair, so... [Narelle] Yeah, so you have a saving in your budget. There automatically. What were the barriers that you found in terms of getting employment? [Brendan] For me, it was a multifaceted, sorry, multifaceted issue. So, number one, I guess was when I was first starting out, it was my lack of experience. Yeah. I like everywhere. We just needed to be given an opportunity. Number two was, as though I was starting to build my vocational skills, it was the, it was the barriers from the Disability Employment Services in terms of, you know, they must have had key performance indicators and one of those would have been placements per month. And so their attitude was that they would just place me in you know, any job. [Narelle] Yep. [Brendan] And I said, you know, so my attitude was, that's, you know, that's great, you know, a job is a job. And you know, it's the greatest form of welfare, according to some people, best form of welfare is a job. But, but I said, but that's not really going to keep me stimulated and motivated, you know, I mean, I might like it for you know, maybe a couple of months, but then after that, it's going to be the same thing day in and day out. And I like variety. That's just who I am. Which is why this role is perfect for me because it's a mix of everything from admin to customer service, to coaching to facilitating and training and networking and more fun. So thanks. [Narelle] You made an interesting. You made an interesting comment there about the Disability Employment Services that when, you're aware I have two sons that are autistic. And I know, particularly with the one of them that got picked up by Disability Employment Services, it was just shoving into a job. And even if it wasn't an appropriate job for him, it was shove him into that job. And there was one job that he was put in, we actually told him to walk out. Because he couldn't cope. He was, he was bullied quite, but actually bullied very badly. And I was on the verge of saying to my husband, I need you to drive up there and just get him out of it. Just go in, get him out, Mark, because it's not safe for our son. And I think that the lad was about 19 at the time. And it was really just stressful for him. And the lack of awareness by the company, the lack of awareness by the people working in the company about the effects. And it's still affecting Nick today. So, what are the differences that you encourage employers to do to take on a person with a disability? [Brendan] Well, so the first thing is, is that I talk to them about, you know, you know, what the research says about employing people with disabilities. So, there is evidence out there that says that employing people with disability is, makes that, so is a great economic decision for a business, because they have, they're more loyal. Well, of course, they are retained for longer. They have on average less sick days. These people are more generally innovative and great at problem solving, because they have to do that as part of their everyday lives to navigate obstacles in their community. And yeah, so, so that's the first thing that I you know, go to them about. And then we start talking about, you know, the structural stuff of their business. So, you know, what policies and procedures do you have in place? What practices do you have in place in terms of inclusive recruitment and on boardings skills? And, you know, what, what programs do you have in place? Once you've onboarded the person with disability to help them remain engaged and be able to connect with the supports that they may need if they are requesting reasonable adjustments. You know, and you know, they're not always going to be requesting reasonable adjustments, but in some cases they may. And in most cases, those reasonable adjustments are very cost effective. And you may also be able to claim reimbursement for those reasonable adjustments through JobAccess as well. [Narelle] So, and how did it help?

Did you know, other employers that you're approaching their kind of yeah, great, let's do it? Or are they very hesitant? Or do you get a real mix? [Brendan] I get a definitely get a real mix. And I do find that it's the people who have had some form of experience with disability, who are more engaged and interested as opposed to the people who have had no experience at all. [Narelle] Yep. [Brendan] And those people who have no experience at all are still willing to try. But there's a lot more coaching involved. Yeah. [Narelle] And do you find that when you get the person in there, obviously you would be supporting the individual that's working for them with disability as well. Do you find it becomes nine times out of ten a great outcome? [Brendan] So, one thing I will say is that this is a service for the business, it's not generally for the job seeker [Narelle] Oh, okay, yep. [Brendan] I do have interactions with job seekers from time to time, but the main focus is on mentoring businesses. Sorry, I, I've forgot the second part of your question. [Narelle] Do you find that you get quite a good result for the business? [Brendan] All right. Yes. Okay. So, yes, sustainable employment outcomes, definitely. So, so, last year, we managed to place or connect 14 job seekers with disabilities. [Narelle] Yep. [Brendan] And I've checked in with those businesses and those people are still employed. So, yeah, and they, and they were in industries like you know, retail, hospitality, IT. Yeah. A bit of tourism. Yeah. [Narelle] So, what type of changes were required for, you know, any of the businesses to employ these people? Were there, was there massive cost involved? Or was it just something that, you know, mostly they could just guide in with a bit of mentorship, bit of budding up with someone else in the workplace that it would just work? Was there, you know, what were the challenges you found? [Brendan] So, yeah, the reasonable adjustments that I'm aware of were things like an height adjustable desk. [Narelle] Oh, okay. That's a good one, yeah. [Brendan] Yep. Something like that. And yeah, I think that's pretty much, you know, the main ones that I'm aware of. It's, it's more that stationary type of thing. And again, that's something that, you know, was able to be reimbursed. And it's common in this, you know, at the moment really for people to request a sit-standing desk as well. So, it's not like it's, you know, an extraordinary type of reasonable adjustment. [Narelle] And that's what I was going to say. And that's something that's very common. What about, you know, any different types of IT that was required, any assistive technology tools, you didn't have any of them at all? [Brendan] Not that I'm aware of that. [Narelle] That's excellent. Because, yeah, that just says mostly it can be done. When you yourself are working, what challenges do you find? [Brendan] Okay. That's a very broad question. [Narelle] Yeah, it is a bit. Yeah. [Brendan] Okay. In terms of [Narelle] Accessibility, physical accessibility, digital accessibility. So, people attitudes towards you? Yeah. [Brendan] So, I think, in terms of accessibility, I, yeah, there are times when access is a bit challenging for me because the entrance to a business might be up a bit of a slope and things like that. But, generally speaking, yeah, I guess maybe, you know, another thing might be trying to find that an accessible car park. [Narelle] Yeah, that would be a big one thing [Brendan] That can be difficult. Yeah. So, you know, if they're all taken, I've got to try, you know, accommodate myself by thinking outside the box about where I'm gonna park. So, sometimes I'll have to go and park next to a pedestrian crossing, so I can open the door that way. In terms of people's perceptions and things like that, people are generally good willed. And yeah, I think people are interested to, you know, they want to be engaged. But I guess sometimes, you know, they're a little bit fearful around saying the wrong thing. And, and also I guess they can't, sometimes they can't really relate to, you know, my experiences as well.

So, that can be a difficult thing to, to communicate and to get understanding I suppose. [Narelle] What would you say to people about that particular point? [Brendan] I would say, just trust the process and, and, and, you know, give it a go, you know, and see for yourself what the benefits are of employing people with disabilities. [Narelle] Is there any tips that you would suggest to employers to start doing before they even talk to you if they really want to do it? What, what could they do just to make their business a much more attractive business to a person with disability? What, what would they do? [Brendan] Sure, they could start doing things like doing an audit of their workplace. And engaging with somebody like yourself to look at their website and their digital communication strings. They could also then start looking at how they communicate about disability in the workplace and be more proactive in promoting the way that they interact with customers through their marketing. So, use images of your customers with disabilities, you know, obviously with with consent, interacting with your business and promoting the fact that, you know, you do, you know, service customers with disabilities in your business. Because I'm sure most businesses do, if not all. Because there are people out there who, unlike myself, have invisible disabilities and you don't identify as having a disability even though, according to, you know, the definitions of disability, they probably do. Yeah. So, that, that would be a great starting point. And to also then start thinking about, you know, your recruitment practices, so using, again, inclusive language. And then making sure you have welcoming statements on advertisements that says things like, you know, we welcome applications from candidates with disabilities, things like that. [Narelle] That's a really simple thing to do. I would never have thought of that one. But that's it, such a simple thing. What about from the the aspect or the perspective of a person in a wheelchair. What could business do, to make your life as their customer, as person just wandering in, what could they do? [Brendan] One of the first barriers that I encounter, if it's not outside the business related to car parks, and things and, and ramps. Sometimes the business doesn't have a ramp. So, one of the first things would would be to be, would be for the business to be aware of that and to try to keep an eye out, for anybody who might be outside trying to signal. And to be approachable and it, come down to them if they can't get into the building and provide customer service on the curbside. Another thing would be to try to lower the height of the reception desk. I find a lot, that I go to places, particularly hotels and medical practices where to cut, the reception desk is really high, and I end up having to wave. To let them know that I'm down here and to talk to me [Narelle] That's actually, because you just made me think of where I go, and it's not just the desk, it's that plexiglass that was put up after COVID. [Brendan] Yeah, that could be a bit of a barrier for some people too, I'm sure. I mean, it's clear, but it does make it harder to hear, I would think. [Narelle] Yeah, or even like for myself I've, and I've never thought about it actually, until you said that, but I tend to go there and I wait for someone to notice me because to me it's just shapes, I, it could be just a chair, I don't know what's there. But yeah, that's the, I hadn't thought about those things, but that's what I love doing this Brendan. You know, we go into areas that you don't normally think about? [Brendan] Absolutely, yeah. [Narelle] What else could you suggest as, you know, just out socially like you go and out, I know like for you going camping, and like I do park run and things like that. We're just normal people. You and I know that, but you know, do other people go, oh my gosh, you're going camping? [Brendan] All the time. Yeah. So, I let you know the other day when we were setting up this meeting, that I'm actually in the process of doing a

project refurbishment of a camper van with the assistance of my dad, of course, and he's doing most of it. [Narelle] Well, that's what fathers are for. [Brendan] Well, I don't really have the know hows there. [Narelle] And that's probably more to the point. Yeah. [Brendan] More to the point. Yeah. But yeah, so yeah, all the time. And you know, it's unfortunate that, you know, I've even had, you know, I've had it again, well meaning, but a little bit demeaning, but people congratulate me for, you know, being out in the community. And, they'll talk down, talk down to you like you are a child. So, you know, had an experience with another friend a while ago and we were out and about just enjoying the day and, you know, we were going along a footpath and just sort of said, you know, that two finger wave, you know. How are you going? to people walking past. And they said, oh, and how's your day going? And we responded, yeah, great, thanks. And they said, oh, you know, well done, kinda thing. Really? [Narelle] Yeah. And, and I've actually been congratulated on how, that the fact that I can walk. And I remember because I was learning some new techniques with my cane at the time. And I was practicing them and I had my support worker behind me. And this person seriously congratulated me on being able to walk. And my support worker just put her hand on my shoulder. And I can hear this very quietly saying, don't say a thing. Just breathe. Because I, you know, it can be quite. Yeah, it's talking down down to. It's mentally pretty tough when you get those things said to you because they're really not necessary. [Brendan] It's just frustrating. [Narelle] Yeah. Yeah, it is. And I know now, I just get the giggles and think, you know, if I said, oh, congratulations, you're out walking to someone that was fit and healthy, they would be, what, what are you saying? But, think about it from the other person's perspective I suppose it's the message, isn't it? [Brendan] Yeah, and it's about you know, changing people's mindsets and attitudes. Yeah, and I think, you know, we've got a long way to go, but we're making an inroads in that regard through programs like this. But, but yeah, it's just, it's very interesting. You know, how this, this mindset develops to thinking that a personal disability is somebody to be admired and, you know, that they're, that they're achieving all these wonderful things. But, you know, really, it's, yes, we are, but so are you. And we're just doing it differently. [Narelle] Yeah. I've got a cousin that has some form of intellectual impairment, definitely. And she retired, oh, not that many years ago. And I remember her ringing me up and her saying to me, ha, beat you. And I said, "What are we talking about?" Because we've done some stupid races in our times. Like we raced to see who was going to have the first gray hair. I actually won that one, because even though she's 12 years older than me, I beat her. But, yeah, just some stupid stuff. But I'd never even thought about it. And she rang me and said, I retired yesterday. And I said, "Oh did you?". She'd done 40 years in the same place. And yeah, she had her frustrations at times, but her mother was there to talk Fran through when the frustrations really start to build up. When my aunt passed away then her sister and brother, brothers, stepped in. And, you know, that's, I suppose that's the message to get across, isn't it? Fran worked at this company for 40 years. And she did a variety of roles. You know, she was a, she ran a team for a while. She didn't like doing that. She was pretty quick to tell me that one. But, you know, she was there. She was a long-term employee. So when she left, and I should say, I think it was in Endeavour Foundation she worked for. But when she left, she walked out with a lot of knowledge. And after 40 years, they probably got their value from Fran. Today, you know, there's a huge number of people with disability that are looking to work. And they want to work. Some are creating their own businesses because what else can they do? [Brendan] Because of short, because of long-term

unemployment, yeah. [Narelle] Yep. Exactly. And how can people get in contact with you, so that you can discuss what we've been discussing here today. So that you can maybe open their eyes to what is really possible in employing a person with disability? [Brendan] Yeah, people were to, to Google, "Enable Business". They'd be able to find it on this spinalifeaustralia.com website, as well. Yeah. And submitted an online inquiry through there, or you can email me directly at bsomerville@spinal.com.au or you can give my phone number a call on 0437 885 379. [Narelle] Brendan, what's the final tip that you can give to people? It could be about anything related to a person in a wheelchair to employment, anything. What's that final tip that you would say? [Brendan] My final tip would probably be, you know, ask a person, you know, with disability if they need assistance before giving it. And also treat them like the way that you would like to be treated. So, what I'm meaning when I say that is what we were talking about before and not demeaning people, not talking down to them, because you perceive them as having a disability, because they could be, they could have a disability. But they could be a highly functioning member of society like, like you and I and like your friend who's just retired. [Narelle] Yeah. [Brendan] So, [Narelle] Yeah. And that's it. We all lead normal lives. I'm having a lot of fun. And I'm meeting people that I would never have met if this disability hadn't happened to me. Yeah, it happened later. But I would never have met people like Brendan and the wonderful people that I'm meeting today. If this hadn't happened, I would be still doing my normal rote job. I would be doing the garden on the weekend, maybe a bit of travel, but I would have been missing out. Yeah. So thanks Brendan. And yeah. Thank you. [Brendan] No, thank you very much [Narelle] And we'll see you on the next episode of The Digital Access Show. [Music]