# Transcript for Diversity and Ability on the AXS Passport

Robin Christopherson:

Welcome to another episode of The AbilityNet Podcast. Disability technology inclusion. I'm your host, Robin Christopherson, Head of Digital Inclusion at AbilityNet, A pioneering UK charity with a mission to make a digital world accessible to all. You can download a transcript of this episode from [www.abilitynet.org.uk/podcast](http://www.abilitynet.org.uk/)

So, sit back, grab your favourite beverage, and let's get started.

Robin Christopherson:

I am very pleased to be here with Ellie Thompson of Diversity and Ability, we're going to talk in a moment about why we are talking to you guys.

Very, very excited about this one, but first of all question that I always ask all my victims, what have you got, a hot or cold beverage to help you get through this ordeal?

I've got a nice big bucket of tea. Yeah. So how about you?

Ellie Thompson:

Yes, I realised that I have a liquid to either side of me. So, I've always got my water bottle with me, and it's also morning so I've got a double shot coffee as well, to my other side. So, I couldn't be more prepared.

Robin Christopherson:

Good, let's hope you survive the ordeal then.

So, thank you so much for coming on. So let us introduce yourself. Well, I'm going to let you introduce yourself and your organisation in a few words, and then we'll go on to talk about why we are talking to you today.

Ellie Thompson:

For sure. Thank you. Yeah, so my name is Ellie, and my pronouns are She/Her and I'm a white woman that's got my hair tied back and I'm wearing glasses as always.

I'm the Communications Lead at Diversity and Ability. And so, we're a social enterprise that's led by and for disabled people. And we provide everything from 1 to 1 support to global kind of scale, training and consultancy.

Really just doing what we can to work towards disability, justice and intersectional diversity and inclusion. We recently won the Tech4Good Award for Workplace Inclusion for our new innovation, which is called AXS passport, which I'm really excited to, I'm assuming we'll go on to talk about very shortly, so really excited to be able to talk through that and celebrate the win.

Robin Christopherson:

Yeah, absolutely. That's it. That's why we've got you on today because you're a double winner, you very modestly didn't mention that.

Certainly, you won your category, the Workplace Inclusion category for the AXS Passport, we should spell that out A X S Passport, very funky. And also, voted winner of winners, so the overall winner of all the categories as well, so massive plaudits and congrats for you guys there. You must be super excited about that.

So yeah, how are the teams feeling after winning those awards? What does it mean to you guys, you know, to be able to have that kind of recognition?

Ellie Thompson:

Yeah, I mean, we were just completely thrilled. I remember finding out that we were shortlisted and even that was such a really, really exciting day for us.

To get that kind of short list e-mail through. I work in the office usually, and I did kind of yell out loud in the office.

So, we've been celebrating since then really. And then to win not just the Workplace Inclusion, but the Winner of Winners awards, which is very hard to say in a humble way. It's just such a thrill.

I wasn't there that night, it was my colleagues Adam, Billy and Meghan, who really kind of pioneered and created AXS Passport.

And they've spoken with so much joy about how incredible it was to just be there in the room with so many other wonderful people and projects.

And Adam was telling me after the awards ceremony, he was just sat there listening to them all, thinking “OH, that one's definitely gonna win.” So, it really is kind of a space of inspiration and to get right recognition in there was such a thrill and really means a lot to us.

You know, we as a disabled person LED organisation are so passionate that techs for good needs to be created by those who its designed to support and enable. You know, we're led by that lived experience and to win these awards kind of feels like a real validation that the way to do tech for good is to involve the people who you're trying to support you know, involve us in those processes. And so that was kind of one of the real celebrations, not just, you know, the recognition for AXS Passport as a product, but for our entire approach and mission and kind of reasons for being. So, yeah it meant a lot.

Robin Christopherson:

I'm getting that vibe. Yeah, definitely. I mean that, you know, idiom or that saying nothing about us without us? Absolutely counts here. So yeah, brilliant.

Well, OK. Well, what is it? What is the AXS Passport? What's the story behind it? How did it come about? How long has it been around? And what does it do?

Ellie Thompson:

Great questions. So, AXS Passport is a digital tool that essentially gives individuals the opportunity to share their access needs and gives organisations the opportunity to do something with that information. So, it's kind of a new approach to accessibility and adjustment passports, which kind of as a concept have been around for a really, really long time and but in our experience as disabled people have always been quite flawed in their execution.

So, if you're an individual looking to kind of share your needs with AXS Passport.

All you need to do is sign up for free via our website or an app.

You will be presented with the opportunity to list any access needs you have and then you get to share them with whoever you want to.

That means at an organisational level, so kind of on the other side of that information, workplaces are able to learn from their employees exactly what needs to be done to make the environment more inclusive so they can really see where the gaps are, where they're not including where they're actively excluding, and really kind of work from there to create more inclusive spaces.

And you know in terms of the story, access really has been created through our lived experience. So, our team has probably collected decades of filling out inaccessible accessibility passports, you know, and they can often be in themselves quite disabling these forms, which, you know are led by us sharing our diagnosis.

And then maybe being presented with an opportunity where you have to kind of really self-advocate to even get that form to someone you know and once you've sent that form off, you then have no control over your own information where it's gone and so we just really knew what was missing here. You know we've; you know had all of these experiences among the team and seeing how workplace is, we're also struggling to know how to kind of shift the approach and create a way for sharing access needs that employees are enabled by rather than fatigued by.

So, this is kind of a new approach to that which is digital.

It's therefore flexible as well, so as someone with a fluctuating condition, I sent off adjustments' passports in the past and that were kind of out of date within the week.

You know, as my needs shifted and my health kind of changed over the course of time and also really crucially with AXS Passport, individuals maintain control of their information, so you can choose who you share that information with, and you can choose to kind of remove the ability to for someone to see that information whenever you want to as well. So, it gives us that sense of ownership over our most personal information.

Which I think is just so crucial and is such a massive shift from the way that we've sent off these forms in the past and kind of had all that information out there in a static document that we lose control of as soon as that e-mail is sent.

Robin Christopherson:

Absolutely. And it's quite a daunting exercise disclosing needs, particularly in the recruitment process because there's always fear associated with, you know being filtered out particularly when you know it's a high-volume role. You know, recruiters are busy, and they have dozens if not hundreds of other applications.

And you know, there's definitely been cases in the past where that channel in some recruitment processes that allow you to disclose.

People get the very strong impression from lived experience that that might actually be doing them a disservice and sort of excluding them from the recruitment process.

So, something like this formalises it. It puts it in the hands of a third party, which means that the recruiters are aware that, you know, there's another, you know, it's a kind of a more official disclosure of need etcetera.

I mean was those sort of thought processes behind it as well to try and help people overcome the challenges around disclosure, particularly in recruitment?

Ellie Thompson:

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I think both kind of overcome the individual challenges and also kind of try and shift the narrative completely. And so, we, you know, have spent years and years and years telling recruiters that having one line at the bottom of your job ad that that says we will make reasonable adjustments. Let us know what they are. It's just not good enough and doesn't create that sense of safety that a disabled applicant needs.

Because as you say, we probably do have experience of those things being used against us or, you know, filtering us out of an application process. I think that the whole concept of reasonable adjustments feels inherently, slightly kind of confrontational and that you know you really do have to do that kind of based advocacy just to be able to enter those spaces and as an organisation we take a completely different approach to what disablement even means.

You know, we are led by a social model of disability and beyond that, a celebratory model where we recognise that the experiences that we bring and the diversity that we bring isn't just a neutral thing for an organisation, it's a positive. You know we are bringing a wealth of and breadth of experience and ideas and innovations that organisations are missing out on, if they don't include us.

So that's kind of where AXS Passport comes in really practically is instead of that kind of you know, small prints, you know illusion to reasonable adjustments. Instead of that you can link someone to a document that they can create and own for themselves, where they get to share everything, they need to survive. And it really is worded in a way which is designed to focus on the barriers that are in place, rather than implying that this is something that an organisation is kind of doing you a favour by working around, so we're not talking about adjustments here. We're talking about removing barriers that make workplaces better for everyone but make recruitment processes better for everyone.

So, its kind of does it.

You know, on an individual level. I know that when I felt filled out my AXS Passport, I felt enabled. You know, I didn't feel that sense of vulnerability that I've had in the past when saying to recruiters during job application processes that I need, you know, a quiet space that I need the questions in advance. All of those things where you feel you're made to feel like you're asking for something more than you deserve, and that you're setting yourself out from the crowd in a negative way.

With AXS instead, this is an opportunity to be really confident and kind of own your own needs and just talk about them as something that enables you to bring the best of yourself to that recruitment process and then to that role. Then obviously that does have widespread implications in terms of behaviour change.

And you know, it won't just impact recruitment processes, it will impact every stage of an employee's journey in a role because from the very beginning, we're encouraging people to share what they need to thrive.

You know, we're not kind of implementing some kind of process where your adjustments are something that maybe comes up as part of a job insecurity conversation. So maybe there's, like, a probationary conversation. Maybe it's disciplinary. It's very much based around you're not doing good enough.

Is there a reason for that and that kind of that confrontational approach? Is really standard practise and the organisation that many of us has been a part of in the past, so it kind of works on both an individual and kind of a societal level to change that narrative.

Robin Christopherson:

And so, you mentioned about impact there. Let's talk about impact. So, what sort of impact has it been having on the users?

Do you get that kind of feedback? Have you got a larger picture there? Have you got some examples? Obviously, you know naming no names.

Ellie Thompson:

Yeah, absolutely.

Yeah, of course. So, we launched AXS Passport in December 2022. So, it's less than a year old at the moment, and when we launched, we had about 13 users. So that was basically members of the staff team who've been involved in the early stages of development who were all because we cared and wanted to share our needs via AXS Passport.

So, in terms of the kind of quantitative impact we currently have over 1000 users.

And one stat that I love is about how many access requirements that involved. So, the most update numbers are, we have 2478 access requirements being shared and that really means a lot, I think.

In terms of kind of enabling people to share everything,

You know if that brings them to an organisation and they start to work around it. So, we've got that kind of collective impact. And then you know I'm a comms person, so I also love the stories and the individual impact.

We got some feedback recently from an Autistic user who had only recently been diagnosed so was quite kind of new to their own approach to neurodiversity and how they kind of thought about themselves really. And they shared that the way that AXS Passport offered them as you know, a list of potential requirements that they might need really enable them to think for the first time about the barriers they've faced and how those barriers were impacting their ability to work.

The way you know, just the way that they live their lives, they said that they used that kind of AXS Passport process as the basis for their Access to Work application, so it also enabled them to approach that government-funded support with a completely different narrative.

And I think as a passport, that's not kind of based on diagnosis, that doesn't ask people to share you know a condition or a diagnosis or anything.

It just asks them to share their requirements and what they need.

That those are the kind of stories that demonstrate that's working, you know, it enables people to just think as an individual level what they need rather than looking at lists of symptoms or lists of barriers that might be faced by people like them, they really just get to think about themselves. And it really does go on to have an impact. And so yeah, stories like that, really involve us to keep going and keep sharing AXS Passport for free with individuals you know and the world.

Robin Christopherson:

Amazing. What about if people don't know what they need? Is there any support or guidance in there or is that where your organisation in you know larger would come in or maybe you point them at AbilityNet I don't know.

Ellie Thompson:

I think the combination of all three of those things, yeah, definitely. So, the way that AXS Passport is designed is really crucial to our kind of wider model and mission, which is that we don't kind of filter based on a diagnosis. So, for example, someone who, and also which goes into that, you don't have to identify as disabled to have access requirements, so we really want to make this a passport that is for everyone.

So, some of the requirements include things like if you experience barriers related to the way your workplace is kind of respond to faith. So, if you need like a private room for prayer. And if you have parental or caring responsibilities, which kind of there are barriers in the workplace to do with.

So that kind of the way that you're able to access all of the requirements is really crucial to us.

But we also do acknowledge that individuals may not have had access to that understanding in the past and that sometimes it can be really useful to kind of filter down what you might benefit from.

And so, at the moment we have a load of different filters on the app where you can think about kind of if you experience barriers related to sensory input or noise, or whether we're talking about physical barriers or cognitive attitudinal ones, and we're also introducing in the future a way of kind of further filtering and kind of with like an access wizard that will you can kind of ask, you can kind of submit anything that you want to and it would suggest where you may benefit from these requirements.

Kind of as a way of reducing that first barrier of not even knowing where to start when someone asks you what do you need.

Robin Christopherson:

Yeah, particularly with a new diagnosis, I mean, obviously, they've had a lot of lived experience before the diagnosis, but still, there's so much out there.

I mean, you know, when it comes to technology and adjustments that can help with hardware and software, you know, AbilityNet is kept incredibly busy keeping up abreast of all of the potential there.

But yeah, so you know, for people to be aware of what they, you know, need to perform at their best is kind of step one and then being able to disclose that in a supported environment and have a receptive, hopefully a receptive organisation at the other end is a you know it's like a whole chain that needs to be in place for people to really be able to thrive on a level playing field.

So, you mentioned about the future there and one potential improvement or kind of advancement in the tool. Any other things on the feature list going forward?

Ellie Thompson:

Yes, definitely. So, it's a really exciting kind of few months I think really again emboldened by the Tech4Good win, wins.

So, we've got loads of new features that are coming really soon that will help to kind of make the behaviour change happen.

And so especially when we think about the organisational level adoption of AXS Passport and that is all through our organisational portal, which has kind of extra advantages for organisations.

So, they don't just get kind of a list of their employees that they also kind of can get widespread data, so they'll be able to see which needs are not being met most often as it gives them that prioritisation list of making sure that they're addressing the real gap. And one of the kind of new updates that we've got coming really soon, before the end of the summer, is Google and Microsoft integration so that organisations can embed AXS Passport into their systems and processes.

So, for example, if you arrange a meeting on Google calendar, you would have the capacity to get a list of the access requirements of the attendees of that meeting so you'd know you know all the things that we would both do anyways, but you need to put captions on in advance and that you need to kind of ensure that there are breaks and send the agenda around. You just get this checklist of things that you can do to ensure that everyone in your meeting is able to access that space and to their full kind of potential.

So that's one that we're really excited about. Also, the potential to create multiple passports. So, you know this is like I said, you know, this is all about maintaining ownership as our most personal information.

And part of that is the recognition that the things you want to share with your employer are probably different to the things that you might want to share with your healthcare team with your GP or consultant.

So, giving people the ability to share their passport, more specifically in a more tailored way with whichever environment they find themselves in so that they can really enter those conversations kind of in the best way possible without having to do that self-advocacy that so many of us know is really exhausting, especially in the health care space.

Robin Christopherson:

Yeah, over and over again. So, tell me. I mean, we've obviously the focus that we've been putting here is on workplace because it was the Workplace Inclusion award and then obviously Winner of Winners as well. But yes, so the passport has much broader applications. You mentioned the healthcare space. But you know what other uses are people putting their passport or passports to in the, you know, going forward.

Ellie Thompson:

Yeah, absolutely. So, yeah, workplace is a big focus for us. You know, that's where we've had a lot of years of experience with kind of, these are the barriers that people experience in sharing their needs.

And we also have been working in the in the higher education sphere for over a decade now. And again, we think this is something that has a real potential to have a positive impact in education. That is another space where you will find yourself sharing your requirements, your most basic needs multiple times in multiple different forms. As you progress through from school into further and higher education and then again when you transition into the workplace.

So, kind of creating a passport that you can kind of use throughout all those different phases of life. We think that's a really, really big thing, and definitely something that I know I would have benefited from when I was at university. So, we've got some exciting conversations about how we can make that happen in higher education.

And then again more widely as well. So, thinking about kind of where you are having repeated conversations. So Healthcare is a big one and I think being able to share that kind of list of your requirements before you have your operation or with your GP when you switch practice has really transformative potential impacts for us as disabled people.

But also, any spaces that you use regularly. I think there's a real advantage to this kind of even just in terms of your casual social interactions, because it enables you to think about what you need best to thrive and create space for those conversations to start.

So we you know, in the office, at D and A more widely we talk about our access needs all the time and we use that as passport as a framework and the conversations that we have will make us think about our own needs and different ways and kind of enable us to kind of have those conversations so.

We kind of want to replicate the approach to sharing these and requirements and diversity that we have adopted organisationally and more widely as well.

And I think we're, we're starting to see that happen, which is really, really exciting. Both, you know as a as a person, as an individual who has access needs and when they’re met feels how different the difference that makes to my life and my well-being, and also more widely, you know, in terms of disability inclusion and intersectional justice, it really does have that potential impact and hopefully we're starting to see that happen.

Robin Christopherson:

Really exciting, really exciting. So, we're coming towards the end then and I mean any other areas that you wanted to talk about, we must not forget to mention the website address.

And any other contact information you want. But yeah, any last thoughts?

Ellie Thompson:

Yeah, I think you know, AXS Passport. So axs-passport.co is the website address. And as I kind of mentioned in passing AXS Passport is completely free to the individual user. So, I really would encourage, again both personally and professionally, encourage people to create their own access passport. Or create the space for you to share your needs in that enabling and positive way.

And see what you can do with that information. And also, you know, as I've also mentioned, we are led by that lived experience.

So, we are always really open to feedback, whether it's about a requirement that you think need needs to be lifted, or a shift in the language. We want this to be a really user led and user owned product. That's where we started.

That's where we want to continue. So, any feedback you have about the product. And then finally, if you're from an organisation and you want to explore adopting XS Passport at that level to get in contact with us via the website.

And so, we can have that conversation and you'll be able to see those shifts start to happen.

Robin Christopherson:

Fantastic. Ellie, thank you so much for coming on. I'm sure you guys have been really busy since the awards. Yeah. Brilliant. Keep up the amazing work and best of luck going forward.

Ellie Thompson:

Thank you, Robin.

Robin Christopherson:

Thank you for listening to this episode of The AbilityNet Podcast.

As well as this free podcast, we offer training and resources to help address the disability employment gap and help workplaces to become more accessible and inclusive to all head to our website at www.abilitynet.org.uk/workplace to find out more.

Thanks again for tuning in and more discussions around disability and inclusion will be coming soon.