Speaker 1: Hey guys, so first extra to drop into the feed. This is the full length interview with Microsoft's chief accessibility officer. It's Jenny Lee Flurry talking to our Mark Walker all about accessibility and leadership within Microsoft.

Jenny: I'm Jenny Lee Flurry. I'm the chief accessibility officer at Microsoft, and we are here in our Paddington offices.

Mark: Cool. And in terms of your background, is it that you were an accessibility specialist over many years or are you a tech person? Are you a...

Jenny: Oh, it's always a good question. Yeah. Everyone comes into this through different ways. My journey into this is I actually have a music degree. I actually was planning to be a musician. Then I got into IT. I joined Microsoft 15 years ago to work on Hotmail here in London, and thought Microsoft would be a great company for a person who's deaf because no one would want to talk to me. I thought they'd all email. I found that was not the case, and I ended up joining the deaf group out of need. Then I joined the blind group, the mobility group, the autism group out of curiosity or nosiness. And I chaired the disability employee resource. I built the employee group at Microsoft and chaired that for 10 years, and that really got me into accessibility. So yes, I'm very nerdy. I spent 15 years leading technical stuff before I went full time on accessibility, but I really got into this through the employee group.

Mark: Cool. So thinking about leadership and change, those are the two things I particularly want to look at over that time, but obviously in particular most recently in the role you're in now. Are there obvious things that you think have moved the dial that made it possible? Have one of the cases had a particular impact? If you look back and think, "Oh, I know it was when that happened."

Jenny: Yeah, you know, I never think it's one thing. Microsoft's been in the accessibility gig since the 90s. Sticky Keys was '94 for those that remember or still have that gorgeous pop up that comes up. I mean it's been going a long time, and that's actually when our employee group started as well. Our first group was in the 90s, blind group, ADD, huddle which is our deaf community, and parents of kids with autism were our first groups. So there was this technical strength, and there was also a people strength, an employee strength. And I would say clearly in that time, the people community's just gone from strength to strength. It's amazing to look at that.

10 years I started our internal conference, The Ability Summit, it'll hit its 10th anniversary next year. I had 20 people in the room 10 years ago, and there were 2,500 at that thing this year. So that's very humbling to see how that's grown. Technology strength is hard, I would never claim that we've been perfect in that complete two decades. We've definitely learned a few tricks. I do think the combination now is working really well because when I had the chance to move into this role four years ago, I brought the two together very, very consciously. And some of that's because I was the chair of the ERG, but it was also very much a customer centric approach to accessibility. How could I really lean into the expertise that we have in the company? We have vast expertise, learn from that, get feedback from that, and then make sure that that actually directs and focuses our efforts on accessibility from a more technical and engineering perspective. Whether that's digital or physical, and both are in the remit.

So I think our approach right now is really, if there's any secret sauce that we have, it's very people focused, very customer focused, and very customer prioritized far more than it ever was.

Mark: Right. And so is part of the success simply winning the case? So you're bringing people along. Obviously people said to pick, people have to be persuaded, I guess, to join in to be part of it. And on the one hand you've got employees with disabilities that maybe have a particular interest in it for their own reasons, but then there's the unconverted or the uninitiated-

Jenny: You know we've definitely... I do remember times where there was a lot of "Why should we do this?" Or "What's the ROI?" Which is always a terrible place to go. You know, that's a trap by the way. Get out of it really fast because that's not the promise and potential with accessibility. It's about how you can design for all through the lens of disability and create way better innovations. So, you know, I think there's definitely some scenarios where you've been in the why. We're not there now. We're just not there at all.

The leadership, it's phenomenal. You know, the CEO was actually the sponsor of the ERG before he became a CEO. That's spread the leadership a deeply committed... There's no question of why should we do this? It's more a vocation of how and what, and you know, the hours that we have in the day and what can we get done in them. And where the people element in the expertise from people comes in, is helping us to make sure that we do the right things in the right order. Because there's always far more. The accessibility is immature, right? There's so much beauty in it, but it's immature. There is a long way to go. There's some brilliant things out there, you know, stuff that we've done but stuff in the industry. There's some brilliant things out there, but there's way more ahead of us than there is behind us. So it is about making sure that we're going to deliver products, environments, services that are going to help and accelerate that. Does that makes sense?

Mark: Yeah. I think it's an exciting time for technology because it's more mainstream as well. It's no longer one item per person. It's essentially making use of something that everybody's potentially got.

Jenny: It's the promise-

Mark: Personalized versus specialized, or something.

Jenny: It's the promise of inclusive design. I mean that's all it is. If you look at the adaptive controller, the Xbox adaptive controller, that's absolutely just a beautiful example of inclusive design. It's when you take a... And I remember that those guys coming into the Hackathon then, which is my sweet like favorite week of the year. And they came in with a charity, with a veteran who had his rig that he had custom built, but it was dodgy because it was custom built and that is his source of therapy. His source of fun... I mean to say it mattered would be like the understatement of the year. And our job was really to lean into what he needed to learn from that and to build. And not just the product, but the packaging that went with it. You know, we ditch the plastic clamshell in the blood sweating, you know, horrible packaging for something that was one ring finger pull, all because we learnt into him. Then another set of NGOs and charities expanded it even further. A special effect here as one. Yeah, I mean that, that's really the promise.

Mark: One of the things that we talk about in terms of how we're building it can be useful in terms of advocacy is developing empathy. Can you talk about empathy in your work? Because it seems to me that's part of the ingredient that motivates people to think about change.

Jenny: Yeah. I mean if you're going to build something for a customer, you've got to understand customers. If you want to build something that's going to work for everyone, you've got to understand disability and that means that you've got to lean into across the spectrum by the way of disability, not just what you can see. Yeah, but a huge amount of focus on what you cannot. So yes.

And I've seen that change over the years. I remember the suitcases of empathy kits that you'd get with the gloves, and the goggles and all that jazz. And I think there's a time and place for that. There's also a time and place just to listen to the people with disabilities and get their feedback. I prefer that vehicle. I think you know, no one can understand my lived experience of being deaf. It's hard to understand what someone's, you know, lived experiences of using a wheelchair, or having autism, or ADD, or whatever it may be. You've got to listen and learn. Just be curious. Far more listening than talking I think is involved in empathy.

Mark: Do you think that change that you've seen over 10, 15, particularly coming up through the... Not the ranks, but you came from within that ERG network. Where the empathy is essentially part of what you're asking for as well as what you're offering. Has that spread out? Do people understand the need for empathy better now because it came up that way? Or is there a top down element? Can you bring in empathy from the top down?

Jenny: Oh crickey, no!

Mark: You can't enforce it, can you?

Jenny: I haven't thought about that. I think if I chew on it, my gut reaction is it's a grassroots, and it's when you empower people to speak up and share their lived experience, then you're going to get better understanding of it. And so one great example... I think it comes from all over and I think if you create a culture where you're super curious, you know, it's kind of the "ask" principle that's so important in disability world. Just ask. I definitely learned it from when, I say stalking, But really that's what I did. Listening would be the more politically, but I really did stalk the communities when I was building the ERG so that I could learn. You know, what was my experience compared to someone else's experience? You know, my deafness, I have a voice. If you are sign and that's your voice, what does that mean?

That ethos has definitely, you know, that's not just because of me. I think that just natural human thing. It definitely spreads. Well, you need to do a lot more of it though. I think as an industry we need to do more. We did post three articles this week of leaders in the company, that had been in the company a long time, that were disclosing their disability for the first time. And I do think that part of the other job is changing societal lenses on disability so that people feel strong and brave enough to do that. Right?

So we had a head of our Windows Insider is a person with dyslexia. One of the key engineering leaders in X-Box is legally blind, and awesome guy in our communications division has OCD and anxiety, and mental health. So sharing leadership voice definitely has a part to play. Because if people see role models they are more likely to self identify, and get involved, and not feel that they have to cover when they walk in the office. So it's probably both.

Mark: I guess the top down thing is also in a cultural sense, giving permission. Giving permission for those conversations to take place, creating a space where it has to be included on the agenda. Those sorts of things come from the top down, don't they? Has that changed since you came into Microsoft do you think?

Jenny: I think it does change. You know, if you look at decades it absolutely goes up and down. There's definitely been moments where accessibility is not being prioritized at the level that it should have been in our history. And I would say again, it's probably a bit of a combination. One it, you know, we've got a leadership team that talks about it a lot here in the UK, back in Redmond from CEO down. I also have a role to play in that in terms of making sure that it's not just something talked about, it's something that's part of managing a business.

So I actually had a quarterly conversation with the senior leadership team where we talk through where everything is. We methodically manage and measure accessibility in the same way as you would security or privacy or any other important facet. You can't just talk about it and let's have awareness. It's got to be methodically managed. And again, not just the digital but the physical. And there's work to do across the board, right? We've been doing that for a few years and I think that's delivered a lot of benefit because by really talking about accessibility again with legalism as the minimum bar, compliance is never the bar, you raise the understanding by it. So I've watched the conversation mature over time in a really powerful way. Really mature.

Mark: And interestingly almost everything you're describing is inward looking to the organization. In a sense, isn't it? Is that the sort of internal advocacy? Have you ever perceived that other people are interested on the outside, and so you need to speak to them about that because that's their interest.

Jenny: Well, I think the other aspect is that when you look at this stuff, it's not just about how do you listen to your employees. It's how do you partner with charities out there? How do you work with organizations that know far more than you do? You know, that's the partnerships are strategic partnerships are as important if not more important in some ways. But I also think that there is a bit, I mean we're a company of 140,000 and if we're going to deliver on our potential and promise to... You know, we have a mission of empowering every person, every organization. We do have to get our house in order.

Now, if we're going to then deliver the technology and the promise on that, we can empower millions and billions. You know, there's 900 million people using Windows 10 today. There's 180 million using Office 365, but I also think there's another part that's important, which is whatever you do learn, you've got to share. So we're very hot on taking the risks, failing fast where we need to, learning, building programs like our autism hiring program or our training portals, you know, whatever it may be. Once we've got to the point of some degree of maturity, getting it written down on paper and getting it out there so other people aren't having to recreate the wheel. Because again, this is an industry that we all need to speed up. And if I learned something, I don't want somebody else to have to go through that pain in order to get to the same point. So yeah, there's a little bit of how can you accrue to the whole that I think is embedded in these types of roles.

Mark: So do you think it's easier because you're a big organization or do you think it's easier because you're a tech organization to bring change? I wonder which of the two is the sort of the biggest lever for you do you think?

Jenny: Ah, well you lost me at the word easy. I don't think any job in this area is easy today. It's a very hard role. There are people that deeply understand the space. We also know there are people that don't. A holistic job, whether it's looking at a big company like ours, or a tech company, or a small company, is to make sure that people are doing the right things in the right way, and hold people accountable where needed, and carrot and stick. And that's not easy. So, you know, in many ways I know that I feel very fortunate to be in a company where I don't have to battle the why. That's not to say we haven't had to do that. You know, we're in a fortunate position where I have this company charter to drive sustainable inclusion of disability and accessibility into the DNA of Microsoft and I'm completely supported.

I know that's a very privileged position that not every company's at. We've worked hard to get there. I could write a book on that. I'm sure most people in the room can. And I do think that there's something beautiful about technology in that we can innovate, and we can move very fast. When we see something like AI and the potential of that coming through, we can really get our arms around it and go. Other industries I see doing that. Whether it's banking, you know, I just look at the companies that come to some of the conferences and what they're doing.

I remember Walgreens, which is now part of the Boots Alliance and what they did with hiring people with intellectual developmental disabilities and autism. And I remember that inspiring me many years ago. In fact, I sat at a conference when they won an award for what they were doing going, "Okay we're going to go right there." Because there was so much embedded in that. So I think we should be motivating and inspiring one another. And again just sharing. Because again if we could make it easier, if I can make the technology easier for people to use, if I can speed up how quick it is to make a website accessible, if I can get those tools on GitHub and give them away. If I can document how we hire people, game on. Let's get it done.

Mark: You mentioned two things that I was going to ask about. One is carrot and stick and the other is AI and ethics. So I'm going to start the carrot and stick, and if we don't get to ethics, it's not like everyone else is talking about it.

Jenny: It's not important at all.

Mark: I wanted to just your take on change from the point of view whether the legal carrot, the legal stick is something that is more important than the carrot. I've had to work out. I was struck when I was in California about how much that legal change that you know is going on in the States compared to the UK.

Jenny: I do believe that if you're going to create a culture of accessibility, you can't have just stick and you can't have just carrot. You have to have operational diligence, which is really the stick. You know, maybe to frame that a little bit how we think about it. There are policies all around the world and they are ebbing and flowing, and different pressure points that come from that. And the bar is constantly being raised as it should be because technology is moving faster than the law in some ways can keep up with. You know, the law moves slow in some areas. I would love to, you know, see where we are in 20 years from now. I think it will be a very different space. So we should always expect that law to be the minimum bar that we go after, but not the goal. And that's a really important thing.

So what we do is we amalgamate all of the legal environment into one policy for every part of Microsoft, and that is what every person has to deliver on as a minimum bar. And so my stick, if you like, is making sure that that is delivered on and there's a lot of rigor behind that. There's also a lot of expertise and processes and systems behind it. Because if you just look at every single part of our product, we're launching Windows twice a year, Office every month. You know, there's other parts of the company that are releasing three times a day. That's not easy. We've had to build an entire testing environment. We had to work with Homeland Security to really build our trusted tester process. Train up some of our biggest call centers and testing environments in the world to cross train them into accessibility, to achieve the scale that we needed.

I mean, I don't want to understate, that's huge and a massive investment, but it's really important to give trust and I want customers to trust that when they get a Microsoft product, they're going to be able to use it. Don't claim perfection though, right? There's a lot more to do.

The carrot I think is important, so you bring more people to the party. It kind of motivates it and it inspires it. Also illuminates and accelerates what's possible. So Hackathons for us are an incredible carrot. I got a 140,000 nerds, regardless of role, that love bright shiny objects. They're all slightly magpie-ish. So you give them, you know, a forum like a Hackathon. Well, this summer I had a 1,900 people hacking on disability projects. What?

Now not all of those are going to reach seeing AI, or adaptive controller, or any of the projects that have kind of... In fact the winner this year was an epilepsy project. Another one about, you know, "Oh my gosh." However everyone comes to that party because they want to build something that is connected to human, that can have, you know, it can have an impact. They may come with zero knowledge, they walk out with some. Some of them walk out with experts, some of them walk out with the basics of etiquette and how to go back and fix the HTML code. So whatever they walk away with, that's a plus for me. Right?

So you have to have both. They go and take that back into their day jobs. And then when I hit them up for, "Okay, where are you at?" They're like, "Oh, I know what that is. I know that it's not something that's a tax. It's not something that's a problem. It's something I should be doing." I don't get people fighting me on it and they get it done now. Now, Perfect utopia, clearly I would have nothing in my inbox and no problems to attack. That's not the case. I have job security at this point, but you have to, you have to think about this as an ecosystem so you can't have one without the other.

Mark: We're talking to scope about hierarchy of needs. They looked at hierarchy of needs and disabled people in the technology. Interestingly, the conversation with them, we're now looking at hierarchy of needs of digital teams. What do they need so that you can empathize with them so you can understand what motivations they have so that you can then work on the change that they need to make their [inaudible 00:24:06]? I guess that hack does that for you. They're curious and they want to play. It's part of the needs that they have within their own sort of professional personal interests. You're playing with that bit aren't you?

Jenny: The other way of putting it's hearts and minds. In fact, on every table in the Hackathon tent there was a poster. I put it on social media actually. Last year it was an "Inaccessible hack is whack" with some specific bullet points. I think this year is an "Inaccessible hack is our kryptonite." You know, there's a brilliant person on my team that puts all that together. But it was like, you know, capturing your video. Don't be a Muppet, you know, here's some really crisp, quick things that you can do to make your hack inclusive. Because you want your hack and your little video, which is one of the things they have to produce to be seen by everyone. And if you don't do it right, how is everyone going to enjoy your content? So yeah, you need a little bit of hearts and minds.

Mark: So I'd mentioned it at the AI ethics, the bias in AI is the particular thing we're going to be at probably. The nature of the bias that the data sets, and also some work that Google is doing to improve the quality of voice recognition by gathering more data from different voices. Voices from different [inaudible 00:25:35] for different reasons. Particularly the price, not just access to that. But how does that play out in terms of the work that you're doing around AI with Microsoft? Do you come across projects and programs like that?

Jenny: Yeah, I mean, so it's incredibly and completely important and absolutely an area that we're super invested in. So I've got the AI for accessibility program, which is our grant program. We're a year in. I've got 25 million to invest in the space over five years. And it is across the spectrum of disability. Speech as a huge area. I mean we're seeing speech now, the parity of natural speech, but we do need to make sure that deaf voice, the impacted voices carefully embedded in that. And it's really just a bell curve. And how do you expand the bell curve in any, either way. And so we've seen some amazing projects come through so far and then we've got deep research areas that we're super invested in as well. But the principal at a high level is not different than any other area. It's making sure that you have representation to include scenarios that then ensure that you're going to give the appropriate facial recognition, voice recognition and more.

So the theory is not hard at a very high level, but then I can make things way more simplistic than they really are. You know, we're working, one of my peers leads our AI and Fairness team. And just the bar and the policy and the standards for this is an evolving space. So for me it's kind of, I get to get my hands dirty with some of these projects that we're looking at, whether it's captioning accuracy with all voices, accents, you know, connected to voice. I do think that there's some beautiful examples of speech pathology that could be really accelerated through AI.

Seeing AI was clearly a huge kicker for this. It's one of the reasons that we started the program. We're seeing how that got picked up and I think the number, and I'd have to double check it, you know before you quote me on it, but the number of images that have been captured now is, and then multiple hundreds of millions. That's all great information. The one thing I will say is that the one area that I, not worry about but I want to make sure is carefully managed is also the privacy insecurity of disability data as well. You know, it's making sure that that's treated ethically as well as making sure that the integrity of the data has the appropriate span, if that made sense. So that's a deep area of passion.

Mark: Excuse me, I should ask, have you seen any examples of signing using any AI machines that you thought were anywhere near actually working? Isn't there some ability to get sent, press releases regularly saying, "Somebody has just invented the robot driven signing."

Jenny: Yeah. Someone said someone solved communication for the deaf is the article I get a lot.

Mark: [inaudible 00:00:29:00].

Jenny: No, but I will say that there's a lot of... And I'm not a believer in the glove. But that said again, with any piece of technology and innovation, you start small and then you grow. We all know the gloves in this, in when you're in the community, you understand that the gloves are not really going to help you with communication. That's really gesture and there is a difference between gesture and sign language and it's a language. And by the way, BSL is very different to ASL.

Mark: And you know to your language.

Jenny: Yes, that was a journey. But again, I do think it's one of those areas where the fidelity of what we can collect has evolved. The ability of us to understand the algorithms has evolved, the partnerships with the right organizations to really, you know, get into this and explore it has evolved. We're thrilled to partner with organizations like RIT and the NTID, Gallaudet and many others to help us to look into this space. We hosted, you know, a great research forum on sign language back early this year. So, yeah, I do believe it's possible. Whereas a couple of years ago I'd have said that's in the further distance. It's in the near term now.

Mark: Interestingly, you also demonstrated the approach as you said about that top level. That you got to engage with people in the community. You find people who understand and have a connection to. You can actually validate whether or not you're actually doing something.

Jenny: Yeah, and I will say there's some amazing experts in not just deaf culture, but really thinking about this in the right technical way so that we could do it ethically and right. I mean there is caution to be had. Sign language has become very, very cool. I love that. But we also need to make sure this is done in the right way to protect the language in some ways.

Mark: And so last question for me, I mentioned this very briefly. I think a lot of people in Tech Share Pro and the people we connect with are looking for how you activate those networks of people around them. So your story really has the ERG at the heart of it, I guess, and you're bringing people through as an interest in yourself identifying disabled people, I think possibly is what you would describing. Whereas what we're also looking at is accessibility champions, which is a slightly different model, of course. This is going in and raising awareness in a different roles. How does that work in your current role in the sense of the sorts of programs that you're uploading? How dow you connect into to the various teams?

Jenny: Yeah, so if I ever just look internally because clearly there's levels to which we partner with organizations both within the accessibility world. You know, I learned from that community every day and also the disability world and you know, they merge, but those external partnerships are incredibly important. When you think about community internal to a company like Microsoft, it's really a couple of levels. One is making sure that you have an empowered employee resource group or BRG affinity group, whatever you want to call it. You know, depending on your size of company, that's going to work in different ways. Ours is one disability group, but it also has verticals of disability type, 20 of them. Most of the new ones being in the invisible category because 70% of disability is invisible. And also we have regional chapters as well. The UK, one being Michael [Vermoush 00:33:04].

So that's an ERG. Those are conversations about anything from how do I work well with my manager? Do I self ID? How do I get an accommodation? I want to work on this project. You know, I'm struggling with this. Best practice sharing, conversations because you need to work with people who've gone through that. You know, again, why recreate the wheel? Learn from others, share and build that sort of lived experience. ERG is very, very important.

We also have an accessibility community in multiple different ways. So I have an accessibility leadership team. So if you just think about my team as kind of a hub and spoke, I sit in the middle. I have a bunch of amazing, crazy experts that I'm very lucky to work with, but more important, not that my team's not important, but more important is how we work with other leaders across the company, all of whom are directly accountable, responsible for accessibility in their division. That's important. I don't create Windows code, I don't build X-Box games. They need to be accountable for the accessibility of their product. So they are the people I look to. And so I have an ALT, I have an accessibility leadership team.

But you go and beyond that, you've then got people dedicated to accessibility and all of those groups from marketing, HR, Office, whatever it may be. And then you have a champ community on top of that. So it's rings. And we have, you know, a massive sales field, customer community that's all about bringing accessibility into conversations. There is a fantastic engineering community that's very much about, "Hey, I got this bug. What's that mean? How should I prioritize this one?" So you need different communities.

Now we're a big company, 140,000 and people are at different levels. So you would expect it to have those kinds of concentric circles. If you boiled it down, what you've really got is an empowered people community with disability talking about it, and it ebbs and flows and grows because you can come to disability at any time. And then you've got an accessibility leadership community and champ community, and that's really, those are the two engines that we have.

Mark: Cool, thank you.