# Transcript for Disability Inclusion Insights with HS2 (High Speed 2)

Lizi Green: Welcome to an episode of Disability Inclusion Insights on the AbilityNet podcast.

I am your host, Lizi Green, Digital Inclusion Consultant at AbilityNet. By providing training, support and resources, we want to help address the disability employment gap and support workplaces to become more accessible and inclusive for all.

Join me and my Co-host and colleague Adam Tweed on this series where we interview leaders in the workplace disability inclusion from across industries and around the world.

You can download a transcript of the session from the ability net website at www.abilitynet.org.uk/podcast.

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

Today you'll be listening to a conversation with my guest, Maria Grazia Zedda, Senior Equality Diversity and Inclusion Manager at HS2 (High Speed 2).

Maria tells us about the things that they have been doing at HS2 and also share some of her own personal experiences with us.

Lizi Green: Welcome everyone to Disability Inclusion Insights podcast. My name is Lizi Green. I am the Digital Inclusion Consultant at AbilityNet and I'm joined today by my colleague Adam Tweed from AbilityNet and we are delighted to be joined today by Maria Grazia Zedda, who's the Senior Equality Diversity and Inclusion Manager for Workflow Force at HS2. So welcome Maria.

Maria Zedda: Thank you very much for having me.

Lizi Green: It's great to have you with us today, so we're going to kick off with a bit of an icebreaker question. So firstly, what have you chosen today as your hot or cold beverage?

Maria Zedda: It is a hot beverage and its black coffee.

Lizi Green:Right.

Maria Zedda: As you can probably tell by my Italian accent, I really love coffee. I'm a walking cliche when it comes to coffee.

Lizi Green: Fantastic.

Maria Zedda: That's my beverage of choice.

Adam Tweed: If its proper pressed coffee, I’ll take it.

Lizi Green: I'll keep up the English stereotype then, and I am drinking the hot beverage of a cup of tea. Controversially, it is biscuit flavoured tea, which is quite controversial around everyone in our office, but I like it.

Adam, what about you? What are you on today?

Adam Tweed: I will always go black coffee as well.

Lizi Green: Yeah, great. Could you tell us, Maria, a little bit about HS2, for those who aren't aware of what you do?

Maria Zedda: Ok. So HS2 is High Speed 2, and we are building the largest infrastructure project in Europe. And essentially, we are building it over the next 10 to 15 years and this essentially will help connect the United Kingdom, particularly Birmingham with London and the North of the country, with Manchester leading up all the way to Scotland.

And so, these will help, not just with speed, but actually it is essential to free up capacity in transport, which is so overcrowded especially in London. And it will free up capacity for transport and be a much greener alternative to transport, than what we have at the moment.

We are building, you know, many brand-new stations that have not been built since the 1800.

And these will in turn help with the local economy and in those localities with thousands of employment opportunities. So, at the moment we are, HS2, are employing around 1700 people, but through the wider supply chain we are currently employing 34,000 people.

So that's HS2 and I am delighted and proud to be working as an Equality Diversity and Inclusion Manager, making sure that we can really foster an inclusive workplace so that we can make this project really diverse and really safe.

Lizi Green: OK. So, into our first question today, which is actually a bit of a double question that we're starting you off with.

So, we want to talk about why you think it's important to employ disabled people and if you could tell us a little bit about what HS2 is doing to actively employ disabled people.

Maria Grazia Zedda: OK, so it is clearly important to employ disabled people. I am one of them. I am severely deaf myself. I have severe hearing loss which I acquired as a child.

And so having grown up, you know, having a childhood where you know, back in Italy where you know very much my disability, my deafness was seen as something that was almost very medicalised. Disability was seen as really something wrong with the person.

I was considered a patient, so to speak, and so for me on a personal level is really incredibly important to employ disabled people because we are part of wider diversity. We’re simply part of the humanity.

And so of course, it's important to include us morally but also, we have a legislation that obviously states that disabled people have a right to access to society and to employment, just like everyone else. So of course, it's important.

And in terms of what we're doing. So, for background, I am a senior Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager at High Speed 2.

And I run it specifically around supporting the organisation around equality, diversity and inclusion for the workforce.

As well as helping our own equality, diversity and inclusion issues for the communities along the way.

And so, I have two sides to my role which are very enjoyable, really good because they make me feel like I am, I can make a difference for others. Very fulfilling job that I have I've had for about 5 years now.

And so, in terms of what we do to actively employ disabled people, we have a number of things that we do.

Well, I'd like to say that I'm going to talk about them, but they're important for everyone, not just disabled people.

So, for example, one of the things that we do is to make sure that our job descriptions and our job adverts are sort of 'EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) checked’. And that means that we really make sure that the language that we use is inclusive.

And we make sure that we also advertise, when we advertise, we request for minimum criteria of the job. We don't put desirable criteria because that risks, you know alienating those people who might miss it, might feel that in the ideal world they don't feel that they can fulfil that brief and therefore might talk themselves out from applying.

And this happens a lot, especially in very technical industries such as engineering and construction, and it's very easy to sort of be so specific.

And especially for high-risk managers, often there is a bit of bias that we operate against. Around the fact that many people think that their career path of the people that their hiring needs to be very similar to their own career path. Therefore, you know, where did you go to university or how many years' experiences have you had in X Y Z, competency, and so on.

And so, what we try to do with our job checks to job adverts and job description is to really make sure that we don't add anything in there unless it's absolutely necessary and we don't require for specific years of experience, or don't even require for Master's degree and so on, as much as we can Unless it is a very, very specific requirement that can be related to maybe health and safety, and that's why it's unavoidable. But as far as possible, we really try to avoid having too many competencies because research shows that ethnic minority, women, disabled people. If they see a hugely long criteria in the job description. They tend to talk themselves out of it and they tend to not apply for jobs unless they can fulfil.

Adam Tweed: I think it's really kind of one of those things where you do as a hiring manager, start listing absolutely everything, but you there is that importance of being able to see it from an applicant's point of view. Who is perhaps kind of primed to that point of being so used to a job not being for them, that the moment they see one of those categories, it's as you say, that they would just discount themselves completely.

That at that point they'll say this isn't for me because they pretend, they were kind of teetering on that brink. That’s a really good point.

Maria Grazia Zedda: Absolutely. Absolutely. So that is hugely important, and it doesn't just help disabled people, it helps everyone.

It really helps widen the reach because especially with in our industries where HS2 operate, such as you know, construction, engineering and you know very technical field.

It's very easy for people to talk themselves out of that, and also, we have a huge need because over the next, you know we are building HS2 now and it will continue on for the next 10 – 15 years.

During that time, many of the people that are currently working in these areas, generally in engineering construction, they will begin to retire.

So, if we don't start to diversify the talent pool we're trying to access, we really won't be delivering HS2 or any other major infrastructure project because we really need to seek out that diverse talent that is out there and we really need to diversify in terms of the transferable skills, for example, that we are asking.

Adam Tweed: I think it's interesting you brought up retirement there as well because obviously we have an ageing workforce, and we know that disability is often acquired.

So, by building these kinds of environments that can flex that can accommodate people with differing needs.

Then I suppose, that's almost that will allow you to keep your workforce longer, to not lose that kind of skill set.

Maria Grazia Zedda: Absolutely. It's really important. So, we are encouraging our, you know, ageing workforce to retire. But I have to tell you, especially in engineering construction, that is the majority of the workforce actually. So that we really need more diversity and that's why it is so important to pay attention to this. And without the diversity, we will not be able to make up for the shortfall.

Adam Tweed: Yeah.

Maria Grazia Zedda: So, it's so important. And then in addition to making sure that the job adverts are checked.

What we do is we make sure that our interviews are structured, and we request accessibility information in advance when setting up interviews, so every candidate will have an opportunity to share if they have any accessibility needs. Or any other accommodation needs for that matter.

It could be, you know, if you have childcare responsibilities and you can't do interviews at 3:00 PM, we will reschedule it. So that's really important.

And then we also work with allies in the business that help us reach out to diverse candidate and disable candidate. One of them, for example, is Evenbreak. They are a jobs board, and we work quite closely with them too. And they literally replicate our job adverts on the site so that they can share their vacancies with their audience, which is really important.

Our own jobs website is audited for accessibility every year. So, we make sure that the communication is actually accessible.

And then finally overall, every hiring manager, every team leader receives inclusive recruitment training.

So that means that should anyone have access needs during the recruitment stage and onboarding as well, we always have people who are prepared, people who will ask the right questions, people who will expect that diversity means coming through.

Lizi Green: That's absolutely fantastic because yeah, awareness is the key and often something that that pops up all the time is people's awareness of things.

So yeah, the fact that you offer that training is brilliant. And so, the next question I wanted to ask you was, what's the role of technology in driving your disability inclusion?

Maria Grazia Zedda: Well, it is incredibly important. Because essentially, we are now living in a hybrid world. We are operating, working in a hybrid world, which is made up of built environments and virtual environment too.

And so, technology is absolutely essential for it, and so the accessibility of technology enables access to people who would otherwise traditionally not be considering certain jobs, for example, such as you know myself.

Before the pandemic, for example, I had to prebook my captioning service, for example, and it required a minimum of 24 hours to 48 hours' notice.

And therefore, that would be incredibly challenging, especially now because I'm literally having back-to-back meetings and I'm holding the meetings at the last minute and other dispersion.

If I was not able to access the automated caption technology, for example. I will quickly lose my confidence and I will quickly lose my ability to do the job.

So, technology is so important and not just for disabled people. I like to always say remember that this is not just about disability, but it's about everybody else. Accessibility and inclusion help everyone.

So, for example, parents who have childcare responsibilities. You know, all the people who are carers themselves, who also are protected under the Equality Act by association. And so, by using enabling technology we can include everyone.

However, we need to keep an eye on that because it is.

Thats within the challenge, so we need to really make sure that the technology is working and with every update that you get, sometimes there are more functions. There are issues and challenges.

And so, yes, and I think it's really important that we are we alert to the fact that it needs constant attention.

Lizi Green: Yeah, absolutely. And that leads me quite nicely into another question that I had. So, what impact has the pandemic had on your ways of working?

So, are things very different today to say how they were three years ago talking about hybrid working? Obviously, the answer is probably going to be yes, they are quite different, but in what ways have you seen those changes?

Maria Grazia Zedda: The changes I mean, obviously the pandemic impacted in the sense that, with regards to office space work.

It impacted because we were having virtual meetings and so we needed to be familiar with the technology and we also have security issues. So, we couldn't use a certain a variety of methodologies.

And so that has been, you know, work in progress it's been something that we needed to pay attention to because not all programmes or software are accessible to our systems because we have very stringent security measures.

So, for example, that could impact. Let's say that one of my colleagues needs a specific type of software to help them with reading or writing. Sometimes we can adjust any type of software, we really have to always double check with our team to make sure that it is compatible with the security that we need to have at HS2.

So, it's always.

Technology is incredibly enabling, but it's always work in progress and even now with all the new updates we are getting.

Sometimes you get the occasional hiccup and things don't work anymore and you have to go back-to base and work it all out.

So, it is a challenge and, in the meantime, especially in the job like mine, where in an industry like mine where everything is project based when deadlines are really pressing because they involve huge amount of cost. So that's why it's so, so important to keep an eye on the technology so there's no delays.

Lizi Green: Yeah, absolutely.

Maria Grazia Zedda: And also, on site as well, it is really amazing because we can automate many processes, we can use artificial intelligence, we can use many, many innovations that help us with being safer and greener as well. So, technology has a massive impact on the work we do.

Lizi Green: Yeah, definitely.

Adam Tweed: I was just going to ask on that one. Your use of captioning? Have you found that because of the pandemic and the amount of people offering them that they've improved? Because quite often there are some slang words that have been used for the quality of captions that I'm not going to mention here, but they weren't traditionally seen as particularly effective. So, do you think that they've improved?

Maria Grazia Zedda: I think they have hugely improved, especially from the start of the pandemic. At first it was very much up to the, let's say, the conference or the event owner to set them up.

So, for me as a deaf person, I will feel sometimes; you know these are not people that I know, and I want to be able to choose for myself whether to share that I am deaf of not.

Adam Tweed: Yeah

Maria Grazia Zedda: By not having that choice, it was really difficult at times. And so, it's recently improved in terms of ownership and the independence that it allows people to toggle them on or off, and definitely the more you use them, the more actually they are.

And I have to say that in my experience, because I use the captioning literally 8-9 hours a day. In my experience it is surpassing the services provided by real people and I don't mean it in a way that is discouraging because I think there is a time and a place for using those skills given by real people.

In a job like mine where I'm often called into meetings at very short notice. Especially with the quality diversity and inclusion. If there are people who are dealing with issues that can be very upsetting and you know they really need their attention right, then and there and I will not be able to help if I didn't have access to this amazing technology.

Some of the funny bits were in the past, you will get for example, any profanity will be automatically edited out, which was funny. But now I can see that we have a choice whether to toggle it on or off, which is hugely entertaining for me.

Lizi Green: That's brilliant and I think as well from the perspective of what you were saying about AI (Artificial Intelligence) is if you were going into one of those meetings like you say you encompass in your role someone might feel more comfortable talking to you about a sensitive topic if you're using AI rather than if there was another person, albeit they might not be able to see that person and they were just there to do a role, it would still be another person that they didn't know who was listening to what they were saying. So, it's quite it's quite nice that you don't have to explain that to someone anymore. You just turn on your...

Maria Grazia Zedda: Absolutely, absolutely. But I mean what I have learned is, I have learned personally, just because it helps me on an individual level, I normally I do try to say unless the people know me already that I do try to say that I am deaf at the start of the conversation and I have a little bit of hearing, but it's so minimal that I really feel more comfortable in sharing the fact that I am severely deaf and also because sometimes they can lead to misunderstanding.

Also, I tried to see the funny side of it as well, that sometimes one of the most hilarious experiences are when the captioning are interpreting people's names.

And so really strange very interesting variations in languages have come across on my captions which I share.

Lizi Green: Oh yeah no, definitely need to share those, yeah.

Maria Grazia Zedda: Absolutely. And it's very funny and entertaining. I think it brings a bit of sense of humanity. We are people after all, and we should be able to talk comfortably about this stuff. So, yeah, I literally cannot do my job with our captioning and so I am extremely grateful that they exist.

Lizi Green: Great, fantastic. Thank you so much for sharing. So next question is, have you faced any barriers when planning and implementing change or improvements to disability inclusion at HS2 and if so, what were those barriers and how did you work as an organisation to overcome them?

Maria Grazia Zedda: Well, I mean there are barriers all the time. Because we live and operate in an imperfect world that has been built with no disability, nor with disabled people in mind.

So, all our virtual environment, all our built environment especially pre-existing ones have challenges, and we should never sit back thinking, “Oh yes, we are accessible 100% now and that's it. Job done”.

Absolutely not, because somebody else might come along and find that your accessible building or accessible environment is actually inaccessible to them. We really need to get it into our sort of mindset that we need to think about accessibility as always work in progress and we should not be surprised at having to implement changes all the time.

And just think rather than being too frustrated, just take it in your stride. Mind you, this this sort of mindset has been work in progress for me. I mean, it's not been easy.

One of the frustrations I remember that I used to experience a lot was for example, let's say I would be in a virtual meeting, and somebody wants to share the White Board. The Virtual White board. One of the things that I experienced at the beginning of the pandemic, that the moment people started to share the White board, I couldn't see the captioning anymore.

And so, it was something that was later on, but it took a number of months.

And in the meantime, that brings lots of issues. So as a disabled person, for example, what do I do?

Do I quietly leave and say nothing? No. Or do I challenge? It's really hard sometimes to navigate this stuff because you're working in a very fine line between advocating for others and advocating for yourself and not wanting to cause a fuss.

So, it's just a bit of a balancing act and in my job. I'm lucky because in my job, if I advocate for myself, I know that I'm advocating for others too.

But we need to know that not every disabled employee has this thing to fall back on.

And so, we should just really bear in mind, let's remember that. Not everyone might be accessing these environments in the same way we are. Just be open. We always do that.

Adam Tweed: What you were saying there about being an advocate, it's for one thing, it's tiring. It's tiring, always being that person who's having to bring that up and it's also one of the things that you kind of feel like you have to be in a as more senior position to be able to challenge people who are on that level.

And I know you were listed in the Power 100, weren't you? And you've kind of got that kudos that comes with you, to be able to say “Yeah, I need this fixed”, but there may be more junior people who aren't that confident who don't want to speak up. Who don't? You know, they shouldn't need to really but it's one of those things.

Look advocacy is tiring, and that constant reminder of people. “Look, it's me again. I need this to be better.”

Maria Grazia Zedda: Yes. Yeah, absolutely.

Yes, absolutely, I agree. And the only way that you can achieve this as employees is to really make sure that we have a culture.

That really, any of those people, that really encourages people to share that they have accessibility needs and that they are not making fuss. Part of creating a culture. And there is no over overnight switch, overnight magic that makes it happen. It takes a lot of gradual building.

And so, for example HS2, one of the things that we do is we have staff networks.

You know, we had them for all protective characteristics, but we had this specifically the together network, which is a network of disabled colleagues and allies.

And so, they help a lot with reviewing things for us and you know, almost providing like a focus group and feedback and also an online place where people can go to share frustration and ask for advice.

So even if you are more junior, having that comfort of going in a virtual team where people understand you, they get you and they don't judge you. I think that’s hugely important.

And then aside to the networks. We have to be very careful here because there are colleagues that are doing all these volunteering in addition to their day job. So, we cannot expect them to create all of that culture for us. So, we also need to take the initiative and really collaborate with communication teams. Really strive with human resources. Everyone who participates in communication, we always link back to our company values.

And just make sure, just make all those links and then encourage communication around accessibility and disability so that it does not become an out of the ordinary thing, but it is very much embedded in the everyday stuff.

Lizi Green: Yeah. And that leads me really nicely into the next question. So, when it comes to your employees, are there any areas specifically that you still want to make improvements on for further inclusion to make sure that you're reaching every candidate?

Maria Grazia Zedda: Well, I mean, one of the things that often is difficult to manage is to accommodate specific requests for certain

So, there can be specific software or other stuff that is sometimes difficult from a security setting, we cannot use a specific software and we have to try a different kind. So that back-and-forth negotiation sometimes can be quite painful. Yeah, and I wish we could just make it happen straight away.

And it's not always possible but there is there is a lot of room for improvement that we really need to get better at that.

And then sometimes even, you know, some of our offices, they can, you know that you would have thought that they would be accessible but sometimes something comes up, you know, someone new comes along. And you realise, “Oh my gosh”, there is a new issue that might not have been picked up by an ordinary access audit. And so, we need to make adjustments for that individual specifically, which is important to do.

But sometimes adjustments, it can be frustrating in terms of the timing and the effort to implement, but we cannot give up. We just have to keep trying. And I also think that when we have learnt about accommodating for a specific adjustment need, then we know that is a powerful lesson for somebody else later on.

Adam Tweed: Yeah, I think it was what you were saying earlier was that accessibility is a journey. It's you're never going to reach that end point. You're never going to be totally accessible for everybody. And yeah, that's really great point.

Lizi Green: Look fantastic. And then my last question, so this one's a bit of a challenge for you. I'll leave you a few words either way. So, using no more than 10 words, I'll maybe give you a few extra words if you want. Can you summarise one piece of advice or a tip that you have learned since working on and creating disability inclusive workplace. Your top tip.

Maria Grazia Zedda: Thank you for that, I have chosen my 10 words. And that should be, be confident about your access needs, visibility is simply diversity.

Lizi Green: You have set the gauntlet now for the rest of our guests to come on and to get 10 words exactly, and to make them as good as those 10 words.

That just leaves me to say thank you so much for joining us today, Maria, your insights have been fantastic. Really, really appreciate you as well sharing your own story and your own journey. So, thank you so much.

Maria Grazia Zedda: Thank you for asking me and it's been a pleasure. I've always been a fan of AbilityNet and the work that you've done over the years.

And actually, we will probably be needing your help supporting and making adjustments for our workforce, so I really look forward to working with you more and more. Thank you for having me. Thank you.

Lizi Green: Thank you. And we will be delighted to help you too. So, thank you.

Maria Grazia Zedda: Thank you.

Lizi Green: Thanks for listening to this episode of AbilityNet Disability Inclusion Insights. If you're not sure where you are with your disability inclusion at your organisation, you can find out with AbilityNet’s disability inclusion gap analysis. Our expert workplace consultants will help you gauge organisations, current cultural state and work with you to prioritise which improvements will have the greatest immediate impact and which will help form a road map for your ongoing disability inclusion journey.

Get started on your journey today by booking a free 15 minute consultation at www.abilitynet.org.uk/gapanalysis.

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