ROBIN: Welcome everybody, thank you so much, so many of you for tuning in for this second in the series of accessibility insights, informal chats with the top people in the world when it comes to accessibility and digital inclusion. And today's guest definitely fits the bill there. We will be talking to Neil Miliken, who is Global Head of Accessibility at Atos, maybe for people who aren't aware, we should make sure you start off Neil by giving a quick introduction of what ATOS is, I will just say hi to you?

NEIL: I didn't realise I was your second episode, so great to be so high on your priority list. ATOS is a global digital transformation outfit, we do everything from landing space probes on comets from the European Space Agency, to building super‑computers and quantum computing to more mundane stuff like making people's desktop experience work in large organisations. So my role is trying to make all of that as accessible as possible.

ROBIN: Wow! Which is amazing, from space to quantum computing. Absolutely brilliant. I'm visually impaired myself, I'm blind, I have no idea if our faces with popping up at the moment. We are on slides, which are welcome slides, for most of the proceedings you will see my face and Neil's which I'm sure is more pleasant, just chatting with a couple of slides at the end. And we will be wrapped up by half past if I have any capability of time keeping at all. A couple of housekeeping slides. Orla, who is an invisible but very welcome presence to this proceedings, she is going to be doing live captioning from the MyClearText people! Thanks Orla. So, you can do that by going to your control panel in Zoom and clicking on the CC button. I'm sure the people who need it know how to do that. Alternative there is a URL on the screen, I won't read it out, it is long and complicated for people that want to have it coming up in a separate window. It's exactly the same captions that you will get through the Zoom platform itself. Now, you have slides that are up there now. They are very minimal, as I have mentioned before, it is mostly us talking. So you probably want to go to the website. Go there after the fact and everybody will be there from show notes, to the questions and answers that we would invite you to pop into the Q&A box. That is as we go through and we won't address them in the limited time today, but we will add our comments and responses to those as part of the show notes and the transcript will be up there and the video et cetera. So go to that website, and you can get all of that information. There is a feedback form which we would really welcome you to complete. You will get it when you close the webinar. Also it will be part of the email you will get as a follow‑up, probably linked to the show notes page as well. Brilliant, any feedback really welcomed. So now, let's bring up our mugs! Our ugly mugs. Speaking of mugs, so, for whatever reason, the question that we asked at the beginning of these different events is what is your poison. What are you drinking at the moment? To get you through this ordeal?

NEIL: Unfortunately with it being so hot, I'm terribly boring, it is a glass of water.

ROBIN: That is hopefully enough to get you through, I have a cup of tea here, it's a Union Jack mug perhaps, I can't remember. Please don't construe any political comment from that whatsoever. Yeah, cup of tea for me. Great, so, I'm going to, as I mentioned before I'm a screen reader user, so if there is pregnant pauses, not too long I hope, it is me reading or listening to my notes so I ask Neil the next question. First question, what in your opinion, expert opinion, has changed, what are the most significant changes and shifts in the landscape over say the last ten years. Not a broad question by any means so, what do you feel like are the most impactful changes?

NEIL: Yesterday was actually my tenth anniversary of starting this current job. It's morphed over the years. I actually joined Siemens on the BBC account ten years ago today. Some stuff remains the same but I think that the global attitudes to accessibility have significantly changed. And I think that the embedding of access features in consumer tech has accelerated to the point where a lot of specialist assistive tech is lagging behind some of the consumer stuff now. That's been some of the major change. And I also think some of the work done within the industry to professionalise and look at how we can make this stuff work at scale, has progressed a long way in this decade.

ROBIN: Absolutely, I couldn't agree more about the mainstreaming of assistive technologies and the power and sophistication of the built‑in options that are in the devices in all of our hands and on our desks. Absolutely, still though, accessibility is thought of by many people as a niche consideration, although be it one with a strong legal requirement, ethical and moral imperative et cetera. I can't imagine, over the last ten years, that it's been an easy ride, or please correct me if it has! So getting to the place where you are, having been able to broach the massive areas of delivery that ATOS cover. But at the same time prioritising accessibility to the extent that it absolutely needs to be champions. So I know that you have done a lot of work on the business case, and on making accessibility a sustainable proposition, within ATOS. Is there anything you want to say about how you have kind of won that case, or what are the key areas that you like to highlight for other people so they can have as much success that you have seen over your tenure?

NEIL: I think some of it is just dogged persistence and I like to think about timescales. We need to think about some of the stuff, obviously for project delivery scales it is fairly short‑term. But for something like this you are having to think in terms of years and sometimes decades. So we have to be thinking about laying the foundations for the future. Which is quite tricky when you are doing a business case for organisations that are publicly quoted on stock markets and report on quarterly and yearly basis. So there has to be a balance between long‑term planning and direction setting and short‑term results. So you have to be able to show that you can make stuff pay or add value, because not everything is about bringing in revenue. At the same time as trying to build for the future, and that has been a tricky balance to strike. I think that some of the stuff that I think has been successful has been growing skills. And also looking at shifting accessibility left. Now, when we talk about shifting left, when things go to the right they are more further along in the process or more expensive. What we are trying to do over time, we are not alone in this, the industry is involved in this. We are trying to get involved much earlier in the process, in the design or initial phases, and to be able to do it more cheaply and efficiently. Because that way we can do it at scale. Because every time we bespoke some element of accessibilities we are adding in cost and complexity. Which is what makes us so popular with Project Managers! Especially when you do it at the end and you come in and you throw a wrench into their project. So I think that building that consistency has been part of it. We work quite closely with organisations like the International Association of accessibility professionals, as does AbilityNet so we are both part of the UK chapter there. I have been working with them on strategic leadership certification in accessibility. But at the other side, shifting left, in terms of not leadership, but people to deliver, we have been working on apprenticeships. It's actually quite hard to find enough people to address the scale of the problem with the skills that we need in the market. So we determined a few years back, that we needed to grow our own skills and we started doing apprenticeships. When we found that people were interested in poaching our former apprentices, I thought maybe this is a signal that we need to go wider. And again working with AbilityNet and Shell and Barclays, a consortium of other organisations, we have created this accessibility apprenticeship standard. It's for accessibility specialists. So it's the equivalent of a foundation degree. So the first year of a degree, a Level 4 apprenticeship. That's almost ready to go. I expect that we should be ready to have a first cohort at the beginning of next year. All being well, because Covid is definitely throwing a spanner into the works with things right now.

ROBIN: That really models our journey of discover within AbilityNet to bring accessibility consultants on at the very earliest stage, train them up and have a constant upskilling of team members. But, poaching is absolutely a problem, particularly in the third sector as AbilityNet is, totally with you there. So shifting to the left really does make for a more mature approach to accessibility. We have seen that and are trying to encourage that in our clients. Not for us to come along at the end and do an accessibility audit and find lots of errors that need to be retro fitted. You have done a lot about an accessibility maturity model within ATOS and that framework that hangs off that. Do you want to say anything off that?

NEIL: Credit where credit is due, the first AMM was the work of the Business Disability Forum, again of which we are members. We try and work across industry, as much as possible. From my point of view, working with all of the third sector and the standards bodies and everything else is crucial, because we need to knit this all together. Because otherwise we are going off in different directions and we want to be pulling in a consistent direction, because it's hard enough to get people engaged in accessibility, it's even harder if there isn't a consistent voice on this. We use this as a way of measuring and ascertaining where organisations are at, including our own, we do this internally and with clients. And it's really useful, because as an organisation you are going to have areas where you are good, and areas where you are less good and no organisation is perfect on this. Even the exemplars still have significant areas where we can all improve.

ROBIN: And it's a moving target as well, ever‑changing?

NEIL: More so now than it was ten years ago. Because what we had then was a sort of fairly fixed technology tack, and then things would change, you could do a new project, implement a system, put stuff in and expect it to run, without too much problem for a period of time. Now we have what we call ever‑green IT, so you have software as a service and stuff is constantly updating. What that means is you have to constantly check the interoperability and make sure stuff is working. It adds to rapid improvement, for example with Microsoft products you are getting with every release cycle more accessibility features. You look at some of the stuff that has come on in Teams recently where they are adding features all the time. Or in PowerPoint for example, where you've got the accessibility checker that can now be always on like spellchecker. Every release there's something new. But, with every release there is also potential for stuff to not work together and therefore that does create an extra layer of complexity and a constant cycle of work and checking to make sure that we can keep people working.

ROBIN: I think the single most impactful thing that Microsoft could do is to surface their accessibility checker in office products to the top level of the ribbon by default. Because you know discoverability is still not all that it could be. So yes, it is definitely a moving target. There are accessibility criteria. There is WCAG when it comes to HTML or web. There is accessibility guidelines for IOS and Android for example. One of the questions we had in advance from the Twitter‑verse was around how WCAG seems to be more comprehensive and mature than the IOS and Android guidelines, for example, but my question would be how, even with relative detail and specificity of these guidelines, you know it's so difficult. Probably even unreasonable to expect the hundreds of thousands of people that are working on ATOS digital services on daily basis, to first be ofay with them, and then to check every last bit of code or copy they do to one of those guidelines. Is there some sort of short cut, what processes, resources have you put in place to try to upskill everybody's, or up the content or inclusion of the daily content that people are churning out?

NEIL: So, it's complex so what we have to look at role‑based accessibility. What's your role within an organisation and what are the elements of your role, crossover with your responsibility to make sure you are being accessibility. And to a certain extent, forget about the rest of it. Because actually the last thing we want to be doing is forcing people to learn stuff that is irrelevant to them. So, we have a lot of training material available already. We're looking to break that up further and make it more role‑based. So that we are less and less of a turn‑off. Because people have very limited time. Putting stuff down into small chunks and bite‑sized learnings is really important, I think. Making accessible components. Component‑level accessibility, I know people like Gareth Ford‑Williams will tell you a lot about the work they have done. They are really on that.

ROBIN: A library of tools for people who are creating.

NEIL: Yes, most people who are developing applications and systems for customers aren't writing code, or aren't writing it from scratch, they are reusing components. In fact, a lot of the stuff that is happening now. We have the citizen developer movement going on. People are using sort of drag and drop compilers. So a lot of the most important stuff that I do is actually not about teaching people about the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, it's about teaching them the principles. We have the principles in our policies and so on. But it's more about working with suppliers and people that are making platforms for this stuff, so for example, we have been lobbying a lot of the low‑code and no‑code suppliers to make their stuff accessible, and some of them have done a creditable job now. So for our Global Accessibility Awareness Day, we had our systems come on and talk about the work they have been doing on the low and no‑code solutions to make sure the components people are dragging and dropping into applications result in accessible outcomes. The other thing is, yes, people know about WCAG, but to my mind the most important standard isn't WCAG, it's ATAG, this is the authoring tools accessibility guidelines, because actually most of the content we have on the internet is created through what are known in WC3 terms are known as authoring tools now. That might be Twitter, that is an authoring tool as is Facebook. But also lots of people's personal websites of which the majority of the web is built on and small business too are creating on things like WIX and WordPress and Drupal and all of these things. It is those platforms and the ability of those platforms to enable people that don't really know about accessibility to produce something that isn't going to prevent people with disabilities from using them that would have a huge difference. So there is work going on sponsored by the European Union, looking into this kind of stuff, and again, that's an area where I'm very keen to make sure that as we procure stuff, as we procure systems on behalf of ourselves and our customers, we are taking all of that into account. Because we are a systems integrator. We build some things, we build super‑computers and we do pull together systems, but we also bring together other people's technologies and make them. So a lot of the work we are doing is about influence, and about building alliances.

ROBIN: That's absolutely brilliant, I'm assuming within ATOS you have gone through that process to make sure your CMS, or probably plural, almost certainly, have the capability to create accessible content and you have good component libraries. Do you have a QA layer or layers to make sure internal...?

NEIL: Yeah, again we work with our group quality organisation. There are some questions coming up and someone is saying what is a CMS, it is a content management system. So, yes we work with group quality, we also have what we call our book of internal controls which are how we go and audit the various different bits of our organisation to make sure they are complying with our policy et cetera. I can't go around, and indeed the team that work with me can't go around and check everything. So we have to do spot checks and that's what our audit function within the organisation does. And make sure that not only are they doing it and looking at the outputs but looking at their processes to make sure they are building it in. In an organisation as diverse as ours where we are doing things like, maybe we are building databases which don't have to be, that's less user focused compared to ticketing systems which are very user focused and really need a great deal of thought put into how different users will interact with them. Those require different strategies for achieving accessibility. So, it's really about looking at what's appropriate for each bit of the organisation.

ROBIN: Absolutely, so I'm going to change gears now and ask you what you think what external factors that are out there in recent months or years have had the biggest impact on where we are today? In terms of the profile of accessibility, or Inclusive Design, how far it's come towards making the internet a half decent place for someone like myself? Or whatever disability you have got to effectively operate in? What do you think the external factors are at play today?

NEIL: There is legislation. Is it's significant amounts of legislation, European accessibility act, the public accessibility duty, section 508 in the United States. We are in a global world so legislation in different countries still applies to large organisations like mine, because we work across those different international boundaries. And software doesn't stay within the country for the most part. Therefore, even though there might not be legislation in our own country, if we're selling to another country we need to be mindful of that. So that has been a big driver, I think awareness of the capabilities of assistive tech and the fact that we're now starting to mainstream some of the assistive components. So text‑to‑speech, speech‑to‑text, the rapid rollout of AI‑powered image recognition and all of this kind of stuff has had...

ROBIN: The API availability so you don't have to reinvent anything yourself?

NEIL: I started 20 years ago working with speech recognition systems, and we were having to build our own computers and look at where we put the components just to get the speech recognition to work properly, let alone looking at tweaking the software et cetera. So, it's become a lot easier to do stuff with standard kit.

ROBIN: Or, just rely on the Cloud, because a lot of the heavy lifting can be done.

NEIL: The Cloud is a double‑edged sword, because I think there's loads of wonderful stuff in the Cloud, and there's a huge amount of powerful computing. As soon as you lose signal you've lost that capability. So if you are fundamentally reliant on assistive tech then that loss of signal is debilitating. And that's where I think the move to push some of it back on device is really interesting. So for example the Google captioning on Android is done on device for the most part, not in the Cloud. Speech recognition that's in the Cloud also has a delay, and so, for example, when I'm dictating on IOS, which is, can be pretty good, but I'm dyslexic and ADHD, so my focus is rubbish, I see what is written down at the first, but then it goes and changes it and I don't notice the changes and I post something on‑line and it's nonsense. Because it's changing stuff after the fact because it's trying to be clever. So some of this stuff, there is a lack of maturity still, it's very capable in some ways, but still not really every‑day useable when you have to 100% rely on it. So I think as this technology matures, there's a lot of prospect for us. To answer your other question, about how friendly is the web? Well, if you take the outputs of the web AMM survey and they surveyed websites 99.9% them are not accessible, it is not a very friendly place. That said, some of those websites we never want to go to. And we have to really take a pragmatic approach and think well we can't blame non‑professionals, you know, for their blog not being 100% accessible. We can't necessarily blame small businesses for not knowing how to do it, or for not being able to do it because the platform doesn't support it. Because if they are using something like WIX, it's not going to output something that is fully accessible. At the same time, large companies, and Government and public services that we need to use and things that we need for our everyday lives, are getting better. But they are still, there is still some way to go. And we still have some work. And I think that's where the legislation really needs enforcing.

ROBIN: Totally agree on the last point. On all of our points, yes, but yeah, we really need to get some more enforcement. The public sector regulations have some teeth, but if we could only follow Norway's model, the changes they have seen, as soon as it's actually been forced across sectors has been a real eye‑opener. I'm aware of time. I'm sorry guys this should be a longer session. Another question from the audience, or from our polling earlier, what have you, either you personally, and/or ATOS more generally, learned from the shift to homeworking?

NEIL: As an organisation we were actually doing flexible working quite some time ago, so it's been really quite good for us in that we were fairly well prepared, not just technologically, because we had the set‑up to enable people to work from home, but in terms of organisational mindset. Because actually a lot of the stuff about working from home isn't about the technology. It's about trust. It's about understanding and allowing your employees to work on their own without micromanaging and seeing them. That said, you know, we still need to make sure that all of the accessibility features work on remote. We need to make sure that people have suitable environments to work in, and that's problematic if people are working from home. Whilst we can allow flexible working not everyone has a good space to be working in. So I think longer term that is something we need to resolve, not just as our organisation, but lots of organisations in terms of Covid and post‑Covid and how do we still have some kind of meeting spaces. I think that longer term as we have been doing this for nearly six months, people, whilst they are pretty good at this are becoming pretty fatigued. I think there is a real Zoom fatigued, I'm amazed we have people on the webinar, because, everybody's doing a webinar! Me included we have been doing access chat for six years. It is great to turn the video on, as to get the visual cues from one, as a very visual person, that lag between what is being said and the microsecond delay actually puts a fair amount of strain on you. I know that's not relevant to you so much. But it certainly is among the dyslexic and neurodiverse community.

ROBIN: Absolutely, and for people that lie on that visual reinforcement, that can be really distracting, we are still in the uncanny valley of virtual meetings, I think. Terribly, we have run out of time. One more question, then, any closing comments that you absolutely wanted to get across and/or anything that you want to provide as a top tip for example that we can pass on to our next guest next month?

NEIL: Isn't that Paul Smyth MBE from Barclays, Paul is great guy and supporter of the accessibility community, again. And I think that both Paul and I are huge believers in, you know, you catch for flies with honey. Essentially, we want to bring people in, have a big tent approach and connect people up. I think that's really the key to some of this. Yes, there's technology, but it's about collaboration that will make the difference.

ROBIN: Fantastic. Thank you so much Neil, really appreciate it, sorry it felt a bit rushed. We could have probably talked for an hour. Thank you so much indeed. I will switch back now, Annie I think will fire up just a couple of closing slides so we can finish on a real high note, so thank you very much indeed Neil. So, very quickly guys to finish off. As we have mentioned this is a series of webinars, we are doing other webinars as well. And we would really appreciate that you have a look at those. If you want to get a discount, you will see a discount code here on the slide. And if you go to the webinar area on the AbilityNet website you can have a look at some of the more, more of the really interesting and informative webinars coming up. Sorry we are on the training slide, aren't we! So we are starting off on the training slide, sorry guys. We have some training courses coming up, and you can get more information on the training area of the website. How to do your own accessibility testing, we have talked about how ATOS does it at scale, and how to evaluate the results et cetera. Have a look at our training offerings, please, our commercial services are how we are able to provide free services to tens of thousands of disabled people. So really appreciate that, and then on the next slide we are just saying, thanks very much indeed. If you want to follow our newsletter please do. 18th of August is the next webinar and we have accessibility services there as well. Just reading down through the slide content. I'm much better at the chat than the admin. So please follow us on all the places. Go to the URL we had at the beginning I was insights‑ATOS and there you can listen back or read the transcript for today's session. Thanks one and all for attending. Huge thanks to Neil and please tune in again next month.

NEIL: Thank you.