# What is happening at TechShare Pro 2023? Transcript

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 (United Kingdom) 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/podcast) . So, sit back, grab your favourite beverage and let's get started.

So, Mark, this is the 7th year that we've been running TechShare Pro. Amazing. The time has flown. A lot of sessions, a lot of themes. But what's you know, going to be different, what's going to be the same about TechShare Pro this year?

Mark Walker

Well, yeah, Robin, it's year seven. It's fantastic to look back at all those years and see all the differences that have come along. And yeah, definitely this year few new things or some obvious themes, I guess that we're going to be exploring.

We're hybrid this year. So, we've had a couple of years where we've been online only starting to let people back in the room. That comes with its own logistical challenges, which you don't need to know about, but 100 people in the room joining us essentially in the studio, a bit like Question Time maybe.

And then two days of content, 25 sessions. I think we've got programmes so far, still some more to come.

People from all over the world joining us as experts.

And I mean, looking back to where we started seven years ago, a single day, quite technical at that point. I think a lot of our content, lot more stuff this year about future gazing and thinking about disability inclusion, having a broader conversation around disability, I think than we were doing before.

So yeah, it's been really fascinating building the conference this year, so much change going on around us. So yeah, I'm looking forward to it.

Robin Christopherson

Absolutely. Now let's start with the hybrid aspect of it. Before we start kind of digging into some themes, but it's always a challenge, isn't it? When you've got hybrid, you've got, you know, the majority of people joining online, how can we make sure that they have a really top-notch experience, but also what will, you know, be extra value or kind of bonus of being able to come in in person if people want to be able to venture to London.

To be one of those hundred in the room. So, kind of what's the different experience and how are we going to make sure that it's going to be really, you know, top notch experience for either group or both groups.

Mark Walker

That's a good question and I think the difference. So, in the room experience, I think we've got used to that again post pandemic, I've been to a couple of face-to-face conferences. I think it is exciting when you first went back into the room and now it is a little bit more normal, you know, and for people to be travelling and getting together.

Of course, what you get from that are two things. One is you're in the room, so you're experiencing the thing live and you can join in the conversations as the sessions are taking place, even if it's with the people sitting next to you.

The other thing is in the breaks when you are wandering around and you bump into someone you haven’t seen for a little while, they introduce you to someone else. Over lunch, you meet somebody who it turns out is going to be a lifelong friend and going to help you with everything.

So, I mean, all of those things have happened and more, of course, at every sort of face-to-face event you've been to.

I think the difference online is how do you give people that type of experience the wrapper to the content. And you know, to be fair, that is the feedback we got last year as we got that balance wrong.

We just had a sort of a stream of content being shared out and not enough time for networking online. So, we're really trying to put as much networking into the content as we can and also doing more than that trying to link it into what's happening on stage. So, if there's a session in the morning, we've got this, we've got this planned for both lunchtimes, we'll have sessions at lunchtime which will reflect on those themes. So, we have one about media representation of disabled people and we'll have something at lunchtime which will reflect on that to do with inclusive comms. Practical examples of what people can do in their own work to promote positive representation of disabled people. Those will be online rooms for people to join in with. We’ll use breakout rooms to connect them up.

So, my idea would be that if you have made the effort to turn up and watch the session in the morning. You might have asked a couple of questions through the online network, but certainly at lunchtime you'll have a chance to come into the room with other people who are interested in that topic.

We'll split you up into breakout rooms, so maybe four or five of you will be sitting there chatting. You'll get to meet some people you don't know, talk about the themes. That's the stuff I think you miss when you're online.

When all you're doing is watching content being played out, you know through a web page, you miss that interaction with the other people in the room.

And so, we're putting a lot of effort into that this year, and I think we will see. I think this idea of matching up to the discussions that are at lunchtime with what's in the morning is going to be really interesting to see how that plays out and a number of other ideas, a bit like that, but really thinking about the online experience, you know, ahead of what we get face to face, I think.

People in the room, they know what they going to get. Really. They're going to be sitting and chatting and meeting people and connecting up around the topics. And that's what we want to try and give the online audience as well.

Robin Christopherson:

Fantastic. Now we over the last seven years have seen a real upsurge in interest in accessibility. Obviously, there's been legislation that's going to be talked about during the different sessions, both current and pending, but also, you know, a lot of the things that people who are joining both online and, in the room, may still have in common is that they will feel like they are the lone voice within their organisation, or maybe just within their team that's championing it's passionate about accessibility. How's that issue going to be addressed in the sessions this year?

Mark Walker

I think so. I think one thing that's grown, you know, not least because of work that we did at TechShare Pro, is the Champions Networks. A few years ago, we had a session at TechShare Pro about growing your champions network and now we have a lot of people who are running accessibility champions networks in their organisations. So, there is this, that's some of where that groundswell of interest is coming from. People want to bring others into the event, and we talk about the accessibility choir, the people. We don't need to preach to the people who are already on our side and thinking about what we're trying to do together as a community.

They are our core audience obviously and I think that it's easy to assume with that shift in numbers and interest that it's got easier to be that lone evangelist. But there's a lot of people I talk to who still feel like they're the only one in their team, the only one in their organisation that they're not breaking through on the business case, that there's another problem that they have to deal with.

Some other project that I've been trying to run which isn't getting prioritised.

And I think a lot of what we do at TechShare Pro as other events like this do is simply provide a community engagement. A chance to meet up and be with people and help them and support them and connect and offer ideas and simply be there to say, carry on. It's worth keeping going and some of that emotional support that people are looking for. We're very conscious that's part of our role with TechShare Pro, is to be that community building space.

Now, the themes shift around. People have different priorities coming and going.

We've got a survey that we're running at the moment. Be interesting to see how people feel about accessibility and over 400 people fill that in. We're interested in seeing, you know, have things shifted over the last year or two in terms of budgets and resourcing and prioritising around accessibility, but we're not expecting that dial to be rocketing of the scale.

It’s still going to be a slog for lots of people who come to this type of event, and so we really want to be conscious that we're giving them help and insight and practical support as much as possible.

Robin Christopherson:

Great. And the networks, the connections that you make at TSP, whether it's online or in person, they do continue. You know they persist, so you will, you won't be as alone as alone a lone voice as you were before the conference. So yeah, please do take heart from that. You will make some great connections and there'll be some great content that will help you win the argument within your organisation.

Now a lot of what we're going to be talking about, whether in person or in breakout sessions, et cetera, is AI (Artificial Intelligence). AI is going to be mentioned a few times in the sessions at TechShare Pro.

Mark Walker:

I think. [Laughter]

Robin Christopherson:

Yeah, let's talk a little bit about in what capacity we might be discussing AI.

Mark Walker:

Well, that's interesting. I mean, obviously last week we had an AbilityNet session about AI with Deque and that was great.

I mean, that came up with all sorts of elements of discussion that we hadn't expected when we first set out on that conversation. I think it's not just the testing tools that Deque are producing. For example, it's much more about the changes in the processes and the workflows for the accessibility professionals.

And there's also more generally about AI and how we're going to use it in our work around inclusion for example. So that's a good example. I give you a couple of sessions that we're definitely running that will be of interest, I think related to AI.

One of them is to meet the founders of Be My Eyes, which is an amazing app, which featured at TechShare Pro, four or five years ago I think now.

They've just added AI into the mix. That's not new news necessarily. There will be people who will be aware of that, but we're going to be chatting to them about what it means, where it comes from. Some of the challenges around implementing it. And I think just lifting the lid a little bit on that service and understanding where AI is inside it and therefore maybe inspiring other ideas of what ways the AI can be used in in other settings and other tools, and I think that's going to be really interesting. We’re going to be meeting Hans, Founder of Be My Eyes.

Then the other one and very different sort of take on it. Somebody from Microsoft is joining us to talk about AI and ethics and in particular, ableism.

You know, to what extent is ableism a problem in AI? That's one question. And then to what extent are we able to mitigate those problems in terms of how we use AI? What can we do if we're users of AI?

To be both aware of and do something about the ableism that's inherent in it. So big picture stuff about ethics.

Still need to scale it back and say right if you're using AI what do you need to think about, just to prevent some of these things coming through.

So yeah, and plenty of others besides this. Plenty of other AI mentions as you said, it's going to be all over the show in the sense of the implied use of those tools as they're starting to come through as well as explicitly discussed in some sessions.

Robin Christopherson:

Brilliant. So, we're going to be covering so much during the TSP sessions this year, guys, including whether the European Accessibility Act, for example, is going to become the new global de facto standard when it comes to web and software compliance because it's so much broader than just the technical guidelines. We're going to be looking at a range of cutting-edge technologies and how to implement them within your organisations.

And we're going to be talking about, you know, how to win the business case and revisiting a lot of themes from previous years, I'm sure as well. So, any final words before we wrap up and tell people where they can find out more.

Mark Walker

Please join us. Join us online. We're doing our best to make that, you know, a real experience over a couple of days where you do get that network and engagement, just that's something we're really trying to work on. So of course, the contents there and there's lots of great stories and ideas, but we really want you to be coming and joining the community and be part of an event where you feel like you're connecting up with others in the same space. So please come and join us.

Robin Christopherson:

Fantastic techsharepro.com is where it's all happening, but I'm sure you'll have been receiving emails as well if you aren't subscribed to AbilityNet’s newsletters and e-mail marketing list, please do. There's some brilliant content in there. There are emails from Mark almost daily, so actually maybe, I shouldn't have said that. No, it's brilliant.

Really, really good. We pride ourselves in how much information we're pushing out to the community and TechShare Pro is where it all comes together. So amazing. Thanks Mark.

Mark Walker:

Thanks Robin. I'm really looking forward to it.

Robin Christopherson:

Hopefully see people there.

Mark Walker:

Yeah. Take care.

Robin Christopherson:

TechShare Pro it's happening again this November for the 7th year running. It is the leading technology and digital inclusion conference. Please do check it out. We are going to be talking about everything from AI and what it will mean with your organisation and with end users across the world.

We're going to be talking about, the European Accessibility Act, which will mean so much more than compliance and a new level of accessibility for European organisations. Will it become the global standard when it comes to accessibility best practise.

We're going to be talking about how still, after accessibility has become so much more prominent people are still feeling like they're the lone voice within their organisation and how networks, both internally and externally, can help you push that agenda forward, that we all feel so passionate about and so much more.

There are going to be dozens of sessions, every single one you'll be able to catch live either in person or online or catch up afterwards. So please join us. The 14th and 15th of November, whether it's online or in person, we would love to have you. You can find out more information at techsharepro.com.