Transcript for Tech4Good Awards with What3Words

Robin Christopherson:

Welcome to another episode of The AbilityNet Podcast, disability, technology, inclusion. I'm your host, Robin Christopherson, Head of Digital Inclusion at AbilityNet, a pioneering UK charity with a mission to make a digital world accessible to all. This week's episode is about the Tech4Good Awards, they're open for nominations, please get your entries in. Closing Date is the fifth of May, you can go to www dot Tech4Goodawards.com That's tech the number 4 good awards.com You can download a transcript of this episode from www.ability net.org.uk/podcast. So sit back, grab your favourite beverage and let's get started.

Robin Christopherson

Guys, we are back for another AbilityNet podcast. Hi, Mark, Marks here.

Mark Walker

Hey, Robin, how you doing?

Robin Christopherson

Really good. Thanks. And we're doing something a little bit different for the next few weeks, where we're going to be focusing on Tech4Good. The Tech4Good awards are coming up this summer. Really exciting. You know, we're back? Aren't we in earnest this year?

Mark Walker

Yep, yep, well, we set this up first in 2011. So, we had 11 years of running it. And then we stopped in 2022, we come back with a new network of support around how we promote the awards. And, and I what I'm really looking forward to is more great stories, we've always just unearthed some amazing people doing incredible stuff with technology, I'm really looking forward to getting back into that, to that flow. So very exciting.

Robin Christopherson

Absolutely. And for anyone that isn't aware, the Tech4Good Awards, celebrate all aspects of technology and how they can be applied to different categories from community to innovation to individuals that are doing amazing work, where technology is being applied, not just in our area, which is disability, but in many other areas, other walks of life. And it's such a celebration is absolutely brilliant. And what we're going to be focusing on for the next few episodes are some of those stories that we've already heard. We're going to be revisiting with new interviews, people from well, winners from previous years, across different categories. And we're going to get innovative in the first one this in this week's episode, it's going to be with What3Words, which if you haven't heard, is a brilliant concept. And they are they were a previous winner of the innovation category. When did they win? And what is What3Words?

Mark Walker

It was 2015 I guess a long time ago, and you'll hear when I, when you hear me chatting to them that that things have changed enormously since then. But honestly, it's one of those things that slightly bonkers when you first hear it, and you can't work out A) why they did it and B) why it's good. Those are the two things to look out for. So, they map, they've created a grid across the whole planet, a virtual grid across the whole planet of squares that are a metre and a half square. And that square has a name, which is identified by three unique combinations of three words. So, the What3Words is what are the three words that describe this exact place I'm standing in, if I take a large piece sideways, what are the completely different three words that describe that space. And there's a bit there's a bit about where that comes from it when they tell the story. But what that creates is a means of identifying squares on that level. And when if you think about what you do with postcodes, and each postcode might have 10, address 10 doors attached to each postcode different houses, this is right down to the other level where I can actually be stood outside your door or stood outside next door. And those two will have very different addresses. And then the impact on that, well the impact of that is about the good that it does is around the fact that people don't have addresses, which we talked about a little bit in like in a valour or in Islam or in any sort of unmapped area that you can actually locate specifically where people are and as well as some of those applications in in the sense of people's houses. The emergency services have picked up on it now, so they know that when you call your exact location rather than saying well, I went for a walk down the lane, I've got about a been going about 10 minutes I'm near the big tree on the left. You know that that if they're trying to find you and you've had an accident you've called out then the emergency services can now make use of What3Words they know exactly what spot you're in, and they can come and find you much more quickly. So, a real range and, you know, incredible stuff, when, as I say it sounds like slightly bonkers. And then they tell you about how it works. And you realise that, you know, it's a very, very, very clever system. So, yes.

Robin Christopherson

It's literally changing and probably saving lives. And I wonder if they had to filter out the words that they use, because you can actually look up online, what your own house, you know, and you will have many squares associated with your house. So, pick the one that is literally your front door? Because why not? And, you know, you might, I don't think you will, but you might find that it's something like, I don't know, nostril saucepan ear lobe or something. And that's going to be a bit disappointing. So, I wonder if they had to filter out the words that they were using in the in the set?

Mark Walker

I think that there is some there obviously some words that aren't included some swear words? And other things. Biological maybe? I don't know, but no, I think that they and they've translated them into multiple languages. Actually, one of the other areas that they've developed is that they're not just doing English. Now, this is, this is a global thing. And I think I can get on with the conversation in a second. But I think that when you look back across the great scope of the Tech4Good awards over the over 100 winners that we've had, I think this one has just really captures the imagination. Once you get beyond that initial point of why would you do that, then you begin to realise just how many things can go wrong, because you don't know exactly where somebody is. And they're a commercial organisation. With a with a sort of a social purpose. So, the social purpose stuff is what they're making good from, if you like, but there's so many different applications in terms of being so precise about it. And the technology. The point about the technology is it's an app you can have on your on your phone for free that can find out where you are and send it to somebody and say, Look, I'm standing here right now, if you want to come and find me right through to the emergency services, and they've integrated it into their navigation system so that when you use the three words, they know why you've said it. And therefore, you know, that the quality of the response is much better. But really, as a Tech4Good example, you know, it really is a great one, I think it's so off the scale. I mean, we you know what, at the time what, what seemed so crazy is now just become mainstream.

Robin Christopherson

So, without any further ado, let's pass over to Mark. Mark Two. And let's hear all about What3Words.

Mark Walker

I'm really delighted today to be joined by Giles from What3Words who were winner of our Innovation and Genius Award in 2015. And Giles, thank you so much for joining us could I ask you to introduce yourself and also tell us the story. Um, you know, What3Words what it is what it does, how it works, you know, way back now, seven or eight years ago, when we first came across it? I'm sure it's changed a lot.

Giles Rhys Jones

It has, the core still remains the same. So yes, Thanks for Thanks for having me on. I'm Giles Rhys Jones, I'm the CMO of What3Words. We met back in 2015 and I've been with the company for, for eight and a half years. And it was great to get the award. And we'll chat about kind of that experience and kind of what it what it meant for us later. But as you said, yeah, maybe worth starting with, with What3Words and kind of what we've done.

Giles Rhys Jones

What3Words is a very simple way to talk about location. What we've done is divided the world up into small squares. So, three metres by three metre squares, there's 57 trillion of those in the world. And we've given each one of those squares, a unique three-word identifier. So, three dictionary words, to describe any location on the planet. And I guess there's, there's a couple reasons why we did that. Street addressing is pretty good in urban centres, generally. But it doesn't cover the entire world. And you go out of London into rural parts of the UK. And actually, streets addressing just isn't relevant or just doesn't exist. And you go further afield into developing markets in Southeast Asia and Africa and places like that they don't have street addresses, even urban centres. And then actually, if you if you look a little bit more closely, in a place like London, often if you put in a building name, the pin will drop in the middle of the building, not near the entrance. And so, if you are an individual trying to go to a meeting, you'll, you'll maybe walk around for a few minutes, five minutes trying to find the right entrance, which is a little frustrating, you tend to plan your journey there. So, you arrive there earlier, just in case, it's a little frustrating. Now, if you're a delivery person, and you're, you're doing that a few 100 times a day, that's incredibly frustrating. But it's also incredibly expensive. For the company, if you are a first responder, and you can't find the right entrance, and it takes you a few minutes to find the right entrance, the implications can be far more significant. So, Street addressing is not particularly accurate and doesn't cover everywhere. GPS coordinates do latitude longitude because it covers everywhere. But and they're very accurate. But they're really difficult to remember. It's 18 digits. There's a number of different formats, there's 35 degrees 27 minutes west, and it's just complex is difficult to communicate and errors and errors creep in. And so, what our system does is it converts those GPS coordinates to words and back again. So that's the system.

Mark Walker

Right.

Mark Walker

And in terms of where it comes from, that sounds like there was a lot of clever maths involved at some point. So it's the origin in somebody who said I've got this problem we need to solve or is it somebody who said I know what you could do. Can you think of how we could use it when which end of that did it come from?

Giles Rhys Jones

It was definitely from, from the problem.

Giles Rhys Jones

And Chris, who's our co-founder, used to organise music events around the world. So was not a geographer, was not into mapping. He just had a problem. And he tried to get bands to get gigs on time. And whether he was trying to find gate 47, A, the NEC arena in Birmingham, or trying to find a chateau in a remote part of France, street addressing just wasn't good enough or it just didn't exist. So he did start using GPS coordinates and he would give them to people. The problem was it became apparent very quickly that roadies and drummers and bass guitarists are not predisposed to remembering, writing down and inputting into a sat nav 18 digits, so they would get it wrong. And they mix up a one and a seven, and they would end up half an hour north of Rome, instead half an hour south of Rome. I think there's one incident when he got a phone call, and they're like, Chris, we've just soundcheck to the wrong wedding. Because they turned up at the wrong place. So he sat down with a mathematical genius, a friend of his from school. And they were like, oh, what happens if we add letters to numbers and we can like crunch it down. Instead of have a 18 digits, we can have like an A and Z for two. And I know an alphanumeric code is awful as well.

Giles Rhys Jones

There's a dictionary on the table and they say what happens if we use words? How many words would we need? And so they did a little bit of kind of mental maths and kind of started on literally on a napkin, the classic story of writing down the equation, and they were like, well, actually, the world is this big, three metres by three metres is small enough to be useful. And there's around 57 trillion in the world. Okay, so that's kind of the that part of it. How many words do we need, and they worked out? They need 40,000 words, because 40,000 times 40,000 times 40,000 gives you 64 trillion different unique combinations. So there's enough we've got enough to do that. And that was it. That was the kind of birth of, the birth of the idea. And again, they you know, very quickly, they were like, hold on a sec, this is this is much more significant than getting bands to gigs on time, this this could actually have a much bigger impact on the world.

Mark Walker

Yeah, I mean, I think the first time I came across it, certainly around the time that we were connecting on Tech4Good awards was there was a talk about favelas, and people who live in unaddressed areas anyway, you know, rural, urban slums and all that sort of stuff. And I can't remember what the connection was. But that's probably the first place I saw the concept in practical use, you know, for good, you know, component, I guess.

Giles Rhys Jones

Yeah. So we have, we have an app and we've made that app free for everybody, and anybody can use it and download it for kind of whatever, whatever they want. We discovered there was a company in the in the favelas in Brazil, who was using it as a postal service. And so people would order online, and they would order to, they were called Cartero Amigo, the friendly postman, and they would order to their offices, which had, you know, a street address, and the stuff would arrive there. But they would also when they were checking out, they would put in there what three words address and so the post, people would, would see the package, they would scan the What3Words address, and then they could go and deliver it. And, you know, historically, they were using, you know, landmark based addressing, so it's like, third house with a red door past, you know, where, where the kids play on the beach sort of stuff. It was just it just impractical. And so we saw we saw a lot of usage in, in Brazil, and then and then kind of aid and humanitarian situations, we saw people downloading our app, and they were using it for microfinance, management, solar panel installations. And just again, just using our app to use the service.

Mark Walker

Yeah, yeah. Um, so I'm guessing, I mean you have mentioned in there about the delivery applications and because what's interesting is there's this commercial and for not for profit, sort of elements of the work you're doing. And clearly, you know, again, I know that you're integrated into you mentioned first responders, you know, health, health, health, emergency services are using it. From the commercial side though, because I think a lot of people when they hear about the idea will be wondering how you make it sustainable, that the commercial stuff is presumably you know, where the where the bread and butter is for you right now, at any given time. You know that because that's keeping the whole idea alive. Can you tell me a bit about some of the things that you're doing which bring that, you know, bring that element of sustainability and commercially to What3Words.

Giles Rhys Jones

Yeah, so there's, we are a for profit company. But we believe that purpose is, is a kind of key part of doing business, you should be able to do good by doing business, we don't think that they're separate. You know, it's not a CSR kind of bolt on, this is something that has kind of been woven into the kind of fabric of the company that doing good and doing business at the same time. So, the way that Waht3Words makes money is we charge businesses to integrate our code into their own systems. So, if you are a delivery company, so we've been integrated into DHL, DPD and Evri in the UK. So, when you check out on an E commerce page, you can pop in your Waht3Words address that gets passed to DHL. DHL will use that address to deliver the parcel to exactly where it needs to go, which makes them much more efficient. And so, we charge them for that. And we've also been integrated into car companies, because popping your address into a sat nav is difficult, problematic. And actually, you know, there's lots of duplication, if I get into my car and say, Take Me to Church Road, the cargos okay, there's 14 Church roads in London, which ones you want to get to. And so, I've actually got to pull over, I've got press some buttons and, and try and narrow down the right one to go to. So, people like Mercedes, Mitsubishi Lamborghini, Jaguar, and Land Rover, have all built What3Words into their cars. So, you can get a What3Words address on a listings page, people are adding them to their contact pages, you can get into your car and say, "Hey, Mercedes, take me to table chair lamp". And it says, "Okay." So, we dramatically improve the customer experience for people like that. So, we're being integrated and again, we charge businesses to do that. And we're being integrated into ride hailing and a whole other, we're being used in infrastructure and asset management and, and all those sorts of things. And as you said, we're being used by emergency services, we're being used by aid organisations, disaster response organisations. And whereas we are being built into their systems, as well as just using our app, we are being built into their systems, but we don't charge them for that. And again, it comes back to the we're trying to do the right thing. And also trying to be profitable and so for people using What3Words for good, it's free. For people who can make or save money, using What3Words, we will charge them.

Mark Walker

And I like that I like that make and save money element as well about, you know, how the connection is made for the commercial benefit. I think that's really smart. I mean, think thinking back then, to that time when you won the awards. Were there any particular things that the awards helped you with? Obviously, we're talking here about nominations been open for this year's awards. And I'm wondering where a for profit business in the way that you're describing, were there particular things that winning or not for profit, essentially, the Tech4Good Award? Did it? Did it steer you in a particular way? Did it bolster a particular sort of angle that you'd already set out on?

Giles Rhys Jones

Yeah, I think there's, there's, there's a couple of reasons for doing awards that we found with were useful for us as a business one, it really forces you to focus very tightly on your proposition and how you sell it. So it's, you know, getting your elevator pitch down very, very tightly, was a really, really good exercise to go through. And thinking through all those things, where you haven't got an opportunity to have a conversation and a bit of back and forth, you've got to get it on a page, you've got to be able to stand up and pitch it on, on stage. So we found that going through that whole exercise was really useful for us as a business, at the start of the business. It was a, it was a really good exercise to do. I think that as I said, we the balance between purpose and profit for us is, is key. And what better way to get in front of new innovative companies who are trying to do good in the world, and large businesses that that are also involved in, in in doing for good then to enter a for good award show. Because all of those businesses could actually use What3Words in their own, in their own businesses. But for doing in their own for good projects. And so we found it was, it was a really good way to one meet like-minded people kind of, two kinds of chat through start-up life, which is, you know, which can be a bit of a lonely place. And, and you know, and talking to people who are going through similar sort of journey to us was, was great and kind of validated some thoughts and challenged others. And then and then getting in front of people who could use us was also a kind of massive benefit. So, yeah, we found we found the process. Good, good for us as a business.

Mark Walker

Cool. And then looking ahead, then you're talking about sort of relationships with car manufacturers, and you know, some of those bigger, you know, the biggest companies on the planet, essentially, those sorts of those sorts of names. Where do you think the next few steps are going to be for What3Words? Is there any, any particular shift in how you're doing things? Is it organic? Are there changes in how the applications may be? sort of coming along? As we move into AI just thinking about AI, for example, are there other ways in which the underlying technologies may shift?

Giles Rhys Jones

I don't think significant shifts, I think that as when we, when we first started, this might even be in our, in our award entry, I tried to dig it out. Actually, I couldn't find out the but you know, we were on a mission to change the world. We're on a mission to make the world a better place, we want to make it less frustrating, want to make it more efficient, and we want to make it safer. And the way that we're doing that is by helping everybody talk about everywhere, really easily. So we had that. We had that ambition when we when we first started, and that ambition has not changed. When we, when we first did the awards, I think there was eight of us, I think we were in a I think we were in an office that we shared with two other companies. I think we had eight languages. And we hadn't I think we were used by about 25 businesses. I mean, like a tiny, tiny, tiny, tiny. Now we're about 150. We're in 54 languages, we're used by, as you said, some of the biggest companies in the world, from Lamborghini, to DPD, to DHL. But the ambition still remains the same. We want to become a global standard. So you see, three slashes word dot word dot word. On a social media site, you see that on a, on a building listing, you see that on a sign, you say it to a voice assistant, and it's recognised as a as an address. That's the, that's the objective. And so from a from a kind of development point of view, we're adding more and more languages to the system, because we think it's important that that anybody can talk about anywhere in their own in their own language, that language they're most comfortable in. So we're adding more languages to the system, we're making it really easy for people to add What3Words to their own businesses. So if you're a small business, a small retailer, you can get a Shopify plugin, you use a Shopify shop, you can get a What3Words plugin, that just adds a What3Words address field to your to your checkout. So we're making really, really easy for people to, to use us, we're continuing to grow with emergency services. So we're being used across America, Canada, Australia, Germany, they're all starting to use What3Words in to help people tell emergency services where help is needed. So that's another growth area. And we're seeing a huge growth in people using What3Words on maps and guidebooks and contact pages. one of the, we worked quite hard with the RNIB naturally, because if I if I put in an arsenal stadium into a mapping platform, the pin drops in the middle of the field, which is actually not particularly useful. And if you have a disability, if you're, if you struggle with mobility, then they're not finding the right entrance, you know, is actually really, really challenging. And so actually Arsenal stadium have added What3Words address for all of the specific entrances around stadiums, so you can go to their website, find the What3Words address and pop it in, and that will get you to the three metres by three metre square exactly by the right accessible door that you might need. And so we're seeing a huge increase in in people just popping the What3Words address on their on that on their contact pages. So that's a that's another area that's starting development. Actually. The other interesting thing as we're starting to get woven into popular culture, so Brew Dog actually did a What3Words beer. So, there's, there's a What3Words beer, named after the three-word address of the entrance to their brewery. We've been woven into various different TV shows, like, I think NCIS Los Angeles, there was a show where one of the team members is kidnapped. And they're going through her notebook, and they find these three random words written in black ink. Like, "what's this thing?" And someone was like "that's What3Words", and they pop it into our map. On the TV show, they pop it into our map, and they discover she has been kidnapped and popped in Vietnam. And so, they send in the choppers and there's guns. I mean, it was amazing. We've just had a couple who got married, and to commemorate where they met, they got matching What3Words address tattooed. Which is, which is amazing. That's the kind of level unlocked when people started starting to do that. So, I think we're gonna see just more and more of kind of What3Words starting to be used. And, yes, emergency service and yes, and cars, but you'll see, you'll start to see it everywhere. And in some places that you wouldn't have maybe, maybe thought of.So,So, it's pretty exciting time.

Mark Walker

Yeah, it sounds, it sounds unstoppable to some extent. I mean, I was just going to ask, I can't think of an alternative, particularly you mentioned at the beginning, why you created this, but doesn't exist, nobody's come up with another idea. I don't think I can't think of another example of.

Giles Rhys Jones

there's a there's a few people that a lot of people have recognised there's a problem with addresses. And a lot of people have tried to solve it, and actually in the way that I referenced earlier, where they've added letters and numbers together. And so you get you got an alphanumeric code, which, which has its own problems, you know, A N Z 2 1 3 4 Y is not necessarily memorable. It's really bad. If you want to say that over the telephone and mistakes creep in. So no, there isn't really a competitor that does it in a kind of as simpler way as, as What3Words does.

Mark Walker

And I'm just thinking people listening in in terms of just, we like to think about ways that people can support, you know, within this network, and I really liked the examples you gave that that sort of, here's a list of here's a list of ideas, how can you implement it in your organisation? How can you implement it in your network? How can that overcome some particular challenge that your community is part of I think that's probably the key thing is, it's changed so much. Now, there are so many different examples of what you can do with it. Compared to, you know, way back when, when we're trying to religiously just understand the idea in the first place. It's so much more rich now in terms of its usage.

Giles Rhys Jones

Yeah, and the and so if you use location or addresses, then we can help. And we've seen that, we're being used. birdwatchers are using us we, you know, we're being used by rewilding projects, where, you know, three metres by three metres. Actually, interestingly, the exact sort of space that a tree needs to grow in, and so people are and they're doing a sponsorship, so ecology, you can buy a three metre by three metre piece of land sponsor it, and they will read rewild it or they will, they'll plant a tree, and you get a little, a little certificate that says that the What3Words address of where your tree is, is kind of this. So yes, we were being used for beach clean-ups, you know, people are just specifying kind of where to where to meet on those sorts of things. So and we kind of discover these every day on social media, some of his Oh, yeah. And I'm using it for this. And I'm using it for that. So yeah, it's brilliant to see that kind of organic use happening.

Mark Walker

Cool. Well, I mean, it from the point of view of the sort of the genius of the idea, as you say, on that napkin it literally, you know, that that particular start of the story, whatever I'm telling people I know, as you said, at the beginning, you're looking for the elevator pitch moment saying, Oh, it's this. And now and now there's so much usage of it. And it's so widespread, and it's testament to you guys, and how I'm no guessing at various times, there's been piles you've been able to choose between, but the fact that you see inside, there's emergency services and inside a Lamborghini, you know, it's an incredible spread, and that's really creative on your part to have become woven into the fabric that's down to you guys. So making that business work in the way they're saying is, it's just, you know, hugely inspirational, really, that, that you could take that napkin and turn it into this thing that genuinely covers the planet is. It's just really cool.

Giles Rhys Jones

So I guess the interesting thing was, we always kind of had the belief that it was they were there with a hint of scepticism, scepticism we but we always had that kind of belief and that, that huge ambition that you know, we're going to, you know, we can got to do this. And I think that it's, it's kind of rare and exciting that, that a business can touch everything from slums to supercars, and everything in between. And, you know, generate revenue, and, and kind of do good. And so it's a hugely inspiring business to be a part of. I mean, I remember, I remember our first emergency service story, that that was sent to us by a police service. And, you know, you could see everybody reading it in the office and just that you could hear a pin drop. And everybody was like, Okay, this is, you know, like, we've achieved something we save someone's life. And if it just kind of comes down to that, it's, you know, I think we can all be happy and proud to be a part of part of a business that that does that.

Mark Walker

Yeah, cool. Well, congratulations. I mean, just generally, like any business still being here, because that's always the first marker of whether a business has succeeded is it still here still doing still doing what it intended to do, but the amount of good that it's doing and the way that it's developed and the scale at which you're operating is fantastic. So thank you so much for joining me today and catching us up on the What3Words story and I wish you all the best for you know whatever comes next and planetary domination and all the, all the bits that are going to be there very shortly.

Giles Rhys Jones

I laughed maniacally after I said that I should know. Exactly. Thanks for Thanks for getting in touch and thanks for being a fan and supporting and, and AbilityNet for kind of giving us a platform to tell the story and reach and reach more people. It's been it's been a kind of key part of our of our early success.

Mark Walker

Fantastic. Thank you.

Robin Christopherson

That was absolutely fascinating, like you say, so many applications, such a simple concept, but with so many practical uses. So yeah, that was really, really good.

Mark Walker

Well, and the other bit, I hadn't clocks until we sort of caught up then was just the sustainability of that idea is a fact that it's a business with a social purpose. And that, you know, there are lots of different models for good, you know, people doing good, don't have to be in a charity, you don't have to be working in a not-for-profit setting. And I think that that was also a very good example of, of the of the sort of diversity that we have in the Tech4Good awards across the piece, we deliberately leave it as open as possible. We're not making a judgement about the nature of the organisation; we're looking at the application and the social impact that it has. And so, I think that's a really great one to kick off this series and to show people why the Tech4Good Awards has these sorts of sort of fairly open criteria is because we won't find those sorts of great ideas if we, if we close it down too much. So, you know, I'm really looking forward to this year to hearing that latest idea that your first response is, well, what's that for? And then something float, you know, falls in behind it and you realise the social impacted and the ability to change people's lives. I think that's a perfect one to have kicked it off with.

Robin Christopherson

Okay, well, these are going to be coming thick and fast, aren't they mark, and I'm really looking forward to the next one. So should we see each other next time?

Mark Walker

See you next time.

Robin Christopherson

Thanks for listening to this episode of The AbilityNet podcast. If you're looking for accessibility training AbilityNet have a range of affordable high quality online training courses to help you build skills in accessibility and inclusive design courses include PDF accessibility, accessible social media, and more. Use the discount code AbilityNet podcast 10 that's all one word for 10% off any upcoming ability net online training, and discover more courses at ability net.org.uk/training Thanks again for tuning in and more hot discussions around accessibility will be coming soon.